



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Wednesday 4 March 2026

Members of the Legislative Council

60th Parliament

President

Shaun Leane

Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Lizzie Blandthorn

Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Bev McArthur (from 18 November 2025)

David Davis (from 27 December 2024)

Georgie Crozier (to 27 December 2024)

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Evan Mulholland (from 31 August 2023)

Matthew Bach (to 31 August 2023)

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

¹ Resigned 7 December 2023

² IndLib from 28 March 2023
until 27 December 2024

³ Appointed 14 November 2024

⁴ LDP until 26 July 2023

⁵ Resigned 8 November 2024

⁶ DLP until 25 March 2024

⁷ Appointed 7 February 2024

Party abbreviations

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

CONTENTS

PAPERS	
Papers	667
PRODUCTION OF DOCUMENTS	
Greater Avalon employment precinct	667
BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE	
Notices	667
MEMBERS STATEMENTS	
South West TAFE	667
Chris Antony	667
International Women's Day	668
International Women's Day	668
Chinese community	668
Middle East conflict	669
Cannabis law reform	669
Community safety	669
Elsternwick Plaza	669
Community safety	669
Women's health	670
Berwick show	670
Shopping centre crime	670
Community safety	671
VicRoads, Kew, redevelopment	671
BILLS	
Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Follow the Money) Bill 2026	671
Statement of compatibility	671
Second reading	673
PRODUCTION OF DOCUMENTS	
Syrian repatriations	676
Data centres	680
MOTIONS	
Small business support	684
QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE AND MINISTERS STATEMENTS	
Rochester swimming pool	695
North Richmond medically supervised injecting room	695
Ministers statements: Changing Places	697
Victorian Mosque Open Day	697
Foster carers	698
Ministers statements: TAFE sector	700
Data centres	700
Housing	701
Ministers statements: women	703
Police conduct	703
Housing	704
Ministers statements: working from home	705
Written responses	705
CONSTITUENCY QUESTIONS	
Northern Metropolitan Region	705
Southern Metropolitan Region	705
Eastern Victoria Region	706
Southern Metropolitan Region	706
Eastern Victoria Region	706
North-Eastern Metropolitan Region	706
South-Eastern Metropolitan Region	707
Western Metropolitan Region	707
Southern Metropolitan Region	707
Southern Metropolitan Region	707
Northern Victoria Region	708
South-Eastern Metropolitan Region	708
Western Metropolitan Region	708
Western Victoria Region	708
Northern Victoria Region	709
MOTIONS	

CONTENTS

Small business support.....	709
BILLS	
Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Ending Political Corruption) Bill 2024	716
Second reading.....	716
BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE	
Notices of motion	730
COMMITTEES	
Integrity and Oversight Committee	731
Reference.....	731
BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE	
Notices of motion and orders of the day	747
STATEMENTS ON TABLED PAPERS AND PETITIONS	
Integrity and Oversight Committee	747
Performance of the Victorian Integrity Agencies 2022/23.....	747
Environment and Planning Committee	748
Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices	748
Respect Victoria.....	749
Maintain the Momentum: Three Yearly Report to Parliament on the Progress of Prevention 2022– 2024	749
Department of Transport and Planning	750
Report 2024–25	750
PETITIONS	
Colorectal and pelvic reconstruction service	751
BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE	
Notices of motion	757
BILLS	
Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026.....	758
Second reading.....	758
ADJOURNMENT	
Metro Tunnel	769
LGBTIQA+ support.....	769
Katamatite-Yarrawonga Road.....	770
Housing.....	770
Education First Youth Foyers.....	771
Maribyrnong planning	771
Formula One Australian Grand Prix.....	772
North-Eastern Metropolitan Region housing.....	772
Early childhood education and care.....	772
TAFE funding	773
Broiler farms	773
Corrections system	773
Kangaroo control	774
Craigieburn road maintenance	775
Blackburn activity centre	775
Health system.....	775
Shopping centre crime	776
Health system.....	777
Responses	777

Wednesday 4 March 2026

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:**

Auditor-General – Major Projects Performance Reporting 2025, March 2026 (*Ordered to be published*).

Major Events Act 2009 – Major Sporting Event Order for the Formula 1 Australian Grands Prix 2026 to 2030, dated of 3 March 2026, under section 22 of the Act.

*Production of documents***Greater Avalon employment precinct**

The Clerk: I table a letter from the Attorney-General dated 2 March 2026 in response to a resolution of the Council on 18 February on the motion of Dr Mansfield relating to the Greater Avalon employment precinct. The letter states that the date for the production of documents does not allow sufficient time to respond and that the government will endeavour to provide a final response to the order as soon as possible.

*Business of the house***Notices**

Notices of motion given.

*Members statements***South West TAFE**

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (09:46): Last Thursday morning Ms Ermacora, a member for Western Victoria, and I were at the campus of South West TAFE in Warrnambool. We were there to see the beginning of the construction of a new \$11 million Building Innovation and Design Centre, and of course there was a ceremonial sod turn. South West TAFE is leading the way in building and construction training across south-western Victoria, where skills are needed and are growing. We need more homes, more apprentices and more workers with renewable energy expertise to build sustainable housing and deliver Victoria's clean energy projects. That is why this new centre is so important, providing our future tradies with state-of-the-art training facilities and specialist equipment for the industries of tomorrow. We are also relocating automotive training from the Warrnambool CBD campus to Sherwood Park campus, ensuring fit-for-purpose facilities for these critical trades. I take this opportunity to thank and congratulate Mark Fidge, the CEO, and his team but also especially all of the trainers and teachers who work so hard in promoting, delivering and supporting vocational training in the south-west so that students can learn in their communities. As Minister for Skills and TAFE I absolutely feel so proud of the efforts that they undertake. They are part of a fantastic team, and Jacqueline, whom I met last Thursday, has been instrumental in encouraging more local women into trades like plumbing, carpentry and construction. Jacqueline is a former South West TAFE carpentry apprentice herself, and is the perfect role model – (*Time expired*)

Chris Antony

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:48): On Sunday with my friends Lyndon and Annette Samuel I attended the viewing of Chris Rua Antony, who was tragically struck by a vehicle that veered off Pound Road, and later passed away. Chris was just 16 years old. He was kind, intelligent, photogenic and deeply committed to his Catholic faith. He made tremendous efforts

at whatever he did, be it study or sport, and lived by his life's maxim: it is efforts, not results, that define you. He aced his studies and wanted to be an engineer. Always a grateful kid, he wanted to give back to the community. He had his whole life ahead of him, but it was heartbreakingly cut short while he was returning home from school. This was a tragic accident that may have been prevented had appropriate safety barriers been in place. There is no greater grief than for a parent to lay their own child to rest. Chris's school and youth group friends are still coming to terms with this terrible tragedy, and it has traumatised many of them. The community around Pound Road are very anxious, as many young families walk their pets and many more walk or cycle there. Today I express my profound sympathies to his parents Antony and Agal, his sister Auxilia and all who loved and knew him. May his legacy be remembered in this place.

International Women's Day

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:49): This International Women's Day I ask that we look at all of our international women and those that have been living in Australia and we celebrate the leadership of women. Let us strive for excellence and support one another. As your local member in the south-east, I will continue to do that.

International Women's Day

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:49): The theme for this Sunday's International Women's Day is 'Balance the scales'. This speaks to the need for all women, girls and gender-diverse people to be safe and heard and have the freedom to shape their own lives; too often our laws, policies and social systems tip the scales against them. The lack of willingness to address this imbalance, even when we know exactly what needs to change, illustrates how broken our systems are. A clear example of this is the Victorian government's failure to take any meaningful steps to better regulate the supply of alcohol, particularly online sales and marketing, despite well-established links to gender-based violence. Preventing gender-based violence requires many changes. Some are very complex and not easy for governments to implement, but the stronger regulation of alcohol sales and marketing is low-hanging fruit. It is readily actionable by governments and would make a real difference, yet in Victoria we see no action on this front. Why? When it comes to gender-based violence the Allan Labor government is more talk than action. The interests of industries like big alcohol are apparently more important to them than the lives and wellbeing of women, children and gender-diverse people who experience alcohol-fuelled violence. It is time to rebalance the scales, and we could start with stronger regulation of online alcohol sales.

Chinese community

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (09:51): As we welcome the Year of the Fire Horse, a year of incredible energy and strength, it is a perfect time to recognise the massive contribution the Chinese community make to our state. This was on show in the CBD with Melbourne Chinatown's Chinese Lunar New Year Festival, one of our city's premier festivals, I must say. This festival attracts over 200,000 attendees and is a massive celebration and showcase of a community that has been a vital part of Victoria's story for over 170 years. Melbourne's Chinatown is the oldest in the Western world, a historical and culturally rich precinct that is a testament to the vibrant community that started during the gold rush and continues to thrive today. In Victoria equality and inclusion are at the very core of who we are. More than half of our small businesses are owned by people with at least one parent born overseas, and precincts like Chinatown are vital cultural, community and commercial hubs for all of us. Our government is backing this through the \$17 million supporting our multicultural traders and precincts initiative, and I want to just take a moment to acknowledge the incredible work of Christina Zhao and the Melbourne Chinatown Business Association for putting on such a spectacular show. These celebrations of culture create the kind of unity and prosperity that make Victoria the very best place to live.

Middle East conflict

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (09:52): I want to reflect today on the situation in the Middle East, and if there were ever occasion for just engagement in combat, this is such a one. I can understand why Donald Trump and the Israelis have made the decision to pre-emptively strike against many Iranian assets. There is a legitimate concern about nuclear weapons being produced, and there is also a legitimate concern about the ballistic missiles that are in such numbers in Iran. So I can understand why the Israelis and the Americans have taken the actions they have. We can never be happy about the deaths and the injuries that occur in such engagements on both sides, of course. But the death of the Ayatollah is a welcome development. The regime has been such a horrific regime targeting various minority groups, including the Baha'i and others. It has been very clear in its targeting of people of various backgrounds and various systems that it does not like. So I am very happy to put on record my strong support for the activities that are occurring in the Middle East at the moment, and the leadership of the Americans and Israelis in dealing with what is a difficult situation.

Cannabis law reform

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (09:54): When you have been working as long as I have, you get a bit jaded, I suppose, and I did not imagine there would be too many surprises left in my career. Well, oh my God, you can colour me shook, because, dear members, I have recently learned that I am trending. That is right – I am blowing up on Facebook, popping on Instagram and even catching fire on TikTok. That is right, over half a million views on Facebook, 1700 on Instagram, 72,000-plus on TikTok and 1200 on YouTube. This is, I am reliably informed by certain young people, a canon event. The cause of my sudden online virality? It seems my speech in November bemoaning the government's failure to heed its own party policy at the state ALP conference to legalise, tax and regulate cannabis has hit differently with gen X, gen Y, gen Z and boomers, because the government's absurd refusal to reform cannabis law in this state does not make sense. We are cutting vital services yet still spending millions of dollars locking up thousands for cannabis possession, not to mention handing billions of dollars to organised crime. It is nothing short of delulu.

Community safety

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (09:55): I just want to mention two significant things we did last week in the local community. First, I was very pleased to attend the local government forum on antisemitism and social cohesion hosted at the Glen Eira town hall by the City of Glen Eira and the City of Port Phillip. We heard from a range of leading voices, including Jillian Segal, the special envoy on antisemitism, experts from Monash University and organisations such as Courage to Care Victoria and the Jewish Community Council of Victoria. It was a forthright discussion at times but a very constructive one, reiterating that there is no place for antisemitism in our community and that we cannot stand for hate and division. The Victorian government always stands with our multicultural groups. We are proud of who they are and celebrate their culture. That is why last year we passed groundbreaking laws to criminalise hate speech in this state, and we will continue to support them.

Elsternwick Plaza

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (09:56): I also stood with the mayor of the City of Glen Eira to announce that through the multicultural business fund we are co-funding, with the council, the revitalisation of Elsternwick Plaza, which is just down the road from the Kadimah and the future home of the Jewish arts quarter, to help celebrate the cultural diversity of Elsternwick with new meeting spaces that will both support local businesses, over 300 local traders, and also celebrate the multicultural diversity of this important part of Melbourne.

Community safety

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (09:56): An innocent family in Pakenham just lived through their worst nightmare: armed offenders carrying machetes, a baseball bat and a firearm tried to force their way into their house at 4 am. The parents barricaded themselves and their three-year-old and

six-year-old daughters in a bathroom in order to keep them safe. Police later said that this was a case of mistaken identity, meaning this could happen to anyone. It could have happened to any family in Pakenham. Not only is this a terrifying crime, it is evidence of what we have witnessed over the last three years, because at the same time that families are hiding in bathrooms Victorians are watching machetes being waved on main highways from their cars. This is a pattern that will now worsen because dedicated protective services officers are being pulled from 120 train stations. Commuters are being left exposed. This is not a coincidence, it is a pattern. When violent offenders are posting and boasting about invading homes, when weapons are being brandished in public spaces in broad daylight and when visible policing is quietly disappearing from public spaces, this is not bad luck; this is a system that is absolutely failing under Labor. A Jess Wilson-led government has a plan to address crime, and we will do everything that is needed because Victorians deserve better.

Women's health

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (09:58): I rise today to send strength to the thousands of Australian women living with endometriosis who have been left feeling devastated and disorientated by the recent media reports regarding their medical treatment. Endo is already delegitimised, denied and considered as nothing more than a bad period. There has been around five times more research conducted into erectile dysfunction compared to endo, and examples of research conducted include rating the attractiveness of women who have the disease. We already know women's health is not taken seriously and people with endo are used to being gaslit and ignored, which is why the ABC's investigation into a former Melbourne gynaecologist has been so deeply distressing, proving that even when someone has fought for acknowledgement from our misogynistic medical system they are still at risk of receiving inadequate care or worse. Patients have been left mutilated after unnecessary operations. Some did not even have the disease at all. Some now face infertility. Others have ongoing physical and emotional pain, feelings of violation and fear about accessing future care. We should be able to trust clinicians with our health, our bodies and our futures, and importantly, we cannot let the unforgivable actions of one disgraceful man impact access to diagnosis and care. To every survivor and to those seeking answers and justice: please know that you are seen, you are heard and you have my unwavering support and solidarity.

Berwick show

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:00): Where else would you find a wood-chopping competition, candy floss, farmyard animals and local politicians? That is right: it is the annual Berwick show, and what a wonderful weekend it was again, just a couple of weekends ago at Akoonah Park at the showgrounds. Along with my colleague Mr Tarlamis, it was a great to spend the weekend there, having lots of great conversations with the local community and engaging in this very historic local tradition as well. Thank you very much to the Berwick and District Agricultural and Horticultural Society for having us, including secretary Margaret Boon and the entire organising committee, and for pulling off once again another fantastic event. Lots of great conversations were had with locals in the community, and I appreciate every single one of them who stopped and took the time to have a chat with us.

Shopping centre crime

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:01): We had a few good conversations as well about community safety, and indeed there was very good feedback that we heard about the rollout of PSOs and police at Fountain Gate shopping centre. We spoke to some customers and retail workers at the centre, in fact, who told us about the difference that made, and how wonderful it was just one week later to see the announcement that this program, Operation Pulse, is continuing. We have seen the impacts that it has had on places such as Fountain Gate and on other shopping centres and the very positive feedback that we have had from retailers, customers and in particular retail workers. This government will continue to do what it can do, and we will continue to listen to the community to inform solutions that will make our community stronger and safer.

Community safety

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (10:01): Here in Victoria we say we are a proud multicultural society. We say everyone deserves to be treated with dignity; everyone deserves a fair go. It sounds fair, but the reality for many is it never feels fair. Across Australia and around the world we are witnessing the relentless rise of racism everywhere: in sporting arenas, in the media, in workplaces, in our local communities and even at decision-making tables and in political spaces. Even right here in this place it is upheld in the institution, shouted across the chamber or written into laws that allow children to be imprisoned for life. We know which children will be most affected: First Nations children, black and brown children. Actively building systems that punish marginalised groups is inherently racist. Beyond this building we see religious groups being targeted and sacred places of worship attacked. We see the Aboriginal Fitzroy Stars netball team being vilified with racist abuse and imitations of monkey noises and gorillas beating their chests. We see a man in Western Australia charged with terrorist acts against Muslim worship and an attempted bombing of an Invasion Day rally in Boorloo / Perth. We are witnessing a disturbing rise in racism, in anti-Muslim hate, in antisemitism and in the growth of far-right white supremacist groups exploiting people's fears to recruit and divide. This hatred is not fading, it is festering.

VicRoads, Kew, redevelopment

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:03): I rise to deliver a brief members statement on the development of the old VicRoads building at 60 Denmark Street, near Kew Junction. I recently had the opportunity to visit this site alongside the Minister for Housing and Building and my Southern Metro colleague Mr Batchelor. There were also Boroondara mayor Wes Gault, deputy mayor Shima Ibuki and CEO Phillip Storer representing the local council. We had a productive discussion about the government's plan for the site, the council's proposal and the importance of including the views and needs of the local community in the process. This location is currently being developed to build roughly 500 new homes, with at least 10 per cent of them being affordable housing. This is fantastic news for the local community because this is a location which is ideally located for new housing near schools and existing public transport options. Located very close to Kew Junction, this development is also a win for many local businesses in the area, who will benefit from having an influx of new customers moving into Kew. In March and April last year Development Victoria undertook a community engagement and consultation process, inviting locals to have their say about their views on the site's development. The community feels very strongly about this site and the importance of getting the redevelopment right. This is because it is a historical site, as the former location of the Kew railway station, which first opened in 1887 but sadly closed down after running its last service in 1952. I would like to thank the team from City Circle Group for showing us around the worksite, and I look forward to seeing the development over the coming months.

Bills**Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Follow the Money) Bill 2026***Statement of compatibility*

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (10:05): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

Introduction

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*, I make this Statement of Compatibility with respect to the *Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Follow the Money) Bill 2026*.

In my opinion, the Bill is compatible with the human rights protected by the Charter. To the extent that the Bill may limit certain rights, those limitations are reasonable and demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom, as required by section 7(2) of the Charter.

Overview of the Bill

The Bill amends the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Act 2011 to expand the jurisdiction of the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission and provide further for public hearings and related investigative processes.

Key features of the Bill include:

- introducing a broad definition of “associated entity” to capture contractors, subcontractors and other entities involved in arrangements connected with public sector activity;
- expanding relevant definitions of public body and public officer to include associated entities;
- removing a provision requiring certain examinations to be held in private, thereby enabling greater flexibility in the conduct of hearings;
- providing for automatic repeal of the amending Act after one year.

The purpose of these amendments is to strengthen the capacity of anti-corruption investigations to examine the full flow of public funds and address misconduct connected with publicly funded activity.

Human rights engaged by the Bill

The Bill engages the following rights under the Charter:

- the right to privacy and reputation (section 13)
- the right to a fair hearing (section 24)

Each is considered below.

Right to privacy and reputation (section 13)

Section 13 protects individuals from unlawful or arbitrary interference with privacy, family, home or correspondence, and from unlawful attacks on reputation.

The Bill expands the scope of entities and individuals who may fall within the jurisdiction of anti-corruption investigations by including “associated entities” connected with public sector functions or publicly funded activities.

These measures engage section 13 because they may involve the collection, use or disclosure of personal or commercial information, or public examination of conduct.

Justification

Any limitation on privacy or reputation is reasonable and justified for several reasons:

- **Legitimate purpose:** The amendments are directed at preventing, detecting and exposing corruption and serious misconduct in connection with public sector activity and expenditure. Protecting public integrity and accountability is a pressing and substantial public objective.
- **Rational connection:** Expanding jurisdiction to associated entities and enabling appropriate public examination directly supports effective investigation of complex financial and contractual arrangements involving public funds.
- **Proportionality:** Existing statutory safeguards governing investigative powers, procedural fairness and decision-making continue to apply. The Bill does not create new coercive powers but extends the reach of existing oversight mechanisms where public sector interests are involved.
- **Timeframe limitation:** The amending Act is subject to repeal after one year, ensuring parliamentary review of its operation.

For these reasons, any interference with privacy or reputation is not arbitrary and is proportionate to the objective of maintaining integrity in public administration.

Right to a fair hearing (section 24)

Section 24 protects the right to a fair and public hearing in the determination of rights and obligations and in criminal proceedings.

The Bill removes a provision requiring certain examinations to be conducted in private, enabling greater flexibility in whether proceedings occur publicly.

Investigative examinations conducted by anti-corruption bodies are generally investigative rather than determinative of criminal guilt or civil liability. Nevertheless, procedural fairness considerations remain relevant where reputational or legal interests may be affected.

Justification

The Bill enables greater transparency in appropriate circumstances while existing statutory safeguards governing examinations remain in place. Decision-makers retain discretion regarding the conduct of hearings, allowing consideration of fairness, confidentiality and the interests of justice in each case.

The reform supports transparency and public confidence in integrity processes while preserving procedural protections. Any impact on section 24 is therefore limited and justified.

Other rights

No other Charter rights are materially engaged by the Bill.

Conclusion

The Bill strengthens the capacity of anti-corruption oversight to examine the use of public funds and the conduct of entities involved in public sector activity. While the expanded jurisdiction and increased flexibility regarding hearings may engage rights to privacy, reputation and procedural fairness, those impacts are limited, proportionate and directed toward a legitimate and significant public purpose.

Accordingly, in my opinion, the *Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Follow the Money) Bill 2026* is compatible with the human rights protected by the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*.

Second reading

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (10:05): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

I am delighted to speak on the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Follow the Money) Bill 2026, a bill brought to this place by the Liberals and Nationals. This is an important and absolutely necessary reform for the people of Victoria, and it comes to this house at a time when public trust in the integrity of government spending has been broken. Why has it been broken? Because we have recently learned that the corrupt CFMEU bosses and their underworld friends have been engaged in corruption and rorting on what can only be described as an industrial scale. It is the biggest corruption scandal in the history of the state of Victoria.

Victorians work hard. They pay their taxes in good faith. They expect their money to be spent honestly, carefully and in the public interest. When that trust is broken, when public funds are misused or siphoned away through misconduct, this Parliament has a duty to act. At least \$15 billion has been stolen from Victorian taxpayers, and this Labor government and this Labor Premier, Jacinta Allan, knew about it and let it happen. I really hope that those opposite in the government reflect on this fact – reflect on the fact that the leader of their party, the Premier, allowed every household in their electorate to have on average \$5000 stolen from them.

Victorians expect that when their taxes are collected those funds are managed responsibly, lawfully and transparently. They expect that major projects are delivered efficiently and that the enormous sums allocated to infrastructure are spent in the public interest. Above all they expect that those entrusted with public money are held to the highest standards of accountability. I think it is fair to say that we have not seen that to this date – \$15 billion. We saw disgraceful attacks on Geoffrey Watson SC, one of the most pre-eminent legal minds in the country, a former New South Wales ICAC commissioner, in his evidence to the Queensland royal commission. We have seen extraordinary attacks on his character and his 18 months of work to try to discredit Geoffrey Watson.

We have seen every excuse under the sun on why IBAC should not be given these powers or why it is not the right time. We saw media briefing to the *Age* as recently as Friday saying that some government members wanted the government to move on giving IBAC follow-the-money powers. But that briefing also said that this is being managed by both the Premier's office and the Attorney-General Ms Kilkenny and it would be really up to them to decide the pathway forward. Obviously they decided that IBAC's recommendations – that our integrity agency recommendations – were not going to be picked up by the government, and you would have to wonder why. Why would this government, having just been exposed in the biggest corruption scandal in Victorian history, where

\$15 billion was siphoned off to the criminal underworld for strippers, to bikies, to all sorts of unsavoury activities, then turn around and say that they do not want to give our integrity agencies the ability to follow that money when it goes to contractors and be able to get to the bottom of it?

Then we see reporting from the Ombudsman that was in the *Age* today about the Victorian Infrastructure Delivery Authority – that its document keeping and reporting are abysmal. This is the agency charged with both vetting contractors and getting money out the door to contractors and having oversight on all of Victoria's infrastructure projects, and the Ombudsman has serious concerns with how that authority is being run. So why would the government turn around and oppose IBAC having more powers or oversight to follow that money down to the contractor? You have to wonder why.

I think many government members are quietly reflecting on why the Premier, who was the Minister for Transport Infrastructure and responsible for the Big Build over the last decade, would now be turning around saying that she does not want a royal commission and she does not want to give IBAC the teeth that are needed to get to the bottom of this, the worst corruption scandal in Victorian history. The Premier is making the calls with her friend the Attorney-General, blocking out every everyone else, clearly blocking out every other view that supposedly Labor members privately have, that they need to do something on this. Why is the Premier not supporting further action to give IBAC teeth?

At present the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission does not have sufficient powers to properly investigate how public funds are spent once they pass into the hands of third parties. That limitation is not a minor technical issue; it is a serious structural weakness in Victoria's integrity framework. It means investigators cannot fully trace the flow of taxpayer money through complex contracting chains, it means they cannot examine every entity that benefits from publicly funded work and it means they cannot uncover the complete picture when misconduct occurs within major projects funded by Victorians, and the consequences for this failure are enormous.

For years IBAC has called for follow-the-money powers to address precisely this problem. Those calls have been consistent, clear and entirely reasonable. Yet they have been completely ignored by those opposite. Billions of dollars have flowed through taxpayer-funded major projects during this more than a decade old government. Alongside that spending have come deeply troubling allegations of misconduct and rorting on an extraordinary scale.

We have seen organisations like the AWU point out with the Suburban Rail Loop that the government's processing is allowing a green light for CFMEU-aligned labour hire firms and contractors to be able to run rampant on the Suburban Rail Loop. So we are seeing history repeat itself in the same way it has repeated itself over the last decade of this government. Is it any wonder the government does not want IBAC to have these powers? And here we are today, moving in this place a bill that would do just that.

As the Victorian Liberals and Nationals announced yesterday, we did include as part of our comprehensive package to tackle corruption and clean up Victoria that we would give IBAC follow-the-money powers. We would establish Construction Enforcement Victoria, backed by a construction code that works, and stamp out organised crime on government-funded projects. We would also introduce tough new laws, modelled on the racketeer-influenced and corrupt organisations laws in the United States, that will target criminal bosses who run organised crime networks, who continue to have influence on taxpayer-funded construction sites, and we will create a police taskforce to recover money stolen on government projects and work in conjunction with the Australian Federal Police.

This bill introduces a comprehensive definition of 'associated entity' covering contractors, subcontractors, agents, trustees, joint ventures, partnership arrangements and third-party providers linked to publicly funded work. The reform recognises a simple reality: public funds rarely move in a straight line from government to project delivery. They pass through multiple commercial relationships, layered contractual arrangements and complex financial structures. Where investigative powers stop at the first contractual boundary, large portions of public expenditure effectively sit behind

any meaningful oversight. This bill ensures investigators can follow public money through every stage of those arrangements.

Again, you have to wonder why Premier Jacinta Allan, who was responsible for major projects for the past decade, would not want those powers. Why does she not want those powers? Why won't she give IBAC the powers it has been requesting – eminently reasonable powers – to follow taxpayer money to where it has gone? Why does she not want to give IBAC those powers? We still have not had a clear explanation on why the Premier does not want to give IBAC those powers and why the Premier does not want a royal commission. We saw today about two-thirds of Victorians want a royal commission. An even higher number are very aware of the biggest construction scandal in Victorian history. As the member for Laverton pointed out, of course punters are speaking to her about the \$15 billion. They are speaking to me about the \$15 billion. I was at the Wallan market a couple of weeks ago, and that number was on everyone's lips. You would never see the member for Kalkallo at the Wallan market, but I was there, and everyone was coming up to me talking about the \$15 billion, just like they were going up to the member for McEwen and speaking to him about the \$15 billion. He very publicly does not have nice things to say about the Victorian government, so of course he was deflecting any blame. But this is something that every single Victorian is concerned about, and rightly so. They should be concerned about it.

These reforms equip IBAC with the tools required to scrutinise contemporary government spending structures. Around \$100 billion has flowed into major transport, construction and development projects across the state, and as I have outlined before, we have seen corruption on a scale of the likes of nothing in this country that we have ever seen – again, \$15 billion. We have seen corrupt officials transform the CFMEU in Victoria into a crime syndicate, selling Big Build jobs to bikies who treated worksites like drug distribution centres, as an explosive report alleges. We saw with the Hurstbridge rail line site taxpayer-funded cars used for hit jobs. Drug distribution, strippers, you name it – everything happened on that site, with competing gang members having a turf war over one government construction site. And you mean to tell me that did not contribute to any blowouts?

We saw pretty awful examples of corruption. We have seen contractors and workers on the North East Link being asked to pay \$5000 to get work on the site. How is that legal? We see contractors on the current Suburban Rail Loop sites being kicked off because they refused to pay a bribe. Again, the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, who loves to waffle in her answers to questions, refused to answer directly about those allegations that were reported to the Fair Work Commission and about whether she had been briefed on that situation on current Suburban Rail Loop sites. The same minister was reported as one of the only ministers backing in the Premier's call not to have a royal commission. I wonder why the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop does not want a royal commission when this corruption and coercion is happening right now on Suburban Rail Loop sites. This minister still is living in a fantasy land where the 2019 cost estimate of \$30 billion to \$34 billion is still within the target band, even though construction costs have increased by 20 per cent and even though the CFMEU is running rampant on SRL sites right now, kicking contractors off sites.

We saw that a professional hit was planned on Mr Irving after he took over the union. We saw that Mick Gatto makes \$5 million a year as a construction industry enforcer, which he denies. The union had a relationship with corrupt police, and ex-cons were paid \$300,000 a year for roles they did not fulfil. How do you go from exiting prison one week straight into a health and safety role on the government's Big Build, straight on to a six-figure salary on the government's Big Build, after you have just been in prison for violent and very serious offences? This is what is happening in Victoria. We all know a lot of those roles have very little to do with health and safety but are more about controlling the turf on government construction sites. I know how it is run, and those health and safety roles are being abused, which is why we need follow-the-money powers.

We saw a woman locked in a small room on a half-built state government hospital by a man previously jailed for violence against women who smoked ice in her face as he detained her. We saw another woman bashed by a bikie-linked health and safety representative on his lunchbreak from a

government-funded project in an attack caught on camera. Yet the government does not want a royal commission and the government does not want to give IBAC the powers it needs to follow the money to these contractors and where taxpayer money is going. You have to wonder why. Why does the Premier not want this, why does the Attorney-General not want this and why does the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop not want it when at least two of her ministers do want a royal commission and multiple backbench members do want a royal commission?

I tell you what: under Jess Wilson and our Liberals–Nationals team we will not be letting this go. This is not something that can be pushed to the side by a few announcements on legislation we have not seen. This is not something that the Premier can just avoid by going out for the day when there are bad news stories, as she always does. This is going to keep haunting this government all the way until November, when the good people of Victoria finally turf them out of office because they refused to back their calls for a royal commission. Over two-thirds of Victorians want one. You have refused the recommendation of IBAC to give them follow-the-money powers to follow the money where it goes.

\$15 billion has been lost in the biggest corruption scandal we have ever seen in the history of Victoria, and this government does not care. Think about what \$15 billion could have bought: 130,000 new nurses, teachers, coppers in our community to keep our community safe. Yet the government has to cut Parentline, VicHealth, our arts organisations. We have got the worst paid teachers. All sorts of other programs this government has had to cut, but \$15 billion can be lost on construction sites to the criminal underworld, a continuing pattern from this government to deny and block all accountability and all scrutiny. IBAC must be able to follow public money through every layer of contracting, subcontracting and associated commercial arrangements. It must be able to investigate any entity that benefits from taxpayer-funded work. It must be able to trace funds, examine relationships and expose misconduct wherever it occurs. We have seen the integrity body ask for stronger authority, and the government refuses to provide it.

This legislation strengthens the ability of integrity authorities to follow public money wherever it travels. It expands jurisdiction to reflect the structure of contemporary infrastructure delivery. It enhances investigative processes and reinforces accountability across complex contractual work. At a time when public concern about the management of major projects is widespread and deeply felt, where Labor have ultimately failed to protect the integrity of taxpayer funds, these reforms are necessary to restore confidence in the integrity of government spending. For those reasons, I commend the bill to the house.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:26): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for two weeks.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for two weeks.

Production of documents

Syrian repatriations

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (10:26): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes that it has been reported that:
 - (a) most of the 11 so-called ISIS brides and their 23 children returning from Syria will be resettling in Victoria;
 - (b) the Premier, the Honourable Jacinta Allan MP, has admitted that the government has known about the group's possible return as far back as September 2025;
- (2) requires the Leader of the Government, in accordance with standing order 10.01, to table in the Council, within three weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution, in full and unredacted:
 - (a) all briefs and correspondence between the Premier and the Department of Premier and Cabinet relating to the resettlement of ISIS brides; and

- (b) all briefs and correspondence received from the Commonwealth government relating to the resettlement of ISIS brides.

I rise to speak on my documents motion, which is asking the government for information on ISIS brides. It is something of deep concern to my community, as I know it is of deep concern to many members of the Victorian public, whereby we have seen that most of the 11 so-called ISIS brides and their 23 children returning from Syria will be resettled here in Victoria. The Premier has admitted that the government has known about the group's possible return as far back as September 2025, and so we are asking the government for all briefs and correspondence between the Premier and the Department of Premier and Cabinet relating to the resettlement of ISIS brides and all briefs and correspondence received from the Commonwealth relating to the resettlement of ISIS brides.

Members of my community, and indeed most Victorians, have been shocked by reports that most of the 11 so-called ISIS brides will be returning from Syria and resettling in Victoria. It has been a particular concern and sent a shiver down the spine of many Assyrian, Chaldean, Yazidi, Alawite, Shia Muslim and Druze constituents in my electorate who had their lives torn apart. They lost family and loved ones and fled the violence of ISIS. It is a horrifying thought that these women – who chose and made the very deliberate decision to leave Australia and go to a war zone to support the terrorist acts of ISIS – could now be able to walk freely down the same streets as those they captured, tortured and tormented. Any adult who has left Australia to align themselves with this barbaric terrorist organisation should not be welcomed back into our state.

I cannot put it better than the president of the Socio-Cultural Syriac association Mukhles Habash, who said:

The presence or return of individuals linked to such extremist ideology could threaten the sense of safety for our children in the future, especially as there is no place further than Australia we could turn to if this sense of security is lost.

For Mukhles and the 12,000 refugees who escaped and came to Australia, the atrocities of Islamic State were not things far away; they were their horrific lived experience. As a country and as a state who have welcomed people in, it is our first duty to protect them and make them feel safe. The Premier, as the leader of our state, shoulders that duty most of all. I think this is about leadership, and we know that the Premier, as far back as September of last year, knew about the likelihood of these ISIS brides returning to Victoria. Last month she admitted she had not bothered to raise this with her federal counterparts at all. I think that is a failure of leadership. It is simply not good enough to handball this to the Commonwealth government, say nothing and claim that the Victorian government is powerless to act. It is well established, including by former home affairs secretary Mike Pezzullo, that it is ultimately the states who will foot the bill and provide the services to these people as they arrive. As he said to a Senate estimates hearing a few years ago, ultimately if a state turned around and said, 'We don't want these people,' the federal government would have to take that very seriously. It is shocking to think that the tax dollars of law-abiding refugees who escaped the horrors of Islamic State could now be used to house, feed and clothe those who aided their terror.

It is well documented in multiple academic studies but also there are firsthand accounts from ISIS survivors who live in my electorate that these ISIS brides were not impartial observers who did not have any agency. They actively assisted with the enslavement of persecuted minorities. They assisted their husband-fighters with slavery, sex trafficking and trade, and the imprisonment of those that were persecuted. I know many in the Assyrian community who were captured for up to six months by ISIS, and they will tell you that these ISIS brides actively assisted – they actively took part in enslavement. So I think it is fair to ask the government for correspondence on this. I think, to his credit, the New South Wales Premier has been quite clear with his community on this. He has appeared to actively consult with affected communities. I think it is the duty of the state government to consult with those affected communities in the first instance to give them an opportunity to at least know what is happening – to know if these people are moving into their suburbs. I think that opportunity should be provided to people that have called Victoria home too.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (10:33): This is a matter that our government takes incredibly seriously. Yes, it is very much about leadership. Community safety is our number one priority – not politics, not headlines, but safety. I want to be incredibly clear from the outset that citizenship and travel decisions are made by the Commonwealth government. These are national security matters handled by federal agencies. Victoria does not issue passports, Victoria does not determine citizenship status and we will not participate in undermining the important work of our security agencies. Our responsibility here in Victoria is crystal clear. It is about keeping Victorians safe. It is about protecting our community's social cohesion. It is supporting the work of Victoria Police, including their work with federal agencies.

As Minister for Multicultural Affairs, social cohesion is something I take incredibly seriously, and it is at the heart of my work. When tensions are high, it is incumbent upon me – indeed it is incumbent upon all of us in this place – to listen to all communities and help to bring that tension down. No multicultural community is served by polarisation and division, and all multicultural communities suffer when they are subjected to racist and divisive rhetoric. Those opposite have shown that they are not truly interested in our social cohesion – in the idea that all Australians should be treated with respect and feel that they belong. They are only interested in finding another global crisis or point of tension – in this case one that is entirely within the remit of the Commonwealth government – to use it in their politics of division to inflame tensions and sow fear. This motion really does show how low Jess Wilson and the Liberal Party are willing to go to cosy up to Pauline Hanson and to One Nation.

Many Victorian families, particularly Assyrian, Chaldean, Syrian and Lebanese Christian communities, fled ISIS violence. Churches were destroyed, families were displaced, communities were terrorised – and so were Muslims. ISIS persecuted Muslims who rejected them. ISIS murdered Muslims. The vast majority of ISIS victims overseas were Muslim. The point I am making here is that trauma is real and it touches many parts of our community. It is why many of these communities, from so many different backgrounds, came to Australia seeking safety and freedom. I say to all of them: your safety matters. We will not allow anyone to divide them.

It is measured, thoughtful leadership that keeps communities safe and united, not whipping up fear, not inflaming tensions. It is rejecting extremism, clear and simple, not fuelling it. It is calling out racism and hate, not standing by those who peddle it, whether it is One Nation or the federal Liberal Party. It is supporting laws that make hate speech a crime, not voting against them. Not once have I heard any of those opposite condemn the hateful anti-Muslim comments of Pauline Hanson or the anti-Indian comments of Jacinta Price or the anti-immigration comments of Angus Taylor. Not once have I heard a condemnation from that side of the chamber. These are not mere assertions. This shows calculation. It is a political strategy; it is divisive and it is cynical.

Multicultural affairs is not a portfolio about culture wars, it is about trust in the community, and our government will never take that trust for granted. We will continue to work with our multicultural communities. Our government has strengthened coordination between state and federal agencies. We have invested in Victoria Police. We have continued to support traumatised communities no matter where they have fled persecution from. We have strengthened our anti-vilification protections, and we will continue to invest in social cohesion, because unity does not happen automatically, it requires leadership. The Liberals voted against our nation-leading anti-vilification laws because they were more focused on peace in their party room than peace in our community. There is a big difference between legitimate security and fearmongering, and Victorian communities frankly deserve better.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (10:38): It is the convention of this place to support documents motions on the basis of transparency, even if we do not support whatever purpose is being sought, and on that basis I suspect this motion may go through. But I cannot just let this pass without highlighting some of the disgraceful rhetoric that has been used, and in particular the use of the description 'ISIS brides' for the information this pertains to. It is not just a term that is used once; it is used repeatedly to describe these people and as the only description of these people. There were many

other words that could have been used, but the choice of 'ISIS brides' was a deliberate choice and demonstrates the kind of base dog whistling that has sadly become a feature of the Liberal Party in this country. It is dehumanising and reductive language that erases all nuance, context and agency of the women. The contemporary inability of politics to allow for nuanced, difficult discussions is a cancer on public discourse, particularly when it comes to sensitive issues like this. The public discourse around this has been frankly disgusting and perpetuated not only by politicians from all parties, including Labor, Liberal and One Nation and different members of those parties, but also by many parts of the media.

If there are national security risks, there are processes for dealing with that. No-one for a second is denying that those issues need to be considered. Professor Ben Saul, UN special rapporteur on counterterrorism and human rights, has said that any security risk can be effectively managed when the women return to Australia, but through proper processes, not just based on what Mr Mulholland thinks. If there are community concerns – and I am very aware of and sensitive to such concerns given the horrific experiences many members of our communities, as Minister Stitt has highlighted, have had due to ISIS actions – let us have the maturity to engage with these concerns and communities in a compassionate and thoughtful way. But the gross politicisation we have seen is doing nothing to address those issues. Instead it has been a race to the bottom, and to what end? It does not make anyone safer, and it certainly does nothing to make our communities more inclusive.

The circumstances that led to these Australian women ending up in Syria are varied and complex. While some may have gone willingly and actively supported ISIS, many were very young, some were coerced and manipulated and some became accidentally trapped while holidaying in neighbouring countries. Many have had children while detained indefinitely in these camps – children who are just that, children. But they too are being treated as political footballs rather than innocent lives caught up in horrendous circumstances through no choice of their own. All of these people are living in deplorable conditions and being indefinitely held unlawfully and arbitrarily. Even if you cannot see that and are unwilling to engage in sensible, nuanced, compassionate discussions, the reality is that Australia has a legal and national security obligation to repatriate, prosecute or reintegrate its citizens.

In any case, none of this is relevant to actions the Victorian government can take, but Mr Mulholland and the Liberal Party know this. Instead of showing leadership by demonstrating how we can have difficult conversations about difficult issues and helping to bring the community along with us, they bring this motion that is nothing more than a deeply cynical move aimed at stoking fear and division.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:42): Well, what do you say? Community safety is Labor's number one priority, but the same cannot be said for the Liberal Party, because when you stand with Pauline Hanson, you stand with the politics of hate, pure and simple. The coalition is eyeing victory using One Nation preferences. Jess Wilson has refused to rule out a preference deal with One Nation, while Jeff Kennett insists they make one. We know the price of that deal is spreading fear and hate in our community, and that is what this motion risks doing. We will not allow that division in Victoria, and we do not want to see communities being turned against each other for political gain, including by the conduct of the Shadow Minister for Multicultural and Multifaith Affairs.

This Labor government is governing for all Victorians, not seeking cheap headlines. Of course transparency is legitimate and important, but fear-based politics is not. Some politicians see every crisis as an opportunity to divide. We see these moments as a responsibility to protect. The multicultural affairs portfolio is one that centres on trust. It centres on restraint and respect and is about lowering the temperature when communities are hurting. But the shadow minister for multicultural affairs has demonstrated again and again his inability to distinguish between legitimate scrutiny of government and reckless fearmongering. When you inflame rather than reassure, you undermine cohesion; when you elevate fear over facts, you damage trust; and when you reopen trauma for political gain, you disqualify yourself from that role.

Victorian communities deserve better – better than what they are getting from the shadow minister for multicultural affairs and better than what they are getting from the Liberal Party. Victorians can see the shadow minister’s political wedge here. It is another example of what happens when you want to stand shoulder to shoulder with Pauline Hanson. This week it is 30 years since Pauline Hanson was elected to the House of Representatives with the word ‘Liberal’ next to her name on the ballot paper. The coalition is seeking victory on the back of One Nation preferences and singling out campaigns against multicultural communities to help get them there. You cannot claim to stand with multicultural communities while standing beside and doing deals with those who divide them. Communities deserve respect and not culture wars.

The question before us – aside from what is written on the notice paper and the motion before us – is really a question of leadership. Is this the kind of leadership in the multicultural affairs portfolio that the Liberal Party wants to see? Is this the kind of multicultural affairs agenda the Liberal Party wants in our community? Is this the kind of shadow minister’s conduct that the Leader of the Opposition expects and endorses? Will she continue to allow him to inflame tensions in our community? The trust that we seek with those communities depends on the standards that you uphold. As I said at the start of our remarks, community safety must come first; it must always come first. Unity, particularly with our multicultural communities, matters. Leadership matters when issues are sensitive, and on this matter today, these issues concern Australian citizens returning from a foreign conflict zone. As the minister said, it is the Commonwealth that has responsibility for immigration, for borders and for passports, and it has been for around the last 125 years. National security is a Commonwealth responsibility handled by federal agencies. Victoria is focused on our community safety, and that is our role. We do not want people to import division and hatred into Victoria. We do not want extremists here, and we do not want opportunistic politicians either.

Motion agreed to.

Data centres

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (10:47): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes that:
 - (a) the recent announcement of the government’s intention to ruthlessly attract more data centres to Victoria has raised concerns about the strain this will place on the state’s energy system and water resources;
 - (b) the government is fast-tracking planning approval for data centres with little or no sustainability or planning policies in place for them;
 - (c) local councils are seeing data centre companies seeking ministerial approval in order to bypass local council approval;
 - (d) on 17 February 2026, the Minister for Water stated that: ‘An expert review is being undertaken by DEECA’ (Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action) ‘with VicWater, the industry peak body, to ensure existing water-use policies for large industrial users, including data centres, keep pace with this rapidly emerging sector’;
- (2) requires the Leader of the Government, in accordance with standing order 10.01, to table in the Council, within 30 days of the house agreeing to this resolution, documents relating to the expert review, including:
 - (a) correspondence from the relevant minister to DEECA and VicWater instructing these agencies to undertake the review;
 - (b) the terms of reference for the review;
 - (c) any interim reports; and
 - (d) the reporting date for the final report of the review.

Victoria currently has over 40 centres, and we have been bombarded with breathless media releases about this government’s ambition to host many, many more to position Victoria as the AI and data

centre capital of Australia. The Premier has vowed to ruthlessly pursue investment with the promise of available land close to the city, serviced with water and power, all ready to be repurposed for the burgeoning industry. We are told these facilities will provide thousands of jobs and unlock billions in potential capital expenditure. While the economic benefits, which are questionable at best, are relentlessly spruiked by the government, the legitimate and growing concern around data centres' voracious energy and water consumption are not being addressed. There appear to be few guidelines on energy procurement, water use or location, and questions around who will ultimately bear the financial and environmental cost of these centres are left unanswered.

Last year the government announced a sustainable data centre action plan, with details to be released within weeks. But the release date for this plan is yet to be announced. There are no details of what it entails, but the plan continues to pop up in government statements. The recently released *Victoria: AI-Driven, Business-Ready – the Victorian Government's AI Mission Statement* trotted out the same quote – Labor's \$5.5 million sustainable data action plan is positioning the state as a 'national leader' in sustainable data centre investment. The mission statement uses the word 'sustainability' a few times in a sort of aspirational, nice-to-have kind of a way, but it is far more about attracting investment than explaining how this vision will actually impact upon Victorian communities. It reads:

Data centres, like all major infrastructure, need energy, water, planning and land allocation.

But data centres are not like other major infrastructure when it comes to energy and water use. By way of example, Greater Western Water is currently reviewing 19 applications for data centres – and that is only a small cross-section of those that are currently being applied for – which will consume nearly 20 megalitres of drinking water each year. That is the equivalent of around 4 per cent of Melbourne's total drinking water – or to put it another way, it is equivalent to filling up eight Olympic swimming pools every year. The Australian Energy Market Operator also estimates that data centres will use 19 per cent of Melbourne's electricity grid by 2050. But the Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs Danny Pearson seemed quite blasé about sustainability, telling the *Australian Financial Review*:

You put AI on a leash and you let it run ... If it starts to get away from you ... then you look at trying to say 'we need to intervene ...

So apparently the plan is to wait for the horse to bolt and then think about shutting the gate. In the US and Europe data centres are already competing with agriculture and residential consumption. The establishment of data centres in Europe threatens to up-end the EU climate law, which requires a reduction of net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55 per cent by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. Similarly, communities across the world are grappling with the strain placed on electricity networks by these energy-intensive facilities, and we face the same issues. With below average rainfall and water storage capacity falling, Victoria is on track to begin water restrictions by the end of the year. Will data centres face those same restrictions – 55 litres a day, perhaps?

Minister Tierney recently stated that an expert review is being undertaken by the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action with VicWater, the industry peak body, to ensure existing water use policies for large industrial users, including data centres, keep pace with this rapidly emerging sector. We welcome that. We are requesting documents relating to this review, including correspondence from the relevant minister to DEECA and VicWater instructing these agencies to undertake the review, the terms of reference for the review, any interim reports and the reporting date for the final report of the review.

These facilities are being fast-tracked for planning approval. We have a right to know what the Victorian government is doing to protect our water and energy needs, now and into the future. We are not asking to turn back time. These are important economic initiatives, but we know data centres and AI are here to stay, and we also know that the sector must be regulated. We need to mandate the use of recycled water and sustainable energy, and these regulations should be in place before these data facilities are approved and built. And we need assurances that the multinational companies building these hugely profitable facilities are footing the bill, not the Victorian public. So we are keen to

understand what the DEECA–VicWater expert review is doing, how it is doing it and when we will get the results. I commend the motion to the house.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (10:52): The AI revolution is well and truly underway, and the Allan Labor government is ensuring that Victorians can reap the benefits of the AI boom while protecting Victorians from the dangers that AI presents. One of the primary challenges of the explosion in use of AI is the impact that it has on the environment, particularly with its use of water. Data centres that house and run the computers that power AI are already supporting critical services like transport, health and banking, but they do consume vast amounts of water for cooling. The government's position is clear: these data centres must be sustainable in their water use. Our sustainable data centre action plan will draw billions of dollars in capital expenditure while ensuring that these centres fulfil their social licence to the community. The government already has very strong controls in place for the industrial use of water, and these new data centres are no different. Already the water corporations that are supplying these new centres are ensuring that they are designed with water efficiency in mind, whether that be through closed loop systems that only need to be filled once, whether that be through maintaining net zero water policies or whether that be through ensuring that these centres use recycled water, not water that would otherwise be used for drinking. I am recalling a recent contribution by the minister to say that they are actually looking at water alternatives, including some new technology that is currently in development.

I think it is an exciting time when it comes to the future of these data centres, because we are also ensuring that there are further safeguards in place to ensure that these data centres are doing the right thing by the communities that they are a part of. Like any non-residential water user, if these data centres were to utilise more than 100 megalitres of water in a year, that would be publicly reported by their supplying water corporation in their annual reports. Importantly, if they are using significant amounts of water, it is on them to be able to upgrade their own network capacity. These new data centres must strive to be efficient in their water use, they must report how much water they are using and they must upgrade their own network if they require more. Ultimately, and I have got to say this probably more than once, Victoria's water supply is for Victorians first. If these data centres want to be part of our community, that is great, but they must play by the rules. Victoria's water corporations assess large water applications submitted by data centres and will ultimately determine if they stack up within the broader planning framework. These data centres must not disrupt the water supply of existing or emerging communities. Water corporations have the final say when it comes to this decision, and if the data centre's very existence is going to affect the water supply of existing customers, then it will not be connected. These data centres could be a boon for jobs and investment in outer suburban Melbourne, but they must make sense within the broader social and environmental context.

In conclusion, the AI age represents both challenges and opportunities, and the government is getting the balance right. We are attracting significant investment in the state, but we are not doing so at the expense of Victoria's most precious environment and our water supply. Our government will always put the best interests of Victorians first, and we will ensure that our state's environmental and water regulations stay up to date and fit for purpose as these exciting new industries continue to emerge. I look forward to updates not only from the minister in this place but from industry and development as we see water alternatives possibly forming part of the cooling functions of AI centres across the state.

There are enormous opportunities in data centres, there is no doubt about it, and I have taken the time of late to familiarise myself with some of the opportunities from AI and also to further understand what risks they may pose to our state, not just in terms of water but in terms of data sovereignty and other issues that have presented themselves. I must confess that I have shifted quite significantly in my understanding and fears about AI of late. I would like to acknowledge some folks that have taken the time to patiently – very patiently – explain to me the enormous opportunities that come from AI. Ultimately, they need to be powered by data centres, and it is only right and just that we consider data centres very much here in our own state as they power the industries and businesses that keep us thriving.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (10:57): I am pleased to rise to speak to Mr Ettershank's motion 1302 about data centres and the background and systems behind them and compliment him on bringing this motion to the chamber. It is a timely motion. It is a motion that focuses on one key problem area, challenge area, of these data centres, and I hasten to add at the start that there are many more. But nonetheless this is a very welcome contribution to bringing into the public domain a lot of information that is needed for the community and those who are interested in these matters to make proper decisions.

Mr Ettershank talks about the attraction of data centres, and I think we all see the importance of data centres and what they can add, both with AI and more broadly into the future, and support general efforts to bring such centres to Victoria. It is a competition between us and New South Wales and indeed overseas jurisdictions as well, and to that end that makes it more important, not less important, that we get the systems right. It makes it more important that the assessments are done more adequately, and it makes it more important that the energy and water and planning matters are all focused on up-front and got right. We cannot, as Mr Ettershank said, let the horse bolt and then go and try and catch it afterwards. That is the wrong way to go around it. The right way to go around it is to get these principles and planning steps in place.

We have seen some very fast planning turnarounds, I might say – I think about 80 days with the Fishermans Bend one in the recent period – with the fast-tracking of these planning approvals. That is almost so fast that local communities and those involved nearby or who have an interest will hardly have processed the application by that stage. I have read the documents for that centre. I must say, whilst they do touch on many issues, they are not touched on in great depth. I just think that is an example of a planning amendment approach that is quite wholly inadequate. Eighty days is a fast track, but do we feel that the water and energy issues for that centre and the impact on other groups nearby have been dealt with? No, they have not.

This motion focuses heavily on water and the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action and VicWater, and no doubt Melbourne Water is involved here as well. I have yet to see anything that makes me assured that the state government have understood that they cannot just raid our general water supplies. It seems to me that we do actually have quite a lot of recycled water and the capacity for more recycled water in Melbourne, and we ought to be looking at where we can actually locate some of these centres that will utilise that and also even captured water. These things have huge roofs for a start. Why are we not requiring these to be employed at a minimum as a start?

These are all legitimate points. The government speaker pointed to the issue of sustainable water use. There is little sign that the government is actually applying such a test to these centres at this point. Then there is the issue of energy. I know Mr Bowen has had a bit to say about that recently, saying the data centres have got to bring their own energy with them. I think that is probably a little unsophisticated, but the point behind it has got some merit. There does need to be a contribution to the grid from some of these groups if they are going to be extracting large amounts of power from the grid. The stability of the grid is one issue, and it is not only the stability to keep the grid going; if these data centres come off, the actual change in the grid, the step-back in usage, is significant on the grid itself. Many of them have alternate sources of power, diesel generators principally – which, given the data centres have got to have consistency of power, I understand is a bit like a hospital. As a former health minister, we actually devoted a lot of time to thinking about how the diesel generators would cut in and out as required and so forth. It is a similar point: you have obviously got to have that backup power. But nobody seems to be focused and I do not think the Australian Energy Market Operator is focused sufficiently at this point on what is going to be required.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (11:03): The government will not oppose this documents motion, as per convention. But wow, if anyone ever needed some clarity about the lack of policy that the Liberal Party do have, whether it be on energy, water or anything broadly, that 5-minute ramble from Mr Davis absolutely pinpointed it. We have new tech, emerging technology, that is critically important to our state. It is important to businesses, it is important to our skilled workforces and it is

essential that we are able to roll this technology forward. As I just highlighted, the Liberals have no plan to bring to the Victorian people about how they are going to do that, whereas on the other hand we have got the Greens, who just want to roll down the shutters and not enable anything. We heard Mr Ettershank this morning – I congratulate him – talking about his big uptake of social media and TikTok. As we all know, when you are getting that many likes, it puts a big data demand on the system for all of us using our social media and our AI, which has taken off at a rate of knots. We have to meet the moment.

The reason why data centres are such a critical issue to meet the moment, as I have highlighted, is jobs, technology and everything we need as a state and as part of a nation to stay relevant and to stay at the front of developing economically within the world. We have to make sure we get the water and the energy right. We know energy is a piece that this government has been committed to and has worked on over decades to ensure that we have the renewable technology to meet the demands of our industry, of our manufacturers and of our homes. At this moment we are talking about data centres, but it has been the same with water. It is Labor that has done the work over decades to ensure the policies and the investments have been in place to deliver the needs of industry. This particular industry, which currently takes up 2 per cent of Victoria's power demand, 70 per cent of which is renewable, is one that we want to make sure we get right. I am currently on an inquiry into oil and gas decommissioning. It has been a major sector for Victoria in providing cheap, affordable, reliable energy for Victorians for decades, but now we are in the decommissioning process and we need to ensure we do that right.

With every new technology and every new sector that has massive investment that rolls out across our state, we quite rightly need to give the attention to what it does to those major draws on energy, water, decommissioning and environmental effects. In this case we have also got to give due concern to impacts on community, because when these centres are going in amongst communities we need to make sure, from early construction to operation, with the many benefits they bring, that we are able to ensure that communities can live nearby and either mitigate or reduce any impacts on those communities.

I thank Mr Ettershank for bringing this forward. It is a topic that will see ongoing focus, as the government has had in recent years. We will continue to focus on it so that we can ensure that Victorian workers, Victoria's economy and our productivity can stay at the forefront of global innovation. I will leave my comments there.

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Small business support

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (11:07): I move:

That this house:

(1) notes that:

- (a) small businesses across Victoria face escalating pressures including rising taxes, soaring energy costs, regulatory burden and increasing retail theft in shopping strips and town centres;
- (b) the Business Council of Australia's *Regulation Rumble 2025* again ranks Victoria last in the nation for cost and regulatory burden, while nearly 40 per cent of surveyed regional business have experienced their worst performance in history over the last six months according to Victorian Regional Chamber Alliance's business health survey report October 2025;
- (c) the Allan Labor government has now confirmed it will spend approximately \$40 million of taxpayers money defending a class action brought by around 16,000 small businesses;
- (d) the government has reportedly paid approximately \$2.8 million to a California-based economist, engaged at rates of about \$US950 per hour, to argue that affected businesses should have insured themselves against pandemic losses, that compensation would create a 'moral hazard', and that

lockdowns were economically beneficial for many traders, a proposition widely regarded by small business owners as bizarre, insulting and dismissive of their experience;

- (e) small and medium businesses are the backbone of communities across metropolitan and regional Victoria and employ the overwhelming majority of Victorians;
- (2) expresses its regret that, at a time of mounting pressure on small enterprises, the government has prioritised significant non-Victorian legal and consultancy expenditure over practical support; and
- (3) calls on the government to restore conditions in which small businesses can operate with confidence, fairness and security.

I rise to speak on the motion that I am moving in relation to small business, motion 1303 on the notice paper. It refers to small businesses across Victoria facing escalating pressures, including rising taxes, soaring energy costs, regulatory burden and increasing retail theft in shopping strips and town centres. I move this motion because the situation facing small businesses across Victoria has become very serious. It is more than a cyclical downturn; it looks worryingly like a structural crisis, and it is driven in large part by the policy settings of this state Labor government. The evidence is varied, anecdotal and statistical, but taken together it is conclusive.

First of all, here are some independent assessments. For the second consecutive year the Business Council of Australia's *Regulation Rumble 2025* report ranked Victoria dead last in Australia for overall cost and regulatory burden – not middle of the road or second last but absolutely the worst. Victoria is ranked last for property taxes and charges, last for licensing requirements and last for payroll tax. This is the independent assessment of Australia's peak business organisation. CPA Australia agrees. Elinor Kasapidis, their chief of policy, said:

Regrettably, Victoria is seen by most small and large businesses as the least attractive Australian state or territory in which to invest because of its high taxes and reputation for over-regulation ...

That is the professional assessment of a respected accounting body. The NAB regulatory impact analysis says the same thing. The ratings agencies are sounding alarm bells. Even the Reserve Bank warns that excessive government regulation crowds out private investment and destroys productivity. Everyone who matters says similar – everyone except this government. The tax environment actively penalises growth. Victoria operates one of the lowest default payroll tax thresholds in Australia. Payroll tax applies when combined wages reach \$1 million. Most other jurisdictions offer higher thresholds, ranging from \$1.2 million in New South Wales to \$2.5 million in the Northern Territory. On top of that base, larger businesses face the mental health and wellbeing surcharge and the COVID-19 debt temporary payroll tax surcharge, costs that still contribute to Victoria's overall reputation for high business taxation. Even small businesses are hit by land tax, the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund levy, rising energy prices and soaring WorkCover premiums, including businesses that have never made a claim. The compounding effect is devastating.

Just last week I was sent by constituents a letter which Bonney Energy, a bulk fuel supplier, have had to send to their Victorian customers, announcing a freight cost increase effective 1 March. The letter lists the reasons: driver wage increases, government and statutory cost increases, rising operating and compliance costs and increased toll charges associated with the West Gate Tunnel Project. I did not have to dredge that letter up from the archive. It came this week. It is the kind of letter I get all the time, and every one of those dot points traces back to a government decision. That 25 cents per litre lands on every small business that relies on fuel deliveries, and those businesses then absorb it or pass it on to customers who are already cutting back.

At the national level the data is grim. A November 2025 MYOB study found that 80 per cent of surveyed small to medium enterprises reported revenue had decreased or remained stagnant. The Council of Small Business Organisations Australia reported that 64 per cent of small businesses recorded lower profits over the past year, that 60 per cent were at times unable to pay themselves a wage and that almost half considered closing or exiting in the next 12 months. The Australian Securities and Investments Commission reported that 14,722 companies entered external administration in 2024–25, up 33 per cent on the prior year. The ATO's collectable debt stock has

swollen to \$52.8 billion, a record high, and two-thirds is owed by small business. The Small Business Debt Helpline reported a 21 per cent increase in cases, with a median debt of around \$70,000.

Closer to home, the regional Victorian story is even more troubling. The Victorian Regional Chamber Alliance, chaired by Jodie Gillett of Commerce Ballarat, found in its business health survey that just under 40 per cent of respondents said their performance in the last six months was the worst in living memory. One business said:

We are planning to close and sell the land within 12 months and leave Victoria.

Another said:

Some weeks a wage is taken, other weeks a wage simply can't be taken.

And another:

We take home \$100 each plus ... rent ...

Others spoke of drawing on savings to make it through and said:

Having to deal with owing money and stress is at an all time high.

One submission was short but clear:

The increase in taxes in all areas has just destroyed all profits.

These are not isolated complaints. They are voices of an entire sector in distress, and the compliance burden compounds the financial pressure.

Council of Small Business Organisations Australia chief executive Skye Cappuccio notes that small business owners are already spending almost a day a week on regulatory paperwork. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry's small business conditions survey found that more than 49 per cent of respondents cited government regulation as significantly affecting their business. A separate survey found 61 per cent of small businesses spend over \$20,000 annually just on compliance. We also know that capital is leaving Victoria. Business groups, including the Property Council of Australia, have reported that a retail investor recently withdrew significant capital from the state, citing the policy and regulatory environment. When businesses and investors are actively choosing Queensland or South Australia over Victoria on this scale, it is a damning verdict on this government's choices.

When I spoke last sitting week in the tributes to Alan Scanlan I did not want to be too political, but in researching that contribution I came across a quote which really shows how far our state has fallen. In his maiden speech in 1961 he observed:

We, in Victoria, are most conscious of the fact that 50 per cent. of the capital which has been attracted to the Commonwealth has been drawn to this State, and this has meant the establishment of new industries and the extension of existent ones. Our population is continually increasing, and Victoria has established itself as the political, cultural and economic leader of the Commonwealth.

Nobody could seriously make a similar argument about our economy now, and responsibility for that lies squarely with this anti-business Labor government, or rather this anti-small and medium business Labor government. They might be happy with big unions and big business, but anyone else is crowded out by procurement rules and complex, expensive and time-consuming tendering processes, as well as diversity quotas, all of which only the largest businesses can begin to navigate.

On the topic of the Big Build, big corruption and poorly managed state infrastructure, one example of this is something I raised in this place recently. The Big Build's Pakenham roads upgrade has seen prolonged road closures on Bald Hill Road devastate local traders. Pakenham Bulk Foods suffered an 80 per cent collapse in sales. The owner struggled to find the rent, and the council was still pursuing her for rates. Over a thousand people signed a petition demanding government assistance. These are

not big corporations with deep pockets. They are mum-and-dad businesses, and the government is destroying their livelihoods without so much as a conversation.

Then there is the retail crime epidemic. Figures from the Crime Statistics Agency show total recorded offences have surged 15.7 per cent, the highest level since reporting began. Retail theft is up 47 per cent to 18,644 alleged offender incidents. In my electorate in Geelong thefts soared from 5530 cases to 7281 in a single year, and nearly half of all crimes remain unsolved. The human stories behind those statistics are shocking. Just this week we learned that Squires Loft restaurant in Geelong West has been broken into three times in less than two years, including an incident where thieves stole a 100-kilogram safe containing thousands of dollars. Nearby Model Citizen Beauty was targeted four times in a matter of months, forcing the owner to lock the doors while inside the salon just to operate safely. She described the area as the 'Wild West'. When I visited Geelong a few months ago with our then Shadow Minister for Police and Corrections David Southwick, local traders told us almost despairingly that they do not even bother reporting theft anymore. There is just no point. This is the broken windows theory in action: when low-level crime is ignored, police are under-resourced and offenders face no consequences, decline accelerates. The only business apparently booming in parts of Geelong is the one installing security grilles.

I want to turn now to another example of this government's extraordinary treatment of small business – the COVID-19 class action. It has emerged in recent days through reporting in the *Age* and through the commencement of court proceedings just how much this government is prepared to spend fighting the very businesses it harmed. Over 16,000 businesses have joined a class action seeking damages for the financial devastation caused by the 112-day lockdown in 2020 – a lockdown entirely seeded by the state's failed quarantine program, which killed 768 people. Rather than support the traders it harmed, the Allan Labor government has confirmed it will spend approximately \$40 million of taxpayers money to aggressively defend the case in a 12-week Supreme Court trial beginning on 10 March.

That alone is troubling enough, but the nature of the defence they are offering is what is truly offensive. The government has engaged a California-based economist, Christopher Pleatsikas, at a rate of approximately \$1400 an hour, for about 2000 hours of work. That is an estimated \$2.8 million of Victorian taxpayer money sent to a single consultant in California. What does \$2.8 million buy? Pleatsikas argued that compensating businesses for the lockdown would create a moral hazard because businesses should have acquired private pandemic insurance or developed their own risk mitigation strategies after the first lockdowns. He went further, arguing the pandemic was actually economically beneficial for many traders due to post-lockdown upswings – actually beneficial for many traders. I cannot imagine what it must feel like for a small business owner who lost everything to read that. Damian Scattini, the principal solicitor acting for the 16,000 businesses, is quoted as refuting this argument:

If any business rang their insurance broker in 2020 and said, 'I anticipate there might be a pandemic. I'd like to have insurance coverage', the broker would have said that was excluded.

Pandemic insurance was simply unavailable. Scattini rightly asked:

Why spend so much money running spurious arguments like no one lost money, and it's a moral hazard to compensate people? Why not just do the right thing?

Caterina Borsato, a hospitality business owner and one of the plaintiffs, is in the same situation as thousands of others. She said:

Small business is not equipped to deal with these sorts of things – they are often mum-and-dad businesses ...

...

If this so-called expert thinks it is that easy, it is not ... Nobody understood the magnitude of this.

The proposition that Victorian mum-and-dad businesses should have out-planned the state government's own pandemic response and that compensating them for a government-seeded

lockdown is a moral hazard is widely regarded by small business owners as bizarre, insulting and dismissive of their experience. The government is paying \$2.8 million to a Californian consultant to argue this, while simultaneously telling Victorian businesses to tighten their belts.

This goes to the heart of why things are so bad. Labor, by and large, have never run a business, do not understand business and fundamentally do not trust business. There is a profound misunderstanding on the left that imagines national and international corporations are typical of business. They are not. Seventy per cent of businesses in Australia which employ any staff employ fewer than five people. In Western Victoria 95 per cent employ fewer than 20. From some slightly dated, but I am sure still representative, figures of the 27,574 businesses in my electorate, just 38, 0.14 per cent, employ more than 200 people – just 0.14 per cent. Despite this, so much legislation treats all employers alike, as if every small business has an HR department, a legal team and deep cash reserves. They do not – I can tell you they do not. You cannot have workers rights without workers. You cannot protect employees if there are no employers willing to take the risk of keeping the doors open. Every business that closes, every business that moves interstate and every business that decides Victoria is too hard, equals jobs lost and families without income.

This motion calls on the government to restore conditions in which businesses can operate with confidence, fairness and security. That means cutting red and green tape, not adding to them. It means competitive tax settings, not the worst in the nation; it means adequately resourcing police to tackle crime; it means properly supporting business disrupted by state infrastructure projects; and it means having the basic decency not to spend \$40 million of taxpayers money, including nearly \$3 million to a Californian consultant, insulting the very businesses the government's own failures have harmed. I commend the motion to the house and urge everybody on the crossbench to stand up for the small businesses of Victoria, the people who employ the vast majority of workers in the state, and I call on this government to listen to them, understand them and support this motion.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (11:27): I would like to thank those opposite and Mrs McArthur for the opportunity to once again talk about the economic performance of our great state, the wonderful supports the Allan government provide to small business in this state and particularly the vital role of small businesses in keeping our economy thriving – providing employment and delivering goods and services, particularly in rural and regional areas, where they truly are the centre of our communities – and to provide them with a little bit of education about the real metrics of performance. I note that this time it is Mrs McArthur that is giving me this opportunity; what a nice change. It is usually Mr Davis who repeats the same tired lines, running down our state. Perhaps some of the education finally sank in. It is a shame Mrs McArthur did not meet with the experts on small business on her recent trip to Europe funded by Victorian taxpayers, and what a shame that she could only fit in three days of meetings in her month-long trip. That is a disappointment. She might perhaps have had some time to learn about how to support small businesses. Never mind, we are here to help.

Let us look at some of the facts, not the cherrypicking nonsense trotted out by those opposite. In the latest data – I know you are allergic to data over there – on jobs and unemployment just out today, across Victoria 4000 new jobs were created in January, powering continued growth across the state. The Victorian unemployment rate dropped by 0.3 of a percentage point to just 4.2 per cent. Wages are growing too. Over the last year Victorian wages grew by 3.3 per cent, well above the average over the decade.

Regional Victoria is leading the nation with an impressive regional unemployment rate of 3.7 per cent, equal best with Western Australia, and may I say again that 2.8 per cent is the figure for unemployment in my home city of Warrnambool. Regional unemployment has fallen by a remarkable 2.4 percentage points since 2014, showing long-term sustained improvement. Something must be going right. 59,900 jobs have been created in regional Victoria in the past five years. Employment in regional Victoria has increased by 139,900. That is 21 per cent since November 2014. That does not sound like

a poorly performing economy to me. Victoria has added more than 123,000 businesses since June, and that is the net figure – almost a 20 per cent increase, the most of any other state or territory.

Bev McArthur interjected.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Sorry, these are the facts. Business investment in the September quarter was up 3.6 per cent, the fastest quarterly growth in over two years. NAB has named Melbourne as Australia's most entrepreneurial neighbourhood, with a 12 per cent increase in the number of business accounts opening and six of the top 10 fastest growing postcodes for new businesses located in Melbourne. Just last November the Premier announced the state's first major subsea fibre-optic cable and the return of international flights to Avalon Airport. Let us have a look at the list. Victoria will soon be the home of Quantum Brilliance, a world-first commercial quantum diamond foundry; NEXTDC's \$2 billion next generation digital campus in Fishermans Bend; an Asia Pacific \$300 million manufacturing base in Dooen – in case you do not know, that is potato chips, plenty of potato chips for those in Horsham and the rest of the state; leading sports technology company Sportable's Asia Pacific headquarters; and Mondelēz International's new state-of-the-art national distribution centre at Truganina. Billions and billions of investment dollars are flowing into Victoria. That does not sound like a place that is bad to do business in to me.

Our record on supporting small business is clear. The hand-waving nonsense from those opposite just does not stack up when you look at the facts. Since we have come to government we have cut taxes over 76 times, including, again, increasing the payroll tax threshold to \$1 million from 1 July 2025, up from a \$700,000 threshold two years before. Over 6000 small businesses now no longer pay a cent of payroll tax, and 26,000 businesses will pay reduced payroll tax, saving up to \$14,550 per year. These are savings those opposite tried to block. Let me repeat that: these are savings that those opposite tried to block. Importantly, we have given businesses in regional Victoria a 75 per cent discount on payroll tax. Particularly for those who are subject to payroll tax, this recognises the importance of small business in regional Victoria. Perhaps this discount explains the low unemployment rate in Warrnambool.

Payroll tax is not the only way we have streamlined and supported small businesses. We have abolished stamp duty on commercial and industrial property, replacing it with a more efficient annual tax based on unimproved land value. We have abolished business insurance duty over a 10-year period up to 30 June 2034. This will save businesses around \$830 million over the first five years. All of this has been done as part of a long-term, well-thought-out strategy. It was not just willy-nilly, based on a handful of metrics selected on some vague notion of 'regulatory burden' touted by Jess Wilson and her former employer the Business Council of Australia. Our *Economic Growth Statement* sets the framework for supporting small business, with a 10-year plan to unlock industrial land; a streamlined single entry point for businesses on all investment-related engagements within the Victorian government; assisting more small and medium-sized businesses to take their products to global markets and helping them identify new markets and break into a diversified customer base; halving the number of business regulators by 2030; and replacing paper-based or outdated digital processes, streamlining licensing and other approvals and addressing pain points for businesses. The Allan Labor government is working towards our target to slash the regulatory burden on business to the tune of \$500 million by 2030.

We have got a plan that is working and we are delivering for Victorians, while the only strategy those opposite can come up with is cuts, cuts and more cuts. When they were last in power the Liberals cut health and education. Families paid the price. In Warrnambool TAFE was cut and 70 jobs were lost last time those opposite were in power, and I do not think we can trust them with free TAFE. Now they have an \$11.1 billion black hole in their budget over there, and that means cuts that make life harder and jobs lost. The economy will slow – a familiar story. They are too busy fighting each other to fight for Victorians. Perhaps if Mrs McArthur had taken a few of her colleagues on the educational trip with her, they would not have felt the need to leak this to the media. I will leave my remarks there, and despite having a large number –

Bev McArthur interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Mrs McArthur, please. You have had your contribution.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I will leave my remarks there. There is plenty to say about the other sections in Mrs McArthur's motion, and I will leave it to my colleagues to tear those apart with pleasure.

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (11:37): I rise today to speak in support of this motion 1303 put forward by Mrs Bev McArthur and to address the matter of the growing urgency affecting communities across metropolitan regions and regional Victoria and the mounting pressure faced by our small businesses. Small businesses are the backbone of our state economy. They are the cafes on our corners, the mum-and-dad and family-owned shops on our high streets, the tradespeople, the service providers and the employers of most Victorians. Yet today they are under extraordinary restraint. We are witnessing rising taxes under this Labor government, soaring energy costs, expanding government burdens and red tape and a surge in retail crime, which together are pushing many operators to the brink.

The Business Council of Australia's *Regulation Rumble 2025* has once again ranked Victoria last in the nation for cost and governing burdens, a deepened concern and reflection of the pressure placed on the very businesses that keep our economy functioning. Compounding this, the Victorian Regional Chamber Alliance's business health survey report from October 2025 reveals that nearly 40 per cent of regional businesses have recorded their worst performance in history in the past six months. This is not just economic data, it is the lived reality of thousands of local business owners who are struggling to keep doors open. You only have to walk down your local street to see how many shops are closed. Just count. You see doors after doors closed. That is just the lived reality under this Labor government.

I want to draw attention to an issue that goes to the heart of government accountability and the burdens placed on Victorian taxpayers. A recent report has confirmed that the Allan Labor government is set to spend approximately \$40 million of public funds defending a massive class action brought by thousands of small businesses. These mum-and-dad businesses suffered significant financial loss during Victoria's second wave of COVID-19 lockdowns, an outbreak linked to the failure of the state's hotel quarantine program. Just imagine how long ago the lockdown was. Just bring back your memories. The class action involves thousands of affected business owners and is now moving towards three months of Supreme Court trial. The government's decision to commit \$40 million of taxpayers funds to defend the class action underscores how consequential these decisions were for these businesses across our state at a time when many small operators are still recovering from the enormous legal spending rise. There are serious questions about the priorities of this government, transparency from this government and responsibility from this government. Our business communities deserve clarity, fairness and a government that works with them, not against them. This case is more than just a legal battle. It is a reminder of the lasting impact of the Labor government's policies and decisions and the importance of safeguarding both livelihoods and public trust. Public trust is the key.

Nowhere is the crisis felt more acutely than in Melbourne's Western Metropolitan Region. I will give you an example in Werribee. Traders have been confronting an alarming escalation in retail theft and violent incidents. Local business owners have gone to the media to say they have gone out of their wits, describing theft, drug activities and disorder, reaching a climax along Watton Street down where my office is. Some traders are so distressed that they are beginning to discuss the possibility of hiring private security and forming vigilante groups because they feel there is no meaningful action being taken to protect them by this government. When small business owners in our community feel that they must contemplate hiring security guards just to run a business or patrolling their own streets at night, something is profoundly wrong in the community.

Across Victoria the picture is much the same. Data shows that business theft surged 20 per cent in 2025, with Victoria recording the highest share of theft claims, around 40 per cent of the national figure. Cafes, salons, retail operators – these are the heart of our shopping strips and are losing cash, tools, stock and equipment at a rate that they can no longer absorb. This is a crisis impacting both economic viability and community safety. Retail crime is not a victimless offence. For small business operators on tight margins, even single theft incidents can wipe a weekly profit. Repeat theft can spell closure, as we have seen. Small business owners are calling out for help.

We need to know the department is listening. So today this motion moved by my colleague calls for some meaningful action. Instead of spending \$40 million of taxpayers funding on a class action, why don't we instead spend it on regulatory reform, a comprehensive reduction of unnecessary red tape ensuring small businesses can open effectively and competitively; relief from rising costs; targeted financial assistance to help businesses manage their stock, rising energy costs and operating expenses; a stronger response to retail theft; increased police resources at known black spots, including Melbourne's west, where my electorate is; and a cooperative approach between state agencies, local councils and business groups to restore safety for our shopping strips?

I want to end: the success of Victoria depends on the success of small businesses. They are not asking for special treatment, only a fair chance to survive, to grow and to contribute to the communities they strengthen every day. At this moment they are telling us clearly they cannot weather these challenges alone. I ask members to support this motion. The Parliament must listen. We must act, and we must stand with small businesses that stand with us.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:43): I am pleased to rise to speak to and mop up some of the mess that Mrs McArthur has left for us and see if we can get to the bottom of some of the points that she has made in her wideranging and odd contribution today. I see that she has nicked Mr Davis's cherry picker and she has reversed it right into the chamber once again, right on cue for a Wednesday, picking out a few things here and there that help her to craft the narrative that she is so desperately clinging on to and that the Liberal Party in this state are so desperately clinging on to as they continue their efforts to talk down this great state and the many enterprising people that are out there running small businesses, starting small businesses in this state, in many such cases with the full support of the government and its policies, which I will get to in just a moment.

Speaking of cherry-picking, Mrs McArthur, you have elected to quote extensively in your motion from a fairly curious report – not so much curious for what it says but for what it explicitly omits. Let us talk about payroll tax, which is one of the biggest levers that the state governments can have to positively or negatively affect business in this state, and let us look at the record of reforms that this government has made. The report explicitly only focuses on top-level rates of payroll tax, which is convenient for the Liberal Party to quote from because that means that it completely ignores the raising of the tax-free threshold up to \$1 million.

Bev McArthur: One million dollars? Have you ever been in business? Do you know where \$1 million goes?

Michael GALEA: The Liberal Party might want to ignore that, but I can tell you that, for the 32,000 small businesses in this state who are going to either pay no payroll tax as a result of this change or pay much less payroll tax as a result of that, that is no small deal to them. Whilst you talk that down, I find it extraordinary, Mrs McArthur, that you try to assume or infer that Labor says all business is big business. But you are the ones quoting from a report that explicitly excludes payroll taxes for small businesses in its calculations. They are talking to the big end of town. So are you of course, but you like to frame it in small business because you think it sounds more palatable. But we are getting on with delivering those improvements, and the payroll tax increased threshold is an excellent example of that. You are using the figures for big business to try and say that small businesses are hurting as a result, which is actually you guys confusing the two.

Bev McArthur interjected.

Michael GALEA: And now you are trying to deflect to another issue because you do not have an answer to it, because you know you are only talking to the top end of town and using reports designed to benefit them and trying to broaden that across small business. Well, small businesses in this state – 32,000 of them – are better off as a result of the payroll tax reforms made.

Let me tell you about some other businesses in this state that are beneficiaries of payroll tax reforms that this government has made, and those are regional businesses, because Victoria now has the lowest regional payroll tax rate anywhere in the country. Businesses in regional Victoria are paying lower payroll tax than anywhere else in this nation because of the direct actions of this government to repeatedly lower it. I note that the report that you quote from – and you have to deflect and deflect and deflect because the report that you quote from –

Bev McArthur interjected.

Michael GALEA: Let me quote from it, Mrs McArthur:

We have not accounted for regional rates in our rankings.

Wow. This is a report that not only speaks just to the top end of town; it explicitly – it says it in black and white – is ignoring regional Victorian businesses. So you are coming in here today, Mrs McArthur, and you are ignoring these the regional small businesses in this state by trying to conflate that with a report that is designed for the top end of town in Collins Street and equate it to what is happening in regional high streets across this state. You have completely ignored it. You have completely ignored the fact that regional payroll taxes in Victoria are the lowest anywhere in the nation, because it is convenient for you to do so. It is convenient for you to use a report that is designed for the top end of town and conflate that with everything else.

Ms Ermacora has already gone through and extensively laid out many of the investments that are being made of course. We have seen 123,000 businesses start in this state since June 2020, a 20 per cent increase in fact and the highest of any state or territory. You also conveniently left that fact off the cherry picker as you drove it into the chamber today, Mrs McArthur. You forgot that one too, and the fact that 59,000 jobs were created in Victoria in the past year. Indeed I note the comments from Ms Ermacora citing the NAB index showing that Melbourne is Australia's entrepreneurial hub, as it were. Six out of the 10 national postcodes are in the Melbourne metropolitan area for the top entrepreneurial activity in this nation, and that is a reflection of what happens when you have a government that is not focused on the top end of town or on doing deals with One Nation but on working with working people and small business owners and changing the settings that actually make a difference, such as the payroll tax threshold increasing and such as regional payroll tax rates as well. This is just typical of a party that is all focused on cynicism and driving this state down, rather than delivering for Victorians.

We are straying a little bit here, but I would draw the house's attention to – and nothing at all against my colleague Ms Tyrrell, but I do question, since you raised it – which of your colleagues on these benches are currently actively going around saying that they are going to join One Nation? Which is it? Do we know? Well, we do know who it is. We know multiple of your colleagues are going around saying that they wish to join One Nation, and candidates who are being specifically endorsed by Jess Wilson are apparently going around telling people that they are going to defect to One Nation. I do not know who that might be – we probably have some idea – but that is just testament to a party for which the wheels are completely falling off because there is no unity, there is no discipline, and you have a leader who is actively going out and endorsing these people despite them going out and making these threats against the party. No wonder things are going so poorly for you.

I would like to come to another thing that Mrs McArthur raised, which is something that this government takes very seriously, through actions that we have undertaken previously and currently, and that is addressing retail crime in this state. Mrs McArthur, you may find this interesting. We have

not only brought in new laws that bring in tougher penalties for people that assault or violently abuse retail workers; we are also bringing in workplace protection orders this year that will be able to exclude violent and repeat offenders in stores. We have successfully delivered Operation Pulse over the summer period. I will happily tell you more about that later today, Mrs McArthur, if you like. I know that the Liberals are opposing PSOs being rolled out to shopping centres, but I can tell you the feedback to this has been nothing short of phenomenal from the community – the support from retailers, from the retail companies themselves, from retail workers and indeed from the customers who feel safer shopping at centres such as Fountain Gate in my electorate and many more across the state as well. That is the operation that you would claw back – that you would cut.

Speaking of things that you would cut, we have also brought in tougher bail laws, tougher sentencing laws, adult time for violent crime and the violence reduction unit to get early interventions into place – another thing that a Liberal MP endorsed specifically by Jess Wilson has said that she would cut. We have had adjournments in this place calling on the violence reduction unit to be cut, yet then you turn around with an apparent straight face, Mrs McArthur, claiming to care about retail crime when you are actively calling for the programs that we are putting into place to address this issue to be cut – because that is all that you would do, is cut, cut, cut. You have an \$11 billion budget black hole, and your plan is just to cut things further. You want to cut the violence reduction unit. You want to cut PSOs from shopping centres. What is more, Mrs McArthur –

Bev McArthur interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Mrs McArthur, please. No-one interjected on your contribution.

Tom McIntosh interjected.

Michael GALEA: We do not know who is going to One Nation – maybe it is more than one or two of you – but the fact is we have a Liberal leader who is desperately trying to court votes. We saw the Liberal Party actually, and in full credit to Ms Tyrrell, make themselves more extreme last week in their votes in this place than One Nation in their desperate attempt, falling over themselves, to fall into One Nation's voter pool.

Tom McIntosh: One Nation doesn't want them.

Michael GALEA: They would be crazy to want them, Mr McIntosh. I will leave that for Ms Tyrrell. We have brought her into this debate enough today as it is. The fact remains, Mrs McArthur, that when you come in with cherrypicked data, despite the fact that Victoria continues to have some of the strongest business growth in this nation, while you talk this state down, you are an absolute rabble.

Maira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (11:54): I also rise to support my wonderful colleague Bev McArthur's motion here, because it is very obvious that all across Victoria small businesses are indeed suffering and fleeing. That pressure reflects the philosophy of the Labor Party. They govern according to their philosophy, which of course is socialism. They can put the word 'democratic' in front of it; it does not really make a difference.

Sonja Terpstra interjected.

Maira DEEMING: It is definitely not democratic over there.

Sonja Terpstra: So you don't want public health? You don't want public schools?

Maira DEEMING: Logic is not your strong point, is it? Labor Party philosophy, socialism, is all about taking power, money and resources and redistributing wealth, power and influence into their own hands, their own circles. They do not like anybody to be able to make their own decisions or to be able to spend their money how they want. They want everybody in this state on their knees, begging this government year after year for grant money for their sports clubs when it should have been properly funded. Grants for the next round of funding? It is ridiculous. You misuse our taxes, people

flee and then you call everybody hateful and blame the people that you are supposed to govern over. You have contempt for the people of this state, and it is outrageous. It is absolutely outrageous that you can get up there and have contempt for the people that you have oppressed, that you have put into debt, that you have –

Sonja Terpstra: Oppressed?

Moira DEEMING: Yes, during COVID-19 amongst other things. You have taken away our free speech. You have oppressed every single business. Businesses who do nothing wrong have been made to pay a mental health tax when they did not even do anything wrong. You have done nothing but exploit and rip through the people in this state nonstop, decade after decade. You are supposed to be the party of workers; you are the party of exploiters.

John Berger: You hate workers. We know you hate workers.

Moira DEEMING: I love workers. Like real people in the Labor Party, I love workers. And if we were going to –

Sonja Terpstra: On a point of order, President, I think this is quite a narrow motion pertaining to small business. I think half of the contribution that Mrs Deeming is making is completely irrelevant to the motion, and I would ask that she come back to the motion.

Bev McArthur: On the point of order, President, those on the opposite side barely got to the point at all. All they did was sledge everybody else, not argue the case about why they are attacking small businesses with \$40 million of taxpayers money.

Sonja Terpstra: Further to the point of order, President, that is a point of debate; it is not a point of order. I would ask that Mrs McArthur's alleged point of order be ruled out and that Mrs Deeming be brought back to the point of the motion.

The PRESIDENT: I have got to say, I am not upholding anyone's point of order. I am just saying that it has been pretty loose, so it is a bit hard to rule on just one person's contribution when it has been a bit out there.

Sonja Terpstra: Further to the point of order, President, I just would like to add that I think Mrs Deeming's contribution has been a little bit more loose than most in here.

The PRESIDENT: It is all a matter of opinion.

Moira DEEMING: What is not a matter of opinion is basic logic, which you should make yourself availed of.

Michael Galea: Make yourself availed of?

Moira DEEMING: You should avail yourself of. There we go, English teacher. Thank you very much, sir. As I was saying when I did get off topic, this is the so-called party of workers, but that does not mean you forget about the businesses who create the jobs for those workers. I will not repeat all the stats that my learned colleagues have already gone over.

Members interjecting.

Moira DEEMING: I am being interrupted by my own side here. I am very capable of telling Mr McGowan to get out if I want him to, thank you very much. How long have I got, President?

The PRESIDENT: You have still got about 1 minute till question time. It takes me about 1 minute to tell you it is about 1 minute, so over to you.

Moira DEEMING: We already know about the soaring business costs that are destroying businesses in Victoria. We have already talked about the crime. We have had many, many small business owners contact us. We have had kind of like a private union group for businesses contact us

complaining that we have businesses in Victoria that are actually being extorted. They have already got rid of the cigarettes. They are being extorted now just for the pleasure of not having these criminals come in and threaten and harm their workers. They just have to pay an extra tax to the criminals on top of the criminal taxes that they are already paying to this government that does not care about anybody having work to do that can pay proper wages.

I commend Mrs McArthur for this motion. I condemn the government for their oppressive restriction on freedoms, their bureaucracy and their ineptitude, which means that we have all these crises one after another. I commend it to the house.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Rochester swimming pool

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:01): (1245) My question today is for the minister representing the Minister for Outdoor Recreation. The proud people of Rochester community have been asking for one thing for a long time now: a new outdoor swimming pool. During the 2022 floods the Rochester outdoor swimming pool was destroyed, rendered totally unusable. This is not just a place to keep cool during the stifling summer; it is the heart of Rochester's community. The Campaspe Shire Council has earmarked the Rochester outdoor pool as their number one priority for this coming financial year. Minister, have you met with the Campaspe shire to discuss the replacement of the Rochester outdoor pool?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:01): I thank Ms Tyrrell for her ongoing advocacy on this issue. Obviously, this is a matter for the Minister for Outdoor Recreation, and I certainly do not know whether the minister has met with the organisation that you mentioned. Obviously this is an answer that will be supplied by the Minister for Outdoor Recreation as per the standing orders.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:02): I thank the minister for passing this on. Minister, it was almost exactly 12 months ago that my Northern Victoria colleague Ms Lovell brought the replacement of the Rochester outdoor pool to this chamber, and yet nothing has been committed towards it. The Campaspe Shire Council have already committed \$5 million towards the replacement of the Rochester outdoor pool, and they have already taken the initiative to remove the old damaged pool. Will the minister commit to funding the replacement of the Rochester outdoor pool in the 2026–27 budget?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:03): I thank Ms Tyrrell for her supplementary question, and of course this will be referred to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation.

The PRESIDENT: Before I call the next question I acknowledge former member of this Parliament and minister Lisa Neville, who is in the gallery.

North Richmond medically supervised injecting room

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:03): (1246) My question is to the Minister for Mental Health. Minister, last month your own department told the *Herald Sun* of the CCTV cameras on Lennox Street:

... the cameras are ours and they are not operational ...

There were previously CCTV cameras on Lennox Street but they were decommissioned in 2021.

Yesterday you told this house:

The cameras have not been offline ... all cameras operating in the North Richmond Community Health site are currently operating and none have been offline.

Using your government's own language when it has been caught out, did the department misspeak? Did you misspeak? Or are you just playing word games with the lives of North Richmond community residents?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:04): I thank Ms Crozier for her question and her ongoing interest in the medically supervised injecting room in North Richmond, a health service that is continuing to save lives and help people break the cycle of addiction. Yesterday, Ms Crozier, you asked me about CCTV cameras not capturing, in your words, an 'incident' outside the medically supervised injecting room, and I gave you a very concise and clear answer about the fact that the advice that I had was that those CCTV cameras at the North Richmond Community Health centre – in fact there are several cameras covering the North Richmond Community Health site – all cameras have been operating. None are offline. In the event that there is an issue –

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Ingrid STITT: The North Richmond Community Health security team is notified immediately if there is an issue with the camera, and this was not the case on the weekend of this incident that you continue to prosecute. In fact I can further advise the house that the incident that you referred to was indeed captured on the cameras at the North Richmond Community Health centre. Very helpfully, the North Richmond Community Health centre provided that footage to Victoria Police, and that footage will assist the police further with their inquiries.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:06): Minister, can you explain why the department said, 'The cameras are ours and they are not operational'?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:06): I thank Ms Crozier for her supplementary question. Ms Crozier, I cannot comment on articles in the *Herald Sun* and how those journalists source their inquiries and their –

Members interjecting.

David Ettershank: On a point of order, President, if the chooks could keep it down a bit, it would be lovely here in the henhouse.

Members interjecting.

David Ettershank: I apologise in advance. I am simply seeking to be able to hear the answer.

Harriet Shing: On the point of order, President, International Women's Day is this weekend. For Mr Ettershank to refer to two female members of the Parliament as 'chooks' is an absolute disgrace. He should be required to make an apology to the house.

The PRESIDENT: On the point of order, Mr Ettershank can defend himself, but I was about to warn Mr Davis, who was very, very loud. Mr Ettershank can defend himself, and I will let him do so in a minute, but I do not think it was directed in that fashion.

David Ettershank: My comment had nothing to do with the speakers. It was just the wall of noise as we were trying to hear a response to that question. That was purely the context. If it was taken in any different manner, I apologise, but that was certainly and absolutely not my intention.

Harriet Shing: Now you withdraw, Mr Davis. Move a substantive motion, mate.

The PRESIDENT: I am not too sure what Mr Davis would withdraw from, other than being –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Being less loud would be very nice.

Ingrid STITT: I was in the process of saying that I am not in a position to give an opinion about an article in the *Herald Sun*. What I have is very clear advice –

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, the minister is misleading the house. I did not ask for an opinion. I asked why the department said, ‘The cameras are ours and they are not operational.’ I was not asking for an opinion, and I would ask you to ask the minister to come back and answer the question.

The PRESIDENT: I think the minister addressed that at the beginning of her answer. That is what my understanding is. You can call a point of order in question time if you do not believe it is right.

Ingrid STITT: Maybe I can deal with it in this way. Our government has made significant investments in the security and amenity of the entire precinct. In relation to the medically supervised injecting room and the advice that I have received from my department and from the service, all of the cameras are operating and operating quite well, it would appear, because they were able to capture the incident that Ms Crozier says she is concerned about, and Victoria Police have been given that footage.

Ministers statements: Changing Places

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:09): I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is supporting all Victorians to participate in activities across the state through our investment in Changing Places facilities. For those who may not know, Changing Places facilities are larger than standard accessible toilets and have extra features such as a tracking hoist and space for two or more carers. They make a huge difference to people with disability who need them as well as their families, and we are delivering these facilities right across the state. Last week I was pleased to open the Changing Place at Yarraville Gardens with local MP Katie Hall from the other place and members of Maribyrnong City Council. Yarraville Gardens is located in the heart of the Maribyrnong community, and now more community members, including people with high support needs, can enjoy everything these gardens have to offer. This Changing Place is not only functional, it is one of the prettiest I have visited, and I was very pleased to meet Thomas, the artist who designed a striking mural on the facility, which complements the surrounding parklands and greenery beautifully.

Here in Victoria we are leading the charge in making Australia a more accessible place for people with disability, with 189 out of the 358 Changing Places nationally located in our state. I am proud of the fact that the Victorian government has provided \$11.4 million towards Changing Places since 2015 to build these facilities. This includes \$180,000 for the Yarraville Gardens facility. A key commitment in *Inclusive Victoria* is to create more inclusive outdoor spaces so all Victorians can take part in nature and community life. Facilities like the new Changing Place in Yarraville will help us reach this goal. We are proud of our continued commitment to the Changing Places initiative alongside our work in *Inclusive Victoria* to make Victoria accessible for everyone. To learn more about Changing Places and find these facilities, they are listed on the Changing Places website.

Victorian Mosque Open Day

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:11): (1247) My question is for the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. On 5 February the minister issued a media release titled ‘Victoria’s mosques open their doors to combat hate’ and announced a \$400,000 grant to support open mosque day. My question is: did any of this money end up at El Zahra Islamic Community Centre in Hoppers Crossing?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:12): I thank Mr Limbrick for his question. Open mosque day is an important day in our busy multicultural affairs calendar across the state. I think it is important to understand the context in which open mosque day was initiated. It was initiated by a number of our Muslim community leaders and faith leaders in the immediate aftermath of the Christchurch massacre, because at that time we saw a worrying increase in the level

of Islamophobic attacks on our Muslim community, and it was one way in which the Muslim community wanted to break down some of those barriers and perhaps some misunderstandings in the community about the Islamic faith. It has been a very successful program that has helped promote social cohesion across the state. I know that many colleagues from across the Parliament attended mosques in their community. It is a day where we see the very best of Victoria's multicultural spirit and diversity on show.

I know that there were around 40 mosques that participated in this year's program, Mr Limbrick, and I am happy to check to see whether that particular mosque was part of the open mosque day. I know that unfortunately there were a few less mosques that were prepared to open their doors this year for open mosque day because of the tirade of abuse, quite frankly, that a lot of our mosques have been experiencing since the Bondi terrorist attack, which in and of itself was a dreadful incident for our country to experience. I will undertake to check that detail for you, and I am happy to provide you with that information. But what I would say more broadly is that the open mosque day is a really important part of breaking down some of those stigmas and misunderstandings and building that social cohesion across our community and unity across our community, something that we sorely need more of at this particularly troubling time not just in Australia but indeed around the world.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:14): I thank the minister for that undertaking. I think that it is very important that Victorian taxpayers know whether money went to this particular centre or not. With the program more generally, the open mosque day, what is the money that the government gives these mosques actually used for?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:15): There are a range of different supports that the funding provides. It provides the opportunity for mosques and our peak Muslim bodies like the ICV and others to promote the day and the events across the community. It also provides the opportunity for those mosques to deliver hospitality on the day but also information about their community, the programs that they run and so on. They are quite modest grants, and they are administered through the multicultural affairs division of the Department of Premier and Cabinet. It is certainly a program that I very much support continuing.

Foster carers

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:16): (1248) My question is to the Minister for Children. Victoria has recorded a net loss of more than 1300 foster carers over the past four years. Data in the last year shows an almost 300 net loss. Speaking with me today, carers say that they feel the system is disrespecting, disregarding and devaluing them. Minister, under your watch Victoria is losing foster carers at twice the rate it can recruit them. What immediate actions will you take to fix a system that carers themselves say is disrespectful, broken and driving them out?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:16): Thank you, Ms Bath, for your question and for your interest in these matters. At the outset I would also take the opportunity to remind the house of the important caring work that we do. Indeed you spoke to this yesterday when we were passing landmark nationally – indeed internationally – leading child protection reforms that this side of the house had brought to this chamber, and I was very pleased that we were able to have a genuinely I think bipartisan conversation around those issues. I hope that that spirit continues in the nature of this question, because these are really important reforms. In your contribution on those bills yesterday you spoke about the work of both foster carers and kinship carers. When we look at the situation in Victoria, we are nationally leading in the number of kinship carers that we have. The majority of children who are cared for by foster carers or kinship carers are cared for by kinship carers. I make that point first and foremost.

What I will say is that we absolutely and I think all sides and all quarters of this house recognise that we are indebted to those who are carers in our system, and that is why our government supports carers in our system. As you know, we have care allowances, we have new placement allowances, we have

education assistance payments, we have client expenses, we have the care support help desk, the care hub and the CaringLife app. We have further supports available for carers like the Victorian carers card, the concessions and the Carer Kafe and in addition to that we also have supports like free public transport, the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund, the Get Active Kids vouchers and the \$100 power saving bonus, so we have a range of ways in which we support carers and those in our community.

Melina Bath: On a point of order, President, I know the minister is responding, but this is a narrow question about the net loss, the net drain, of foster carers out of the system. These things may be in place, but the system is still broken and people are still leaving. I ask you to bring the member back to answer the question.

The PRESIDENT: The question was: what are you doing as a minister about this? I thought she was being relevant and comprehensive, but I will let the minister continue.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I was indeed taking the opportunity to acknowledge that we all value the role of carers and the various ways in which our government seeks to support carers. The member also asked what we are doing in terms of reform in the system. Just yesterday we passed some landmark child protection reforms in this place, and indeed it is this side of the house that is continuing to bring those reforms. If the member had done her homework, she would also be across the further work that we are doing in reforming foster care in terms of being able to make more foster –

Melina Bath interjected.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sorry, it is very difficult to answer the question if I am being interrupted by the member. What I do want to draw to the attention of the house is that we are making improvements to the foster care system, ensuring that we have a system that is targeted. As a result, last year we established up to 200 new therapeutic foster care placements, which provide more carers, children and young people in foster care with that access to enhanced therapeutic supports, and that really is an acknowledgement that the children and young people that we – *(Time expired)*

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:20): Long-term carers are saying that they are being treated like second-class citizens, and they are routinely reprimanded when they advocate and speak up for the wellbeing and needs of children in their care. Indeed children are saying – and this was presented to me today in relation to a child that wants to stay in the foster care system:

Dear Government

Now listen up!

Do you even care?

You say its our choice but you dont care. Make it for the kids, listen to us. Keep me safe!!!

Minister, will you and your department treat foster and kinship carers with the respect they deserve and put vulnerable children first?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:21): I am not quite sure where to start with that question. As the chamber well knows, this would be a highly inappropriate place to canvass individual matters. But if the member has circumstances – and indeed I have followed up many matters for the member before, so she knows to contact my office and how to do it – if she has legitimate concerns such as those, I would be very concerned to hear that there were people being reprimanded for raising things that they think are in the best –

Melina Bath interjected.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sorry, Ms Bath, if you would like me to answer your questions, it is very difficult when you are interrupting me. If there are particular concerns that you would like followed up on behalf of people who you feel have been reprimanded for raising matters that are in the best interests of the children in their care, then I would ask that you follow the appropriate process and refer them through my office so that I can seek the advice of the department on those matters.

Ministers statements: TAFE sector

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:22): Victorian families deserve public education they can rely on. Victorians deserve TAFE campuses close to home so they can access quality training regardless of their postcode, and Victorians deserve free education at their local TAFE so there is no cost barrier to high-paying jobs. When we came to government, those opposite had closed 22 TAFE campuses, including 18 in regional Victoria, and I am pleased to update the chamber that Labor has repaired TAFE. We have restored the TAFE network right across our state, including in our regions. Just last week I unveiled the 45th new and upgraded TAFE campus, and I did it proudly in regional Victoria. Last week I also announced \$50 million in joint state and federal funding for two new TAFE centres of excellence. Our current TAFE capital program now includes the digital, AI and technology centre of excellence in Frankston, which will cement Victoria's position as a national leader in AI skills and innovation; the Home and Community Care Centre of Excellence in Moorabbin, which will help the growing demand in home-based care; the Centre of Excellence in Disability Inclusion in Geelong, which will harness the power of TAFE in inclusive employment; the trade centre in Warrnambool; the new campus in Melton – not to mention the new campus in Sunbury. Labor has invested well over \$700 million in 45 new and upgraded TAFE campuses. Under Labor the number will keep rising, because only Labor will be able to guarantee funding certainty for TAFE and only Labor will guarantee free TAFE. Only Labor will deliver the quality education Victorian families deserve.

Data centres

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:24): (1249) My question is to the Minister for Water. Despite some generally welcome rain last week, Victoria has been experiencing ongoing dry conditions and well below average rainfall for well over a year. The CSIRO predicts that in Victoria droughts are projected to become longer and more intense, with more time being spent under drought conditions. The hotter, drier weather has seen daily household water usage rise while our water storage levels have decreased from 86 per cent to approximately 75 per cent, with inflows well below the 30-year average. In her foreword to the *Victorian Annual Water Outlook* the minister predicted the increasing likelihood of water restrictions in 2026. So I ask: will data centres be subject to the same sorts of water restrictions as the rest of us when they inevitably kick in?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:25): I thank the member for his ongoing interest in water and indeed the scarcity of water. As the member would be aware and the chamber certainly should be aware, there are a number of initiatives that this government has put in place. It is timely that we have a former Minister for Water in the gallery, and she obviously is chairing the taskforce that we have established alongside another former minister for water, Peter Walsh, looking at a whole range of issues in terms of water security in this state. Of course it is timely because of the situation that we are in, but we also know that there are issues in terms of the gap between rainfall and what can be expected now and into the future.

All that work is starting and is well underway, and of course that report will be provided in early 2027, but we are not waiting on the work that is being done by that taskforce. There are a number of other initiatives that are in place, and you might have noticed the campaign that is currently underway, which is 'every drop counts', because we do believe that it is timely for us to make sure that the community is more than aware of the situation that we have in terms of our storage levels. We are also wanting the community to understand the water-saving provisions that have been in place for some time, but I think a lot of people have forgotten about that, so that is why we have also brought the 'every drop counts' campaign to the fore, so that we can raise the consciousness and change the habits of the community. We are encouraging the community to be a lot more sparing in terms of their water usage.

In terms of the issue of water restrictions, there have been water restrictions in different locations at different times, and this is an ongoing management issue that the water corps deal with in terms of their local communities, and it is based on advice at the time. In terms of the issue that you particularly

raise, it is not the first time that you have raised this issue, and in fact it has been the subject of a motion before the house this morning. This is a matter that is very active in the space of water, and as I have reported, there is work that is being done within the department, with VicWater and with others that are key to the sector, looking at all sorts of different ways that we can look at data centres and the usage of water in particular but also of course being well informed about what is happening in other jurisdictions. Indeed the other element to it is the technology and the technological advances that are in place that are being used by a variety of different data centres around the world.

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:28): Thank you very much, Minister. That was really informative, and it is genuinely appreciated. I think you have answered my supplementary, so perhaps I might just ask a question for a clarification, if I may. We have heard about the sustainable data centre action plan. I am just a little confused, and perhaps you could just explain it to us. There is a taskforce, which I had not heard of before. You referenced a little while back the expert panel with DEECA and VicWater, and I am just wondering: how do those two fit with the sustainable data action plan, and how will that be rolling out?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:29): The taskforce, which involves former ministers and also experts when it comes to water, is primarily looking at what we do and what the options are, and all options are on the table, which I think is a breakthrough for the water sector. What do we do about the gap that we know there is between rainfall and usage and the forecasts that are associated with all of that? That is the task that they essentially have. It is a little bit more complicated than that, but I am more than happy to have you briefed in respect to the work of that taskforce. Of course their report will come to government in the first quarter of 2027. The reason that it is coming to government in 2027 is that, as I have said and will continue to say in every forum, water is too important to play politics with, and I do not want their good work that is being undertaken – *(Time expired)*

Housing

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:30): (1250) My question is for the Minister for Housing and Building, Minister, Brendan Ryan was earlier this year found dead at a Rosebud campsite after reportedly waiting two years for housing. Also, recent data from the Productivity Commission shows that after a decade in government, Labor has increased the Victorian public housing stock by just 36 dwellings. It appears that while the government has been turning a blind eye to corruption, ordinary Victorians like Brendan have been left to die on the street. I therefore ask: how many more Victorians have to die waiting for a home before the minister admits Labor's housing system is broken?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:31): What a shame, Mr Davis, that amongst a number of legitimate questions and concerns to put in this forum, you have sought to commodify and to extract cheap political mileage out of the death of a vulnerable person. You are an absolute disgrace, Mr Davis.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, it is a simple question. The minister should just answer it rather than attacking the opposition in the response.

The PRESIDENT: I think that if the question can be quite provocative, sometimes you can expect an answer in line with that.

Harriet SHING: So, Mr Davis, as I said –

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Harriet SHING: Well, Ms Crozier, I do not like that one, because the way in which the question has been framed is seeking to commodify an issue of real vulnerability.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, it is a simple question. The minister should just answer the question rather than debating the question.

The PRESIDENT: I am just struggling with the ‘simple question’ bit. I will ask the minister to continue. I ask members not to interject and the minister to ignore interjections.

Harriet SHING: As I said, I am not going to turn the deaths of vulnerable individuals into political fodder. I am not going to do that. It would not be fair to them or to their loved ones to do that. Of course we take reports of anybody’s death very seriously. I want to offer my sincere condolences to this gentleman’s loved ones and to the people who called him a friend.

On the matter of housing and delivery of housing, we have made a record investment into new housing across the state. Mr Davis, you would be well served to have a look at the figures that show that we have nearly 12,000 social housing homes either completed, approved or in construction. We have an investment of more than \$8 billion when we combine state and Commonwealth programs, with a commitment to deliver around 16,000 additional social housing homes. There is an inventory of more than 91,000 social housing homes across the state, and as part of our record commitment we have 3200 public housing homes complete or underway through our programs. At the same time, we are taking housing that is no longer fit for purpose offline. That includes the developments that we are undertaking across a range of sites, including the Carlton red brick towers and the work to densify 39 hectares of land across the inner-urban environment, changes which you opposed and which you continue to oppose when you block and oppose the development and the delivery of social housing across the state.

I just want to out of an abundance of caution in answering this particular question make it very clear for anybody concerned about the blocking and the opposing of public and social housing in this state that it was in fact you, Mr Davis, who was here for the blocking and the opposition of the Markham estate public housing in Ashburton. You were on the record in opposing this housing. You and your colleagues have continuously opposed the delivery of social housing, and that has got to stop.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:35): CFMEU corruption has cost taxpayers \$15 billion. Not having a house probably cost Brendan his life. With Victoria’s public housing waiting list growing and net public housing increasing by just 36 homes in a decade, how can the minister justify Labor’s failure to provide safe housing to people who are literally dying waiting for help?

The PRESIDENT: I think it is a very similar question to the substantive, but I will let the minister, if she wants to, answer the same way.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:36): We are in the process of meeting our commitments under the Commonwealth housing accord. We have an investment of between \$8 billion and \$9 billion to deliver social housing. The Housing Australia Future Fund, a \$10 billion fund from the Commonwealth, is assisting us through the social housing accelerator program to deliver around 769 additional homes. That is a fund which, had he had his way, Mr Dutton, whom a number of your colleagues have had views about in recent times, would have scrapped. So we have record investment. Again, we are determined to continue to invest in supports, including \$300 million annually for homelessness support services across Victoria. The Bayside peninsula area, which includes the Mornington Peninsula, receives the highest investment of homelessness services of any area across the state, with over \$54 million in 2025–26. This is including funding of 17 agencies to provide support. There is always more work to do, but under you it would never get done.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:37): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Ministers statements: women

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:37): It does appear appropriate, given a range of matters in this place, that I talk today about our support for women. Whether it is building homes for vulnerable women and their children at risk of homelessness or delivering trades and construction jobs for women on state-shaping, nation-building projects like the Suburban Rail Loop, we are helping women to work and to live safely and securely. Support begins with providing housing for those facing the greatest barriers, giving vulnerable Victorian women the dignity and the safety of a secure home. That is why our Big Housing Build is delivering homes for 1000 victim-survivors of family violence. This work is well underway. In 2024 we put the finishing touches on almost 100 new social housing homes for older women in Melbourne's south-east. That is on top of the recently completed 49 homes for older women in Summerhill Village, West Footscray. At Essex Street in Prahran we are delivering 86 social housing homes dedicated to women and children experiencing financial instability or homelessness or escaping family violence. At Alphington we are transforming unused government land to build around 70 new homes, including seven affordable homes for women on low incomes.

Labor is also increasing women's participation in our booming building industry, whether it is the Building and Plumbing Commission's commitment to gender parity or engaging women in the building regulatory industry through the building surveyors group's women's network. It is not surprising that the Liberals tried to block us from establishing the Building and Plumbing Commission in the first place. But it does not stop at housing. The Allan Labor government is providing long-term, well-paying, safe job opportunities for women in construction and their families. We are mandating that at least 40 per cent of apprentices, trainees and cadets on the Suburban Rail Loop are women, and we will also be driven by the first all-women tunnelling crew in the world when tunnel boring kicks off later this year. But that is all under threat under your lot – \$11.1 billion of cuts and scant regard to respect for women.

Police conduct

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:40): (1251) My question is to the Minister for Police in the other place. Minister, we have seen reports that two Victorian deaths have been linked to Victoria Police's use of so-called 'less lethal' weapons. In July 2023 Mark Smith was shot five times with projectiles and tasered 14 times, an inquest has heard. In November 2023 Steven Woodhouse, aged 29, died after allegedly being shot with beanbag rounds and a taser in Reservoir by the critical incident response team, the same unit that was involved in Mr Smith's death. A year before both these men died IBAC released a report highly critical of Victoria Police's use and reporting of lethal force, writing that the community was being put at risk. Minister, will you reduce the use of these so-called 'less lethal' weapons by Victoria Police?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:41): I thank Ms Copsey for that question. I will refer that question to the Minister for Police in the other place for a response in line with the standing orders.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:41): Thank you, Minister, for passing that on. In supplementary to the Minister for Police, the use of projectiles has been linked to deaths around the world, and critics have argued that their continued increase in the police arsenal has not been matched by commensurate increases in accountability and oversight. Minister, will you establish a police ombudsman in Victoria to provide independent oversight of police?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:41): I thank Ms Copsey for her supplementary question. I will make sure that is passed on to the Minister for Police in the other place for a response in line with the standing orders.

Housing

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:42): (1252) My question is for the minister for housing. How many additional homes have been contracted to be built out of the \$30 million allocated to the Big Housing Build projects in the Macedon Ranges shire since you last informed the house on the Macedon Ranges Big Housing Build projects in June 2025?

The PRESIDENT: I am just concerned about the level of detail in the question.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: I am just externalising my thoughts. I am happy to accept a point of order.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, the minister talked about it in the chamber. She is very open to being questioned about it under normal rules.

The PRESIDENT: I will call the minister, but I just remind the chamber of other rulings of very great presidents who have come before, around this level of detail.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:43): Thank you, Ms Lovell, for your question. It is an area that I have spoken about extensively as it relates to the 79 local council areas across the state and the work that we are doing to continue to deliver on that record housing investment, whether it is part of the Big Housing Build, the Regional Housing Fund – a range of programs it is part of – public housing renewal and upgrade programs or the work with the Commonwealth. We will continue to do this work. The question that you have asked me is about what has occurred since you last asked me a question about this. Given that you are asking for point-in-time information as it relates to one of those 79 LGAs, it is a level of granularity, which I appreciate you having used a question in question time to ask about. I will take you up on an invitation, given that you have raised it in question time and in accordance with *Rulings from the Chair*, to provide you with further information on the progress of that work as it occurs across not just this shire but others around the state.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:44): In June last year you confirmed that out of the \$30 million guaranteed minimum investment for the Big Housing Build projects in the Macedon Ranges shire, only \$12.5 million, less than half, had been committed at that time, despite the fact that the Big Housing Build was supposed to have been completed by 2024. You also said that the whole of the \$30 million investment ‘will be done over the next 12 months’. Eight months after you made that promise there is not a single project listed in the Macedon Ranges on the Big Housing Build website – none completed, approved or proposed. Why has the Labor government totally failed to progress vital social housing projects in the Macedon Ranges shire?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:45): Thank you very much for that supplementary. Again, the way in which you have asked it presupposes – putting to one side the answer that I have given to the substantive question – that there has not been investment across this LGA when indeed there has. I have just had a look at some information. Again, I am very happy to provide you with point-in-time information, but the \$33 million is about making sure we are delivering local projects. I have been able to have a look at the planning that is underway for two projects in Macedon. That includes Kyneton and Lancefield; that is part of that work. Of the \$33 million – and I think I may have said this previously – 17 homes have been completed and 34 are underway. That is a total of 51 homes, Ms Lovell. Again, when you are talking about point-in-time information, that is perhaps a question for a constituency question, but I will provide you with further information as it is available to me.

Ministers statements: working from home

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:46): I would like to inform the house of the significant economic benefits of the Allan Labor government's working-from-home laws. Working from home is already transforming the way Victorians work, live and move around our state, providing more opportunities than ever before for Victorians to participate in the economy. Thirty-six per cent of Australians already work from home, including 60 per cent of professionals, according to the ABS. CEDA research shows that working from home increases workforce participation by 4.4 per cent. It also states that working from home on average saves a worker \$110 a week, equating to over \$5000 a year. Working from home also is cutting congestion. Victorians on average have 3 more hours in their day when they are not commuting. Even if you cannot work from home, we know that reduced congestion will get you to work faster, saving you time and money, boosting productivity and moving workers and goods faster. People who work from home use that saved time very often not just to improve their lives at home but also to work around 20 per cent longer, benefiting their employer. This is good for the economy. It also boosts local economies, whether they are suburbs or whether they are regional areas, because workers who get to work in their own communities spend their saved money in their own communities, which is good news for small business.

There are many people that are going around talking down this policy, saying that it should not be a right for everyone and saying that businesses will leave the state if we make this a law. I would point to evidence from this morning, in the last hour. The ABS released economic growth figures for the December quarter. Business investment in Victoria grew by 2.2 per cent in this quarter, well above the national average of 0.2 per cent and even further than in New South Wales, where business investment went backwards – minus 1.4 per cent. Given this increased business investment and given the economic growth, I would say that is pretty good evidence off the back of a policy that was announced in August last year.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:48): Minister Erdogan will get answers in line with the standing orders from the Minister for Police for Ms Copsey and Minister Tierney for Ms Tyrrell from the Minister for Outdoor Recreation. Other ministers have offered to get further information in their answers.

Constituency questions

Northern Metropolitan Region

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (12:49): (2188) My constituency question is for the Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs. Last week I joined the minister at the State Library for the Alice Anderson Fund's International Women's Day event to celebrate the achievements of women-led startups. We know that there is a significant funding gap when it comes to women in the startup sector, and programs like the Alice Anderson Fund are doing the heavy lifting to close it. Since 2021 the Alice Anderson Fund has invested over \$8.9 million into 43 women-led startups, which has helped unlock more than \$57.4 million in private sector investment. Victoria's startup ecosystem is now valued at a massive \$142 billion, and in the Northern Metropolitan Region our local founders are a huge part of that story. My constituents are keen to see how we can continue to make it even easier for local women-led businesses to start, scale and drive jobs in our community. My question to the minister is: how is the Allan Labor government supporting women's startups within the Northern Metropolitan Region?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:50): (2189) My constituency question is to the Minister for Police. Residents in South Melbourne have contacted me with concerns about community safety after seeking police assistance only to find that their local police station was closed. One constituent had rocks thrown through his window late one night, and when he attempted to report the

crime the following day, a Friday, he found the station padlocked shut, despite the advertised opening hours of 7 am till 11 pm. He was then advised that the station would remain closed all weekend due to low staffing levels, forcing him to travel into the city to make a police report. In South Melbourne and across the City of Port Phillip crime is rising, and the community feels less safe. Last year significant increases in offences such as burglary, assault and theft were recorded in this area, and only last night we heard of the machete attack in Port Melbourne. The crime just goes on and on and it is out of control, not just here but right across my electorate. The question I ask is: why are South Melbourne residents left without a staffed police station when local crime is rising?

Eastern Victoria Region

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (12:51): (2190) My constituency question is for the Minister for Education. One of my constituents from Eastern Victoria Region has contacted me about a draft policy which changes how schools take part in particular sporting events. These concerned regional schools taking part in shooting sports. The new policy will require students to already have a junior licence to participate in these school-organised shoots. We have juniors shooting at Olympic level, so it is critical we maintain a program for them. This unnecessary bureaucratic requirement will lead to significant decline in participation in these events and further reduce our opportunities for regional students to access shooting sports, despite these events being safe and well run. My question is: will the government ensure that these shooting sport events are protected from unnecessary bureaucratic changes and just obey the law?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (12:52): (2191) My question is to the Minister for Education. How is the Allan Labor government investing in our local schools through the Capital Works Fund? Beaumaris Primary School, Brighton Primary School and Ripponlea Primary School are among six schools in Southern Metro to receive funding for upgrades to their facilities thanks to the Capital Works Fund. Beauie primary is going to receive refurbishments to six bathrooms at the school, including better facilities for students and staff; Brighton Primary is having refurbishment works undertaken on two bathrooms, making for more pleasant facilities for the children at the school; and Ripponlea Primary School, which is a fantastic local school in the East St Kilda area, more than 100 years old, will have its roof repaired. These are works in addition to the major upgrades being undertaken at Hampton Primary, Gardenvale Primary and Caulfield South Primary. Labor is investing in our local schools.

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:53): (2192) My question is for the Minister for Police and for the Minister for Emergency Services. Recently a single full-time-working mother from Pakenham told me that she is extremely distressed about her daughter's safety now that the government is removing PSOs from certain train stations. Her daughter is in year 8 and must use the train to travel home in the evenings after her learning support sessions. Although these changes were announced last November, this government is keeping the list of which stations are going to lose protection secret until April. Her local train station is Cardinia Road station, which has become a hotspot for crime. There have been intimidations, car break-ins and violent assaults occurring there. Crime in Pakenham is certainly on the rise, and something needs to be done about it. This mother is one of many who has to choose between learning support for her kids and her children being safe. My question is: will Cardinia Road station be one of the ones left compromised by a loss of PSOs?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:54): (2193) My question is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. The North East Link Project environment effects statement predicts many daily breaches of the carcinogenic air pollution standard of PM2.5. It is laid out clearly in chapter 10, figure 10-8. PM2.5 is a by-product of diesel truck emissions, and the modelling was done near

Marcellin College in Bulleen. Minister, what actions are you taking to protect the health of these school students and nearby residents when these breaches of safe air quality occur?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:55): (2194) My question is for the Minister for Health. I am very excited to see that works are due to commence later this year to deliver an upgraded emergency department at Casey Hospital, which will deliver immediate care cubicles, short-stay beds, resuscitation bays, ambulatory care, procedure rooms, consulting and interview rooms, mental health zones and satellite imaging as well as providing capacity for an additional 52,000 presentations each year whilst also improving the flow, safety and quality of care that this wonderful hospital is able to provide to my community. We are continuing to invest in better health infrastructure across the south-east, and my question to the Minister for Health is: how will the upgrade at Casey Hospital emergency department improve health services for my constituents in Casey–Cardinia?

Western Metropolitan Region

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:55): (2195) My constituency question is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. My constituent Stephen is legally blind and has contacted my office regarding serious safety concerns on Melton Highway, particularly at the intersection of Sunshine Avenue and Melton Highway. Stephen reports that he has almost been hit multiple times while attempting to navigate this area and is deeply concerned about pedestrian safety. He has also raised concerns about the broader access and safety along Melton Highway for people with disabilities, including the adequacy of crossings and accessible infrastructure. He tells me that the original project scope was reduced, including the decision not to replace the two roundabouts with traffic signals, and he wants to know what measures are currently being considered to improve pedestrian safety at the intersection of Sunshine Avenue and Melton Highway and what steps are being taken to improve safety for people with disability.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:56): (2196) My question is to the Minister for Housing and Building. My constituent Andrew is a social housing tenant and wheelchair user who has experienced ongoing accessibility issues since moving into his current property in 2019. The current apartment itself is not accessible, including a front door that is too narrow for a wheelchair. There are no ramps in the communal areas, and the building's main entrance is only accessible via stairs, forcing Andrew to enter through the car park. The building also experiences frequent lift breakdowns, which at times prevent him from both accessing and leaving his apartment. All of these issues have been raised with the housing provider over several years, but they currently remain unresolved. While he was recently offered an alternative property, it was located in Coburg, far from his current home in St Kilda, and therefore disconnected from his support services, and it also was not accessible for his needs. Minister, when will my constituent be offered suitable and accessible housing?

Southern Metropolitan Region

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:57): (2197) I welcome the Victorian government's announcement of key reforms to address the issue of youth crime. Victorians will see more local visible police and protective services officers patrolling their communities. Through data and intelligence, visible police and PSOs will be deployed to target crime when and where it is likely. Additionally the Allan Labor government plans to invest an initial \$19.8 million to establish the violence reduction unit and an additional \$7.7 million for youth mentoring programs. Modelled after the UK and Scotland, it aims to connect young people with reformed offenders as well as 20 social workers in targeted schools as early intervention for tackling youth crime. These key efforts show that our state is taking important steps forward in addressing the root cause of youth crime and supporting

safer communities. My question for the Minister for Police is: what improvements can my community of Southern Metro Region expect to see as a result of these initiatives?

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:58): (2198) My question is for the Minister for Planning. When will the bushfire planning advisory committee start and finish its proceedings for the Bendigo planning scheme amendment C287? Labor's housing policy is failing disastrously. They promised 80,000 houses a year, but they have only delivered 54,000 in the last year. Labor's failure is especially painful in regional Victoria, where rents are rising faster than wages and pushing people into homelessness. Back in April 2025 the City of Greater Bendigo sent a request to the planning minister to authorise its managed growth strategy that would facilitate more housing. Eight months later the minister had done nothing with the request, and then on 22 December, just before Christmas, when no-one was looking, she quietly pushed it off to the bushfire advisory committee. The planning minister can find the time to approve a \$1 billion data centre in just 75 days but continually delays vital planning reforms in regional cities. Only the Liberals have a real plan to deliver more homes that are more affordable and will restore the dream of home ownership in regional Victoria.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:59): (2199) My question is for the minister for transport and planning. It was only a couple of months ago that I raised the issue of safety concerns along Linsell Boulevard in Cranbourne East in this chamber. Following this, temporary traffic lights were placed along the boulevard and this was very well received by locals. But the community had barely let out a sigh of relief before crying out in frustration – the day the Thompsons Road–Clyde Road roundabout reopened in reduced capacity, the lights were turned off; then shortly after, they were removed entirely. The Clyde Road works are still causing commuters to take detours around the traffic mess this project has caused, so the safety concerns along Linsell Boulevard are still very real. Therefore my question to the minister is: will the minister ensure the temporary lights on Linsell Boulevard are returned and left on until the Clyde Road–Thompsons Road intersection works are complete?

Western Metropolitan Region

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (13:00): (2200) My question is for the Minister for Ageing. Data from the Productivity Commission shows that it now takes older Australians 22 per cent longer to be assessed for home care services compared to 2023. Currently the wait period for these services can take up to 380 days for approval, and once approved it takes a median of 245 days for services to commence. This amounts to two-thirds of a year; in many cases, it takes a year to begin. I have received significant concern and worry from elderly citizens from Werribee and Brimbank who have reached out to me. Therefore my question is: can the minister please update my constituents on what advocacy the minister has taken with her federal counterpart in Canberra to accelerate the wait period for older Victorians needing care at home? These citizens and individuals deserve better, more timely support services than the treatment they are currently receiving. I look forward to the minister's update for my constituents.

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (13:01): (2201) My question is to the Minister for Children. As Dr Anne Webster MP has exposed, families across Loddon shire were led to believe at the 2025 federal election that \$5 million would deliver new childcare services for their communities. We now know the federation funding agreement between the Albanese and Allan Labor governments proves this money was simply recycled funding for the Wedderburn centre already announced in 2023. The mayor has confirmed there was no consultation and that most of Loddon remains a childcare desert. This was not a new commitment; it was a deliberate, dishonest repackaging of an existing promise, designed to deceive regional families during an election campaign. So, Minister, do you defend this

cynical exercise in double counting, and will you commit to genuine additional funding so regional families are not treated as props in a dishonest pre-election marketing campaign?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (13:02): (2202) My question is to the Minister for Environment, requesting a review of the mandatory introduction of glass-only kerbside recycling bins for regional councils. The Campaspe Shire Council has raised serious concerns, including significant cost increases, higher emissions, environmental impacts, inefficiency, duplication of existing programs and a lack of flexibility for local communities. The council has undertaken further analysis and modelling and resolved to reject the mandatory implementation of the glass-only bin service for households. For Campaspe shire, a glass-only bin will not deliver a glass-free recycling stream, as contamination will still occur at the material recovery facility due to co-mingled recycling from New South Wales, where glass-only collection is not mandated. More than 30 Victorian councils have called on the Victorian government to abandon or fundamentally revise the current glass bin mandate in favour of more efficient, locally tailored waste management solutions. Given the substantial concerns raised by local governments, will the minister reconsider this one-size-fits-all approach and work collaboratively with councils to deliver a more sustainable and cost-effective outcome for regional communities?

Sitting suspended 1:04 pm until 2:06 pm.

Motions

Small business support

Debate resumed.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:06): I rise today to contribute to the debate on this motion relating to the important role that small business plays in our economy here in Victoria. I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge my good friend in the other place Minister Suleyman, who serves our state as Minister for Small Business and Employment, supporting small business and helping to keep our business environment competitive.

Of course no small business owner wants to survive off government subsidies. They want to trade and grow based off goods and services which they are providing to the marketplace. The role that can be played by government in order to help facilitate this and make conditions more favourable to small business activities includes things such as helping to bring more people into the places where businesses operate. For example, in February the minister announced the multicultural business precinct revitalisation program grant recipients, investing over \$6 million into supporting our small businesses across the state. These grants will help to update shopfronts and make our high streets more attractive, improve local infrastructure to make it more accessible and invest in these public spaces to create a greater sense of community. This is not a handout to businesses who cannot survive on their own; these are smart investments which help to create local areas with more character and an improved environment in which to do business. In the Southern Metropolitan Region we have a number of locations receiving grants from this program, including Bay Street in Port Melbourne, Chapel Street in Prahran, the Oakleigh activity centre and more.

I have drawn on the multicultural business precinct revitalisation program as only one recent example of how the Allan Labor government is supporting the small businesses which help make our communities such great places to live. It is an important example, but so too are the range of other measures which have been taken by this government across a number of ministerial portfolios which are benefiting small businesses and making it easier for them to do business. One reform that has significantly benefited small businesses are the changes which have been made over recent years to payroll tax. These reforms began under the former Treasurer Tim Pallas, who served our state in that role for a decade, and they have continued under the current Treasurer Minister Symes. On 1 July 2024 we increased the payroll tax-free threshold from \$700,000 for annual returns to \$900,000. At

the beginning of the current financial year, on 1 July 2025, we increased it to \$1 million for annual returns. The increase of the threshold to \$1 million means that 6000 businesses who were previously paying payroll tax are no longer obligated to do so. Further, it means that 22,500 businesses are paying a reduced rate.

The current base rate for payroll tax in Victoria is 4.85 per cent. I would, however, like to note that in 2017 the former Treasurer Tim Pallas successfully implemented a lower rate of payroll tax for regional Victoria. Today the regional rate of payroll tax sits at 1.2125 per cent, a low rate which is helping to create a positive environment to do business in the regions. Increasing the payroll tax-free threshold was not the only pro-small business reform which was brought in at the beginning of this financial year. A number of other reforms have come through as part of a prudent and growth-focused deregulatory agenda, cutting red tape and making it easier to open or expand a small business. One set of significant reforms, which came into effect at the beginning of the financial year, are the changes which we have made to liquor licensing. Previously small businesses seeking to serve liquor were obligated to apply for both a planning permit from their local council and a liquor licence from the state government through Liquor Control Victoria. Now businesses are no longer obliged to receive the planning permit; they must demonstrate they are not contravening the existing planning scheme. This reform will take up to \$7000 off the cost of starting a hospitality business and will allow businesses to open as early as six months sooner. Making it easier for businesses to open and grow is good for economic growth, good for creating more jobs, good for government tax revenue and ultimately good for local communities, who will benefit from having more bars and more restaurants opening sooner. These reforms are a continuation of other liquor regulation reforms which were carried out during the then Andrews government.

Previously, many areas in the eastern suburbs were designated dry suburbs, in which no pubs operated and where restaurants historically either were not able to sell alcohol or faced an additional regulatory burden and bureaucratic challenge in seeking a liquor licence. This was a regulation which had been brought about in the 1920s. For context, this is the same time when across all of America all alcohol sales had been made illegal under the constitution. In recent decades, however, a number of restaurants in these dry suburbs have been successful in obtaining liquor licences and have demonstrated demand among local residents for liquor service in their local restaurants. Further, this also demonstrated that liquor could be served by a restaurant without damaging the character of these neighbourhoods. As such, by the time the Andrews Labor government got around to reforming these outdated laws, it was widely welcomed by the business community in those areas. Since then suburbs in my constituency of Southern Metropolitan Region such as Surrey Hills, Camberwell, Balwyn, North Balwyn, Ashburton, Glen Iris and Canterbury have all seen new restaurants and bars popping up and serving these communities. Reforming the outdated dry suburb laws has been a significant success for Victorian small businesses in my electorate.

Further reforms to liquor licensing which came in at the beginning of the current financial year are benefiting the entire state. Other reforms which are benefiting small businesses in my constituency and across the state include permanently removing the need for planning permits for outdoor dining. This was a temporary reform brought in during the pandemic to enable restaurants and cafes to reopen safely. We found, however, that not only did it enable safe reopening for the hospitality industry but it also proved to be popular and commercially successful. As a result, in order to help the hospitality industry to grow and to thrive, and to provide the sort of service that customers are looking for, we have made that change permanent.

Other pro-business reforms pursued by this government include the replacement of stamp duty with the more efficient commercial and industrial property tax, the CIPT in short. The CIPT makes it easy to set up businesses or move locations and will provide a \$50 billion boost to the economy while facilitating the creation of 12,600 jobs in Victoria over the next 40 years. We have also as a state committed to abolishing business insurance duty.

These various measures which I have outlined so far are saving businesses money. When businesses save money, they are better able to reinvest back into their business to help them grow, hire more staff and serve more customers. We are also using these reforms to make doing business easier and to ease the regulatory burden which businesses have faced for far too long. Whether it was the struggle of getting a liquor licence or needing a planning permit to have outdoor dining, these regulations made it harder for businesses to open, operate and grow. That is why removing these unnecessary regulations was important, and this is another way the Allan Labor government is committed to creating an environment which supports small business, to work to help them, rather than to get in their way. Reducing costs for small businesses does not just help businesses, however; it helps them pass on savings to customers and stave off price increases.

Those of us in this place who speak with small business owners in our constituencies know that these reforms are making a difference, but we do not just have anecdotes or personal experiences to show for it. In the year leading up to January 2026 Victoria gained 14 points on the NAB business conditions index. This demonstrates that the changes which we have made have had a real impact in creating an environment which is friendlier towards businesses so that we can encourage and facilitate economic growth. Ultimately, the driving force behind these reforms and which has driven them through is this side of the chamber seeking to create a more prosperous state to benefit all people.

Small business has an important role to play in helping this state to achieve economic growth. Economic growth is how we create even more jobs and better wages. Of course small business is an important part of that big picture, but small business is not only part of the big picture; small business is often about the smaller picture as well. It can be the important role that one cafe or restaurant plays in the local community – the meeting place it creates for a community organisation, the job which it can create for a younger person entering the workforce, the wine it has sourced from the Victorian wineries and the food it has sourced from the Victorian farmers. The Allan Labor government has a commendable record on delivering for small businesses and creating an environment where small businesses, particularly in hospitality, can thrive and local communities can enjoy everything they have to offer. It is a record which all of us on this side of the chamber should be applauding.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:16): I thank Mrs McArthur for bringing the motion to the house. It is timely – probably more than timely. Anyone who talks to any business in Victoria knows it is obviously suffering, struggling, persisting and trying to buy time to get through to the end of the year. Every business I speak to in my community is feeling the pinch of the taxes, of the crime and of the cost of utilities and other inputs to their business. It is really dire, and it does reflect in the overall competitiveness of the state. We know that 92 per cent of employment in Victoria is actually from small businesses themselves. They are the backbone. We like to call lots of things the backbone, but this is literally the backbone of our economy. We have become a very unproductive state because of these things. We have lagged the nation by nearly a per cent for over a decade, and that is a compounding problem. We have a massive trade deficit as a state. We lose business to other states. Just today we lost another major – \$800 million – investment into fuel systems. That has gone to, guess where, South Australia, where they actually have a concept of how businesses should be treated.

But I have risen to make a short contribution today because I want to read in some stats from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Get your pens out, because I think this will be useful for future reference. One thing that is often quoted here in this chamber by the Treasurer and others is how many businesses have been created in Victoria: ‘They’re doing marvellously because’ – and I am quoting directly from the ABS here – ‘we had 123,400 new businesses in Victoria in the 2024–25 year.’ That sounds quite impressive, doesn’t it, until you just analyse the numbers slightly. We also had, though, 106,900 exits, so we had a net change of 16,500 businesses. But it gets better – or it gets worse – because when a business goes out of business and a new business enters, the question is not the number of them, it is how much capital departs and how much capital comes back in. You can have a proxy measurement of that capital by how many employees come along with that new business, because

believe it or not, there is a difference between registering an Australian registered body number and being a business, and I will illustrate that.

In the year to June 2025 Victoria's business stock changed as follows: businesses employing 200 or more people were down by 28. Businesses employing 20 to 199 people were down 326 – so we had 326 less companies that employed between 20 and 199 people. Businesses employing five to 19 people – that is the group that might be in the payroll tax exemption zone; well, even then we had 395 less of them. Businesses employing one to four people – that was down. There were 3627 less businesses, small businesses, the bread-and-butter businesses – well within that exemption range. Every single employing category went backwards – every single one. The only category that went forward, which makes that plus 16,000 that we have left after all the exits, is the one which employs no-one – zeros. Yes, we have 16,000 new businesses that employ no-one.

Bev McArthur: With an ABN and no employees.

Richard WELCH: And keep in mind the ABNs that are registered in Melbourne are because if you are a national company and you want to do business you have to register, but that does not mean you are actually operating in Victoria. It does not mean capital has come back into Victoria. It does not mean you are employing anyone. In fact the ABS says that the only category where we have increased business registrations is businesses that employ no-one at all, so that is where the 16,000 new businesses come from out of the 123,000 headline figure. There are no categories in which we are doing well in businesses that employ. There is no growth. There is no business growth, and that therefore manifests in the other really essential stat in the last two years: out of every 10 jobs generated in Victoria, eight of them were government related and only two came from the private sector.

The capital is not flowing back in a way that is generating jobs. We continue to lag in productivity. We continue, as Mrs McArthur pointed out, to be at the bottom of every metric, practically, of doing business in Victoria. It would only be those on the other side of this chamber who could somehow twist this around and posit that this is a positive thing for Victoria. But it does not surprise me because politically, they have got to. What else are they going to say? Of course they are going to have to defend it. But it follows this trend of ignoring object reality across all that they do. They say, 'Everything's fine in hospitals and everything's fine on roads, and we're investing here and we're investing there.' They will be very apt to point back to something that happened 35 years ago in this state but not deal with the reality that is before us right now, which is that we are a deeply uncompetitive state, deeply unattractive to significant investment, deeply poor on productivity, the worst in the nation for inflation and the worst in the nation for unemployment. In fact on any other metric you can go by – highest tax, highest barriers to entry – the numbers prove it. We do not employ people. Our capital stock, particularly in small business, is dropping, which is why the government going after the very small businesses that are struggling the most in a lawsuit is so disappointing. But then this government is never happier than when it is punching down on Victorians – punching down on regional Victoria, punching down on small businesses and punching down on people in activity centres who may not want towers next to them. Like any socialist government, it does not see people as people; it sees them as economic units to be pushed around on a chessboard and just marshalled where they see fit. Business is simply a bottomless pit of money you can plunder so that you can fund your debt, because that is the key equation we have got left.

That leads me to another point. One of the reasons why all this occurs is the confiscation of money from businesses to government in the way of land tax and payroll tax. It reaches a certain threshold where the ability of businesses to invest in their own business and grow is compromised, because if you do not have sufficient working capital, you cannot invest back into your own business. If you cannot invest back into your own business, you cannot grow, and if you cannot grow, you cannot employ people. It will manifest in two levels, either in your cashflow or in your working capital. It will be a hard constraint you will run up against. The ABS figures say that that hard constraint means we drive employing businesses out of business altogether and we replace them with employeeless businesses instead. If the government's objective is to create more small businesses, it is kind of

succeeding, because they are all getting smaller – infinitely small, to the point of disappearing. I will leave my contribution there.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (14:25): I stand to oppose this motion and oppose much of the very interesting commentary we have heard from the other side. Of course the Liberal Party, as we all know, have no plan for Victoria, much like their colleagues federally have no plan for this nation. They are unable to identify what it is they believe in – a set of values that as a party they can gather around. Under Bolte the Liberals were state builders. They built dams, they built roads and they built power networks. What we see in the opposition today can build nothing. That is why motions like this come to the floor. They want government to play no role in improving the quality of Victorians' lives, and they have no incentive, they have no drive, to improve the quality of people's lives. That is why we have seen the Victorian Liberals have a different leader every year for the last half a dozen years, because they are absolutely focused on themselves and on tearing each other down and throwing mud within their own party and at the government and not bringing anything to the table that is solution focused, that is focused on improving the lives of Victorians. They love the negativity. It is like they are willing Victoria down with their negativity.

We know business investment is up over 50 per cent in the last 10 years. We know that there have been 123,000 new businesses since July 2020, an increase of 20 per cent. I will in my contribution go through more statistics, but I want to make the point that it does not matter what aspect of Victorian life you put in front of the Liberals; they will talk this state down. We just heard Mr Welch talk about punching down, which I think I and some of my colleagues actually audibly laughed at, to hear the Liberals try and accuse others of punching down when that is exactly the sort of politics that they in Victoria and around Australia have used. They find marginalised groups and they punch down, because, as I said earlier, they have no clear, identified values that they could create policies from which deliver a plan for voters. Instead the easy, cheap, lazy politics is to find people, generally those that are in a minority, to punch down on. That is exactly what the Liberals do, while we are in here talking about our economy and investments in this state and economic outcomes for everyone in this state. It is that laziness that has led to consistent years of Liberal leadership turmoil and a lack of clearly identified plans from them as a party.

Mr Welch talked about confiscation of money by the government. You hear this sort of extremist language from the other side, and last year there were debates that gained media attention, from the Liberals using language that most moderate Victorians find just disgusting. But do you know what government needs to do? They need to invest in what makes our state better, what makes our state more productive and what improves the quality of life of all Victorians. When we are talking about employers and businesses, they benefit when we invest in early education – when our kids get the best start in life through being out socialising and through learning as early as possible, firing all those pathways for the time they are coming into school-age education. I have spoken to primary school teachers that say they can see the difference. They can see the difference that it makes, from that three- and four-year-old education pathway, when they are hitting foundation/prep, those early years.

With that difference you are then ahead every year all the way into working life. I had a bunch of year 12s in here just last week who were sitting in this very chamber, who were out doing two days a week in TAFE, three days a week in school, keeping them in the education system to complete year 12 whilst training and engaging in the workforce but entering the workforce fit and ready for work at an age when they have got the maturity and the skills and have developed holistically to be a really productive part of the workforce. So it is about supporting our youngest Victorians to develop and, when they enter the workforce, to be personally happy and productive on a personal note but also productive in their workplace and for our broader economy.

The investments this government has made in public transport to get people from home to work and the investments we are making in housing – nation-leading rates of housing – are seeing downward pressure on rental prices and downward pressure on housing prices. Yet those opposite want to get rid of the short-stay levy. As usual, they just want to say, 'Let's rip. We don't care about whether people

can get housing. We don't care about investing in social housing.' It is just another example of the Liberals' view that they learned when they were at university, in their uni clubs, their Young Liberal clubs, looking at Reagan, looking at Thatcher, idealising Reaganomics and free marketism. It is quite astounding.

Alongside the investment in public transport, we are investing in our roads network to ensure that not only our workers but our products can get from A to B.

Bev McArthur interjected.

Tom McINTOSH: Mrs McArthur, this is the thing. They will never acknowledge the investment that we are making in our freight networks or the trains that they ripped out and the stations they shut down under Kennett. The movement of grain in this state – they ripped it apart and they decimated it. It is like the TAFE system. We heard Ms Tierney in her ministers statement today talking about TAFEs. I think it was 22 TAFEs that the Liberals closed. You know what, if you are a business, you want to be able to find a worker who is equipped and well trained to be as productive as possible in your workplace. You guys gutted TAFEs, exactly like you gutted our transport networks through our trains, linking our agricultural product to our ports and to interstate transport networks. Time after time there is example and example again of where the Liberals just cut and cut and cut to remove the services that our businesses need, that our economy needs, for us to be the most productive society ever.

And you talk down this state. Ms Bath was in here talking yesterday about the town of Nyora. It is a very small town. She could not bring herself to mention the new lights at the footy club, because it is not in your DNA to acknowledge the positive and it is not in your DNA to celebrate. It is in your DNA to talk down every single aspect and every single component of Victoria. As I outlined, when you have got no clear set of values between you, when you cannot create policies that will improve people's lives in Victoria, you do not come to Victorians with a plan, you go to the negative and you go after people. You go after groups of people when you think it is advantageous. But Victorians have seen through it, and they continue to see through it.

Bev McArthur interjected.

Ingrid Stitt: On a point of order, Acting President, I would ask you to bring Mrs McArthur to order, because I believe that we sat in silence on this side of the chamber when listening to contributions of those opposite.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Mr McIntosh has got a cracking 41 seconds to go. If we can hold it until then, that would be great.

Tom McINTOSH: As I said in my first speech, I believe Victoria is the greatest state on earth. I was fortunate that when I did my trade I got to travel much of the world and see many, many countries around the world. In Victoria we have incredible resources, we have incredible people and we have incredible diversity. We are a powerhouse of the Southern Hemisphere, we are a powerhouse of the world, and every single day we should celebrate it. We should celebrate every single day the economic activity in this state. I, for one, love Victoria. I will leave my contribution there.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:36): First, I might just start by addressing some of the things that Mr McIntosh just said. He often talks about how the Liberal Party is just negative, and one of the things he said is 'It's not in your DNA to celebrate.' That was one thing he said. He also said, 'You're always talking about the negative.' I want to talk about why we do bring these things up, because when every child is born in Victoria, they inherit essentially their own little patch of debt – \$20,000 of it. Because of Labor's corruption, every home, every household, is going to have essentially a \$5000 corruption debt they will have to pay. So while you are over there celebrating yourself – and good on you, because really self-praise is better than no praise – the reality is that things are a mess in this state.

Mr McIntosh also spoke about education, where the reality is that one in three children in the state of Victoria cannot read and write proficiently. When you go into areas like those that Mr McIntosh and

I both represent, that number comes down to one in two. We are not being negative by highlighting that; we are fighting for the next generation so they can actually have a go and get ahead. Let me tell you, Mr McIntosh, the biggest indicator as to whether a child will enter a life of crime is whether or not they can read and write. So you can talk and you can celebrate yourself – that is really lovely – but the reality is that people are hurting in this state.

I want to thank Mrs McArthur for bringing in this important motion. More importantly, I want to thank her for bringing up the plight of my constituents in Bald Hill Road, who are really, really suffering. I was not going to speak on this motion until Ms Ermacora came up and started calling it cherrypicking nonsense. That is what she called it. Then she went on with the most patronising and self-serving speech. She actually said, ‘Let me teach you something’ and started speaking about small business. That is when I decided that I was going to stand up. I tell you what, you can grandstand, you can patronise us and you can say that we know nothing – what we are representing here is the 350 small businesses that shut every single day in Victoria. They are places like Pakenham Bulk Foods, who have had an 80 per cent drop in their revenue and are now concerned. Their kids have already come out of the sports that they were playing because they cannot afford it. Their business is about to go bust and their dreams are crushed. That is not cherrypicking nonsense; that is what we are here fighting for. The speeches that you have given today have just shown a complete disconnect and a lack of compassion. I want to thank Mrs McArthur for bringing this motion to the house, and I commend it.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (14:39): With great pleasure I will sum up. I first of all want to thank my colleagues Mr Luu, Mrs Deeming, Richard Welch and Dr Heath for absolutely identifying what is wrong in Victoria in relation to small business. What is wrong is you people over there on the other side. You hate small businesses. You are busy going to the courts, spending 40 million of taxpayer dollars to fight small businesses, the mum-and-dad businesses of Victoria. And you are handing over nearly \$3 million to a Californian consultant to fight small business. What an absolute disgrace you are, you people over there. I love Victoria. Even more so, I love Western Victoria region, and guess what, I live there. Unlike Mr McIntosh and Mr Berger, who do not live in their electorates, I actually live in my electorate, as does Dr Heath and as does Mr McCracken. They live in their electorates, as does Mr Mulholland as well.

Members interjecting.

Bev McARTHUR: You do not live anywhere near your electorate, Mr McIntosh. Anyway, with a bit of luck you will not be there after you do your preselections.

But the fact is that you will not stand up for small business; you would rather go to court and spend \$40 million fighting 16,000 small businesses, and you will hand over money to a Californian consultant who says they ought to have had insurance for pandemics. This is in the state with the greatest lockdown in the world. You locked people up; you actually sent businesses broke left, right and centre. They are not recovering, and now they are taxed to the hilt. There is crime rampant. They get broken into all the time; there is theft at extraordinary levels. Everything is a problem for small business. You do not care at all, and you totally deny the facts that we have identified. As Mr Welch said, of the 16,000 new small businesses that you wanted to talk about, they do not employ anybody. They do not employ one person. And out of every 10 new jobs, eight are in the public sector. That is not about small business.

You have absolutely no idea what it is like to be in small businesses. As I said, so many of them cannot pay the rent. They cannot employ anybody. They cannot even take home \$100 at the end of a week because they are in such dire straits. If they do not get broken into, they get taxed and they get regulated. Being under this government for small business is just the worst place to be in Australia. We think that small businesses are the backbone of this state and of this country, and we will stand up for them every day, even if you will not. You absolutely do not care about small business. Nothing that you do actually helps small business. The regional business alliance is absolutely strapped trying to mentor small businesses that are going broke. You give them no assistance whatsoever. The

chambers of commerce are all volunteers trying to do their best for small business. You give them no help whatsoever. And what do you do with 65 new and increased taxes? You just make life for small business, life for families and life for individuals in this state terrible. What about how every tax you have introduced has affected small business, because small businesses are usually families – families who are struggling with a cost-of-living crisis brought about by high energy costs, taxes, regulations, charges and crime in this state which is rampant. This is the crime capital of Australia. You had \$14 million on machete bins, and they are still out there waving them around on roadsides. You have done nothing to stop the crime in this state. It gets worse every day. People commit crimes, especially young people. Nothing happens to them. Meanwhile businesses have to close their doors. You do not care about small business. We do, and we will stand up for them every day of this week and every day of this year.

Council divided on motion:

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

Noes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Motion negatived.

Bills

Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Ending Political Corruption) Bill 2024

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Sarah Mansfield:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (14:51): I rise to speak on the Greens bill, the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Ending Political Corruption) Bill 2024, which has sat in this place for some time. I do thank the Greens for bringing this important bill forward. We have seen some really, really shocking allegations of corruption over the last month – over the last couple of years, even – but I think what has come to light in the last month is the biggest corruption scandal this state has ever seen. The fact that those opposite are still avoiding accountability and denying it is even an issue I think says a lot about their character. It says a lot about the state of this government, that it thinks it can just brush this scandal under the carpet. Some of the evidence that we have seen – the allegations that have been made about taxpayer dollars going to bikies, to underworld figures, to criminals, and spent on all sorts of things like strippers on worksites; we have seen drug deals on worksites, we have seen women bashed and abused on worksites. We have seen government cars used for criminal hits.

The level of corruption that has gone on has been quantified to a conservative estimate of \$15 billion. I think the fact that this government is not willing to take steps to deal with this issue is appalling. We saw today that over two-thirds of Victorians support a royal commission into CFMEU misconduct on construction sites – so pretty much everyone except the Premier supports a royal commission. We know that even two Labor ministers and many of their backbench support a royal commission, because a royal commission is what we need to shine a light on CFMEU corruption. The people most affected by this are the workers and good contractors that have been kicked off construction sites, that just go to work on a construction site for a hard day's work. We back those workers in every single day of the week. They should not have to pay \$5000 as an entry fee to go work on the North East Link. They

should not, as has happened on the Suburban Rail Loop sites, be forced to partake in bribes to work as a contractor on a government Big Build site. It should not be happening, but it still is.

The Queensland government is now ruling out working with Mick Gatto-linked companies. I want to know: do M Group companies currently have work on Victorian construction sites? That is what we need to know. This government will not be forthcoming about that – of course they will not. They will not follow the lead of the Queensland government – of course they will not. You have to wonder why.

I spoke at great length earlier today about the need for follow-the-money powers. These are powers that have been requested by IBAC for some time to enable money to be traced to the contractor level and to follow taxpayer dollars where they land, because there is basically no oversight on government money. As Ronnie Hayden has even said, once it gets to the contractor level there is basically no oversight of taxpayer dollars. Is it any wonder why the Ombudsman has called out the Victorian Infrastructure Delivery Authority and their record keeping as abysmal today? Is it any wonder why taxpayers money has been rorted to such a degree that we have seen when the record keeping of the infrastructure delivery authority responsible is a sham?

So we do support giving IBAC follow-the-money powers. We have also announced that we will establish Construction Enforcement Victoria to enforce a renewed construction code as a tough cop on the beat, we will stamp out organised crime on government-funded worksites and we will introduce tough new laws modelled on the racketeer-influenced and corrupt organisations laws in the United States that will target criminal bosses who run organised crime networks. We will enforce the law, we will find the money and we will stop the rorts in this state. That is our plan to clean up Victoria under a Jess Wilson government. Those opposite want to pull the wool over their ears and bury their heads in the sand and continue on like nothing has happened, like we have not just had the biggest corruption scandal in Victorian history where we have lost, taxpayers have lost, \$15 billion. That is 130,000 new nurses, teachers or coppers to keep the community safe. That is the equivalent of what we have lost in taxpayer money. We need to have strong follow-the-money powers.

As we have mentioned in previous debates and flagged in debate on a previous bill that the government had to shelve, we think there is more work to do on the definitional change of ‘corruption’. We would support the Integrity and Oversight Committee having a deeper look at those particular changes. Until that time we are not in a position to support those changes, but the general principle of what the Greens are trying to do is good. We need stronger laws in this state, and when IBAC makes recommendations we do need to take them very, very seriously, unlike this government. We saw an extraordinary joint statement from our integrity agencies for better management and more transparency over how our integrity agencies are funded, to be more transparent and for government to state reasons why funding, delivery and budgeted items are not met year on year.

As I mentioned, we do have some issues with the definitional change. In broad principle we support where the Greens are going with this bill. We would not be in a position to support it because of those changes, but I am looking forward to hearing more in the debate and hearing from the government in their defence of what is, as I said, the biggest corruption scandal we have ever seen in the history of this state. We have seen scandal after scandal. We have seen women abused on construction sites. We have seen a woman bashed by a health and safety officer who had been released from prison not long prior. We have seen some pretty shocking allegations of corruption which has resulted in \$15 billion rorted on government construction sites. There have been reports of drugs, strippers and violence against women and Indigenous Victorians that have come at a cost, and I did call the Premier out on it when she was transport infrastructure minister. A good Indigenous business, for no reason, was kicked off the Mickleham Road site in Greenvale in my electorate, up the road from my electorate office. Why? Could not provide a reason. Who replaced that good Indigenous business? A company that was linked to Mick Gatto that did not seem to have any Indigenous affiliation at all. The company that got kicked off is affiliated to Kinaway. We have had many members on that side speak positively about Kinaway and the peak body and what they do, yet this is consistently happening on government construction sites, whether it is a level crossing in Mordialloc, whether it is Mickleham Road in

Greenvale or whether it is the North East Link, which seems to be the epicentre of the corruption that is going on. These people are calling the shots through the North East Link by saying, 'If you don't take this particular business off this level crossing project, you're going to lose work on the North East Link.' They are doing it over and over again, and the Suburban Rail Loop is the next epicentre they are going to use to command and control construction sites across Victoria.

IBAC does need the power to follow money where it goes, but that is only one part of the solution. The other part of the solution is a royal commission to really get to the bottom of the conduct of the CFMEU. Let us remember: the only reason that we are now hearing about the \$15 billion lost in Victoria is because of 18 months worth of work that Geoffrey Watson did that was submitted to the Queensland royal commission into the CFMEU. We should not have to find out this information from a Queensland royal commission; we should be having our own. We also need to bring back the construction code with a Construction Enforcement Victoria body that is the tough cop on the beat. The federal government, as soon as they were able to get their mitts on it, defunded the Australian Building and Construction Commission at a federal level, and while it was defunded and not yet abolished Jacinta Allan was still referring industrial relations issues on construction sites that she was responsible for to the ABCC, knowing it could not and did not have the ability to investigate. She would respond to me, like she did on Mickleham Road matters, that industrial relations are a matter for the Commonwealth. It was only when she was exposed and embarrassed by articles in the 'Building bad' series in the *Age* that she all of a sudden saw the logic of doing something about it. She has not gone far enough. We need to clean up Victoria. We need to enforce the law, we need to find the money and we need to stop the rorts.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (15:04): I rise to speak on the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Ending Political Corruption) Bill 2024, introduced to this place by my colleague Dr Sarah Mansfield. This is the Greens' latest attempt to give our integrity agencies the powers that they need to ensure that public projects are being administered correctly, to ensure that governments are acting with integrity and to ensure that our public funds are being disbursed not only in the public interest but in the way that the government claims and intends for them to be spent. We have known for a long time that the powers our integrity agencies hold are currently insufficient, and the integrity of our government depends on IBAC being given the teeth it needs to root out corruption – corruption like we have seen recently revealed and alleged on the Big Build project. The bill that we have brought to this place and the amendments that I will introduce today to that bill will achieve just that.

The majority of Victorians clearly want and support further investigation into corruption on Labor's Big Build projects, but not just on that; they want confidence across the government's whole big-spending infrastructure agenda that we are seeing the public benefit delivered that these projects claim to deliver. The only people who are standing in the way of that happening currently are Jacinta Allan's Labor government. It is seriously concerning how desperately Labor have been trying over the past sitting week and this week to prevent our integrity agencies from gaining these powers. It does raise the query of why, when we have heard for years from the agencies themselves and from Parliament's Independent Oversight Committee that these powers are needed – that they are necessary – the government is dragging its feet. It raises the query in the minds of those of us in this place and in the population of Victoria: do they have something to hide? Do they know more about what has been going on? Let me be clear, though: these powers are important beyond the scandal of today. They are important and have been important for decades to enable our integrity agencies to do the job that they are set up to do.

Today we are debating our bill to give IBAC the powers it needs. We are supportive of many, many actions to try and rectify this issue, but only the bill that the Greens are putting forward gets to the root of this problem and tackles grey corruption. I heard Mr Mulholland's contribution and about the difficulty that the Liberals face with some of that, but it is an essential improvement to our integrity

agencies and one that IBAC has repeatedly asked for itself. It is only the Greens who are putting that solution on the table at the moment to get to the root of that problem.

The bill will expand the definition of ‘corrupt conduct’ so that IBAC is no longer restricted to investigating serious indictable crimes or common-law offences like misconduct in public office, bribery or perverting the course of justice. This would empower IBAC to identify, investigate and expose corrupt conduct of public officers that does not in itself constitute a criminal offence. That is things such as serious breaches of codes of conduct of MPs and ministers, really egregious pork-barrelling or the awarding of non-competitive tenders and appointments to public positions that are not informed by a competitive process. The bill will also, crucially, make provision for investigations of conduct that occurred before the commencement of the bill, and it will allow IBAC to re-examine matters that it has previously dismissed or referred to another agency. That is really crucial when you consider the events that have led us to this place today in relation to Big Build corruption allegations.

If we genuinely want to fix this and stop this problem happening again not just in the current instance but over time and going forward, we must give IBAC the powers that it has been begging for, and anything less than that really is a cop-out. We have heard some comments on the need for a royal commission, and obviously the scale of this scandal deserves serious investigation. I will make the comment that IBAC was essentially set up to be a standing royal commission, but it has deliberately not been given powers akin to that investigating body – the powers that it needs to do its job. If we want to investigate this current crisis properly now, we need to give IBAC the proper powers, because this is not the first political scandal that we have seen with the integrity agency – with its hands tied – unable to get to the bottom of it. And if we do not fix the problem, it will not be the last; this will happen again. We have a huge spending agenda from the Labor government, some of it undoubtedly going into very worthy projects. But we need to have the scrutiny and the accountability for the public to feel confident that that is being delivered effectively.

The bill that we have before the house, crucially, will actually just bring IBAC’s powers into line with those of most other anti-corruption watchdogs across the nation, including the new National Anti-Corruption Commission. I will observe that we have some integrity bodies here in Victoria, but they have been hamstrung because of a deliberate decision to withhold from them the powers that they need to root out corruption and to stop it before it starts. If the Allan Labor government opposes these really sorely needed reforms, we can only reach one logical conclusion: that the Premier does not want the Victorian public to know about the full truth and the depth and the breadth of corruption on the Big Build. So I truly hope that we will take the opportunity that is contained in this crisis and actually finally act to give our integrity agencies the powers that they have been calling for for years.

As I said in commencing my speech today, we also have some amendments that are in my name, and I ask that those be circulated now. These amendments turn to some of the issues and solutions that have been broadly canvassed in the media and in this chamber in recent times. The first of these is on KC70C, the sheet in my name, which provides the follow-the-dollar powers. This will give IBAC the power to follow the money all the way through publicly funded projects and into the private sector and organised crime, where currently it does not have the power. To get to the bottom of the Big Build scandal, IBAC must be given the power to investigate the corrupt conduct of third parties and of private subcontractors, including dodgy developers, the firms that are run by organised crime, the bikies hired as health and safety reps and standover men who are working as industrial dispute mediators. These are some of the allegations that we have heard, and at the moment they just stand and cannot be properly investigated because IBAC lacks the power to follow the money. This amendment will also vest IBAC with strengthened powers to explicitly authorise someone who has made a complaint to IBAC to communicate to someone else about IBAC’s response to that complaint – for example, to be able to communicate that IBAC has decided whether to dismiss or investigate the complaint.

The second function of these amendments, on KC75C, is to amend the Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2011 to remove the exceptional circumstances threshold that IBAC needs to satisfy in order to hold public hearings. IBAC recently told the Integrity and Oversight

Committee that the exceptional circumstances requirement for holding a public examination ‘imposes an additional and unnecessary constraint on IBAC’s ability to inform the public and promote accountability’. Put simply, Victorians have a right to see with their own eyes where the Big Build billions went, including what the Premier knew and when she knew it. I want to emphasise that this amendment will not remove important safeguards on public hearings, including that it allows IBAC to maintain discretion, to hold private hearings where necessary, to protect the identity of whistleblowers or to protect the reputation, safety or wellbeing of a witness. But it provides that ability for them to conduct public hearings without having to satisfy exceptional circumstances, which will improve the transparency and the confidence of the public both in IBAC’s exercising of its duties and in turn in the administration of public funds.

Our final amendment is a clarification of the meaning of ‘corrupt conduct’, which is on sheet KC76C. This is new to this place. The amendment clarifies that a finding of corrupt conduct is not a finding of criminal misconduct. Currently section 162(6) of the IBAC act states that IBAC cannot find that someone is guilty of a criminal or disciplinary offence. IBAC currently employs a conservative reading of the IBAC act 2011, to avoid breaching section 162(6), that the definition of ‘corrupt conduct’ is limited to serious indictable offending or common-law offences. That is why Victoria’s anti-corruption commission does not make findings of corrupt conduct. As such, IBAC proposed to the Integrity and Oversight Committee that the IBAC act could simply be amended to clarify that a finding of corrupt conduct is not a finding of guilt but simply establishes jurisdiction. IBAC is of the view that this would let it report more clearly on corrupt conduct, it would sharpen its recommendations in relation to prevention without prejudicing criminal investigations and prosecutions, and it would help build public trust. The effect of this amendment is empowering IBAC to do just this.

We actually have the power today to start giving Victorians the answers that they seek and that they deserve on the full extent, the cost and the criminality involved in what has been going on. I do urge all members to do the right thing for Victorians today and in the future by supporting our bill and amendments. I note we have had some pretty incredible conduct from the government. It is vital that we actually get a resolution to this. These are not new issues, as I have said. We have been seeking to expand this jurisdiction and give IBAC the teeth that it has needed essentially since the agency’s creation. The gap that was left in IBAC’s abilities has meant that over time it has done very good work in improving transparency, accountability and oversight but there has always been this glaring gap that means that incidents like those that the government has spent many weeks now trying to defend and bat off have continued. We just must not allow that situation to go into the future. We have the ability to fix the jurisdictional issues that IBAC has come up against.

The Greens have been consistent in bringing laws on this topic to this place. We were also consistent in putting forward amendments, as has been mentioned, to the omnibus bill that the government currently has waiting in the wings. We believe that these are vital fixes to our integrity and oversight bodies. We have not just brought this up as part of the latest crisis. It is something that Tim Read, my colleague in the other place, our integrity spokesperson, has been diligent on, and it is something that my predecessors in this place also raised on behalf of the Greens over many, many years.

It is time to actually bring this saga to a close and give our integrity agencies the powers that they need to ensure that Victorians have confidence in the administration of public funds, in the government’s decision-making around that, in its implementation of what are huge, eye-watering sums of public funds. The allegations around \$15 billion are serious, and if the government were really serious about getting to the bottom of that, I would think that they would want to know what has happened with the huge amounts of expenditure that are currently committed. We need to have confidence in the way that these funds have been administered. I would hope that all parties could agree on that principle and provide our integrity agencies with the powers that they need in order to address the gaps that they currently face and that allow situations like corruption on the Big Build to flourish. I would ask all

parties to give serious consideration to our amendments and the bill before the house. This is a necessary fix, and I commend the bill to the house.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (15:19): I am very pleased to rise to speak on the private members bill seeking to make amendments to the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Act 2011 and to consider the amendments which have been circulated. This is a complex area of law and public administration that I think requires and deserves careful and detailed attention. I am going to spend quite a bit of time today going through some of the issues that I think present themselves in considering some of the precise issues that are raised by either the bill or the proposed amendments, and I hope that in doing so the contributions that I make are not wilfully mischaracterised by others as being anything less than taking these issues exceptionally seriously.

As someone who has served on the Integrity and Oversight Committee for the duration of this Parliament, the 60th Parliament, and has spent many hours discussing and debating with colleagues on that committee, interviewing witnesses and preparing reports on a wide range of issues, I know these are complex matters that require careful consideration. I do not think that the text of the amendments proposed today give due consideration to the complexity of those issues. There are a series of questions that remain significantly unanswered about the operation of the precise amendments that are being proposed today that I think warrant further consideration, and we should not characterise them as simple things that we can just implement because they tick a recommendation from the IOC's report, which I will get to and question in many respects, and that we can just put through and it is really simple. This is a very complex piece of public administration and public law. It involves the granting of exceptional powers to a body. I think we have to be very, very careful in how we as legislators consider changing that legislative framework, and I will get to that in the course of this contribution today. I take this very seriously, and I hope that people understand and appreciate this contribution as being in that vein.

I want to make some broad comments at the start about the context that sits around the legislation before us today, because obviously the motivation of various people making various speeches and various contributions is for them to articulate. What you have seen from the government since the serious allegations of systemic improper and illegal conduct on construction sites here in Victoria were brought into the public domain with such force back in mid-2024 is an absolute and unwavering commitment to ensuring that illegal activity on our construction sites is stamped out.

The best way for illegal activity to be dealt with is by Victoria Police bringing charges in a court of law against the criminal, and that is exactly what Victoria Police have done. Taskforce Hawk has made 17 arrests. Nearly 70 charges have been laid against individuals involved in the building and construction industry here in Victoria as a result of their work. That is how seriously the government takes these issues. We have referred matters to Victoria Police. Matters have been investigated; charges have been laid.

There are a range of other measures that the government has taken, principally on matters to do with labour hire licensing that are within the jurisdiction of the state, to ensure that standards are lifted and that we have the capacity and the legislative framework, through the appropriate regulators at a state level, to weed out bad characters from regulated industries here in Victoria. We have debated on prior occasions the significant new powers that have been given to things like the Labour Hire Authority to weed out bad actors from those particular industries. There are also a range of issues which need dealing with at the Fair Work level because, as we know, things like the regulation and the approval of enterprise bargaining agreements in the state of Victoria are powers that are referred to the Commonwealth and it is the Fair Work Commission that has responsibility for dealing with some of the issues that have been raised with respect to irregularities or alleged irregularities around the registration of enterprise bargaining agreements, and I hope that takes place.

We have also seen swift and strong action from the Commonwealth government, as the level of government responsible for the regulation of registered organisations, to appoint an independent

administrator to the CFMEU to clean out the bad actors. That has all happened. That is the context for this debate. This legislation before us today is seeking to do a number of things in that context, and some of them, as both Dr Mansfield and Ms Copsey have articulated in their contributions, are matters of reform that they suggested should occur prior to these revelations, so they are not solely a response to the contemporary revelations with respect to the building and construction industry, and others feature with more prominence.

I want to get to the bill and to the amendments in particular. There are a series of questions raised by the particulars of the amendments that have been circulated today when considered alongside the report of the Integrity and Oversight Committee. Obviously, the Integrity and Oversight Committee in December last year released quite a substantial report – I would do the page count – of a couple of hundred pages with a considerable number of recommendations. The inquiry itself took us, as a committee, a long time, and it was a thorough piece of work. That report contains a series of recommendations that traverse matters broader than those which the Greens have proposed in this legislation before us today and touches on a number of matters that have not been brought up in these amendments, but it also deals with other factors that some of these amendments do raise that have not been considered by the Greens, and I will get to some of those. So there are both matters that have not been dealt with by these proposed amendments arising out of the IOC's report and other matters that have been dealt with, but the depth and the complexity of the issues that the IOC raised have not been dealt with by these proposed amendments.

The first I want to go to is what is in the substantive bill, and that is effectively the change that is sought to be made with respect to the definition of what constitutes corrupt conduct. The bill itself seeks to make amendments to section 4, where the definitions of 'corrupt conduct' are in the IBAC act, to remove the requirement that conduct needs to constitute a relevant criminal offence in order to be investigated by IBAC as corrupt conduct. Obviously the definitions of 'corrupt conduct' in the IBAC act have not been static since the IBAC legislation was brought in in 2011 and passed in 2012. There were a series of amendments brought forward in 2015 and 2016 by the government that broadened IBAC's scope of powers and that removed restrictions that had been put in there by the previous Liberal government when they established the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission. They made a series of changes to the laws in 2016, and there were further amendments to a lot of issues made in 2019. So it is not as if there have not been amendments to IBAC's legislation over the course of this government. That is one matter.

The second is that the proposed amendment here in its particular form does raise a series of issues that I think need further and better explanation. One of the challenges that we encounter in dealing with this particular space is, both in Dr Mansfield's second-reading speech, which was delivered I think last year, and in Ms Copsey's contribution today, the intended effect of these amendments. This is important because when there are ambiguous phrases in legislation, the contributions in the second-reading debates and particularly the second-reading speeches of those who moved them are really critical to aiding statutory interpretation. So it is really important that we understand what is meant.

Both Dr Mansfield and Ms Copsey talked about this bill seeking to give IBAC the power to eradicate and deal with grey corruption. The reason I find this challenging is because of the evidence that our committee, the Integrity and Oversight Committee, received from a range of legal experts about the difficulties in determining workable legal definitions for the concept of grey corruption. To quote from page 22 of the IOC's report:

Some scholars have noted that including acts of 'grey corruption' may be difficult to define legally. For example, Professor Tim Prenzler notes that '[t]he term "grey corruption" appears to have utility in political discourse in describing areas of minor corruption and/or unethical but legally ambiguous practice'.

In doing so, he is basically saying that grey corruption is a useful term for political discourse, but it is not a particularly useful term if you want to start putting definitions into acts. That is one of the reasons

that the IOC, in its consideration of these issues, made the following comments, and I quote from page 24 of the IOC's review of IBAC's laws:

The Committee recognises the difficulty in settling on a workable legal test for a definition of serious corrupt conduct in the political context that falls short of a criminal offence, and notes the lack of substantive definition, and even consistent definition between witnesses, on what would constitute 'grey corruption'. The Committee does not consider that the term 'grey corruption' is helpful in guiding reforms to the IBAC's legislation.

I think this is incredibly important because it does present to us a real challenge in supporting today the proposal that the Greens have put forward when the second-reading speech and the contribution from Ms Copsey said that this is designed to target grey corruption but the evidence the committee received was that it is exceptionally challenging to form that legal definition. One of the things that the New South Wales ICAC has looked at is particularly how to define the term 'pork-barrelling', which is one of the things, again, that Dr Mansfield in her second-reading speech said this bill would be designed to deal with. The New South Wales ICAC's report on Operation Jersey, which delved into questions about how to define what pork-barrelling is, basically said there were challenges in finding definitions and that it essentially amounted to conduct that generates partisan benefit.

What we find from evidence that was certainly presented by certain witnesses, including Clancy Moore from Transparency International, at the IOC's hearings was that there are lines that are difficult to define about what is normal horsetrading in the course of political agreement – agreements that might be sought to be made by people who sit in a chamber like this about whether they would support particular legislation – and the extent to which those discussions would constitute pork-barrelling or grey corruption for the purposes of defining IBAC's proposed powers. What we may be doing by proposing the amendments as they are drafted here today is capturing conduct that many of us might regard as being a normal part of trying to pass legislation through the Parliament, because if a deal was done between parties to block or not block, pass or not pass legislation through the Parliament that in some way was regarded as offering a partisan benefit, which is what the New South Wales ICAC in its discussion of these issues in Operation Jersey said was one of the things that constituted pork-barrelling, then we would run a serious and significant risk of introducing legislation that renders –

Members interjecting.

Jacinta Ermacora: On a point of order, Acting President, Mr Batchelor is engaging respectfully and deeply with this bill, and I think the noise, even though it is not as loud as usual, still makes it difficult to hear.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Gaelle Broad): I will just ask for the interjections to be kept to a minimum or a reasonable level.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I think one of the issues that the people interjecting are talking about is that the words in the bill are not the words that were put in the second-reading speech, and the point I am making is that the words in the bill are ambiguous. The words are ambiguous about what would fall within the definition of 'corrupt conduct', and to determine what those words meant and what those words mean, courts will look to the second-reading speeches, particularly the second-reading speech of the member who introduced the bill, as informative extrinsic evidence to determine what is meant by ambiguous words in legislation. It is a very simple principle of statutory construction that the High Court itself, in understanding what some particular provisions of the IBAC act mean, looked at in the last few years. I know people do not think these are serious issues because of the way that they are interjecting, but I think that understanding the implications of legislation that we seek to pass is the fundamental job of us as legislators. If members wish to clarify what they mean by the words that they propose and the words that they say, they will have opportunity, I suspect, in the course of the debate to do that.

There are a couple of other matters I want to get to here. One of them relates to the amendment on sheet KC75C which is proposed by Ms Copsey to repeal section 117(1)(a) of the IBAC act, which is

the provision that public hearings should only occur in exceptional circumstances. I think we should at the start make it pretty clear, because there has been some misreporting in the media, what the IOC report recommended. The IOC did not recommend this change to the IBAC's legislation. The IOC gave careful consideration to these issues and formed a position that this amendment was not something that should be proceeded with. I want to give some context from the report as to why that is the case, because I think it is important in the course of this debate. In dealing with examinations I think one of the things that people do not have an appreciation for routinely is the exceptional nature of IBAC's powers. This is a passage from page 56 of the IOC's report:

IBAC's examination process is notably different than the court process for giving evidence. Aside from the abrogation of privilege discussed above, submissions have also highlighted that while witnesses in IBAC examinations are able to have a lawyer present, their lawyer is not able to speak, and there is no opportunity for cross-examination to enable a right of reply. It has also been stated that '[e]xhibits used by IBAC lawyers in examinations are not provided to witnesses or their lawyers prior to the commencement of the examination, which is distinctive from court processes. Additionally, an IBAC investigation is identifying whether corrupt conduct has occurred is a truth-finding exercise, which is a lower threshold than the finding of guilt beyond a reasonable doubt in criminal court hearings. It is also necessary to ensure IBAC's examination process is consistent with the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* ...

I am not aware, although I might have missed it in Ms Copsey's contribution, of whether there has been a statement detailing the compatibility of these amendments to the charter of human rights. If there has been, I would be willing to read it. But I am concerned that there has not been, because the charter of human rights – at right 13, 'Privacy and reputation', subsection (b) – says that the person has the right not to have their reputation unlawfully attacked. IBAC's examination process is one where you do not have the right to silence, you do not have a privilege against self-incrimination, you do not see evidence before it is presented to you and your lawyer cannot object during the processes. This is an extraordinary set of powers that has the potential to extraordinarily impact on witnesses. The legislation, as it is framed, draws strength from the charter of human rights to protect an individual's right not to have their reputation unlawfully attacked. The committee, in determining its position on this question, said:

While the Committee acknowledges that the exceptional circumstances test in section 117 of the *IBAC Act* ... provides a high threshold for an examination in public, the Committee considers that this is appropriate when considering the risks associated with IBAC's public examinations, including reputational damage.

I would be interested to understand the perspective of the people who are proposing this change and what impact it has in an assessment against the charter of human rights – also because the statement of compatibility with human rights that was tendered with the original bill relied upon this section being present in the act as evidence that the proposed changes to section 6 on corrupt conduct did not abrogate an individual's human rights. The statement of compatibility tabled with the bill said that the changes to section 6 did not abrogate human rights because of protections in section 8(a) and also because of protections in section 117, but the amendments that are being moved by Ms Copsey take away one of the things that their own statement of compatibility with human rights says protects human rights. So we need an explanation about how these changes uphold the charter of human rights.

We also have the evidence from the chief inspector of Integrity Oversight Victoria, who gave evidence to the IOC's inquiry on 25 August last year and said:

We have had the experience of individuals who have found that the damage to their reputation is such that they are not able to get banking, finance and the like, and they are looking to get confirmation that what they have done is actually not a finding of being associated with corrupt conduct.

I will come to this question as well, because one of the other changes that Ms Copsey has proposed in her set of amendments is to enable IBAC to make findings of corrupt conduct about an individual. As was explained earlier in the debate, because of the requirement that corrupt conduct constitutes a criminal offence, IBAC is precluded from detailing findings of corrupt conduct against individuals. The proposal from Ms Copsey seeks to make that change consistent with the recommendation from the IOC. But the problem that we have with the amendment that is being moved is that it cherry-picks

one recommendation and ignores two other recommendations related to exactly the same issue that provide protections to individuals who may be the subject of such findings. They also run contrary to the submissions of IBAC itself to the IOC, and I will go through that in just a moment.

The concerns about these sections were expressed by the Law Institute of Victoria in their submission to the inquiry, which said:

A public finding of corrupt conduct or police personnel misconduct against an individual inherently impacts on the person's right to privacy and reputation, particularly where such findings have been made in the absence of the same procedural fairness safeguards that would have been provided in the judicial system. Arguably, in the social media age, public findings of corrupt conduct or police personnel misconduct are likely to have long lasting reputational impacts for the individual, which may culminate in severe impacts to the person's future employment and overall health and wellbeing.

In order to prevent people's human rights being severely abrogated, IBAC said in its submission:

IBAC seeks an amendment to the IBAC Act to provide it with the express power to make findings about, and form and express opinions of, corrupt conduct and police personnel misconduct consistent with the powers of other Australian anti-corruption commissions. Any such amendment should include a provision clarifying that a finding or opinion that corrupt conduct has occurred is not a finding of guilt or proof of the commission of a criminal offence and serves solely to establish jurisdiction for the purpose of enabling IBAC to perform its functions under the Act. This approach aligns with administrative law principles and reinforces the distinction between IBAC's investigative jurisdiction and the role of the courts in determining criminal liability.

Why does this matter? Because the amendments before us today, whilst purporting, I expect, to pick up recommendation 24 of the IOC's report, ignore recommendation 25 and recommendation 26. Recommendation 25 is:

That the Victorian Government seek to amend the *IBAC Act 2011* (Vic) to require that IBAC implement additional procedural fairness requirements in respect of findings of corrupt conduct, including in respect of (but not limited to) confidentiality, timeliness and providing individuals with an opportunity to respond.

Recommendation 26 is:

That the Victorian Government seek to amend the *IBAC Act 2011* (Vic) to require that IBAC, in relevant reports, expressly states that findings in respect of corrupt conduct and police personnel misconduct do not amount to findings of guilt.

What the Greens amendments do is ignore those protections. What the Greens amendments do is ignore the further protections that were recommended by the law institute, recommended by IBAC and recommended by the IOC. I think it does demonstrate that on this particular issue there is more work that needs to be done – that the totality of the response to the IOC's recommendations needs to be properly considered by government. That is exactly what the government is doing. The government has had this report since it was tabled in the Parliament in early December.

What I have hopefully demonstrated over the course of my contribution today is some of the complexity that exists in this area of law, how the IOC in its report sought to work its way through some of that complexity and how the Greens in their amendments have ignored complexity, have ignored the issues and the implications and the consequences for things like human rights and have failed to provide a comprehensive suite of legislative amendments that are necessary and required to see how we can improve IBAC's performance in this state. As I said at the start of my contribution, what I have tried to demonstrate today is that there is significant work that has gone into this by the Integrity and Oversight Committee in its report. Sadly, the amendments before us today ignore a lot of it and run contrary to some of it. What the government has said is that it is carefully considering the report and will provide a comprehensive response to all of these issues so that when we make amendments to an exceptionally complex piece of law that has the effect of abrogating the rights of citizens, including their right to silence and their fundamental human rights, we do so carefully and in a considered way. This is what this legislation is about. This is what we should have as our standard for amending integrity legislation in Victoria.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (15:49): There is a lot you could take from that speech. After all the talking down that we get from a member representing the government, you would never know that the biggest financial corruption scandal in history happened under their watch. You would never know that. Some of these things are quite ironic, and I will quote Mr Batchelor saying he thinks people just do not appreciate IBAC's powers. I would agree with him, because it seems the Premier certainly did not when she referred the biggest financial corruption scandal in history to IBAC, a body that does not have follow-the-money powers.

Last month brought to light the biggest corruption scandal in this state's history, the biggest that has ever been seen. I just want to state plainly that when Victorians are facing a cost-of-living crisis, when there is not enough money to fund police, when there is not enough money to fund ambulance services – the very basics of what this government should provide – we have heard that \$15 billion has been lost to corruption. That would have funded every one of those services that I just mentioned. It is pretty upsetting that Victoria has become a state where parents are pulling their kids out of ballet and soccer due to cost-of-living pressures and due to the unbearable tax burden that it requires to live in this state. While parents are pulling their kids out of sport, people are accessing state-sponsored strippers. It is unbelievable. Can you believe that? When in Victoria we are short of 2000 police because of Labor's mismanaged budget and because we are consistently running in the red, crooks are using state-sponsored strippers. Just let that sink in. While ambulances in my area cannot be manned, due to this budget crisis, government cars are being used for hits. It is actually true.

When we hear the government speak about International Women's Day, women are being bashed on state Big Build sites. In fact here are two case studies. A woman was locked in a small room at a half-built state government hospital by a man previously jailed for violence against women, who smoked ice as he detained her. Another woman was bashed by a bikie-linked health and safety representative – which is ironic in itself, to be bashed by a health and safety representative – on his lunchbreak from a government-funded project. It was caught on camera. While the government have treated anyone – and we have just seen the best example of it in the last speech – who questions them as less, as conspiracy theorists, as somehow not quite as enlightened as they are, government construction sites have become the business headquarters for drug deals. That is the reality in this state: government construction sites have become the home of drug deals, threats and crime.

What I have found really upsetting is how lightly this government seems to be treating this matter. We are now into the second sitting week where we have been asking questions in question time, and I have just found the posture of this government amazing. It has been staggering to witness how the government have responded when asked questions – when asked what they knew, what went wrong. It seems like they have found it extremely funny, hilarious even, and whoever raises facts has been essentially called a liar. This is not the transparency that Victorians deserve. Every Victorian has the right to know what is happening with their taxpayer dollars. It is unbelievable that the government, who seem to have lost \$15 billion of somebody else's money –

Nick McGowan interjected.

Renee HEATH: exactly, our money – are turning their nose up at a royal commission when their own government members, who obviously are too afraid to say who they are, are supporting that. This government has made light of it once again and treated everyone else like idiots – the public; the Greens, who are bringing this bill today; the members on this side who have raised questions and spoken in favour of a lot of what they are saying – when the Premier herself referred this issue to an agency which did not even have the powers to follow the money and to look into it. It is outside their scope. So enough fake outrage, I think. It is time to actually face up. This government has been given a very important job. You hold the purse, and you have lost \$15 billion. It is time to enforce the law, find the money and stop the rorts.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:55): I rise to make a brief contribution to the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Ending Political Corruption)

Bill 2024, brought to this chamber by my Greens colleague Dr Mansfield, just to provide some further remarks to those made by one of my other colleagues Ms Copsey. It is quite an astonishing experience being able to follow Mr Batchelor's remarks earlier. He managed, from the government side, as a Labor member, to speak for 30 minutes on this bill effectively just to say that the matters are complex and also to dwell for minutes on end, minutes at a time, on a definition in the bill that actually is not there if you look at page 2. I was trying to keep track of how many times the member used the word 'serious' – it was dozens and dozens; I lost track – when ultimately, if the government has not been forthcoming with its own solutions to this problem, how seriously is it taking the issue? It is performative. \$15 billion – that is the number that is not going away. It is the number that is keeping this Labor government up at night – \$15 billion in public money allegedly lost in rorts, public money allegedly used to fund criminal activity, organised crime, on government construction sites. Yet this Labor government refuses to take any accountability for this gross level of corruption. They refuse to give our anti-corruption bodies the powers that they need to investigate. It is little wonder then that a majority of voters have said this betrayal will influence their vote this November. That is what we have learned from polls just this morning.

That is \$15 billion that could have been spent on funding our hospitals. It could have been spent on Victorian schoolkids, who, let us not forget, receive the least per student amount of funding in this country. It is \$15 billion that could have been spent on improving our transport network. It could have been spent helping people with their medical costs or putting food on the table – \$15 billion. These laws that the Greens have brought before this Parliament to stop this dodgy behaviour, this waste of taxpayer money, cannot wait. It is incumbent on every member of this chamber to support these laws – laws to stop the rorts, laws to stop the kickbacks – and these Greens amendments to follow the money. We need these laws now more than ever, and I commend them to the house.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (15:58): As members would probably know, we are not in a position to support this private members bill moved by the Greens. It is characterised like a silver bullet to end political corruption. The reality is that there is no silver bullet when it comes to integrity reform. Complex problems in our democratic institutions do not have simple one-line solutions, and they certainly cannot be solved through a political stunt. Even after multiple royal commissions and decades of regulatory reform, complex issues cannot be solved with a single measure. The same is true when it comes to integrity reform. Strong integrity systems are built carefully over time through consultation, proper legislative design and effective oversight of institutions. They are not built through rushed amendments presented as a silver bullet, yet that is precisely what we see in the bill before the chamber today.

In addition to the solitary provision that Dr Ratnam introduced in 2024, the Greens are adding in some of the stunt measures they formulated last sitting week to derail the passage of critical legislation – such a massive expansion in one week. That context matters because integrity reform should never be treated as a political tactic. It is too important for that. Australia had a royal commission into this. It took two years. It cost \$46 million. It attacked ordinary workers, and it resulted in only one conviction.

Instead of more talk, we took strong action, and it is working. Victoria Police and the Labour Hire Authority have the powers that they need, and they are using them, because this government is serious about integrity. Victorians deserve to know that their institutions operate with transparency, accountability and fairness. That is exactly why the Attorney-General has tasked her department with working through the 30 recommendations made by the Integrity and Oversight Committee of this Parliament just last December, so beautifully articulated and explored by my colleague Mr Batchelor. Those recommendations follow careful work by the committee and extensive hearings involving integrity agencies and experts. Importantly, the government will undertake this work in consultation with integrity agencies, because on this side of the chamber we understand something very simple. You cannot fundamentally recalibrate the powers or jurisdiction of an integrity agency without consulting the people responsible for operating it. You need to understand how those changes will work in reality. You need to understand how they will be resourced. You need to understand how they

will affect investigations, staff and operational priorities. And we need to avoid unintended consequences, which can happen with hastily drafted legislation.

The Integrity and Oversight Committee's recommendations were designed precisely with these considerations in mind. They ensure that IBAC has the powers it needs while also recognising the broader impacts on Victoria's integrity system. The government will respond to the IOC before midyear, but what we will not do is rush through amendments that cut across the careful work of the committee and risk undermining the integrity system we are working to strengthen. We will not circumvent the proper process the government has in responding to committee reports, because integrity reform must be done properly. That is why we are consulting thoroughly with our integrity agencies to ensure that any changes introduced into this Parliament do not introduce inconsistency or operational challenges.

One example of the risks in this bill is the proposal to remove the exceptional circumstances test for public examinations. The government supports Victoria's integrity agencies and recognises the importance of IBAC being able to use its public examination powers when necessary to undertake this vital role. Public hearings do educate the public sector and the community about corruption and misconduct. They can raise awareness of serious misconduct and demonstrate that allegations of corruption are taken seriously and investigated thoroughly. But public examinations also carry significant consequences. They can significantly limit individual rights and can have serious costs for the privacy, reputation and wellbeing of the individuals involved. And it is important to remember that at the stage of an investigation we are dealing with allegations, not a determination or finding of guilt. I want to reiterate that point, that they are allegations when an inquiry is underway, it is not a finding.

Another consideration is that public hearings can be a deterrent to the reporting of corruption. For some individuals in the public sector, the thought of reporting what they think might be corruption may be off-putting if they know they are likely to be put before a public hearing. It is a little bit like when there is an abuse dynamic – the intimidation. Many people do not report, because they feel intimidated, so it is a tool of intimidation and prevention of reporting if there are automatic public hearings. The threshold for matters to be investigated in an inquisitorial system is lower than the threshold required for a matter to be heard in open court in our adversarial justice system. Those two processes should not be confused. This means that the powers of IBAC are much greater than a criminal court's. Public hearings increase the risk that the public may infer guilt long before any determination has been made, and once that perception is created it can follow a person for the rest of their life. It is searchable online regardless of the final outcome. This undermines the criminal justice system, and for this reason the IBAC act currently requires IBAC to consider on reasonable grounds whether holding a public hearing would cause unreasonable damage to a person's reputation, safety or wellbeing.

This requirement strikes an important balance. This is especially so for the principle of natural justice. Vexatious complaints and politicisation of the work of integrity agencies undermine community confidence, and in that context automatic public hearings, again, can change people's lives unfairly. As the current arrangements stand, they ensure IBAC can undertake its work while protecting the rights and welfare of individuals. The IOC recognised this balance when it recommended that the exceptional circumstances test for public examinations be retained. The committee also recognised the extraordinary nature of IBAC's powers compared to a criminal court's, including less protection for witnesses, whose lawyers are not allowed to speak in their defence; no opportunity for cross-examination to enable a right of reply; exhibits used by IBAC not being provided to witnesses or their lawyers in advance; and lower thresholds for finding of guilt than in criminal proceedings. With powers of that magnitude must come appropriate safeguards. Lowering the threshold for public examinations in the way proposed by the Greens risks causing serious harm to an individual's reputation and to their safety or wellbeing in circumstances where the alleged conduct may not justify those risks. Even if such a change were to be considered, it would require careful rebalancing of other safeguards to ensure witness welfare, avoid prejudicing criminal proceedings and maintain due process.

IBAC itself has also previously raised that confidentiality in investigations is critical to understanding they are not compromised, yet the Greens proposal does not acknowledge these complexities. The amendments proposed not only expand IBAC's ability to use its extraordinary powers but allow it to do so retrospectively. It is a fundamental principle of the rule of law that the law must be knowable at the time of the relevant conduct. There would be significant charter of human rights impacts in retrospectively making it so that a much wider range of conduct can constitute corrupt conduct. In fact you could imagine it being politicised very easily. Looking back 10 years, not appreciating the context and accusing someone of doing something completely out of context – it just is a massive broadening of IBAC's powers. Unless these legal issues are carefully worked through, it risks giving IBAC powers that would not withstand challenge. There is also a significant risk that this will politicise IBAC's independent function. This would put them in a difficult position in terms of exercising their discretion in relation to a very large number of historical matters, impacting on IBAC's ability to focus their efforts as they see fit and where they consider it will have the most impact.

Finally, the Greens propose expanding IBAC's jurisdiction to allow coercive powers to be exercised against any person whose conduct could impair public confidence in public administration. That is the anything rule. That is an extraordinary broadening of the threshold, which, combined with the retrospectivity, is unprecedented. It would cast an extremely wide net, enabling the use of powerful investigative tools in circumstances far beyond what the Integrity and Oversight Committee recommended.

Integrity reform must be proportionate, it must be workable and it must respect the rule of law. Victorians deserve a strong and effective integrity system. They also deserve one that is fair, balanced and carefully designed. This government is committed to strengthening integrity in Victoria, and not through slogans or silver bullets. It must be done through thoughtful reform, consultation with integrity agencies and a commitment to getting the balance right. Just in closing, I want to say that these proposed reforms do cut completely across the IOC's work, particularly their inquiry. I think in order to show respect, let alone the government's due process in these situations, this is out of order in a way, and we absolutely cannot support it.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) incorporated the following:

I rise to make a brief contribution in support of the Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission Amendment (Ending Political Corruption) Bill 2024.

Victorians are increasingly turning away from the major parties, and they are doing so for good reasons.

When our integrity agency is denied the powers it needs to meaningfully address corrupt conduct and is opaque by design – it's not doing much to restore faith in democracy.

If the government doesn't want to take transparency seriously, then it's up to us as non-government members to hold them to account.

That's why we are pleased to offer our support to the Bill before us today that will make changes to the Independent Broad Based Anticorruption Commission, known as IBAC.

In present form, these changes include an expansion of the jurisdiction of IBAC by removing the requirement that corrupt conduct must include conduct that would constitute a relevant offence. A relevant offence is defined as an indictable criminal offence as well as certain common-law offences. These changes are intended to apply retrospectively to conduct that occurred before commencement of the legislation, as well as allowing IBAC to re-examine matters that it had previously dismissed or referred to another agency.

We understand further amendments will be made to this Bill. In brief, these are related to "follow the money" powers by broadening the definition of corrupt conduct, removing some public hearing restrictions and clarifying that a finding of corrupt conduct isn't a finding of criminal misconduct.

It is important to acknowledge that debate on this Bill comes in the wake of recent reports of billions of taxpayer dollars being left unaccounted for on major projects in Victoria.

While there has been debate about the exact dollar figure, at the end of the day it's not about that. It's about the public who want to understand how this corruption was allowed to happen, and they want their integrity bodies to have powers to investigate!

As a member of the Integrity and Oversight Committee for some years, I am intimately familiar with these issues. The final report from our investigation into the adequacy of the legislative framework for the Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission recommended, among other things, that:

1. the Victorian Government seek to broaden the definition of ‘corrupt conduct’ in s 4 of the IBAC Act 2011 (Vic), to remove the requirement that conduct constitute a relevant offence and include matters involving a serious disciplinary offence, misconduct worthy of termination or other relevant offences or instances considered in breach of public trust in the public officer by reason of their appointment as a public officer.

And:

2. the Victorian Government seek to amend the IBAC Act 2011 (Vic) to provide the Commissioner of the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission with powers comparable to the Victorian Auditor-General including: Follow-the-dollar investigatory powers.

I would like to briefly touch on why these recommendations were made.

The definition of ‘corrupt conduct’ in Victoria’s legislation creates a high threshold for an investigation that limits corruption to conduct that amounts to indictable offences or specific statutory crimes.

An expanded definition of corrupt conduct and a clarification that a finding of “corrupt conduct” is not a finding of criminal misconduct was called for in many submissions to the inquiry. IBAC argued the NSW ICAC’s broader definition may better reflect public perceptions of what constitutes corruption and is arguably easier for the community to understand.

An expanded definition would also include follow-the-dollar investigatory powers to allow IBAC to oversee the use of public funds whether expended through public or private entities.

The issue of public hearings did not make it into the final recommendations of this report. However, I, along with my colleague Dr Tim Read MP, were one of the only two members of the committee to vote in support of a draft recommendation to remove the exceptional circumstances test for holding public hearings.

This test is understood to require circumstances that are highly unusual and quite rare. Only in this tiny minority of cases may an examination be public – this is wrong.

The debate on the idea of public hearings only in exceptional circumstances came to a head with the establishment of the National Anti-Corruption Commission, who were set up with a similar requirement.

At the time, a survey by the Australia Institute found that less than one in five Australians believed the Commission’s ability to hold public hearings should be restricted to when it would be in the public interest and in exceptional circumstances only. This was consistent across all voting intentions.

Before concluding, I want to acknowledge that we cannot have a conversation about making these changes to IBAC’s jurisdiction without discussing the need for additional resources.

In Integrity and Oversight Hearings earlier this week I asked the Commissioner about the consequences of a retrospective application of a broader definition of corrupt conduct, and she rightly pointed out that additional resourcing is critical for these changes to be effective.

So, I would like to see the government put their money where their mouth is. Act on integrity, reform these laws, and fund IBAC appropriately.

This isn’t the first time IBAC has asked for increased powers. They have been making these calls **for many years** and they have gone unanswered.

It is time the government stepped up and gave the community confidence that these reforms will be enacted.

Thank you.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:13): 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.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:13): I move:

That the consideration of notice of motion, general business, 1304, be postponed until the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

*Committees***Integrity and Oversight Committee***Reference*

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (16:14): I move:

That this house requires the Integrity and Oversight Committee to inquire into, consider and report, as soon as practicable given the state budget is scheduled to be delivered on 5 May 2026, on the adequacy of the annual budget for the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission, the Ombudsman and Integrity Oversight Victoria, and requires the committee in undertaking and reporting on this inquiry to:

- (1) hold public hearings with the agencies listed in this referral;
- (2) provide advice on what settings are appropriate for the funding of these agencies in the 2026–27 state budget; and
- (3) provide advice on the likely consequences if the funding provided by the government is inadequate.

We know that funding is inadequate. We know that the government has made a specialty over its period in government of starving the integrity agencies of money.

A member: Every year it goes up.

David DAVIS: Well, no, that is actually not true. When you look at the actual allocations and when you look at –

Members interjecting.

David DAVIS: You actually have to look not just at the budget papers, you have to look at the actual schedules. You have to look at the budget schedules in the chamber. That is exactly where you do not understand what is going on. You have got to look at the actual schedules of what is put in.

Members interjecting.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): Order! I think we can proceed without any interruptions from anybody.

David DAVIS: Acting President, I will try not to be provoked and try to press forward. I will try not to take the bait, as it were.

Members interjecting.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): I do not think we got too far with my request, so let us try it a second time.

David DAVIS: As I said, motion 1305 seeks to refer to the Integrity and Oversight Committee to seek their advice for the chamber ahead of the state budget. I understand Mr Batchelor has said he wants to make some changes to the motion. If they are as outlined to me verbally –

Ryan Batchelor: I've emailed them to you.

David DAVIS: Have you? Okay. That is all right. But in recent times, I think – very recently. Forgive me, but I do not have the capacity to both –

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): Mr Davis, perhaps we do not have to debate across the chamber as you go on with your presentation.

David DAVIS: Acting President, forgive me. I may have many skills, but both reading and speaking in the chamber concurrently is probably one that is beyond most of us, so I will just leave that to one side.

In all seriousness, this is actually a very important motion because the integrity agencies have not had the funding that they deserve and the funding that they need. They have said that both before the 2022

state election and subsequently in documents that they have released formally and communicated to each and every MP and in evidence to the Integrity and Oversight Committee. The offices have spoken more broadly on this as well. There is an issue with funding. If you compare the material in the submissions that they have made and in the materials that they have distributed, it is clear that we are also behind in the support for our integrity agencies compared to other jurisdictions. That is important to understand.

I want to make a point here. I am always in favour of cautious spending, spending that returns an outcome, but in this area being penny-wise is not the right step. In this area spending carefully but in a targeted manner at a level that gets the outcome is actually a better outcome for the community, because if you can prevent corruption, you actually make a big saving for the community. Transparency International says as a rule-of-thumb figure 3 to 8 per cent of government procurement could be corrupt in jurisdictions. That is what they say if you go and read their figures. They do not have state figures, but they do point to this around the world. In the case of Victoria we have more recent information in the form of Geoffrey Watson SC's contribution to the Queensland inquiry. He makes it clear that it might be as much as 15 or even 30 per cent of spending on certain types of procurement, in this case Big Build procurement, where massive amounts of public money have been spent but it appears massive amounts of public money have also been lost.

That is what we need to understand: if we do not have strong integrity agencies, police included, such as IBAC and the Ombudsman, we will have more corruption in our state. If you want to clamp down on corruption, it is necessary to spend adequately and make sure that the agencies can do what they need to do to root out corruption, to prevent corruption and to act with the right education motives. The IBAC has got an important education role, but again, it cannot do these things if it does not have the resources and money that it needs, and it surely has not.

My office has actually tracked the budget of IBAC back to 2012. You could actually follow the ins and outs of the money and the rolling over. We have actually got all of the rolling over of money, because they do not always spend all the money each year.

Ryan Batchelor: They don't spend their money?

David DAVIS: There is sometimes lumpy expenditure, if I can put it that way.

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

David DAVIS: No. Let me just be very clear that in some years there are allocations and they are spent in the following year for various reasons. The timing and the hearings and all of those sorts of things operate in a certain way. So the money, when you phase it over the period, has not been increasing in the way it should have. The money and the resources for IBAC have not kept pace. And you, Mr Batchelor, can go and look at IBAC's own charts and you can see that in fact their share of spending has actually slipped down and they are in a position where they do not have the resources that they need. It is very clear that they actually need proper resources. That is what I want the IOC to look at, and I want them to give us advice.

In this chamber in two recent years we have sought to make a suggested amendment to the budget of the Parliament – because these agencies are added to the Parliament's budget, not the general budget – and to increase the funding for IBAC and the Ombudsman. We have done that because it is clear that their funding has been inadequate. It is clear that this government has sought to –

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

David DAVIS: This government is a corrupt government. It is a government that actually has tried to starve the agencies, and it has tried to starve the agencies because it does not want the scrutiny. That is the truth of the matter. They do not want the scrutiny, and they have tried to keep the money down because more scrutiny will lead to more grief for the Allan Labor government and the corruption that is associated with the Allan Labor government.

This chamber has carried a number of motions and bills that deal with some of these matters. We have obviously been dealing with a particular bill today that is looking at the follow-the-money power and looking to insert that. It is looking at widening the definition of 'corruption'. All of these are important. Indeed there have been a number of bills considered in this Parliament and there are a number still on our notice paper. We had the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Facilitating Timely Reporting) Bill 2022, the Multicultural Victoria Amendment (Independence) Bill 2022 and the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Restoration of Examination Powers) Bill 2022. That was an important bill that actually sought to restore some of the powers that had been stripped by this government from IBAC in the period around 2019. And why does the government do that? Because the government wants less scrutiny, less focus on it as time goes forward, and the government's focus on less funding for IBAC and less funding for the Ombudsman makes it clear that there can only be one reason that this government will not fund them properly. This systemic decision to starve these agencies of proper funding is designed to cover up the government's failures and cover up the government's corruption.

I think we have been done a great favour by those in the Queensland inquiry but particularly by Geoffrey Watson SC with his thoughtful work. We know it is not just him that says there has been around \$15 billion of corruption through the Big Build sites. We also know that the federal workplace commissioner thought this would be around the correct figure. He had obviously discussed that with senior Victorian officials – I think that is how he described it – and they had concluded a similar figure. So we know that that \$15 billion figure actually has some robustness to it; a number of groups have come to similar conclusions. We obviously do not know an exact figure, but we do know that corruption is rife on our Big Build sites. We know that the corruption is widespread. We have seen report after report after report, and we know that Jacinta Allan, as the minister at the time, did not act adequately, did not do what was necessary and did not make the referrals that were necessary. Where she did make a referral, she sent it to IBAC in a way that could not be investigated, because in that case IBAC did not have the follow-the-money powers that it needed. IBAC wrote back to the Premier and explained that to her, and she ought to have known, she ought to have understood, that she needed to take further steps – that further steps needed to be taken to make sure that those corrupt activities that were occurring on those Big Build sites were dealt with in a constructive and significant way.

I also want to say something about the timing of this. I understood from Mr Batchelor that he wants to make a hard date of 5 May. I have tried to leave latitude, and I am open to be convinced on this. I do not think it is a terribly material fact, but I have left it open because I was wanting to leave whatever latitude the committee needed. If it needed to do it a week later, it could do it a week later. That was the logic when I wrote this. I was not trying to be harsh or prescriptive. But I am happy with 5 May, because 5 May is obviously budget day, and I would have thought that that is the time when we need to see the advice – by around that time. Obviously this chamber is not scheduled to sit on that day. I think the IOC could table a report nonetheless on 5 May, so we might see if the clerks could give us some information. I just want to hear that definitively. My understanding is that it could, but it would be helpful if the clerks, by the conclusion of this debate, could give some definitive advice on that particular matter.

Mr Batchelor says he does not like point 3. He says it is sort of leading. It is written the way it is because I actually do believe there is now a broad consensus that the agencies have not been funded well enough. They have said so, and other independent investigators have said so. A number of the groups that follow integrity agencies have said this to me and to others. I think any fair independent investigation would conclude that the agencies have not been adequately funded, to the extent that if number 3 disappeared off the list I do not think it would materially affect how the committee went about its work and I think the committee would approach it with exactly the thought process that I have had here – that actually the agencies are underfunded. That is why we are making the referral, and we want some formal advice on that so that we are in a position, when the budget comes forward, to try and persuade the government to come forward with a more adequate budgetary approach.

Is this the ultimate solution for annual appropriations for the integrity agencies? No. Are there alternate models out there? Yes. Would some of those models be better considered in the longer haul? Absolutely. But at the same time, we are not in a position where we can introduce one of those models this year, right now, ahead of the state budget on 5 May. This is the model that I have suggested for this occasion, for this year. It will mean that the IOC can hold some quick hearings, can talk to the agencies, can seek some other advice if they so wish and can come up with some thoughtful suggestions to make to the chamber to put us in a position where we can take the relevant steps that we might want to take to ensure that the agencies are in a stronger position going forward.

I just want to reiterate very clearly here that this is one of those areas where government spending returns a financial dividend. If you have got a government that is spending sensibly and in a targeted way on its integrity agencies, you can actually prevent corruption, save public money being squandered and thereby actually get a return for the taxpayer. Think about what has been squandered on these Big Build sites – \$15 billion, \$15,000 million. Robert Redlich said on radio the other day it might not be \$15 billion; it might be \$10 billion or it might be \$20 billion. Either way, if it is \$10,000 million or \$15,000 million or \$20,000 million that has been squandered, that is a gigantic amount of money that could have been spent on hospitals, schools, roads, a whole range of worthy –

Bev McArthur interjected.

David DAVIS: Less taxes. In my own portfolio I am watching very important arts organisations that have received very modest grants. \$150,000 a year for Writers Victoria – well, that has been cut. Right across government, money is not being spent, because it has been squandered on these Big Build sites – corruptly squandered. The corruption is clear there, whether it be the bikie gangs, the women who have been put onto the sites in inappropriate ways, the thugs that have been there threatening firms or the treatment of apprentices – you know, those terrible stories that we read just about a year ago, broken in the *Age* and the *Financial Review*, about the treatment of some apprentices. All of these are terrible circumstances, but they are also costly circumstances for the state budget, and if you are spending \$15 billion in corruptly squandered money, you are going to have less money to spend on other points.

My motion is a very simple motion. It gives the job to the IOC. It asks it to do it in a relatively short timeframe. I am open to a hard date, as opposed to a more flexible state, and I have said ‘as soon as practicable’. But the reality is this is an important motion because we need to take whatever steps are necessary to strengthen our anti-corruption agencies – whatever practical, sensible steps we can take – and part of it is funding them adequately. I urge you to support the motion.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (16:31): I am very pleased to rise to speak on Mr Davis’s motion about funding for integrity agencies and the work program for the Integrity and Oversight Committee. As a member of that committee I am always up for more work to do, because the committee itself is obviously the committee of the Parliament entrusted with the responsibility to exercise oversight over our integrity agencies listed here, principally IBAC, the Ombudsman and Integrity Oversight Victoria, along with a couple of others. As independent officers of the Parliament and accountable to the Parliament, appropriated through the parliamentary appropriation, it is indeed the IOC that has the responsibility and should exercise that responsibility to ensure that the performance of these agencies and the funding of these agencies are scrutinised – and we do. In fact on Monday the Integrity and Oversight Committee held public hearings with IBAC, the Victorian Ombudsman and Integrity Oversight Victoria and discussed a range of matters relating to their performance, as is our responsibility as a committee, including their funding arrangements and their budgets. Having done it once on Monday, I am sure the committee will be able to continue to examine those issues and do that work that we do in the normal course of events as well.

I should say that the Integrity and Oversight Committee is also at the moment undertaking a performance audit of the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission and Integrity Oversight Victoria, as is required under the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Last year we

completed a performance audit of the Victorian Ombudsman, as is required under the Parliamentary Committees Act. Those reports of IOV and IBAC this year will be tabled, hopefully, at the end of August, which should again give further assurance to the Parliament, to the Council, to the chamber, that matters of the funding and performance of these agencies are being examined. Our annual report on the performance of the integrity agencies will come around that time as well, following the hearings we were holding earlier in the week.

I will say a couple of things just in general terms about funding of integrity agencies, because I do not think that some of the claims that Mr Davis made should go unchallenged or uncontested. We know that there have been instances where there have been some challenges associated with Mr Davis's interpretation of figures, and I just thought it would be helpful to put on the public record some of the facts about integrity agency funding. IBAC today has more than double the funding it had when Labor came to office – fact. The Ombudsman has nearly double the funding – a 189 per cent increase in funding since when Labor came to government – and Integrity Oversight Victoria has nearly four times the funding than when Labor came to government. So I am not really going to be lectured about the finances of these agencies by Mr Davis when Labor has invested. He said funding is being cut and you should look at the numbers.

David Davis interjected.

Ryan BATCHELOR: No, you did not say 'effectively', you said funding had been cut. Table 2.2 of IBAC's annual report 2024–25, which was tabled last year, shows that in the financial year ending 2025 the total parliamentary authority provision of outputs to IBAC was \$66.9 million. In the 2024 financial year, the year before that, it was \$63.1 million. I am no great mathematician, but I think that \$69 million is more than \$63 million year on year. That says to me that in that financial year, the last financial year, funding went up, as you would expect it to, and we have doubled IBAC's funding since we have been in government. But we also know that there was a substantial increase in IBAC's funding in the 2022–23 budget. To quote from IBAC's annual report 2021–22, page 52:

Similar to previous years, IBAC submitted a budget bid for consideration as part of the state government's budget process. The budget bid related to an increase in base funding to enable IBAC to operate effectively and efficiently into the future. This bid was fundamentally informed by the work undertaken as part of the independent base review, which IBAC committed to undertake prior to submitting our 2022/23 budget bid. Central to our budget submission was a request for an increase in our base budget, so that we can maintain our current capacity and deliver our legislative functions, while also strengthening our ability to do so into the future.

In the 2022–23 state budget, the government announced funding for the IBAC budget bid. In dollar terms, IBAC will receive \$32.0 million over the next four years and \$8.6 million per year thereafter.

If you go and look at the output initiatives in the 2022–23 budget in the service delivery budget paper, you will note that the additional funding that IBAC is receiving this year as a result of the budget decision that was taken that year is \$8.6 million. \$8.6 million increased operational funding to IBAC was provided in that budget, and we saw from the annual report numbers that I just read out the increase year on year that is flowing to IBAC. I know that Mr Davis might have difficulty understanding these facts as well as other facts. I hope that the work that the IOC does, if this motion is successful, will help illuminate the increased funding that the government has provided to IBAC.

As Mr Davis foreshadowed, there are a couple of amendments I wish to move to his motion, and I ask that they now please be circulated. They are pretty straightforward. I move:

1. Before paragraph (1), omit ' , as soon as practicable given the state budget is scheduled to be delivered on' and insert in their place 'by'.
2. In paragraph (1), after 'referral;' insert 'and'.
3. In paragraph (2), omit 'budget; and' and insert in their place 'budget.'
4. Omit paragraph (3).

The first set of amendments just seek to give an actual reporting date to the committee. As a member of the committee, I think that it is always preferable to have an actual reporting date. We seek to do that by budget day because that was the date that Mr Davis had flagged it would be better for it to be done by, so why don't we just do it by then. As I said, we have already held some hearings on Monday, so we are well advanced on many of the things that Mr Davis seeks to do. The last is to omit paragraph (3), which I just think is a bit unnecessary and presupposes what the committee might find. I think it is best in terms of reference for inquiries to ask committees to investigate things without presupposing what they might find. Those are the amendments that I have moved to Mr Davis's motion. I think they are relatively straightforward and uncontroversial.

The other thing I will say is about the Ombudsman, because I do not want the Ombudsman to feel neglected in the course of this debate. I have articulated that the funding to the Ombudsman has been increasing since Labor took government. One of the challenges that the Ombudsman is facing, though has been highlighted in its last two annual reports as it has failed to meet some of its investigation performance targets. The evidence the Ombudsman gave to the IOC on Monday was that the impact of a combination of parliamentary referrals of matters to the Ombudsman and the operation of the Public Interest Disclosures Act 2012 and referrals under the PID act are having a significant effect on the capacity of the Ombudsman to undertake investigations. One of the things that hopefully we will be able to do in the course of the inquiry of understanding the budget is to also understand some of the drivers of the cost pressures that are being placed upon the Ombudsman, in particular, in being able to fulfil their function of conducting investigations of complaints made by the public, which is really what their fundamental core role and core function is. Bearing in mind that there have been four referrals from this chamber or its committees in the last couple of years, every time that occurs it results in resourcing implications for the Ombudsman, and that has flow-on effects to other work that the Ombudsman seeks to do and that the public I think has an expectation that it will be doing. I think that is one thing that we uncovered in our hearings with the Ombudsman that were held on Monday discussing their budget, which hopefully will help to inform the discussions that occur as part of the referral inquiry here. I think it will be an interesting inquiry.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (16:41): I rise to speak in support of this motion that Mr Davis has brought today. As Victorians' elected representatives in this Parliament, we have a responsibility to safeguard the independence and effectiveness of the integrity agencies that hold this government to account. But alarmingly, our integrity agencies not only lack the powers to delve into systemic corruption but are increasingly starved of funds to do so. IBAC, the Victorian Ombudsman and the Victorian Auditor-General's Office exist to scrutinise government, ensure its financial probity and expose maladministration, corruption and breaches of our fundamental human rights. The credibility of our integrity agencies depends on their financial independence and their capacity to operate in the knowledge that they will not suffer the cruel cuts of a cabinet razor gang in retaliation for them just doing their jobs. Today we are again reminded of the critical role these agencies play as independent officers of the Parliament as we learn that the Victorian Ombudsman rang the alarm bells about the Victorian Infrastructure Delivery Authority's (VIDA) alleged maladministration of \$100 billion in Big Build bucks months before the current Big Build scandal came to light. Today's report notes that the Ombudsman has referred this matter to IBAC and VAGO, which begs the question: do these two agencies even have the resources required to investigate a government agency that oversees the spending of so much public money?

IBAC, the Ombudsman and VAGO have recently co-published a paper on advancing budget transparency for Victoria's core integrity agencies. Their paper makes it clear that funding decisions about these critical integrity bodies remain opaque and it undermines their ability to fulfil their respective mandates. The joint paper outlines how these three integrity agencies face multiple interconnected barriers to budget transparency. Their funding is determined through a process shrouded in cabinet secrecy, with budget requests classified as cabinet in confidence. Neither the Integrity and Oversight Committee nor the parliamentary Public Accounts and Estimates Committee have any formal input or even visibility over budget decisions affecting the agencies they oversee.

This is despite legislative provisions seemingly intended to allow such consultation in the case of the Victorian Ombudsman and IBAC.

Our integrity agencies have no visibility of the Treasury advice that informs funding decisions and no opportunity to correct errors or provide context before budgetary decisions are made, and they receive no written explanation of outcomes or variations from their bids. Compounding all this, Victoria's integrity agencies are not automatically immune from the same efficiency dividends and savings measures applied to regular government departments, despite their unique statutory mandates. They also lack any kind of contingency funding mechanism to handle unpredictable workloads – for example, the Ombudsman's recent referral of VIDA's alleged maladministration to IBAC and VAGO. The funding of our core integrity agencies is heading in the wrong direction. Our integrity bodies are increasingly under-resourced relative to the public sector and public investment they are charged with overseeing. Victoria's investment in integrity functions as a proportion of total government expenditure has been trending downwards since 2016–17. It has fallen below the 0.15 per cent benchmark recommended by Transparency International Australia, and Victoria now lags behind New South Wales. Victoria's Ombudsman has half the number of complaints officers of her New South Wales counterpart.

If we have learned anything from the evolving Big Build scandal, it is that when government infrastructure spending grows but the proportional investment in oversight shrinks, the system becomes compromised. The bodies tasked with exposing misconduct, maladministration and waste are stretched thinner each year, even as their workloads increase. Take IBAC for example. Complaints and notifications rose 18 per cent in 2024–25 above the average of the preceding three years. The result is a backlog that delays investigations and puts undue strain on complainants, witnesses and staff alike. The Victorian Ombudsman is in a similarly difficult position. Significant new functions were added to the Ombudsman Act 1973 in 2019, yet there has never been a corresponding base budget review to properly resource those expanded responsibilities. When Parliament refers urgent matters for investigation, as it should rightly be allowed to do, the Ombudsman must proceed immediately, but without any guaranteed supplementary funding. The agency relies instead on informal Treasurer's advances that lack any legislative backing or certainty.

Other jurisdictions have recognised these emerging risks, and they have acted. In 2024 New South Wales amended its Government Sector Finance Act 2018 to enshrine a transparent funding process for five integrity agencies, including its Ombudsman, audit office and Independent Commission Against Corruption. This followed a 2020 special report by the New South Wales Auditor-General that identified precisely the emerging risks to integrity we are now seeing here in Victoria. New South Wales integrity agencies are excluded from efficiency dividends. A specialist Treasury unit manages their funding representations, and, crucially, agencies are invited to review Treasury's own advice to cabinet before decisions are made, giving them the opportunity to correct errors and to make their case. Funding decisions are then provided in writing, with reasons given for any variation from the original bid, to both the agency and its parliamentary oversight committee. A dedicated contingency fund is also available for urgent and unexpected matters. It is important to note that these reforms do not remove cabinet's authority over final funding decisions and they do not compromise fiscal discipline. They simply make budgetary processes more transparent and give agencies a fair hearing.

Victoria was once a leader in integrity reform, but on budget transparency we have stood still while others have moved forward. The New South Wales model is actually very modest. It is implementable and consistent with emerging best practice across jurisdictions. What is needed now is the political will to follow their lead. Transparency in budget processes for our core integrity agencies is a key democratic safeguard, and at a time when trust in public administration is faltering ensuring that integrity agencies are transparently and appropriately funded is essential to maintaining public confidence in the system. If our core integrity agencies are perceived to be financially constrained by the very executive they oversee, public trust is eroded. I commend this motion to the house.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (16:49): I rise to lend my support to this motion. Here we are again. It is just getting to be a tired old theme, talking about corruption in this state. Victorians are reassured constantly that our watchdogs are there: they are doing their job, they have got the powers and they have got the money. It sounds reassuring of course, but we all know that it is just not true. We know from our lived experience that it is just not true. We might have IBAC and the Ombudsman and Integrity Oversight Victoria – they are supposed to investigate corruption and protect taxpayer money – but we have all heard the responses when reports come out called ‘educational reports’. We have watched as reports are delayed in being released. We have heard them argue themselves that they do not have enough funding to do their jobs and that they cannot handle the volume of complaints. We know now about the underlying problems with secrecy in terms of when they are asking for more funding. Even that level of transparency from the government is missing, let alone the actual funding measures themselves. It makes you wonder whether perhaps it was designed to fail.

We have already heard all the other motions seeking to restore the powers and to grant extra powers so that these organisations and institutions can actually have teeth when they discover things, but this one is mostly about money. I find it very amusing and interesting that one of the defences that government ministers bring up all the time is: ‘Well, I referred that to the relevant agency. We referred that to the relevant agency at the time.’ They stand there and say that knowing that there is no guaranteed funding to finish. How unsatisfying.

It is no wonder public concern about corruption has grown across Victoria. We know that the construction sector is of particular concern. We have heard about the \$15 billion to \$30 billion scandal. Instinctively I think both of those numbers would be on the lower side. I would love to be proven wrong, but that would take some kind of investigation, and we need funding for that.

This government claim to be running the largest infrastructure program in Victoria’s history and that they are investing more than \$100 billion through major transport and construction projects. First of all, it does not feel like we are getting any delivery for that. Most of this money seems to go on planning and ghost shifts and things like that. All of these layers –

Members interjecting.

Moira DEEMING: The Metro Tunnel, which trains apparently cannot get around the corners on and that firefighters will not go down into – yes, that. Thank you for reminding me. Public money that moves through this many layers before reaching its final destination –

Members interjecting.

Moira DEEMING: Acting President, I cannot hear myself.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): Order!

Moira DEEMING: Public money that moves through this many layers before reaching its final destination – this volume of public money – necessitates strong oversight. Anything less is actually scandalous. I would not even call it negligence. Obviously, the taxpayer is the one that pays. They pay for whatever abysmal quality of project is eventually delivered, they pay for the cuts on top for the corruption, and they also pay for the toothless, hobbled oversight bodies just sitting there, trying their best, unable to get the job done.

I was going to go through the list of them. I will just do it quickly. Who could forget the ghost shifts on major infrastructure projects? Who could forget the red shirts affair, when they said, ‘We put it back when we got caught’; Operation Watts, with political parties getting funded with taxpayer money to branch stack; Operation Sandon, with planning powers; or Operation Daintree, where there was improper influence – millions and millions of dollars? Even the failures that fell short of criminal corruption technically are very important. You can think of all the other kinds of scandals. There is just not a culture where corruption struggles to thrive in this state. Remember the Eloque joint venture? The Victorian Auditor-General’s Office examined that. We lost \$20 million, and the conflicts of

interest on that project with government ministers were obscene – and we do not know how our bridges are going.

These agencies themselves say that they are under significant resource pressure. The government says funding was not cut. Well, it just goes to show you that the corruption is so bad in this state that even if I granted you that funding has not been cut, even if I were to grant all of those arguments, clearly corruption is so bad that it is still not enough. That is an abysmal state of affairs. The Victorian Ombudsman received over 16,000 complaints in the most recent reporting year. Only about 4000 progressed to inquiries, and 23 formal investigations were completed out of almost 17,000 complaints.

Investigative capacity determines how many complaints are going to receive proper scrutiny, how many are going to be thoroughly investigated and how many are going to be completed. Integrity Oversight Victoria operates with about 27½ staff while overseeing multiple integrity bodies handling these public complaints. The scale of responsibility is absolutely enormous compared to the availability of resources. As many people have said, public trust depends on transparency, independence and investigative capacity. Everybody here has said that Victorians deserve the confidence that corruption risks receive serious scrutiny, but I think that we should not have even had to ask for this review. All of this anti-corruption, systemic institutional infrastructure should have already been in place. You should not be allowed to keep cabinet-in-confidence funding requests from our integrity oversight bodies. That is a disgrace; there is no good reason for that. There is no good governance reason for the way the system is set up. There are only very, very dubious reasons for the way that it is set up. I commend this motion to the house.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:56): I might actually start where my colleague Mrs Deeming left off when she openly asked why we need to be asking for this at all. I would concur with the question. She may wish to ask Mr Davis that. I would concur because I understand that the Integrity and Oversight Committee actually conducted their annual performance hearings into all of these integrity agencies quite some time ago – well, it was actually Monday this week. It was two days ago that they conducted these very inquiries, so Mrs Deeming may well be right to inquire. She may wish to query why we need to ask for this, and I would actually join her in that question. Mr Davis might be able to explain why, just two days after the IOC conducted inquiries into the integrity agencies and their finances and their performance outcomes, we need to be doing another inquiry into this. But that is the situation we find ourselves in today, and hopefully Mr Davis can illuminate it for us. He did not give us much illumination in his earlier ramblings on this motion, but hopefully in his summary he might be able to inform us.

Harriet Shing interjected.

Michael GALEA: His florid ramblings on this subject, yes. Flush with just two days ago having these hearings take place – and I am sure many of us will eagerly look forward to reading the transcripts of those hearings when they do become available, and they might provide some basis for what the IOC can do as part of its continuing work – I also wish to note some other of the more curious comments made by Mr Davis in his opening ramblings, when he claimed that the budgets for these agencies have been slashed. Slashed – what an outrageous thing for a government to be slashing the funding of these integrity agencies, as indeed it would be if it were true. But unfortunately it is hard to reconcile those claims from Mr Davis when you do look at the fact that funding for IBAC over the time that we have been in government has doubled, indeed with a further increase of \$6 million just in the past year alone, as Mr Batchelor was outlining, which is buried – tucked away – in a very hard-to-find, secret place in IBAC's annual report. If Mr Davis cared to look at that, he might even see that in there for himself. He might even be able to see, if he looks at the Ombudsman's annual reports, that their funding has also almost doubled over the time that we have been in government and indeed, as Mr Batchelor outlined, that Integrity Oversight Victoria's (IOV) funds increased somewhat – fourfold – in that time too. So it is a curious definition of the word 'slashed', but as with many things that Mr Davis brings before this house, 'curious' is indeed an apt adjective.

I do want to address something else that has been said a couple of times, and that is in relation to efficiency dividends. Throughout the course of the Silver review, which sought efficiencies from right across the public service, there were very few areas that were specifically remarked to not be included in those reviews and in search of those efficiency dividends, and that includes the integrity agencies. So I would just remind the house that when we talk about these other things interplaying with this, such as the Silver review, there are no efficiency dividends being expected of the integrity agencies.

Mr Davis, you were also outlining to this house, and you apparently claimed, that the integrity agencies, or at least one of them, were not spending all of their budget. So it is a curious thing to turn around and say that they are underfunded too, again given the fact that funding has increased year on year. I was probably a little bit more perturbed and surprised, though she has left the chamber now, by Mrs Deeming's apparent, extraordinary attack on the agencies at the outset of her speech, where she implied that they were not doing their job. Now we can and should – and certainly this is the role of the IOC – examine and give proper oversight to these vital agencies, and we can as a Parliament obviously debate many things around it, but I do not think it is a reasonable claim to make that these integrity agencies are not doing their job.

I was further confused and not sure where the Metro Tunnel comes into this specifically, but to say that the trains are not able to turn corners or the tunnels cannot turn corners, whatever the claim was – I would suggest that Mrs Deeming actually go and have a look at the trains that are running through the Metro Tunnel and the benefit that it is having in her own electorate.

For the Liberals to run a scare campaign saying that the trains will not be able to run through the tunnels before the tunnel opens is one thing, but it is quite another more outrageous claim to make several months after the tunnel has opened and trains have been running quite smoothly and managing to turn those corners in the tunnels seemingly several times a minute. But there we have it: that is the take of the modern Liberal Party. They are running their scare campaigns even after the project has opened and even after the proof has come into place.

As if to contradict some of her earlier remarks on these integrity agencies not doing their job, apparently, Mrs Deeming then raised a litany of work and research that these agencies have done and included Operation Sandon in that. I am not sure why a member of the Liberal Party is trying to draw attention to an investigation of alleged corrupt activity of Liberal councillors, but is she is welcome to do that, and I at least welcome her bipartisan approach to look at everything from a broader angle. You might learn a thing or two from that, Mr Davis.

Another thing I was struck by with this inquiry motion is that the wording has changed a bit since it was first drafted. Mr Davis, you might be able to illuminate for us in your concluding remarks as to the role of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I understand that you were going to give us on that committee some extra work as well, and I actually think it is an interesting thing to consider. The IOC does do its routine inquiries into the role of the various integrity agencies – IOV, the Ombudsman and IBAC. PAEC meets and fulfils its obligations to engage properly, oversee and meet regularly with the Auditor-General and with the Parliamentary Budget Office, but we do not do that in a public forum. That is perhaps an interesting thing for us to contemplate in future – or perhaps for a future Parliament to contemplate as to the role of PAEC. I am not quite sure why that was included and then taken out, but I would be genuinely quite interested to know your thinking along those lines as it relates to the Auditor-General.

To conclude where I started, the role of the IOC is a very important one. As with many of the joint investigatory committees, it does have that very important oversight function. As part of its routine work it looks at things such as the budget, performance, performance targets and all those various aspects of their operation as well. Indeed members need look no further than Monday, two days ago, to see the committee in action doing just the sort of thing that Mr Davis is advocating.

I would actually note on that point that I am pleased to support the amendments moved by my colleague Mr Batchelor. I think they are sensible amendments. Firstly, they provide a reporting date to the motion. It is one thing to sit down, have a ramble and write out a motion on a Monday night, perhaps, send it through and say, 'It can report back whenever.' Maybe giving the committee a specific timeline, a deadline, might be a constructive thing. Especially if it is a referral in relation to the budget, let us make the reporting date before the budget. That is what Mr Batchelor has proposed, and I think it is very sensible.

The second part of the proposed amendments by Mr Batchelor goes to perhaps not predetermining the outcome of any investigation. If Mr Davis wishes to run a sideshow, he is free to attempt to do that. But if he wishes to run a fair and genuine inquiry, that inquiry should not predetermine whatever outcome may flow through. If that is what he wants to do, then I am sure he would be all too supportive of Mr Batchelor's amendments in that space too, because they do tighten it up and make this a more robust inquiry that will be narrowly focused. I know Mr Davis loves to be narrowly focused, and this will be an inquiry narrowly focused on what he intended it to do. I expect there to be a proper inquiry done should this motion pass the house today, and I am sure the members of the IOC are only too thrilled and excited to get their teeth into it. No doubt the fact that they have looked into this matter just two days ago will help keep things fresh in their minds as they undertake that inquiry.

As for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, we will continue to do our work through the estimates process in just a couple of months time as well. As I said, I am looking forward to Mr Davis's views on the ins and outs of why that was included and why it was not. It may well form the basis for some further opportunities that other committees, such as PAEC, can undertake in future as well. In closing, I am pleased to commend Mr Batchelor's amendments to the house.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:05): I also would like to say a few words on this motion put forward by Mr Davis to set up an inquiry to look at the adequacy of the budget funding for IBAC, the Ombudsman and also Integrity Oversight Victoria. I would start by saying these agencies are probably one of the very few things that I have actually advocated for more funding for. I would like to think that they do a good job all the time. That is not necessarily the case, but certainly I have seen some great work by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office and the Ombudsman.

The Ombudsman in particular in the last term of Parliament during the pandemic played an absolutely critical role in highlighting some of the human rights problems that happened during the pandemic and with the pandemic response. I think the best example of that was the investigation into the housing tower lockdown. That highlighted some of the quite horrific, frankly, things that happened to people and their experiences of not being able to go outside and get fresh air, being fed inappropriate food and all sorts of awful things that happened to people. They were locked inside, and they were locked inside other people's houses because they were visiting. It was just a terrible, terrible situation. In my opinion the Ombudsman did a fantastic job of highlighting these problems and came up with sensible recommendations for many of them. In fact the Libertarian Party last term attempted to implement one of those recommendations, which was to say that if anyone is locked in a housing tower ever again, God forbid, they must be guaranteed access to fresh air and exercise. Unfortunately, the government and the Greens voted against allowing fresh air and exercise – one of the things that I thought we could all agree on, but apparently not.

The Auditor-General – although I do not know that they are going to actually be part of this – have done some fantastic work as well. IBAC have as well. I know people have differing views on the effectiveness of IBAC. I know that many people say that they do not have the powers to do their job and this sort of thing, and that was a debate earlier today. But certainly they have shone some light on things that are of interest to Victorians, and shining that light on things can sometimes help inform future directions on how we manage processes and how we prevent corruption and this sort of thing. So I think that that is a sensible and appropriate thing for this committee to be looking at. That is their job. It will give these agencies a platform to argue what their funding levels should be and why, and I hope that the committee does a good job in scrutinising that. If it is the case that they require more

funding in order to do their job – we all know that corruption is a big problem in Victoria, so having these agencies be effective is very important. In the scheme of things many of these budgets, in comparison to the losses from corruption, are minuscule, so in fact it seems like a good investment if they are doing their job properly. It does seem like a good investment.

I would also say another thing with the Ombudsman. People see the big Ombudsman's reports that they put out, but the thing that people do not see is when – I am guessing it happens with other MPs' offices – people come to MPs. Usually they see them as the end of the line – they have tried every other avenue – and quite often we will recommend people to go to the Ombudsman and use that as a channel of referral. Sometimes they can get their problems fixed. Sometimes the Ombudsman comes back and says that it is not within their jurisdiction or they cannot fix it or whatever. But sometimes that is a really good pathway to recommend people to. Sometimes a letter from the Ombudsman to whatever agency it is that the constituent is having trouble with is enough to fix the problem, amazingly. They do not want the Ombudsman to come down on them.

I do think that it is important that these agencies are doing their job well, and to do their job well they need the appropriate resourcing, and the Integrity and Oversight Committee looking at whether that resourcing is appropriate is a totally normal and good thing for this committee to do. Therefore the Libertarian Party will be supporting this motion.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) incorporated the following:

I rise to speak in support of motion 1305, in Mr Davis' name.

This motion requires the Integrity and Oversight Committee to inquire into, consider and report, as soon as practicable, on the adequacy of the annual budget for the Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission, the Ombudsman and Integrity Oversight Victoria.

The motion also requires the Committee in undertaking and reporting on this inquiry to hold public hearings with these agencies, provide advice on what settings are appropriate for the funding of these agencies in the 2026–27 State Budget and provide advice on the likely consequences if the funding provided by the government is inadequate.

There has been a lot of talk recently about what legislative changes are needed for our integrity bodies to ensure they can properly fulfil their roles.

As a member of the Integrity and Oversight Committee, I have been privy to these discussions, many of which have been had over the course of our inquiry into the Adequacy of the Legislative Framework for the Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission (IBAC).

The final report from this inquiry recommended a number of important changes to IBAC's legislative framework, including expanding its jurisdiction through changes to the definition of corrupt conduct and removal of the relevant offence requirement.

These changes are critical to capturing grey corruption – the kind of behaviour that may fall short of a criminal offence but still represents a lack of integrity and is worthy of investigation.

But these changes cannot happen in isolation. More powers to investigate more corrupt conduct must be accompanied by more resources to effectively use those powers.

In Integrity and Oversight Hearings earlier this week I asked the IBAC Commissioner about the consequences of a broader definition of corrupt conduct, particularly if it were to have a retrospective application.

The Commissioner rightly pointed out that additional resources are critical for any such changes to be effective.

This government must act on integrity, reform these laws, and fund Victoria's integrity agencies appropriately.

If it takes a short sharp inquiry like the one put forward in this motion to make this happen, then that is what we will do.

Thank you.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) incorporated the following:

I rise to speak on the motion regarding the referral of matters relating to Victoria's Integrity Agency Funding.

Integrity in this place is not an optional extra.

It is fundamental to public trust in government.

Victorian's expect transparency, accountability and proper oversight of public institutions.

They expect independent bodies to investigate misconduct, scrutinise expenditure, and uphold the standards that underpin our democratic system.

That is why since the establishment of IBAC successive Labor Governments have not only maintained the Commission but strengthened it.

Including year on year increases of funding into our integrity agencies.

IBAC was established as a permanent, independent statutory authority with coercive investigative powers to examine serious corruption and police misconduct.

Its creation marked a serious change in Victoria's accountability structure.

Labor Governments have continued to provide operational funding through successive state budgets to these integrity agencies.

Integrity bodies are subject to estimates scrutiny and required to table annual report to this Parliament.

The funding model for our integrity agencies ensures transparency while maintaining independence.

Those opposite speak frequently about integrity but it was a previous Liberal Kennett Government who sacked the Auditor General legislating to abolish the office.

In contrast, Labor Governments have maintained and supported independent integrity institutions, preserving their statutory independence and funding through transparent processes.

Beyond funding, legislative reform has also strengthened elements of Victoria's integrity framework.

The Integrity and Accountability Legislation Amendment (Public Interest Disclosures, Oversight and Independence) Act 2018 modernised Victoria's Public Interest Disclosure framework.

It increased responsibility for the actions and decisions of public officials and bodies by encouraging people to report wrongdoing.

Ensuring serious wrongdoing is effectively investigated.

Creating independence, strengthening the roles of key integrity bodies and supports the investigation of serious wrongdoing by investigating entities who are independent from government influence and control.

Each integrity body has appropriate and proportionate powers that allow them to achieve their objectives effectively within the system.

This Act ensures transparency by providing clear guidance on how complaints are to be treated by the public sector and integrity bodies, and how integrity bodies are overseen by the Victorian Inspectorate.

Allows integrity bodies to collaborate more effectively with each other and with the public sector.

Promotes cohesion by resolving discrepancies between integrity bodies' jurisdictions and improves referral mechanisms, which will prevent the duplication efforts between bodies and will help to ensure matters are resolved in a timely, efficient manner.

It also added additional safeguards to protect the rights, safety and welfare of people who are involved in an integrity body's investigation, to ensure that people are treated fairly and equally.

It acquitted commitments that the Government made during its previous term to resolve jurisdictional issues between key integrity bodies and evaluate the Protected Disclosure Act, and builds on the reforms delivered by the Government's Stronger System Act to acquit the Government's commitment to provide Victoria with a robust and effective integrity and accountability system.

More recently, the Justice Legislation Amendment (Integrity, Defamation and Other Matters) Act 2024 made technical and procedural amendments to improve the operation and coordination of Victoria's integrity agencies.

Parts 5 to 12 make a range of significant technical amendments to ensure that Victoria's integrity and accountability system is clear, accessible and efficient.

This Act included reforms to the Ombudsman Act 1973, Victorian Inspectorate Act 2011, Freedom of Information Act 1982, Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014, Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2011 (IBAC Act), Public Interest Monitor Act 2011, Public Interests Disclosure Act 2022.

The 2024 legislation also clarifies the Ombudsman's authority to investigate an authority under public interest complaints as referred by IBAC or to examine improper third-party conduct in relation to that authority.

These are refinements designed to improve clarity and coordination within the integrity system.

Integrity reform is not always dramatic. Often it involves technical amendments that improve administrative processes and ensure agencies can work effectively together.

That is responsible governance.

Integrity is also about prevention.

Victoria has strengthened political donation and electoral transparency laws through amendments to the Electoral Act 2002.

Donation caps have been introduced.

Foreign political donations have been banned.

Disclosure requirements have been strengthened.

Integrity begins not only with investigation after wrongdoing occurs, but with transparency in how elections are funded and how political actors are regulated.

Victoria maintains a public Register of Lobbyists and ministerial standards that govern conduct.

These frameworks promote transparency and reduce the risk of improper influence.

The Local Government Act 2020 strengthened councillor conduct frameworks, governance standards and oversight mechanisms within local councils.

IBAC retains jurisdiction to investigate serious corruption in local government, reinforcing accountability across all levels of public administration.

Taken together, these measures demonstrate that integrity in Victoria is not confined to a single agency or a single budget line.

It is embedded across legislative frameworks, oversight institutions, electoral processes and administrative systems.

The motion before us concerns funding for integrity agencies.

Scrutiny of funding is appropriate.

Public expenditure should always be subject to parliamentary examination.

But scrutiny must be principled. It must be evidence-based. And it must not be reactionary.

Integrity bodies exist to uphold public trust.

They are not instruments for day-to-day political contest.

Referrals to oversight committees should be grounded in clear statutory purpose and evidence not used as responses in the political cycle.

When integrity institutions are drawn into partisan disputes, we risk undermining the independence we claim to defend.

The opposition seeks to frame integrity funding as a political vulnerability or to use oversight mechanisms as a vehicle for government attack, and they should be honest about that.

Integrity institutions deserve better than to be used as instruments of political theatre.

The record shows that integrity agencies continue to receive operational funding through annual budgets.

Their funding is published in Budget Papers.

Their operations are scrutinised through Estimates hearings.

Their reports are tabled publicly.

IBAC continues to conduct investigations and publish findings.

The Ombudsman continues to examine maladministration.

The Auditor-General continues to audit public expenditure.

The Victorian Inspectorate continues to oversee the exercise of coercive powers.

There is no evidence before this House that integrity agencies have been stripped of their capacity to function.

On the contrary, they continue to operate within their statutory mandates.

Funding decisions must balance competing priorities.

Health services, schools, emergency response, infrastructure and social services all require investment.

Responsible fiscal management requires careful allocation of resources across the public sector.

But fiscal responsibility does not equate to neglect of integrity.

Integrity is not measured by the volume of motions brought before this Chamber. It is measured by institutional design, legislative clarity, independence, transparency and sustained support.

On those measures, Victoria's integrity framework remains robust.

It was established through legislation. It has been refined through further legislative amendment.

It is funded transparently.

It is overseen by Parliament.

It publishes its findings independently.

This Government has:

- Maintained independent statutory integrity bodies.
- Provided operational funding through successive State Budgets.
- Respected the independence of integrity agencies by not interfering in their statutory functions.
- Modernised public interest disclosure protections.
- Strengthened information-sharing and coordination through legislative amendment.
- Improved electoral transparency and donation regulation.
- Strengthened local government governance standards.
- Supported parliamentary oversight mechanisms.

That is a record grounded in statute and public documentation.

Integrity should not be reduced to a partisan talking point.

It is foundational to democratic governance.

It requires steady institutional stewardship, not political escalation.

Victoria's integrity agencies continue to operate independently and transparently in the interests of the Victorian people.

This Government remains committed to maintaining the highest standards of integrity and accountability in public administration.

Not through rhetoric, but through legislation, funding and respect for institutional independence.

It is important to state clearly that the government does not direct IBAC investigations.

It does not determine findings and it does not interfere with its statutory functions.

That separation is embedded into legislation and respected in practice.

The Allan Labor Government has strengthened the powers and given record funding to IBAC making it better able to serve its mandate of uncovering, investigating and fighting corruption.

This not only gave IBAC budget independence and the confidence to continue to be fearless in its efforts against corruption.

The 2025–26 budget delivered \$65.5 million for IBAC to keep it working effectively in the best interests of the Victorian people.

Justice Legislation Amendment (Integrity, Defamation and Other Matters) 2024 improved the operation and effectiveness of Victoria's integrity agencies.

By making technical and procedural amendments to various integrity and justice acts to enhance the administrative processes of the integrity system.

For instance, the bill enables the Ombudsman and the Victorian Inspectorate to share information with a Victoria royal commission, board of inquiry or other commission of inquiry.

The IBAC will also be given similar provisions to disclose information to the appointed commissioner of inquiry under division 5 of part 7 of the Local Government Act 2020.

This amendment will assist the integrity bodies to acquire information relevant to their role.

Of course, the sharing of information will only be done when it is relevant and appropriate and must not lead to the identification of a person who has made a public interest disclosure.

The bill also clarifies the Ombudsman's authority to investigate an authority under public interest complaints as referred by IBAC or improper third-party conduct in relation to the authority.

This ensures that our integrity system maintains the highest standards of integrity and accountability.

Integrity reform should not be reactionary but serious and evidence based. These integrity agencies should not be used as a political vehicle to attack the government.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (17:10): This is a straightforward motion. I am relaxed, as I have said, about the proposed amendments by Mr Batchelor. I think on one level they are trivial, but on another they are a little bit more prescriptive for the committee, and I was trying to be a bit more generous to allow the committee to have the elbow room that it may need. But having said that, he wants to move it. I certainly do not oppose giving a very clear instruction to the committee to come back by budget day, and that can be tabled in the Assembly because it is an Assembly committee. But we can give them a reference, and it will be tabled here in the next sitting day after that. That is the advice of the clerks.

I want to just draw attention to a brief from the Department of Justice and Community Safety to the Attorney-General, dated 18 October 2022. It paints a picture of a falling share of funding for the integrity agencies on page 17:

A challenge under all three options is how to set funding levels.

It goes on about benchmarks and international benchmarks. In that paper Transparency International Australia called for sustainable budgets of all core public integrity agencies at federal, state and territory levels of not less than 0.15 per cent of public expenditure combined. It also called for funding to be based on four-year direct budget allocation by Parliament. But what the chart presented to Jaclyn Symes, the then relevant minister, shows is a declining level of funding at that point, down to 0.13 under the required level, when the various agencies are added together. It shows that that integrity funding had fallen, and that is a problem which is replicated, importantly, in *Advancing Budget Transparency for Victoria's Core Integrity Agencies*, the February 2026 paper by the Ombudsman, IBAC and the Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

I pick up Mr Galea's point. In the end I decided to bring a simple motion that was a single referral to a single committee of the three agencies which that committee has oversight over. It may be hard for Mr Galea to understand, but the other equivalent agencies, the Auditor-General and the Parliamentary Budget Office, are answerable to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. But I just thought in the circumstance it was simpler to do a single referral for the agencies which the Integrity and Oversight Committee is responsible for. So that is an answer to his question there.

Picking up on the February 2026 paper, it does show Victoria falling behind New South Wales and the 0.15 per cent minimum standard, and goodness knows with the corruption that has been uncovered in our state we do need to spend properly on our integrity agencies. It is a false economy to starve the agencies of the funding they need and to expect that there will not be corruption in government programs. What we have seen with the material that has come from Queensland and the significant statements and report and testimony of Geoffrey Watson SC is that \$15 billion has been corruptly squandered by this government. I say that every cent of integrity money spent bolstering IBAC, bolstering the Ombudsman and ensuring that those agencies are able to do their work to root out corruption wherever it is, to get to these Big Build sites, to dig out the corruption, to stop it – we have got to put a stop to it. If that requires more resources, I say to the Integrity and Oversight committee: tell us, and the chamber will be in a position to move suggested amendments to actually strengthen

the budget if the government continues its activity in trying to starve our integrity agencies in this state. The reason it is trying to starve them is it is trying to avoid embarrassment.

Amendments agreed to; amended motion agreed to.

Business of the house

Notices of motion and orders of the day

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:15): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Statements on tabled papers and petitions

Integrity and Oversight Committee

Performance of the Victorian Integrity Agencies 2022/23

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (17:16): We have spent a lot of time today talking about IBAC and things that have happened during the week at the Integrity and Oversight Committee. I do not think we can let the week pass without mentioning the most significant thing that happened at that committee hearing, which was the IBAC Commissioner publicly apologising for IBAC's conduct in complaints about police handling of police-perpetrated family violence made by a courageous victim-survivor. The apology relates to the report of the then Victorian Inspectorate in the handling of Emma's case, which was tabled after the Legislative Council rose during the last Parliament. So I seek to speak to that document and also the report of the Integrity and Oversight Committee on the performance of integrity agencies in 2022–23, which also covered these matters.

For an agency as powerful as IBAC to admit that they got something wrong and for the commissioner to use such clear language as 'the hurt and trauma caused' is remarkable. One of the senior lawyers involved described the apology as being 'as rare as hen's teeth'. The apology was made to Dr Jana Katerinskaja, who is one of the most courageous women I have ever met. She is Emma, the subject of the Victorian Inspectorate's report in 2022, under conditions which were so serious for her, her safety at such risk that a pseudonym was used. She bravely outed herself as Emma to the Integrity and Oversight Committee at our public hearings in 2024.

The inspectorate's report in 2022 was very critical of IBAC's handling of complaints. IBAC's 27-page response at the time, IBAC now concedes, was inappropriate and insensitive, and in that finding, in that report and in the response to that report, which was tabled in this Parliament, IBAC now concede that they made multiple, inaccurate, inappropriate or misleading assertions about their interactions over the course of this inquiry with Dr Katerinskaja. IBAC's apology states that:

There were other flaws in our response to the Emma report, not least:

- failing to take account of the welfare of Dr Katerinskaja and their family;
- questioning the Inspectorate's agenda and urgency when Dr Katerinskaja's wellbeing was central to its approach; and
- focusing on our resource constraints, rather than reflecting on prioritising the available resources.

In a separate document that was sent to Dr Katerinskaja that the ABC reported on on Monday, the ABC report says:

In a separate email to Dr Katerinskaja, IBAC recognised she had approached the commission with the expectation that she could safely make complaints and IBAC would assist.

This is a quote from IBAC:

“Not only did this not occur, but our approach left you feeling attacked, trampled, gaslighted and silenced by us,” it said. “We deeply regret the lack of insight and compassion we showed, and we apologise for the impact this has had on you and your family.”

This is a very extraordinary admission by IBAC that they got this so wrong. I think it takes a lot of courage for an IBAC Commissioner to admit that their predecessors in the organisation made such serious and significant mistakes, and I think there is a lot of credit that needs to go to the current leadership of IBAC for the way that they have undertaken this restorative justice process with Dr Katerinskaja, who suffered physical violence as a result of information about her case being leaked from Victoria Police to her perpetrator, a serving police officer. I think there is also some accountability that needs to occur by those who were leading IBAC at the time. I think that the former IBAC Commissioner should make a statement about this apology and about the response – which has been so comprehensively criticised by the current IBAC Commissioner – that bore his signature. I know that Mr Redlich is not shy about giving comment to the media on a range of issues. I think, given the significance and the unprecedented nature of the apology from IBAC this week based on actions that occurred under Mr Redlich’s watch, he should give some sort of explanation or make some sort of statement about these matters to see whether he too echoes the apology that was so deservedly granted to Dr Katerinskaja this week.

Environment and Planning Committee

Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:21): I would like to take the opportunity to make some comments on the inquiry into community consultation practices. The report was handed down yesterday. I say this as a member for North-Eastern Metro: within my electorate we have particular experience of consultation and what I deem the misuse of the consultation process, because we have the North East Link, we have the Box Hill suburban rail loop activity centre, we have the Glen Waverley Suburban Rail Loop (SRL) activity centre and we also have the Blackburn activity centre. In all four cases I have seen the government’s consultation processes in person – have some personal experience of it – but I also have a number of constituents who are very, very angry at the way the consultation process has been done, in their view, in a highly manipulative way.

I would like to draw attention to a couple of things within the findings of the report. I will start particularly with findings 4 and 5. Finding 4 is:

When the terminology of engagement and consultation are used without specific meaning, expectations clash and trust erodes.

I just posit to begin with that the definitions of ‘engagement’ and ‘consultation’ are not ambiguous. They have absolutely clear meaning, unambiguous meaning. It is only when those terms are abused and used to mislead that there is a problem. No wonder trust is eroded, because the definition is clear. The expectations of the public are therefore clear. When they are told they are going to a consultation and engagement exercise, that is exactly what they are entitled to receive.

Finding 5 is that:

Some in the community do not consider the provision of information a form of engagement ...

That is right, because those words have definitive meanings, and simply handing someone information is not engagement nor consultation by any normal use of the English language. So of course they felt let down by that process. I have personal experience of that as well from when I have gone to SRL consultation sessions. It says it is an information night, a consultation night, and you go in there and you will ask someone a perfectly basic question about the project, and on more than one occasion they will say, ‘Oh, no, I can’t talk about that today. I can only talk about this aspect.’ They deliberately narrow the focus of the so-called consultation, in that sense, to a very particular set of things that

probably only represents about 20 per cent of the subject matter that would be naturally of interest to the person from the community coming to see it. It is a deliberate ploy to narrow the focus: 'Oh, the person who's responsible for that is not here; I can't speak about it, but I can tell you about this thin sliver of it.' What that is in effect, in practice, is a lie by omission. It is saying, 'We're consulting, but we're not going to touch these topics.'

I will share a personal experience. In the Box Hill SRL activity centre all of the diagrams and all of the public information that we were consulting on included the area of the Box Hill brickworks, which is a landfill site that is currently open space, and it is very important to the community that that remains open space, hopefully to become permanent parkland. Very early SRL drawings showed a road through it, so naturally the community wanted to know if they were going to build through the site. I went there and I asked, 'What's this line?' The person who was representing the SRL at that consultation period said to me, 'No, there are no plans to build on this site – no plans. No, that's just a walking path.' So I went and asked another person there, and I pressed; I had to persevere. They said, 'No, it might actually be a bike path that goes through the park.' I pressed further, and I said, 'Well, is there going to be any housing?' 'No. Look, it may be a road.' If I had not pressed three times within that consultation period to someone, after having been stonewalled, that information would never have been provided to me. That was a consultation period in 2024. Subsequently of course they are building across the entire site. So what was I consulted on – nothing, and that is typical of the entire exercise across all of the consultation periods in my electorate. My people have been misled with lies by omission.

Respect Victoria

Maintain the Momentum: Three Yearly Report to Parliament on the Progress of Prevention 2022–2024

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:26): I rise to speak on Respect Victoria's *Maintain the Momentum* three-yearly report to Parliament covering the progress made between 2022 and 2024 in preventing family violence and violence against women across our state. This is the second report of its kind, and it paints a very clear picture that prevention works and investment in prevention works. Victorians are demanding that we continue to lead the nation in this critical area. What comes through strongly in this report is the scale of the Victorian government's commitment. Across the reporting period Victoria invested an estimated \$130 million in primary prevention, which is more than any other state or territory in Australia, and this includes major investments in Respectful Relationships, multicultural and faith-based prevention programs, workforce development and the landmark \$9.8 million Respect Ballarat saturation model, which is the first of its kind in this country.

This investment is not symbolic. The data shows real impact. Sixty-nine per cent of surveyed practitioners reported that community awareness of gendered violence is higher than it was three years ago. The 2023 national community attitudes survey shows 68 per cent of Victorians now reject violence-supportive attitudes, and participation in prevention activities is also rising, with 8500 Victorians taking part in the Walk Against Family Violence in 2024, which was up from 5000 people only a year earlier. Respect Victoria's campaign alone engaged an average of 1.65 million Victorians, and 90 per cent of grassroots funding recipients reported that their local projects increased community understanding of gendered violence. These are meaningful and measurable behaviour change indicators, early signs that the cultural drivers of violence are shifting.

There are also encouraging signs in practice and systems strengthening. All 227 recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence have now been acquitted, and we have seen major reforms such as affirmative consent laws, the criminalisation of non-fatal strangulation and the continued implementation of the Gender Equality Act 2020. The Gender Equality Act alone has driven improvements across almost 300 public sector organisations, with 88 per cent achieving progress in leadership and gender equality and major gains across recruitment, pay equity and workplace sexual harassment reform. This report also highlights the growth of the prevention workforce, with more than 4000 practitioners now engaged through the Partners in Prevention network, an 800-person increase

in the reporting period, and more than 570 practitioners participating in specialised professional development. This is a prevention workforce that is maturing, connecting and expanding its reach across local government, education, sport, faith communities, multicultural organisations and women's health services as well.

The report also makes it clear that prevention delivers an economic return. The Victorian government's own modelling shows that an \$82.8 million investment in family and sexual violence systems will save between \$120 million and \$130 million over 10 years, with up to \$140 million in economic benefits across the same period. Prevention does not just save lives, it strengthens our economy and reduces long-term pressure on the police, health, housing and justice systems. But perhaps the strongest demonstration of impact is Victoria's progress compared with the rest of the country. The Women's Health Services Network reports that the proportion of Victorian women experiencing violence has fallen from 8.1 per cent in 2016 to 5.3 per cent in 2022 and it is now below the national average of 6.6 per cent. While the only acceptable ratio is zero, this is a promising shift that aligns with the report's finding that sustained primary prevention can change behaviours, attitudes and structures when it is properly resourced.

Of course the report is clear that more must be done. However, rising online misogyny, harmful content, AI-generated abuse and economic inequality all pose new risks, and prevention is still not funded at the scale the problem demands. But community-led organisations, especially Aboriginal community controlled organisations, multicultural organisations, disability groups and LGBTIQ+ organisations, all need long-term secure funding to continue their essential work. But what the report does show is that Victoria has laid the strongest prevention foundations in the country. We have the workforce, we have the evidence and we now have community momentum. I commend the report to the house.

Department of Transport and Planning

Report 2024–25

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:31): I rise to speak on the Department of Transport and Planning annual report 2024–25. Page 47 of the report says that one of the department's key initiatives is planning reforms to improve the planning system's performance and boost housing supply. Labor's housing statement promised that they would deliver 80,000 homes a year, but they have failed disastrously and only built 54,000 homes in the last year. Rather than improving the supply of housing, Labor's Minister for Planning is actually holding up important planning reforms that would facilitate more housing, especially in regional Victoria. In September last year I raised two structure plans in the Macedon Ranges, the *Gisborne Futures Structure Plan* and the *Romsey Structure Plan*, which had both been sitting on the minister's desk for over 12 months at that time, and nothing has been done to progress them forward. These are still not resolved.

At around about the same time that I was raising those two structure plans sitting on the minister's desk the City of Greater Bendigo were actually planning their own future. In September 2024 the City of Greater Bendigo councillors passed a motion agreeing to prepare amendment C287 to the Greater Bendigo planning scheme in order to give effect to their *Managed Growth Strategy* and housing and neighbourhood character strategy. Councillors also agreed to write to the planning minister requesting authorisation to prepare and exhibit the proposed amendment, which they did on 1 April 2025. Two weeks later the planning department wrote back to the council saying that a further review was required. But then there was silence as a written request for authorisation sat on the planning minister's desk for almost eight months with no action being taken in the middle of a housing crisis.

Labor's failure is especially painful in regional Victoria, where rents are rising faster than wages and pushing people into homelessness. The state Labor government has imposed a housing target of 37,000 new homes for Greater Bendigo, and the city is eager to facilitate an increase in the supply of housing. The City of Greater Bendigo is taking steps to responsibly meet its housing target and, following extensive consultation with the community, produced the *Managed Growth Strategy*. The

strategy is important for planning and orderly release of additional land for housing and development whilst preserving heritage, amenity and neighbourhood character in their beautiful gold rush city. But eight months after sending their proposal to the planning minister for changes, there has been no progress at all.

Then, in December 2025, just days before Christmas, when no-one was paying attention, the planning minister quietly handballed the planning amendments to a bushfire planning advisory committee. The minister has asked the committee to provide its report no later than 40 business days from the last day of its proceedings, but we have no idea when those proceedings will start or finish. The planning minister can find the time to approve a billion-dollar data centre in just 75 days but continually delays vital planning reforms in regional cities. I have asked the minister to confirm when the proceedings will begin and end, because we cannot allow this lazy, incompetent Labor government to continue blocking essential planning reforms in regional Victoria. Only the Liberals have a real plan to deliver more homes that are more affordable and to restore the dream of home ownership to people living in regional Victoria.

Petitions

Colorectal and pelvic reconstruction service

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (17:36): I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration.

One year ago in this chamber I warned that without dedicated wraparound care colorectal patients would suffer. A year on, children are suffering because that care no longer exists. Last year I shared the story of Bridget, a mother and constituent near Warnambool. She and her family are in the gallery tonight. At just 40 hours of life her son Sidney was airlifted to the Royal Children's Hospital with severe bowel obstruction. After a week in neonatal intensive care he was diagnosed with Hirschsprung disease. At six months old he underwent pull-through surgery to remove the section of bowel without nerve endings, which caused repeated blockages. Bridget understood that surgery could not cure Sidney's condition. She had hoped that the worst was behind him. But the colorectal and pelvic reconstruction service, the CPRS, so important for little Sidney's health and quality of life, was closed in May 2025, so Bridget's problems were just beginning.

The CPRS was a unique world-class multidisciplinary service. It provided patient-specific surgical, nursing and allied health care to children with complex conditions such as Hirschsprung disease, anorectal malformations and chronic constipation. It was the only service of its kind in Australia, globally recognised and respected. In the months leading up to the closure last year, little Sidney had 17 dirty nappies a day. He could no longer have baths, only short showers, and would defecate at least twice during a 5-minute shower. Bridget asked whether that was normal for Hirschsprung disease. No, it was not normal. Under the CPRS model Sidney could have commenced a bowel management program with clinical nurse consultants via telehealth within 48 hours. Instead he waited eight weeks for a surgical appointment. Bridget called the hospital three times a week for six weeks chasing a prescription. Calls were not returned. It took a volunteer parent from the colorectal consumer advisory group to escalate her unanswered calls before a surgeon contacted her directly. How is it that volunteer parents are acting as liaison officers in Australia's premier children's hospital? But by then it was too late. Sidney was rushed from the Warnambool hospital. He had a complete bowel obstruction. He spent six nights admitted. He endured a bowel washout under sedation, further procedures, biopsies, iron infusions and botox under anaesthetic. His recovery from anaesthetic was, in Bridget's words, scary. He was like a caged lion.

The escalation was avoidable. Colorectal conditions deteriorate quickly; they require constant adjustment and follow-up. As the medical journal *Children* states:

To achieve a good functional result for a colorectal patient ... it takes hundreds of hours of additional work to achieve good results – the vast majority of which relies on good nursing care.

That was the CPRS model: consistent specialist nurses, care coordinators, psychological support for children enduring invasive procedures and for parents administering daily enemas and dilatations at home, and expertise that recognised these rare conditions immediately and intervened early. Without it, a child becomes critically ill and a mother blames herself, saying, 'I can't begin to tell you how deflating it is to have calls for help go unanswered.' There are hundreds of families like Bridget's, perhaps even thousands. One or two surgeons, however skilled, cannot provide the wraparound, ongoing care required for a lifelong, unpredictable condition. The CPRS improved quality of life. It kept children out of emergency departments, out of critical care beds and out of ambulances. It saved trauma and it saved money. The cost of Sydney's emergency transfer and prolonged admission could have been avoided. The vision for the Royal Children's Hospital is a world where kids thrive.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:41): I am pleased to rise, following my colleague Mrs McArthur, to speak on this motion regarding the colorectal and pelvic reconstruction service today, and in doing so I wish to acknowledge my colleague Mrs McArthur for her continued advocacy on this matter. It is a matter that is of concern and interest, I know, to members across this chamber. I note that we did, as was mentioned, discuss and debate this issue just a little over 12 months ago in this place too. The CPRS, as members will be aware, was a one-off, time-limited initiative of the Commonwealth government, which has now lapsed. We have in this state a remarkable children's hospital, the Royal Children's Hospital (RCH), which has provided much succour and support to countless Victorian families in their times of need. I do want to take a moment to acknowledge the remarkable efforts of the doctors, the nurses and the support staff in that hospital and the work that they do on an ongoing basis. It is clear to me that the CPRS was providing particularly special support, particularly special outcomes and, frankly, a sense of security for countless Victorians as well, many of whom I know are with us today. On that motion just over a year ago we had as well many people joining us in the chamber, and I was able to share the story of a wonderfully bright young lady called Milly, who lives in my electorate. I shared the words of her mother Anthea to speak to the level of support that the service provided to them.

It became clear to me that the service was unique in that the conditions that it treated are themselves very unique and often not sufficiently covered by the breadth of knowledge that many other general practitioners or specialists will have, despite the wonderful work that they do. The CPRS provided that one source of information, of guidance and of solace to those families. Since that time the time limit for the federal initiative has come to an end. I know many of us were hoping that the federal government may continue that funding, and that is something that, at least as of yet, has not happened. There have been many other conversations that many of us have undertaken across this chamber with the minister, and I acknowledge the minister for her great investment into the RCH as well.

I do want to come back to my constituent Milly and a conversation I had with her mum Anthea earlier this week, when she spoke to some of the challenges that they have faced in more recent months, such as with the replacement of a button, which would have taken around a day in previous circumstances but in this situation took a bit over three weeks, and the psychological distress that caused Milly as well, which is something that is worth noting. I do think that we need to continue this conversation. We need to find a workaround, a solution that works for families who are dealing with this issue now and for families that will in years to come.

I note that we do now have an auxiliary group, the Colorectal Champions, and I really wish to acknowledge their volunteer work, supported by the RCH. They are people, most of whom have been involved in one way or another with this issue, who have come together themselves to raise that. I am pleased to see them here in the chamber today and advance that as well. My colleague in the other place Matt Fregon did wish to be attending this debate as well, but he is in the Speaker's chair in the Assembly at the moment. He and I have been working on this issue as well, and we have reached out to the CEO of the Royal Children's Hospital, Dr Peter Steer, seeking to meet with him on behalf of our constituents in particular but to raise this issue and to see just how we can make the support services provided to families dealing with these issues better and as strong and as improved as they can be,

whether it be through a full return of the CPRS or through another mechanism. We are eagerly awaiting a meeting with the CEO, and I very much look forward to continuing to do what I can to raise the voice of constituents of mine who have raised this issue with me.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (17:46): I want to start by acknowledging and thanking the petitioners who have signed Mrs McArthur's petition. It is worth noting the extraordinary number of them; there are over 10,000 signatures on this petition. That is quite incredible for what is a fairly specialised service. Most Victorians I think will have never heard of the colorectal and pelvic reconstruction service before, let alone ever had to use it, but for those who have, it has been life changing. That is really reflected in the incredible level of support the service has, as demonstrated by this petition.

It is a unique service, as has been described by Mr Galea and Mrs McArthur. It was established in 2019 and provided holistic, dedicated services – like dieticians, psychologists, paediatric surgeons, nurses and care coordinators – all to support babies and children with conditions like anorectal malformations, chronic constipation and Hirschsprung disease, amongst others. These are complex conditions. They can be very confronting for families, and there can be a lot of stigma. There is a lack of awareness, not just amongst the broader community but also even within the medical profession itself, about many of these conditions. I have previously spoken to families and clinicians about their experiences with the CPRS, and having a service that deeply understands the needs of these families – where sometimes there can be multiple family members affected, because there can be a genetic basis to some of these conditions – and where they have the same group of health workers that they can develop a relationship with and experience that continuity and trust is therapeutic in and of itself. Not only are families spared the stress of having to explain their condition again and again to different providers, but issues can actually be identified more readily – because of that familiarity and that relationship – and can be dealt with more quickly and complications can be prevented. This is something that is supported by evidence regarding this sort of specialised care model for complex conditions.

I have spoken in this place before when this issue has previously come up about the value of this kind of service for GPs as well – for GPs like me – when they are out in the community trying to support a patient or their family with one of these conditions that they do not necessarily have the depth of knowledge required to manage. If you can quickly and easily access advice from someone who knows that family well, you can provide better support to that family and to that patient.

Since we last debated this topic the children's hospital executive did meet with Mrs McArthur and me and some representatives of families – and I am aware that there had been ongoing discussions between the Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) executive and family representatives – to try and find a way that this terrific service, or elements of it, could continue. I appreciate that families have still been able to access high-quality care through broader services and in no way want to cast aspersions on the health workers or services providing that care, but the signatures on this petition being debated today make it clear that the needs of these families are still not being completely met. Something has been lost in the change in the model of care and the loss of the CPRS. It was a credit to the RCH that they established this service back in 2019, and it became globally recognised for providing gold standard care. While I appreciate that maybe there have to be some changes, I sincerely urge the government and the Children's hospital to listen to these families and commit to restoring the things about the CPRS that have clearly been lost, that were so valuable. That continuity, that familiarity is something that is clearly missing in whatever care that they are currently being provided. I commend this petition to the house.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:50): As we all know, the closure of the colorectal and pelvic reconstruction service last year is the issue that brings us all here today. It has ignited a passion in many parents to advocate for the model of care that best serves their children and their families. At the time of the closure, first indicated in February 2025, the new CEO of the hospital recognised the parent and patient perspective had not been consulted as part of the changes made to the CPRS. He initiated

the establishment of the parent advisory group to work with the hospital. Since its establishment in June 2025 the colorectal consumer group has met nine times. There are 15 parent or carer representatives and five hospital staff members, including a member of the Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) executive and surgeons.

The following statement has been provided by Alexandra Ellis, a mother and the volunteer co-chair of the colorectal consumer advisory group. The following statement has been prepared on behalf of the parent and carer members of the colorectal consumer group, and I am going to read it. It says:

Since the closure of the CPRS due to the end of federal funding in June 2024, the RCH has actively engaged in consultation with patients, parents, carers and supporters as part of the colorectal consumer advisory group. Together with the executive and medical staff from the RCH, this group has undertaken a significant, robust and clear assessment of the current patient needs and resulting gaps in services which are no longer being provided. This joint assessment has uncovered that with the current resources available the gaps in the service are now causing quality-of-life impacts to patients and their families. The highest priority gaps include, but are not limited to, clinical nurse consultants and psychological services. Other areas of service decline include multidisciplinary care coordination, dietetics and transitional programs into adult care.

There is clear evidence that the multidisciplinary and wraparound care that the CPRS service used to provide reduced inpatient nights and emergency department visits and improved quality-of-life outcomes for patients. Since the closure these improvements have been reversed. Patient care and quality of life are now in decline, while hospital costs increase due to patients returning to hospital when previously they could have been assessed and accessed care from home. The impacts of this decline in service have been shared today through patient and family stories.

We commend the hospital on their willingness to investigate our concerns. The consumer advisory process has allowed both the hospital and parent representatives to reflect on the changes in services and delve deep into a better understanding across both parties around patient needs, actual impacts of the closure and current hospital resourcing availability. We have worked thoroughly and collaboratively to now fully understand specific areas that need to be reinstated and resourced.

It is now clear that the hospital no longer has the resources it needs to provide even just the baseline care our children require to be able to live a dignified life. We therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the government to ensure that the colorectal patients at the Royal Children's Hospital are provided with the full range of services required for their care and to commit to safeguarding the long-term sustainability of such services.

That is the end of their statement. I want to thank everybody who has put into this. Everyone embarked on this patient advisory process with the desire to ensure sick children with colorectal conditions can be adequately cared for. The result of this robust collaboration is clear. The hospital needs dedicated and immediate funding to ensure the restoration of the CPRS on a permanent basis, as this is the best model to care for complex conditions for children with these issues. I commend the petition to the house.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (17:55): We all know that there is nothing more challenging for families than when our children are unwell, and the Royal Children's Hospital provides world-class care for some of the most complex paediatric cases in the country and is a world-leading provider of paediatric care, delivering some of the most complex, specialist high-acuity care in the country. The hospital's care extends to children not just in Victoria but Tasmania, southern New South Wales and other states around Australia and indeed overseas. They are also the designated statewide major trauma centre for paediatrics in Victoria, as well as a nationally funded centre for cardiac and liver transplantation, and the leader of many other statewide services. I know that the Royal Children's Hospital does hold a very special place in the hearts of every Victorian family. Access to high-quality, safe and supportive care for children and families is an absolute priority for the Victorian government, and for decades the Royal Children's Hospital has provided care for our kids with complex colorectal conditions. They continue to do so, and we will continue to support the Royal Children's Hospital and all our hospitals.

The Victorian colorectal and pelvic reconstruction service was, as some of my colleagues have already indicated, a one-off Commonwealth grant that was delivered by the Royal Children's Hospital, and many of the improvements delivered through this project will have ongoing and long-lasting impacts and benefits for patients and families, particularly in the model of care delivered at the Royal Children's Hospital. These include an expansion of the RCH's stomal therapy capacity; the establishment of the colorectal clinic, which will continue; and a stronger, more holistic approach to supporting patients, which includes psychology, social work and dietitian services that have been and will continue to be delivered. The high-quality core medical care received by patients will continue, and I am advised that patients will continue to receive allied health and nursing support through those central teams in the same manner that children with other complex surgical conditions do.

Our record investment in health also has included an uplift to all of our hospitals, including the Royal Children's, for the care that they deliver. Clinical care decisions are led by clinicians, and I am absolutely confident that the level of care that continues to be delivered at the Royal Children's Hospital is world class. We will continue to support the work of the Royal Children's Hospital, and we have been providing further investment to allow the hospital to expand their existing emergency department and deliver a new 30-bed inpatient unit at the Royal Children's Hospital. This expansion will allow the hospital to continue to meet increasing demand through the expansion of acute paediatric beds and emergency department services. The first stage of the Royal Children's Hospital expansion to deliver a new 30-bed inpatient ward on level 5 was completed in 2022, and it is treating patients with a range of different illnesses, including cancer.

I too want to thank those that have been involved in this petition, and I know that the Royal Children's Hospital take incredibly seriously the very specialist care that they have been providing to children and by extension their families. As I have indicated, many of the improvements that have been delivered through the CPRS will not end just by virtue of the Commonwealth funding grant ending. They will continue to be delivered and embedded through the model of care at the Royal Children's Hospital and continue to provide that highly specialist care. We thank our nurses and our clinicians at the Royal Children's for the incredible work they do day in and day out.

Renee Heath: I ask that the clock be extended by 6 minutes.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (18:00): I too rise to speak on this petition. I want to thank Mrs McArthur and all petitioners who have signed it for bringing this important debate to this place and to state from the outset that I support any move that would see the colorectal and pelvic reconstruction service reinstated at the Royal Children's Hospital. The work of this clinic cannot be underestimated, so when I heard about its closure, I knew that we as politicians all had to do something to find an urgent solution for the families who rely on this vitally important clinic. That different parties across the chamber have spoken on this petition today really demonstrates the importance of this clinic and how much the stories have united us. I want to acknowledge the colorectal consumer advisory committee for their advocacy on this matter, and I know that many of them join us in the gallery here today. They are an amazing group of people who have used their own stories to push for change. To recap, the CPRS, as it is known, was a highly specialised unit at the Royal Children's that provided care to children born with anorectal and colonic malformations and diseases. Last year the clinic closed after a \$5.9 million grant from the federal government in 2019 was not renewed. It is simply unacceptable for governments to just say that these families will continue to get care while at the same time not renewing this highly important specialised service.

In talking about this issue, I want to bring attention to the story of Seija. Seija's daughter was born with an anorectal malformation known as a rectovestibular fistula. Within minutes of her birth, nurses recognised that Seija's daughter's abdomen was distended and there was no anal opening. Before Seija was able to hold her daughter, she was rushed to the Royal Children's Hospital. When she was just three months old, she underwent a 10-hour corrective surgery, which also formed a stoma, and due to COVID this was in place for nearly a year. During that time the family managed leaks, bleeding, skin breakdowns and the daily realities of looking after an infant with a colostomy. Seija and her partner

were also required to perform twice-daily rectal dilations, which involved inserting a metal dilator rod about 10 centimetres into her rectum. The couple has since learned that their daughter is permanently faecally incontinent because she does not have an internal sphincter.

I was about to talk about the fact that I have obviously just become a new mum. As someone who has gone through this experience recently, I know how difficult motherhood is, particularly the vulnerabilities in the beginning, and I cannot begin to comprehend the added struggles that these families have gone through on top of that. Seija tells me the difference in care before and after the closure of the CPRS has been stark and that what was once a coordinated, responsive team available within hours has been replaced by generic communication channels and delayed responses of sometimes up to two weeks with persistence. ‘We know firsthand how essential wraparound care has been for our daughter, especially now that it is gone,’ she said. This service has proven to be life-changing for the families who use it, and without it they are worse off. I call on the government to find a solution urgently, to act on the ask of the people who signed this petition and the many families who reached out to all of us and are joining us in the gallery today – for Seija’s family and for every other kid that has gone or will go through this service.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:04): I rise to speak to the petition presented by Mrs McArthur this evening, and the reason we are debating this is because of the enormous numbers of people that have signed this petition – over 10,000. That is not an insignificant amount, as I have said. That just goes to show, as Dr Mansfield and others have said, the concern that has arisen out of the decision to shut down the colorectal and pelvic reconstruction service at the Royal Children’s Hospital.

I was first alerted to this issue in February of last year, when a mother from New South Wales contacted me. She has two children who are affected by bowel disorders, one of six years and one of three years. Both suffer from two of the most serious forms of the condition, Lucy with long segment and Hannah with total colonic, meaning the ganglion cells are missing from the entire colon. She wrote to me:

The condition is serious, unpredictable and complex. Hannah continues to live with a stoma, and Ileostomy Bag, which helps her manage the condition. When Lucy was born, we spent the first 9 weeks of her life living at the Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne, and subsequently, across the first 12 months of her life, we spent a total of over 9 months at the Royal Children’s Hospital. Most of our visits were unplanned admissions, involving transfer from Albury’s Emergency Department via emergency patient air transfer. Hannah has walked a similar path with her condition; however, her journey was made significantly better by changes which the then Liberal, Government were able to make.

Of course people have referred to that one-off funding that Greg Hunt provided back in 2019 to set the clinic up. Even though it was one-off funding, it does not mean that the service should shut down, and that is the issue here. I spoke to Mel last night. She phoned me, knowing that this petition was going ahead. As others have said, what this service does is provide psychologists, dietitians, social workers, stomal therapists, clinical nurse consultants, all providing that wraparound care for the children that are affected and their families. This service, which has looked after many hundreds, thousands of children across the nation, has been really nation-leading, and we know that from the stories that have come through the media and through other means and the advocacy that I have raised and Mrs McArthur certainly has raised over the last 12 months and beyond. Her petition talks about why this service is important and what the state government needs to do.

We should not actually have to be standing here debating this, because when I spoke to Mel last night she said, ‘The care’s just going to be put onto the local services. My children are going to need emergency admissions into Albury–Wodonga and then be flown back down here and back into the emergency department, where we had the wraparound service that could deal with it, that prevented all those emergency admissions.’ It makes no sense. It makes economically no sense, let alone the holistic care that these children got. And yet this government is refusing to remedy a very simple thing.

I have been to the Royal Children's Hospital and I have spoken to the CEO Dr Steer, who actually reassured me that, as the minister said – she is not here anymore – it was embedded in the model of care. That is what they reassured me. But that is not what the parents have told me. That is not what Mel told me last night. All of that support has gone. As Ms Purcell said, the wait times and the rigmarole that people have to go through to try and get that so-called embedded model of care is putting the health and all sorts of elements of these children's care at risk.

The other thing I want to say in the final few seconds that I have got is it is not only babies that are affected, it is the teenagers that the Royal Children's are assisting with and this unit assisted with in helping teenagers navigate both their sexual health and also their bowel health. What a very important process and very supportive process this unit did. We see the amount of waste and mismanagement and the corruption and the huge amounts of dollars going out the window. Congratulations to Greg Hunt for having the foresight to set this clinic up. It should not mean that it gets shut down. It should continue. That is what good governments do: they continue with services that actually make a difference to people's lives, and this unit did.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:09): I want to thank my colleagues the Shadow Minister for Health Ms Crozier, Dr Heath, Dr Mansfield, Georgie Purcell and Michael Galea for speaking on this petition today. Unfortunately, the minister just read out the propaganda from the management of the hospital. That is what we heard over there, very sadly. I want to thank Bridget and her family for being here – and all the other families – because Bridget has put herself out there in the public arena to raise this issue so publicly, not just by authoring the petition but by the media she has done and by allowing me to read out her very personal story. I would also like to acknowledge my daughter Sarah, along with Seija and Alex, who work so hard for all parents across Australia to ensure that this service is continued.

It is a monumental disgrace that it has been closed down for a measly \$1 million a year. This service is no longer available to these babies, children and families across this country. Those in government in Victoria and in Canberra, the Labor governments, should hang their heads in shame that they have done this to the children and families of Australia and particularly Victoria. The colorectal and pelvic reconstruction service improved quality of life. It kept children out of emergency departments, as Ms Crozier said. It is penny-wise and pound-foolish to stop this sort of allied health care that we actually promote in many other areas to stop the need for patients and families to get on an air ambulance and fly from all parts of Victoria and Australia to the hospital. No emergency department and no doctors waiting room can help these children. They have to have this specialised care.

Motion agreed to.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:12): I move:

That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 1287, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

*Bills***Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026***Second reading***Debate resumed on motion of Gayle Tierney:**

That the bill be now read a second time.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (18:12): I rise to speak in support of this bill. The Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026 takes some welcome steps in the right direction. This bill makes it mandatory for electricity distribution network companies to publish network resilience plans so our grid can better withstand increasingly frequent climate disasters, and the Greens support this. Climate change means Victoria is increasingly vulnerable to severe storms, heatwaves, bushfires and floods, leaving our communities increasingly susceptible to prolonged power outages. We need to ensure our communities are supported to withstand this increasingly hostile climate.

During the Greens-initiated climate resilience inquiry last year we heard heartbreaking stories from communities who had experienced loss of power during extreme weather disasters, often for days and even weeks, with seemingly no accountability taken by these distribution companies. People were unable to keep their fridges going, which affected not just their household food but things like the storage of vital medications. It impacted water systems. It impacted ATMs and telecommunications that rely on power. The simple act of trying to charge your mobile phone was something that became really difficult for many of the people living in these communities. This bill ensures that distributors have a responsibility to ensure energy security for all Victorians, regardless of where they live.

But let us be honest about what is really at stake here. This summer alone we have watched climate change burn our farms to the ground and flood our coastal towns. Communities in my region and across the state are bearing the cost of a crisis they did not create – and they are bearing it right now, not in some distant future. Yet we are not moving fast enough. This bill further consolidates the VicGrid reforms and supports VicGrid's new approach to planning renewable energy zones and transmission infrastructure. We need an urgent transition to cleaner, renewable energy, and time is running out, and it is not just from a climate perspective but also in terms of the cost of living for everyday Victorians.

Fossil fuel generated electricity is expensive, and it is projected to only get more expensive, but currently we are not moving fast enough to get off these fossil fuel sources of energy. We continue to burn dirty coal and gas to generate our power. Despite more renewables coming online than ever before, coal consumption in Victoria is simply not falling at the rate it must, because our energy demands are growing faster than our grid can carry. This includes energy demand driven by Victoria's AI data centre boom, and that is a topic we have spoken about at length over recent weeks in this place. The government is rolling out the red carpet and stripping back regulations for these energy-devouring AI data monsters. But the government appears to have no plan for how we will power them without putting our transition from dirty coal and gas into jeopardy.

Let us be clear: the Allan Labor government's target of 95 per cent renewables by 2035 is at serious risk if they do not dramatically lift their ambition and urgency. In that light we welcome this bill, as it will assist with speeding up the transition, but while legislative reforms like this are necessary, they in themselves are not going to be sufficient. We need to focus on energy demand reduction. That is a whole other subject that I will not get into, but it is one that gets far less attention from this government than it warrants.

We also need to ensure that communities are brought along on the journey, and I say this as a regional MP who hears what regional communities are saying. Rural and regional communities like mine in western Victoria will be hosting a lot of this renewable infrastructure. It marks a major change for

these places, and while there is real potential for it to bring positive transformation and benefits for rural Victorians, many are not yet seeing or experiencing those and the projects face ongoing local resistance. The thing is, these communities, more than any, know how serious climate change is. They are on the front lines. They are dealing with the droughts, with the floods, with the fires and with the storms. They are the ones who are having their power cut off for weeks. They know what is at stake. Last year's changes to VicGrid and the establishment of community benefits programs were good moves, albeit very belated, but there is still so much room for better on-the-ground engagement, listening to and supporting these communities. It is in everyone's interests that we bring these communities along on the journey and get this right.

Climate change is not waiting. We urgently need to close down our dirty coal power stations and stop burning fossil gas. This bill gets us a little bit closer to that, and I commend it to the house.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (18:18): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on the Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026. I will say power and energy in Victoria at the moment are certainly not very resilient at all. I have been to a number of areas, and I know Euroa, as I have mentioned before in this chamber, had 17 power outages in just a couple of months. I spoke with a bakery there that talked about not being able to afford a generator. Other business owners are getting up during the night to plug in and unplug their utilities in their stores, and it is putting businesses under significant pressure. I have had other residents contact me because no power means no mobile connection. Their booster goes down, and they have got no internet connection and no access to emergency services information. I have spoken to businesses which depend on energy for their work, and at the moment they are facing significant increases in costs. We have heard today about the number of larger employers – I know Mr Welch spoke about that earlier – that are being forced to close down. The numbers do not look good when you actually look into them in greater depth.

We know from a report done by the Auditor-General that the energy future in this state is looking very grim. The Victorian Auditor-General's report from December 2025 notes:

Victoria is on track to meet its renewable energy target in 2025, but meeting future targets will be more difficult ...

while maintaining reliable electricity. It notes that key projects have been delayed, risking electricity shortages. It does identify the need that, for Victoria to ensure that its energy needs are met, the government should develop contingency plans to address project delays and risks. It talks about the VNI West renewables link being delayed from the original schedule. It is now expected that these projects will not be in service until at least 2030, two years after Yallourn closes, and Victoria will not meet the 2032 offshore wind target. The report said that, to date, planning for Victoria's energy transition has not adequately considered risks and uncertainties, advice around key decisions has included optimistic assumptions and there are limited options to address potential shortfalls. It says:

If these risks are not successfully managed, Victoria would be more likely to face energy shortfalls after the Yallourn coal-fired power station closes in mid-2028.

It does also mention on page 10 of the report that:

Victoria could face electricity shortfalls to meet peak demand if these risks materialise, which could result in load shedding (planned electricity reduction to selected areas) and blackouts.

And:

... there is still a significant risk of electricity shortages after Yallourn closes.

I spoke with a business recently which was in that situation where they were told their power was being switched off, and staff were actually sweltering. They were working in intense heat, and we know that heat stress can actually cause death. It is one of the worst conditions to be in. But this is the situation we now face in Victoria with the likelihood of being asked to turn the power off, so it is certainly anything but resilient.

Yet we know that our demand for power generation in this state is going to continue to grow. We have a growing population. We have heard about data centres and the incredible amount of power that they consume; this is not something that seems to be on the government's radar. Families and businesses do need reliable, affordable and consistent power supply, but at the moment, as I said, costs just keep going up. Victorians need confidence in the energy system, but this bill just undermines that.

I certainly think it is worth pointing out that under this government we have seen the work on the VNI West link, and it has been shocking. The impact on communities and the way it has been handled has been appalling. The Nationals have made it very clear that we think that project should be halted and that a review needs to be done of the whole transmission plan. What we have seen now from the government is – surprise – that they are making an amendment to this bill. We actually had a briefing, just on the amendment, this morning, and we asked why the last-minute change. We were told an internal government process only approved its release yesterday. This is the situation we are in. We have got a government that is putting in a nice, sneaky little amendment. This amendment is about the environment effects statement still being underway yet having the process of compulsory acquisition happening at the same time. So you can imagine if you are a landowner, if you are a farmer, you are in this situation where you are putting a whole lot of your time, effort, energy and resources into the EES process, then suddenly you could be facing compulsory acquisition. These are not people that are heavily resourced with a whole lot of government resources behind them. These are individuals that could be in a very difficult situation. I think it is very clear.

The Victorian Farmers Federation have expressed their disgust at this sneak attack on land rights and environmental laws, and they believe it should be stopped. VFF president Brett Hosking said the move was a betrayal of trust and due process:

This amendment is being jammed through at the eleventh hour with zero transparency or consultation with the farmers whose livelihoods are on the line.

It would allow the Minister to bypass Victoria's environment and planning laws, and potentially waste millions of taxpayer dollars in the process.

You don't build the roof before you pour the slab, and you certainly don't compulsorily acquire a farmer's land before you've even finished the independent assessment proving the powerline is safe, necessary, and in the right spot.

This goes on to say:

Mr Hosking warned the amendment would damage perceptions of the EES process and strengthen the hand of power companies which are already treating communities with contempt.

I think it is worth pointing out that the government does not have the numbers in this chamber. They do not have the numbers for this legislation to go through, and this amendment is being pushed through under the carpet. It is a very slippery slope, and this Labor government has certainly already slid too far. I think we all know there have been some significant things. We have seen the \$15 billion that has gone into the hands of criminals on government projects. The fact that that has happened in this state is extraordinary, and yet the Premier does not want to look into it: 'Nothing to see here' – unbelievable. Again, the state is going backwards. Our power supply, as the Auditor-General pointed out, is not resilient; it is going backwards. Mobile phone coverage, certainly in regional areas, I know is going backwards. Our roads and the maintenance or lack thereof, again, are going backwards. Education: we have seen the shortage of teachers – again, going backwards. And health services: significant delays to our health services – again, going backwards.

This bill talks about a resilience plan for companies, but I think the government needs a resilience plan for the whole state, because certainly people are under pressure at the moment. There are parts of this bill that we do support, including things like strengthening poles to withstand high winds, relocating assets from flood-prone areas and deploying mobile generators to support affected communities. Yes, they are elements that we do support, but certainly this amendment that is being put forward is not one that we want to see happen and I would just encourage the chamber to consider that.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:27): I also would like to say a few words on the Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026. With some of the things that this bill is addressing, you wonder how we got to this place in the first place. Firstly, with these resilience plans, this seems to me like a whole bunch of extra red tape for companies to supposedly increase their resilience. I am sceptical of this sort of thing. Really what is going to happen is, I think, it will just turn into a box-ticking exercise that will inflict more costs on consumers ultimately. These companies already try to manage resilience. The idea that having some plan submitted to the government is going to make them more resilient when the incentives are already set up in such a way that they should be as resilient as possible – I am sceptical as to whether that will help or not.

I am disappointed that we are not seeing any protections for property rights at all after the awful VicGrid bill last year, which was an affront to property rights. There are many people in regional Victoria that are actively resisting what these companies are doing. Some of them have said they are willing to go to jail over property rights. The government have been heavy-handed in the way they are handling this. I am concerned that ultimately it is going to end up in conflict and people are going to get arrested, and I do not want to see that. In fact I would like to see people's property rights respected.

Dr Mansfield before bemoaned the use of gas in Victoria for electricity and how much gas we are using. No-one seems to ask questions about why we are using so much gas in Victoria for electricity. Well, the reason is because we have renewables, and when the wind is not blowing and the sun is not shining, you need something to back it up. Coal cannot ramp up quick enough. Batteries do not have the capacity. So we have gas, and that is why we use so much gas in Victoria for electricity production. The government, both at state and federal level, do not want to support introducing nuclear technologies. So ultimately what I think we are going to come to in Victoria is the realisation that we have made our grid massively more complex and massively more unreliable.

Those coal power plants that we have out in the Latrobe Valley have been derided by so many for so long now – they are derided by the Greens, they are derided by everyone, but not derided by me – but ultimately we are going to realise that actually they have great value. They take advantage of a natural resource that we have, which is brown coal; we have abundant amounts of it. Ultimately, we are going to have to think about what we are going to do, because they are falling apart now. There has not been a lot of investment, because why would anyone invest in something that the government actively regulates the hell out of so it is not going to be profitable? What I would like to see is us get to the point where we say, 'Well, actually, maybe we need a new coal power plant.' I think that we are going to get to that point eventually. There are people in the Labor Party I know that agree with this. They would like to see a whole bunch of boilermakers and other engineers go ahead and build a new coal power plant, because we are not going to build a nuclear one, apparently.

In other countries with more sensible policies, you will see that they are preparing for this. It has been brought up many times, the AI data centre rollout, and they are going to need enormous amounts of electricity. In fact I read about one case recently in America where a single data centre needs 24/7 single-gigawatt power, so basically they are contracting the entire output from a single nuclear power plant for this one plant. Argentina want to be the AI superpower of South America. They know that the only way they can do that is with nuclear energy. They are rolling out a nuclear power fleet in order to become an AI superpower. The idea that we want Victoria to be some data centre superpower and yet we are making our entire grid dependent on intermittent energy sources seems fanciful at the least, because it is not going to happen. That is the fact of the matter. We are lucky that we have the data centres that we have got already. But when we come to the realisation that, like every other country, we are not going to get to net zero and we have to think of something else in the meantime, that is going to be plugged by gas. Gas prices are going to go up. Electricity prices are going to go up.

The government keeps saying, 'Oh, we're making electricity cheaper,' but the consumers know that is nonsense, because every year their electricity bill goes up, and it is not going to be any other way. In fact what we are seeing is the economics of the way that batteries work means that the first batteries

on the network are going to make a lot of profit, because what they do when electricity is oversupplied is store it at a great profit, and then they sell it when it is undersupplied, when the electricity price is high. But every battery that you put on the network narrows that curve and in essence narrows the profit margin. It not only narrows the profit margin of new batteries; it narrows the profit margin of existing batteries. So these companies that have gained the favour of government to set up battery farms are all of a sudden incentivised to resist new market entrants – and won't the politics of that be interesting when you have the renewables companies or the battery companies, the companies that supply these, all of a sudden resisting it because new batteries on the market will reduce their profitability. That is just the way that the economics work on this; it is just the way it is. So you are never going to get this mass battery rollout because it will just get less and less and less and less profitable, to the point where companies will not bother investing in it.

We need reliable energy. Reliable and abundant and cheap energy is what Victoria needs. The idea that Victoria, or Australia indeed, is going to change planetary weather systems by whatever we do is nonsense. Whatever we do is nothing more than a rounding error. We should be looking out for Victoria first and not pandering to the UN or all these other places that think that we have to do whatever it is that they want us to do. What they are really doing is forcing us to use energy sources. They keep talking about this transition, the energy transition. The energy transition is not like we transition from the current power grid to a new power grid. The transition that we are talking about is permanent – forever. By the time that we get to the point, if we ever get there – let us say we get to 90 per cent renewables – all of the original infrastructure that we built will need to be replaced. We will be constantly replacing this infrastructure, in perpetuity. It is unsustainable. It makes us totally dependent on foreign countries – totally dependent on China, actually.

Many of the materials that are used to build these towers require enormous amounts of mining. The same people that push for renewables also want to resist mining rare earth metals in Victoria, when it is the demand for magnets that they use in wind turbines that is one of the main drivers of demand for this. So rather than mine our own neodymium in Victoria, they would rather we be dependent on China forever. This is dangerous. If we look at the supply chain in China, the polysilicon supply chain, the estimates are that vast amounts of it are actually tainted by slave labour in China. When people talk about cheap renewables, maybe we should ask: why are these panels so cheap? Well, the polysilicon is tainted with slave labour. If that is what we want to dedicate ourselves to becoming dependent on forever, then I do not think that is a good thing. I do not think that is moral. I do not think that is the right thing to do. Then some people say, 'Why don't we make it in Australia?' Well, guess what, it is not cheap anymore then, is it?

What we should be doing, to my mind, is building a massive nuclear fleet. We are not going to do that. So if we are not going to do that, we should take advantage of the resources that we have in Victoria. I totally disagree with Dr Mansfield about phasing out coal. It is never going to happen. It is never going to happen in Victoria. Sooner or later we are going to come to realise the value of what those visionaries in Victoria did all those years ago when they set up those power plants in the Latrobe Valley. We are going to come to see them in a new light and how valuable they really are, and maybe we will build new ones.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (18:36): I rise to speak on the Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026. The bill amends the Electricity Safety Act 1998 to require Victorian electricity distribution businesses to prepare network resilience plans and to provide for the approval and enforcement of these plans by Energy Safe Victoria. We will be experiencing more frequent and more severe weather events due to climate change, and energy distribution companies will need to take proactive steps to prepare for these events. That might include fortifying infrastructure to withstand high winds, relocating assets from flood-prone areas or providing generators to communities left without power in the wake of an extreme weather event. The resilience plans will be enforceable, and there will be penalties for businesses that fail to take reasonable steps to implement their resilience plans.

During the inquiry into climate resilience in Victoria we heard evidence of communities being left without power for extended periods following floods and bushfires. It is great to see the minister responding to the findings and recommendations of that inquiry. The bill makes other changes, including amendments to life support provisions under the Electricity Industry Act 2000 and the Gas Industry Act 2001, amendments to the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 to support the transition of the energy sector from fossil fuels to renewables, and amendments to the Statewide Treaty Act 2025 to ensure the Self-Determination Fund can receive and administer the relevant benefits to traditional owners, as well as other minor amendments which I will not go into now.

There have been amendments moved by the government and the opposition. Let us look at the opposition amendments first, the first of which is to impose a requirement on electricity retailers to itemise the proportion of funds that will go into the Traditional Owners Fund. The legislation relating to the three groups receiving benefits under the scheme was passed in the previous VicGrid bills. Those groups all received the same amount: landholders, affected communities and traditional owners. It is an accepted practice to include the compensation and benefit payments in the project costs, which are then reflected in the network component of the retail bill. The opposition say that this amendment is about transparency – that consumers are entitled to know what they are being charged for. But if this is about transparency, why aren't they seeking for all funds to be itemised on the bill instead of just the Traditional Owners Fund component? Why is the opposition only interested in the amount being paid to traditional owners?

Their other amendments seek to amend the national electricity act 2005 to remove various clauses relating to environmental assessments and to applications to the grid impact authority for approval of generation, storage or hybrid energy projects located outside of a declared renewable energy zone. The bill amends the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 to allow the Minister for Energy and Resources to make an order relating to the regulatory arrangements related to the declared transmission system where an environment effects statement has been ordered, so it allows those two processes to run concurrently. However, the conditions of the EES must be satisfied.

In relation to the clauses concerning applications to the grid impact authority, I was a little curious as to why the opposition would oppose the streamlining of processes to enable more applicants to connect to the transmission network, notwithstanding their rather well ventilated antipathy towards renewables. These clauses require applicants to prove that they have undertaken due consultation and engagement with affected landholders, communities and traditional owners and that their project delivers meaningful social value and economic benefits. Those very requirements for appropriate consultation I think were admirably highlighted in the inquiry that the Environment and Planning Committee just completed into consultation. I think the feeling of the committee was pretty much unanimous as to the ability to improve this. We have heard those opposite complain about the lack of consultation with landholders and communities. Surely they are supportive of requirements for a grid impact authority holder to consult and engage with these groups. I suspect their resistance perhaps has more to do with the requirement to also engage with traditional owners in this process. This suite of amendments has nothing to do with transparency. I am afraid I feel that there is an element of this which is primarily dog whistling. We will not be supporting them.

Turning to the government's house amendments which deal with the government's compulsory acquisition powers, currently the compulsory easement acquisition process for transmission projects can only commence once the environment effects statement process, which includes the heritage impact statement, is completed. This amendment will allow the EES process to run concurrently with the compulsory easement acquisition process, as currently happens with rail networks, with roads and with water infrastructure, so it is not exactly groundbreaking. It will create more certainty for landowners and bring forward completion dates. The acquisition transaction will not take place until after the environment effects statement has been completed, and if it is found that the easement is unsuitable for the transmission line route, if it is not much use to the company anyway, the land can be sold back to the landholder. Either way the landholder is no worse off. That said, this is an area we

are looking forward to exploring further with the government tomorrow when we are in committee, although I am told it is fairly unlikely at this stage that an easement would be found unsuitable, as the process of calibrating the transmission line route is more advanced and the route has been altered literally thousands of times. As I understand it, on the current western link proposal the EES is almost completed now and will be released later this year.

The amendment will align Victoria's compulsory acquisition powers with those that currently exist in New South Wales and have done for some time. These have been uncontroversial and very successful in finalising those voluntary agreements with landholders. In New South Wales 98 per cent of voluntary agreements are reached once the compulsory acquisition process has been triggered, and this is what Victorian landowners have been calling for. Emma Kealy, the Nationals member for Lowan, beseeched the Premier to get on with compulsory acquisitions in September last year. I do want to put a caveat here, which is that I have not had a chance to contextualise this with Ms Kealy, but if I quote directly from the transcript, it says:

Have compulsory acquisitions of land and make it quick and make it fair so our people can move on ... I call on Premier Allan: please, if you care about regional people, go out and do compulsory acquisition, as you would for a Melbourne project, and let our people deal with this, because the uncertainty is dividing families.

That seems a very reasonable proposition from Ms Kealy. She is from out that way. As I said, there may be some contextual issue that I am missing, but it seems to me that that is a pretty solid support for exactly this concept of bringing forward the compulsory acquisitions.

Despite this, the coalition are not supporting these amendments. They say that the process undermines the EES process, which it does not, because it runs concurrently. It simply allows the government to trigger one process ahead of the other, which, as I have noted, has been working fine in New South Wales. The outcome is ultimately the same. It is not about how many easements have been acquired. If the EES does not pass, the process will be the same whether the land has been acquired or not. It is bigger than any one site.

I am not denying that there have been issues with the rollout of the government's renewable energy scheme, particularly when it comes to community consultation in the regions. We heard this loud and clear and shamefully in the Environment and Planning Committee inquiry into consultation processes. But this is something that needs to happen. We must move away from coal-powered energy. Whilst it is all fine for Mr Limbrick to hark back to the days when we had lots of coal and say, 'We need to build a new coal station,' no-one is going to fund it, unless Mr Limbrick is going to be arguing that that should be funded by the state government, which would seem to be rather contrary.

In reading some of the opposition contributions to this debate in the Assembly, I cannot help but feel that all the outrage that generational farming families are having to carve off productive country that feeds the state, the nation and the world to accommodate transmission easements is a bit disingenuous. It does not take much to recognise that the greatest threat to productive agricultural land and farming communities in Victoria is climate change. There will not be many more generations of farmers working that land as they do currently if we continue to delay Victoria's transition to renewable energy. We will be supporting the bill and the government's house amendments, and I commend the bill to the house.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (18:47): I rise to speak on the Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026 and to strongly oppose the extraordinary amendments that were given to me late on Tuesday night. These amendments fundamentally expand compulsory acquisition powers under the Electricity Industry Act 2000. They allow easements to be acquired not only where they are required but where they may be required. 'May be required' is not a narrow test. It is vague, it is speculative and it dramatically lowers the threshold for the state to take control of private land. We are talking about farmers, we are talking about family properties, we are talking about generational landholdings across regional Victoria, and this Parliament is being asked to sign off on broader land-taking powers with barely any notice.

But it gets worse. New clause 12A deliberately carves around safeguards in the Environment Effects Act 1978. It makes clear that environmental oversight provisions cannot prevent the Governor in Council from approving the acquisition of an easement. In other words, if there are serious environmental concerns, if communities demand proper assessment or if there are legitimate questions about biodiversity, waterways or landscape impacts, those concerns cannot stand in the way of acquisition. That is not resilience reform, that is executive overreach.

Compulsory acquisition is one of the most coercive powers a government holds. It must be exercised transparently, cautiously and with full environmental scrutiny. Instead these amendments expand power, reduce oversight and sidestep safeguards, and they were introduced at the eleventh hour. If this reform was so reasonable, so balanced and so necessary, why introduce it late at night? Why avoid proper consultation? Why avoid proper scrutiny? Regional communities already feel ignored in Victoria's energy transition. This sends a clear message: their land can be taken on the basis that it may one day be needed. That is not how trust is built. For those reasons I oppose these amendments and call on the house to reject them.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) incorporated the following:

Thank you, President, I rise today to offer my contribution to the debate on the Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026.

This bill is all about strengthening our energy grid and ensuring that Victorians will have access to affordable and reliable energy for decades to come.

Part of this involves upgrading the resilience of our energy infrastructure.

Another part involves making an adjustment to the Victorian Energy Upgrades program which will allow the system to continue to incentivize people to upgrade their household appliances to more energy efficient, electrical appliances.

Also, changes made to the VicGrid reforms which were delivered in 2024 and 2025 will ensure a smoother process for the declaration of Renewable Energy Zones.

These are smart, pragmatic reforms being brought in by a government which is determined to get the details of policy right.

Big picture reform matters, but governments which want their big picture reforms to work well and last for generations always need to make sure to get the details right.

That is what the Allan Labor Government is determined to do through this bill.

Because, as the Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for the State Electricity Commission said aptly in the other in place in her second reading of the Bill.

Climate change is impacting our state, with severe weather impacts affecting Victorian communities' access to power services.

Bushfires, floods, severe heat and storms leave communities with prolonged periods without power.

And as named in the Bill itself, these resilience reforms intend to give Victorians assurance that they will have access to power in weather events that leave them vulnerable.

The specific changes to energy legislation as detailed in the Bill will achieve this.

By amending the Electricity Safety Act 1998 to require distribution companies to prepare network resilience plans and to provide for the approval and enforcement of network resilience plans.

By amending the Electricity Industry Act 2000 and the Gas Industry Act 2001 to provide increased flexibility for the setting of retailer obligations to life support customers.

By amending the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 to clarify the eligibility of payments to landholders by limiting it to interests in land in relation to new major transmission infrastructure.

To make further provisions in relation to the issue of grid impact authorities.

To confer further functions in relation to the national electricity market onto VicGrid.

And to make further provision in relation to preferred transmission project areas of interest within and between renewable energy zones.

The bill would also amend the Energy and Land Legislation Amendment (Energy Safety) Act 2025 to include, in the consequential amendments being made by Schedule 1 to that Act to the Electricity Safety Act 1998, additional amendments to change references to enforcement officer to an authorised officer.

Amend the Victorian Energy Efficiency Target Amendment (Energy Upgrades for the Future) Act 2025 to repeal certain provisions of that Act.

Amend the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Act 2025 to make an amendment that is consequential to the amendments being made to the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 relating to preferred transmission project areas of interest within and between renewable energy zones.

And amend the Advancing the Treaty Process with Aboriginal Victorians Act 2018 to make further provision in relation to the composition, structure or legal form of the self-determination fund referred to in that Act.

That is a lot of amendments, but President, these changes matter.

In 2021, as reiterated by the Minister, the intense storms of June and October left over 230,000 Victorians without power.

With our cities experiencing outages of an average of 49 hours and, notably, some rural areas experiencing up to 84 days without electricity.

For almost three months, some of our rural communities could not access this vital infrastructure.

Prompting the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change to establish the Electricity Distribution Network Resilience Review Expert Panel the following year.

Further, storms in February 2024 damaged 12,000 kilometres of powerlines and poles across the state, and outages caused by these events impacted over 529,000 Victorian homes and businesses.

And circling back to the Electricity Distribution Network Resilience Review Expert Panel established in 2022.

The then-Andrews Government broadly supported the recommendations of the panel, implementing actions to do so in many cases.

To implement immediate reforms to drive investment in the current regulatory period.

Acting to establish medium term, enduring reform to embed resilience investments in the Victorian regulatory framework.

And longer-term reforms to embed resilience investments in the national regulatory framework.

To engage with communities and local councils in emergency planning and response.

And to prioritise the restoration of power following an outage.

To ensure there is adequate communication with customers before and during prolonged power outages.

To deliver relief to customers affected by prolonged power outages.

And to ensure that reviews are undertaken to improve outcomes for customers impacted by prolonged power outages.

Immediate reforms to drive investment in the current regulatory period were implemented, including identifying high-risk locations.

Conducting geospatial analysis through Prolonged Power Outage Risk Assessments.

By supporting local councils to identify the needs of community hubs.

Identifying the range of potential investments preferred investment solutions.

Through conducting cost-benefit analysis and identifying investment sources.

And by introducing new regulatory obligations to invest in energy infrastructure.

Electricity distribution businesses were required to provide support to an emergency response.

By participating in a relevant meeting or shift briefing of any Incident Emergency Management Team or Regional Emergency Management Team daily for the duration of an emergency response.

To attend a relief centre, community hub, or a community meeting, to provide information about incident and response activities.

And to take reasonable steps to ensure that relief centres and community hubs can continue to operate during a prolonged power outage.

The government implemented new directions power to the Secretary of the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, or a representative, to require the electricity distribution businesses, if requested following a major energy emergency, to provide additional information.

And they were granted new directions power to require the electricity distribution businesses, if requested following a major energy emergency, to provide customer information or to take reasonable steps to deliver or assist in the delivery of relief activities.

But this bill seeks to deliver on all other recommendations made by this panel and supported by the government.

Enforcing obligations for energy distribution businesses to prepare and implement network resilience plans that are accepted by Energy Safe Victoria.

That will detail how these businesses will prepare for and respond to severe weather events such as bushfires, floods, severe heat, and storms.

And penalising energy distribution businesses that do not comply with these obligations.

This Bill seeks to ensure that Victorians can have confidence that these plans are enforced, implemented, and work.

This is important to all communities across Victoria, and especially rural areas that in the past have endured several months of power outages.

This Bill not only improves outcomes in the cases of power outages, but it saves lives.

To support priority restoration of power following long periods of power outages, the government has taken into account recommendations of the Electricity Distribution Network Resilience Review.

By amending the Electricity Industry Act 2000 and Gas Industry Act 2001 to strengthen frameworks surrounding life support provisions.

Making these provisions more flexible, proactive, and responsive, giving certainty, but also safety, to Victorians who require life support equipment in their homes, during severe weather events and power outages.

This Bill support Victorian communities in having access to the services they need, in their home and in daily life, but critically, it saves lives in prolonged periods of power outages.

From the Electricity Distribution Network Resilience Review Expert Panel of 2022's recommendations, our government has made significant progress to build stronger systems, frameworks, and regulations surrounding the operations and obligations of energy distribution businesses.

But we are living in a period of climate change, with severe weather events becoming more frequent, leaving Victorian communities more vulnerable to the impacts of power outages.

And this Bill ensures that our government and regulatory bodies have the flexibility to adapt to changing situations.

This Bill also makes critical reforms to the Victorian Energy Upgrades program, through its amendments to the Victorian Energy Efficiency Target Amendment (Energy Upgrades for the Future) Act 2025.

It repeals a section of the Act that would exclude a key business model responsible for delivering a significant number of the Victorian Energy Upgrades program activities.

Therefore, ensuring certainty and success in the Victorian Energy Upgrades program achievements.

While still retaining current offences relating to prescribed activities, definitions of scheme participants, and regulated action.

In terms of VicGrid reforms, this Bill relates to a number of existing acts to support our commitment to transitioning to renewable energy and delivering reliable energy to Victorians across the state.

Our stance on the transition to renewable energy is firm.

Not only are coal-fired power stations becoming unreliable.

We are in a period of climate change.

Through the Renewable Energy (Jobs and Investment) Act 2017, the then-Andrews Government committed to renewable energy targets of 25 percent of Victorian electricity generated from renewable sources by 2020, 40 percent by 2025, 65 percent by 2030 and 95 percent by 2035.

The Managing the Transition to Renewable Energy report published in December 2025 confirmed that we had reached the target of 40% by 2025.

The 'Cheaper, Cleaner, Renewable: Our Plan for Victoria's Electricity Future', the publically published plan in 2024 to reach 95 percent of energy generated by renewable sources reiterates this.

Because coal-fired power plants are unreliable and this is why they are being closed down.

Because fossil fuels are unsustainable and our government is committed to net zero by 2045.

VicGrid is a key program in delivering this transition to renewable energy sources, in planning renewable energy zones and transmission infrastructure.

With \$480 million invested into renewal energy projects that will strengthen and modernise Victoria's energy grid.

Overseeing the delivery of current major transmission projects underway in Victoria.

Which include the Gippsland offshore wind transmission, the Marinus Link, the Victoria to New South Wales Interconnector West, and the Western Renewables Link.

Coordinating the delivery of the transmission to connect new offshore wind resources to the grid.

Providing key information to communities regarding their activities.

And they are putting the needs of Victorians at the centre of their work to deliver their Victorian Transmission Investment Framework.

Clarifications are made through this bill regarding the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005.

In the context of new major transmission projects created in or after 2025.

To support eligible landholders in receiving recognition for their contributions to the transition towards renewable energy.

This Bill also works to support the implementation of renewable energy zones and the new access regime through increased flexibility in Renewable Energy Zone Orders and assessment of Renewable Energy Zone Scheme authorities.

By allowing for renewable energy zones to be set in place where there is existing sufficient transmission infrastructure.

Or where there is not an existing proposed transmission project in that moment.

And by granting VicGrid powers to adopt the most appropriate method for assessing and issuing Renewable Energy Zone project authorities.

With consideration towards the characteristics of the renewable energy zone, projects with interest in participation, and broad market interest.

These changes are critical to support the work of VicGrid in their implementation of their transmission access regime coordinating new energy schemes.

To provide security and certainty for investors and developers supporting new energy projects.

And to ensure meaningful engagement with communities, Traditional Owners and landholders impacted by new energy projects.

This bill supports a limited class of transitional projects at the advanced development stage, including Capacity Investment Scheme projects, to achieve their goals in renewal energy schemes.

By introducing a new head of power for the Governor in Council to make regulations to replace the substantial constraint test set in the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005.

Bringing in an alternative assessment process which requires developers involved in renewal energy projects to meet government standards on community engagement, ensuring social value and delivering economic benefits to Victorian communities.

And in our responsibility towards Traditional Owners, this bill makes amendments to the Advancing the Treaty Process with Aboriginal Victorians Act 2018.

Supporting changes to the Self-Determination Fund through the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, ensuring the fund can have more than one fund, including non-charitable investment vehicles.

Which allows for payments to Traditional Owners to be used for non-charitable purposes.

In our commitment to supporting self-determination in our Victorian Indigenous communities through Treaty last year.

The Allan Labor Government has reached the goal of 40 percent of energy powered by renewable sources by 2025.

And we still have more work to do towards reaching 65 percent by 2030, 95 percent by 2035, and ultimately, net zero by 2045.

Because coal-fired power plants are unreliable, fossil fuels are unsustainable, and climate change is impacting our Victorian communities.

Access to power is one part of that, but it is a critical, and lifesaving one.

And this Bill strengthens and empowers our legislation, regulatory and planning authorities, and projects to deliver on our renewable transition goals.

But it also takes into consideration the impacts and security of investors, developers, Victorian communities, Traditional Owners, and landholders.

It is a considered bill that I commend the Minister for Climate Action, for Energy and Resources, and for the State Electricity Commission for developing and introducing to parliament.

I would also like to thank the Electricity Distribution Network Resilience Review Expert Panel for their contributions which guided the development of this Bill.

The Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action for their planning work towards net zero.

And VicGrid for their work in planning Renewal Energy Zones, the Victorian Transmission Plan, and renewable energy transition projects.

There has been significant work done to ensure that this Bill is measured in progressing our renewable energy transition work, supporting communities impacted by prolonged power outages.

And ensuring that the security of investors, developers, Victorian communities, Traditional Owners, and landholders is preserved throughout our work.

I support the work done by the Minister in presenting this bill to parliament, and I commend it to the house.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:50): I move:

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

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

Adjournment

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (18:50): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Metro Tunnel

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:50): (2370) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure in the other place, and the action I seek is for the minister to provide information on how the Metro Tunnel is making our transport network better. Victoria has always led the way on rail safety. Who could forget the iconic Dumb Ways to Die campaign, which helped reduce train station accidents by 21 per cent? Safety is something we take seriously, and the Metro Tunnel continues that tradition. The Metro Tunnel is not just a transport project, it is an engineering masterpiece. These new stations are among the most advanced in the world, designed with cutting-edge safety features. From improved ventilation and sound reduction to creating open, accessible spaces deep underground, every detail has been considered to make the passenger experience safe and comfortable. Some may try to play politics with safety, but let us be clear: this government has delivered a project that sets a new benchmark for rail infrastructure. The Metro Tunnel will transform how Victorians move across our city, and it will do so with safety at its core. I ask the minister to outline the specific measures that make the Metro Tunnel and its stations safe for all passengers, and I look forward to her response.

LGBTIQA+ support

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (18:51): (2371) Military operations are intensifying in the Middle East, and many Iranian Australians are watching events unfold with great interest, some with hope. Since 1979's Islamic Revolution the Islamic Republic of Iran has imposed one of the most

repressive regimes in the world. Few groups have suffered more under that regime than LGBT+ people, and I feel deeply for them, because in Iran today homosexuality is criminalised. It can result in imprisonment, it can result in public floggings and in the most extreme cases it can result in execution. There are documented cases of gay men being thrown from buildings. There are cases of forced confessions. Gay people face discrimination in employment, housing and education, and in many cases are forced to live in fear and live their lives in secrecy. Human rights organisations estimate that thousands of people have been executed in Iran on charges related to homosexuality since the revolution, with many more cases going unrecorded.

Now let us turn to Hamas. The Iranian regime is one of Hamas's largest financial backers, providing an estimated \$350 million a year funding weapons, training and military equipment. That funding has helped Hamas arm themselves with rockets, and they have fired them indiscriminately at Israeli cities. Hamas is not exactly a beacon of human rights either. Under Hamas rule in Gaza homosexuality is illegal, and many gay people face persecution, imprisonment and violence. It is quite simply the same ideology and repression as in Iran. Yet here is the extraordinary contradiction we increasingly see in parts of Victoria: we see people proudly waving Pride flags and declaring themselves champions of equality, and then in the very next breath we see them supporting Hamas, an organisation that would happily imprison them, beat them or much, much worse. It is a very strange kind of activism that on one day you are celebrating LGBT rights but then the next day you are supporting the exact regime that would counter that completely. Human rights cannot be selective. If you claim to stand for equality, then you must stand against those who try and crush it.

The action I seek is from the Premier, and it is simple: that she publicly condemn Hamas and the Iranian regime's persecution of LGBT+ people and other minorities.

Katamatite-Yarrawonga Road

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (18:54): (2372) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the action I seek is for the minister to direct the Department of Transport and Planning to conduct major repairs on the dangerous condition of the Katamatite-Yarrawonga Road. On 25 September 2025 the minister responded to my constituency question from 10 September regarding the appalling condition of the Katamatite-Yarrawonga Road. The minister assured my constituents that maintenance on the road would be conducted in the following weeks. While some of the deeper potholes have been filled, the overall condition of the Katamatite-Yarrawonga Road is still abysmal. The road is riddled with potholes, rutting and uneven surfaces almost the entire length of the Katamatite-Yarrawonga Road. In fact parts of the road are so uneven it is like driving a roller-coaster. Deep potholes are scattered along numerous sections, causing drivers to swerve to avoid them or risk damage to their vehicles. The bridge over the number 3 channel just east of Katamatite is incredibly dangerous, as it is not only narrow but also rutted and potholed. Deep rutting and bulging in the asphalt in the other sections of the road are another cause for alarm. Regional Victorians are tired of navigating dangerous roads just to travel around their communities. Many cars, trucks, buses, farming machinery and motorbikes travel this road every day. Every day they risk their lives and damage to their vehicles due to the poorly maintained road surface. So the action I seek is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety to direct the Department of Transport and Planning to conduct major repairs to the dangerous condition of the Katamatite-Yarrawonga Road.

Housing

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:56): (2373) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Housing and Building. The Allan Labor government is currently undertaking the nation's most ambitious urban renewal project. This project will see our old social housing towers, three of which sit in my community of Southern Metro, being redeveloped so that the sites can host more social housing built to modern standards. These projects will deliver more high-quality social housing at these locations and will give existing residents a right to return to the location once construction is completed. Over the next two years Homes Victoria will work with residents to hear about their

individual needs and support them in relocating and finding an alternative place to live during the period of construction. As anyone can imagine, temporarily relocating during a period of construction may be difficult for many of the tenants. The action I seek is for the minister to provide me and my office with information on what sorts of assistance residents in these towers can seek for the relocation and transition and where they can go to receive help.

Education First Youth Foyers

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (18:57): (2374) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Housing and Building. The action that I seek is for the minister to commit to allocating funding in the 2026–27 state budget to build and operate an Education First Youth Foyer in Bendigo. Education First Youth Foyers provide an incredibly valuable service that can change the life of a young person at risk of becoming homeless or dropping out of education. Youth foyers support vulnerable young people by giving them a place to live in return for their commitment to staying in education, training or work. It provides more than just a place to sleep. It integrates accommodation with education, connects students with learning and work opportunities and provides a peer community and network of support workers to help develop life skills. The Victorian government has recognised the importance of youth foyers and agreed in principle with recommendation 92 of the *Victorian Infrastructure Plan 2021*, which recommended that the state government fund at least six new youth foyers in regional Victoria by 2026 to better use existing education infrastructure and support vulnerable young people.

I have repeatedly advocated in Parliament for the government to invest in an Education First Youth Foyer for young people in Bendigo, but progress under the Allan Labor government has been slow. I met with Bendigo TAFE executives in 2024, and they had already identified a building suited for rapid refurbishment and were excited about the prospect of being the educational partner for an Education First Youth Foyer in their city. When I asked the minister to fund the youth foyer in Bendigo, the minister took seven months to provide a response and eventually informed me that Homes Victoria was in discussion with a potential operator. Since then nothing has been heard about the project, and I am worried that, just like Labor's other housing programs, it has fallen off the radar and young people in Bendigo are missing out because of Labor's incompetence and mismanagement.

Education First Youth Foyers are proven to work. A five-year study of the first three youth foyers showed that the model substantively improved participants' education, employment and housing outcomes. I was the housing minister in the Baillieu Liberal government responsible for establishing Victoria's first three Education First Youth Foyers, and I am always immensely proud when I hear the success stories of students who have benefited from a youth foyer. Young people in Bendigo deserve their chance to benefit from this service too, and with rising rents causing housing stress among families, the risk of young people becoming homeless and dropping out of education is higher than ever. This project is absolutely vital for the city of Bendigo, and it is imperative that Labor shows some urgency and moves beyond discussion to action. The minister must allocate funding in the 2026–27 state budget for an Education First Youth Foyer in Bendigo.

Maribyrnong planning

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (19:00): (2375) Maribyrnong is host to a large number of disused and derelict buildings and vacant land. Many are in strategically located sites with existing planning approvals, but instead of being converted into much-needed housing or community assets, years of neglect have left them as suitable homes only for vermin and targets for graffiti and vandalism. The impacts of long-term vacant and underutilised land on community safety, amenity, housing delivery and local economic activity have long been felt by its residents. The old Dimmays and Forges building in the heart of downtown Footscray, a beautiful old building with a rich heritage, is a glaring example. Since its closure in 2009, it has been left to rot. Its roof leaks and masonry and broken glass carpet the floor. Centrally located next to shops and facilities, residents are forced to traverse this eerie and dangerous place as they shop for groceries, go to the bank or wait for the bus. It

is but one of many such sites in Footscray, including the former Little Saigon market, which burnt down in 2016. Since its acquisition by developers, it has remained unused, other than as a site for illegal dumping. These sites are prime land in the Footscray CBD, 7 kilometres from the city. Residents want the owners of these abandoned sites to actually start converting them into much-needed housing and community amenities.

Maribyrnong City Council concede there is little that they can do beyond encouraging development. It has no statutory authority to compel development or require interim activation of privately owned land, with key legislative, planning and taxation powers instead held by, of course, the state government. These are not the sorts of sites that are generally captured by the vacant residential land tax, and this issue is not addressed by the recent major reforms to the Planning and Environment Act 1987. The action I seek is that the Minister for Planning initiate reforms to prevent land in designated activity centres from remaining vacant after planning permits are granted. These could include reining in excessively generous permit expiry terms and requiring interim activation where developments do not commence within a set timeframe.

Formula One Australian Grand Prix

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (19:02): (2376) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events, Steve Dimopoulos. The free Formula One Melbourne fan festival returns in 2026. The action I seek is an update on how this event will boost local businesses and ensure more Victorians can share in the excitement.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region housing

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (19:02): (2377) From time to time members in this place have cause to speak to ministers about a number of things in their portfolio. Often I will speak to the Minister for Housing and Building, of course, in respect to my local constituents in Ringwood. It is to the Minister for Housing and Building that my adjournment matter is actually focused, and that is to seek from the minister an update in respect to the 62 new dwellings that I know the government is currently constructing in McDowall Street in Mitcham. I, on behalf of my community, would certainly appreciate an update, and I thank her for her attention to that. Also, for the numerous occasions when I have reached out to the minister, I thank her for her efforts and that of her staff and her department as well.

Early childhood education and care

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (19:03): (2378) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Education, and the action I seek is for him to urgently meet with the Australian Education Union Victorian branch, representing kindergarten educators, and bring forward a fair wage increase offer. Kindergarten teachers are educators with specialist expertise in children's learning development. They are tasked with children's language development and ensuring active social participation and that high-quality and fun educational experiences are delivered to our youngest learners. They serve the profession, the community and Victorian families with so much heart, care and compassion. Minister, you have explicitly said Victoria is the Education State. However, our early childhood educators continue to face high and unmanageable workloads, with half of kindergarten teachers often thinking about leaving the profession altogether.

After 20 months of negotiations with the AEU Victoria, the Allan Labor government has failed to put a single wage offer on the table. In the midst of Victoria's child safety crisis in early childhood education settings, this is unacceptable. This teaching profession has been consistently devalued, with educators reporting working almost half a day of overtime every week. Why does the caring sector, this sector, continue to be left to fight so hard, and yet their commitment is being met with disregard by this government? Newly introduced legislation to support child safety means nothing without adequate wages for educators that match the level of responsibility and accountability we expect them to have. Legislation alone does not protect children; people do. Quality education and children's

wellbeing are inseparable. If this government is serious about being the Education State, it must start by properly valuing the educators who make it possible. Minister, will you finally hear directly from our kindergarten teachers and heed their calls?

TAFE funding

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (19:05): (2379) My adjournment is for the Minister for Skills and TAFE, and the action I seek is for the minister to update the house on how the state Labor government has supported TAFE in eastern Victoria. Minister, I am proud to have gone to TAFE, done my apprenticeship for four years and worked 10 years in a trade. Shockingly, the Liberals, when they were last in a position of power, closed 22 TAFE campuses; 18 of those were in regional Victoria. The Labor state government has opened or upgraded 45 TAFE campuses. That, alongside free TAFE, is incredible.

Members interjecting.

Tom McINTOSH: We know the Liberals hate TAFE and they want to close it down. They are talking it down as we speak. Labor will always back in Victorians to get training and skills and get into the workforce.

Broiler farms

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (19:06): (2380) My adjournment is for the Minister for Agriculture regarding the cumulative impact of broiler farms on regional communities. Local residents have raised concerns over the cumulative effect of broiler farm developments in the Moolort Plains region of central Victoria. There are three broiler farm facilities operating within a 10-kilometre radius of their properties. All the plans seem to meet the broiler code specification, and they recently lost a VCAT appeal against another proposed broiler farm. The operator of this farm already had an application for a second shed on another property, plus two more in the Mount Alexander shire. With each new development comes a further increase in noise, smell, dust and truck movements along roads that are not designed to cope with that level of traffic. To quote directly from the correspondence I received, it said:

... these plans seem to meet the broiler code specifications but it is the creeping, cumulative effect these industrial buildings are having on this area which is very concerning. With every new complex there is increased odour, another 850 (Approx) truck movements in and then out on road not capable of handling this, further light pollution, more chicken manure piles not being spread causing self combustion and therefore putting us at high risk, further degradation of our environment, community, biosecurity and the list goes on. Last summer on a day of total fire ban a manure pile 600 meters from our house self combusted. If the northerly winds of later in that day had been blowing we would have been burnt out, a risk we shouldn't have to undergo. The Moolort plains are already a very sensitive area with few trees, hills and gullies to trap odours so we suffer greatly from the odour.

These issues raise not only environmental and amenity concerns but also serious safety risks in an environmentally sensitive area. The action I seek is for the minister to review the Victorian Code for Broiler Farms 2009 in relation to this cumulative effect of multiple broiler farms in one area to address these community concerns.

Corrections system

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (19:08): (2381) My matter is for the Minister for Corrections and is concerning the practice of decanting – that is, the practice of shuffling detainees between police cells across Victoria due to a lack of prison beds. The action I seek is for the minister to urgently address the overcrowding crisis and outline how the government will ensure that individuals on remand are held in appropriate correctional facilities, not cycled indefinitely through police stations in conditions never intended for long-term detention.

A recent report revealed that on any given night around 300 Victorians are being moved between police cells sometimes hundreds of kilometres away as police attempt to manage an overstretched

system. One unsentenced person – regardless of background, the same rights of care while in custody should apply to all – in this case an Indigenous man, was held in different police stations for 26 days, almost double the usual 14-day limit applied to police custody. I have been informed that the purpose of decanting is effectively to reset the clock and avoid breaches of regulations that are designed to protect detainees from the very harm occurring.

The community impacts are severe. Police cells are intended for short-term holding only, and people housed in them do not receive the same rights as those in correctional facilities. This includes limited access to fresh air, inadequate provision for health and wellbeing, and reduced ability to attend court in person, disadvantaging vulnerable individuals in an already strained justice system. Lawyers have also raised serious concerns about this practice, both for the safety of detainees and for the fairness of legal proceedings. The Police Association Victoria has warned that the system is under massive pressure, with officers increasingly forced into the role of actual prison guards, and this situation, they say, cannot continue. They fear that it is only a matter of time before a death in custody occurs as a direct consequence of overcrowding and extended stays in prison cells. To compound matters, recent bail reforms have led to sharp increases in remand populations, with 29 per cent more adults and 50 per cent more children requiring a call to a lawyer after the laws came into effect. These changes have intensified the demand for custody placement and heightened the crisis inside police and correctional facilities. Can the minister please immediately step in and end the over-reliance on police cells and see how the government can guarantee basic rights, safety and humane practice for every Victorian held in custody?

Kangaroo control

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (19:11): (2382) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Environment, and the action I seek is for the kangaroo harvest program to be suspended until credible ground-based population assessments can be undertaken across all recent bushfire zones. You can only imagine the shock my office felt when we were told multiple kill permits had been approved to shoot kangaroos in bushfire-impacted towns such as Longwood. As wildlife rescuers struggled to keep up with the number of injured, burnt and displaced kangaroos, the Victorian government continued to give the green light to their sanctioned slaughter.

In Victoria kangaroos are killed in two ways. They are either shot by private landholders who hold an authority-to-control-wildlife, or ATCW, permit, or they are hunted by so-called professional shooters supplying the commercial kangaroo industry for their meat and for their skins. Both of these programs operate with limited scrutiny and oversight, and we now know they are continuing despite the fact that we have no clear understanding whatsoever of the impact the 2026 summer bushfires have had on kangaroo populations. We were told of a Seymour local witnessing commercial shooters transporting multiple kangaroo carcasses to the processor in the weeks following the fires. Instead of being afforded every possible chance to survive and recover from the devastation, these animals are being peppered with bullets. This is particularly galling given that wildlife rescuers were blocked from entering fire zones to undertake their vital work following the bushfires. It might just be me, but it appears to be a desperate attempt to conceal information and delay public knowledge of the bushfire devastation in order to deny calls to suspend these killing programs, which I might note the government has done before – after the Black Summer bushfires.

We know the continuation of this authorised shooting is not what most Victorians want. Independent survey results from the Victorian state survey report by Kangaroos Alive found that 77 per cent of Victorians want commercial killing stopped until reliable population estimates are obtained, and 90 per cent believe kangaroos should remain part of the Australian landscape. So how can the minister allow their killing when we do not even know how many are left in these areas after the fires? This government's current treatment of kangaroos is deplorable, and I am not one bit surprised that the slaughter is taking precedence over ensuring these animals get a fair chance at survival after surviving the bushfires. I urge the minister to immediately suspend the kangaroo harvesting program and ensure that rigorous, transparent population assessments are conducted before any further killing is permitted.

Craigieburn road maintenance

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (19:14): (2383) It is no secret that I love Craigieburn and advocate on their behalf, so my adjournment is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety and the action I seek concerns the increasing amount of traffic and congestion suffered by my constituents in Craigieburn. The Craigieburn station car park on Interlink Drive was a long overdue addition for my community, who are consistently forced to wait for basic traffic infrastructure like car parks thanks to a very shoddy and delayed planning process. To make matters worse, when combined with increased traffic flowing from the Hume Highway and Hume Freeway on to Craigieburn via Craigieburn Road East, this has resulted in a serious bottleneck and significant congestion, particularly during peak periods. The situation is being further worsened by increased traffic along Craigieburn Road East, driven by expanding housing estates around Wollert, which is one of the fastest growing suburbs in all of Melbourne, with more vehicles funnelling into Craigieburn via the roundabout at the intersection on Interlink Drive and Craigieburn Road East. A constituent who has written to me says that he sees many dangerous incidents as well as close to a kilometre of traffic snaking back to the rail overpass bridge on the Hume. This is dangerous; it is unacceptable. But it is what is happening under the Labor government, who are happy to take the tax revenue from the new homes of course – the growth areas infrastructure contribution money, the stamp duty, the windfall – but refuse to spend it where it is actually collected.

The action I seek from the minister is to urgently investigate what traffic management, safety upgrades and general improvements can be made to the roads around Craigieburn railway station so my long-suffering constituents, who are desperately neglected by this government, have the ability after a long commute to get home sooner to their families. This is quite important. It is a traffic bottleneck every day around Craigieburn station and around Interlink Drive. My communities, as they are growing, need that urgent attention, particularly Craigieburn, which is I think the epicentre of all growth issues in Melbourne. Again, the government is happy to see all the tax and stamp duty revenue come in. They will spend it on a big \$34 billion project in the eastern suburbs but will not actually deliver for the good people of the northern suburbs, which is what I am asking the government to do.

Blackburn activity centre

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (19:17): (2384) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Planning. It revolves around the current consultation on the Blackburn activity centre. I think there is an area of grey that would be very useful for you to clarify. We have been given building heights, according to the literature that has come out, of six, eight, 10, 12 and 16 storeys in the suburban area. But each time the actual diagrams are ambiguous. On the same bit of colour coding it will say 'up to four storeys' but then will say in brackets underneath 'up to six storeys on large plots'. Immediately the community are confused: is it four or is it six et cetera? But we also had the shocking example this week of the apartment building in Brunswick which was granted extra height on the proviso that it was providing 80 per cent affordable housing. The planning minister overruled the local heights and approved a higher height on the basis of that affordable housing, and now that developer is seeking to have all the affordable housing struck out. None of it will be affordable housing, but of course the extra height will still be there. In the case of Blackburn could you please clarify in explicit language – no beating around the bush: while you have specified a maximum height of 16 storeys for certain sections of the Blackburn activity centre and 12 in others and 10 in others, is that an absolute maximum, or do you have discretion to increase the height under certain circumstances? Because if that is true, you have not disclosed that in the consultation documents that people are currently consulting on. I think it would be fair, I think it would be transparent and I think it is appropriate that you clarify that explicitly.

Health system

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (19:20): (2385) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health. The action I seek is for the minister to explain when the government will release

a new, long-term digital health strategy that ensures hospitals, clinicians and patients are supported by a modern, connected and efficient health system. Victoria's health system is under enormous pressure, as we all know. You have heard me talk about it so many times. Emergency departments are overflowing. Elective surgery waiting lists remain far too high, and clinicians across the system are telling us they are being asked to do more with less. In a modern health system, digital infrastructure should be one of the most powerful tools we have to improve patient care and reduce pressure on hospitals. Digital systems should allow doctors and nurses to access patient information instantly, reduce duplication of tests, support virtual care and improve communication and coordination between hospitals, community health services and primary care. But when we look at Victoria's digital planning for health, we draw a blank. The government's digital health road map was trotted out as the panacea for a world of woes back in 2021, but the road map was time stamped from 2021 to 2025, so that is last year. It was intended to improve digital maturity across the health system – things like electronic patient records, better data sharing and digital care models. But it is 2026 and the road map is now a roadblock. At this stage there is no publicly released successor strategy that sets out how Victoria will digitally transform the health system over the next decade. That means Victoria, a state spending more than \$30 billion a year on health, is past the end of its digital health road map without a clear plan for what comes next.

At a time when digital transformation and AI are redefining health care, what we see is a fragmented patchwork of hospital IT systems that often struggle to communicate with one another. Even the government's own integration projects rely on stitching together multiple platforms through exchange layers rather than building a truly unified system. You do not see this happening in other states in this country. This is unique to Victoria – and no surprises, they have just stuffed it up again. Without a long-term strategy, health services are left investing in their own systems, often with technologies that do not talk to each other. That fragmentation creates inefficiencies, wastes resources and ultimately affects patient care. At a time when every hospital bed and every minute of clinician time matters, we should be doing everything possible to ensure that the system is connected, efficient and working as one. Other jurisdictions, as I said, are moving ahead with long-term digital health strategies and workforce plans. Victoria should not be falling behind. Digital reform cannot be an afterthought. It requires leadership, coordination and a clear long-term plan. Clearly in Victoria we do not have that with the Allan Labor government.

Shopping centre crime

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (19:23): (2386) I rise to raise an adjournment matter this evening for the Minister for Police, and it is in relation to Operation Pulse. The action that I am seeking is an update from the minister on how this very successful operation has unfolded in my electorate of the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region, particularly with regard to Fountain Gate shopping centre, where I have had fantastic feedback from locals about the success of this operation. I have heard directly from retail staff at Fountain Gate and at other shopping centres across Melbourne, including some former delegates of mine from my time as a union official, who have told me about the difference that the presence of PSOs and extra police in these shopping centres has made to their sense of security and to their colleagues' sense of security. We also know from the statistics that retail crime has significantly reduced at the centres at which Operation Pulse has been rolled out. Certainly from talking to constituents, including those at the Berwick Show just last weekend, they know as well what a difference that has made for many of my constituents just going to the shops, going to the movies or going for a bite to eat at Fountain Gate.

Coupled with the various other reforms, including workplace protection orders and tougher penalties for those who assault or violently abuse retail workers; coupled indeed with early intervention such as the violence reduction unit, which this government is investing in even if the Liberals want to cut it; and coupled with tougher bail and sentencing laws, this is all part of the package of making retail workplaces safer.

Members interjecting.

Michael GALEA: Whilst those opposite may wish to argue from the sidelines and talk about what they want to cut, this is a government that is investing, with Australia's largest investment in any police force of any state or territory being made in the state of Victoria. This is something that you can do through Operation Pulse, making our retail workplaces safer. I would welcome an update and breakdown from the minister of exactly how this operation has made a difference for my constituents in the south-east, particularly in relation to Fountain Gate.

Health system

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) incorporated the following (2387):

My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, and the action I seek is for the Minister to advise what is being done to ensure that Victoria's health system has a culture that takes mandatory reporting obligations seriously.

This week we celebrate International Women's Day.

The theme 'balance the scales' is a promise that every woman and girl, regardless of background or identity, should be safe, heard, and free to shape their own lives. Unfortunately, we still face barriers to fulfilling this promise, while discriminatory laws, policies and practices persist.

In women's healthcare, this government has taken meaningful steps to recognise and respond to how these barriers prevent safe access.

Australia's first ever inquiry into Women's Pain shone a light onto what many of us have already known.

We are left to suffer with pain for far too long because our healthcare needs are dismissed, disrespected or we receive inadequate treatment, leading to distrust in the system.

Part of the call for change coming out of this inquiry was that women want to be treated with empathy and respect and empowered to make informed decisions about their health.

Disturbing allegations about surgical misconduct at a Melbourne private hospital have again shone a light on the difficulties in answering this call.

Reports are that a surgeon removed tissue and organs from young women for "severe" endometriosis when pathology showed they had little or no trace of the disease – leaving some in pain and with compromised fertility.

Women should feel confident about their treatment. These allegations dismantle this confidence.

It is particularly concerning that despite mandatory reporting obligations reports suggest it took three years since the first complaints to hospital management for them to notify AHPRA and that concerned nurses were told to write to the hospital's legal department if they wanted support from the hospital.

These reports are incredibly distressing – it should not have taken so long for these concerns to be escalated.

I have endometriosis, many of my dear friends have endometriosis. You suffer from so much pain and the least you deserve is a medical system that you can trust.

So, I ask, will the Minister advise what is being done to ensure that Victoria's health system has a culture that takes mandatory reporting obligations seriously?

Responses

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (19:25): This evening there were 4912 adjournment items, and they will be referred to the relevant ministers for response! There were a number of matters which did come under the portfolio of housing, so I will acquit them this evening.

At the outset I want to confirm to Mr Berger his commitment to ensuring that towers residents who are part of relocations will continue to be consulted, to be engaged, as part of the allocation of relocations officers, through support with information through information hubs; a survey which was provided from last week to residents; the way in which we are having family and friends sessions; and the Hand in Hand program, which is about making sure that residents can hear from people who have already relocated as part of previous towers redevelopment processes and settled in new homes. This is alongside making sure that people have information which is accurate and providing them with a measure of comfort about the things that will remain the same, including that rental settings will not

be changed as a consequence of relocation; that people will have a right of return to the redeveloped area once it is completed; or that people will be able to stay in the areas to which they relocate, should they so wish.

There is a dedicated relocations team led by Peter Beaumont that is making sure that people have access to information around identifying the priorities, whether it is staying close to your church, your medical centre, early childhood education or your job. And for older people this is about being within walking distance of the sorts of things that are the most important, given that driving is often a challenge. There will be no relocations under this program until July this year, and they will continue to flow from July until the beginning of 2028. It is a slow process, because it needs to be done thoroughly and carefully, and it needs to be guided by the views of residents, including as those views and perspectives and priorities may change about where they want to live. So thank you, Mr Berger, for the ongoing commitment that you have demonstrated. It has been really wonderful to attend all seven of the towers as part of the most recent tranche of announcements, announced at the end of January, to hear from residents about the things that are most important to them and to make sure that as we progress with this work we are doing so in a careful, safe and inclusive way.

I want to say thank you to Mr McGowan for his very, very pithy matter, seeking some information about housing across part of the region that he represents in this place. I am very happy to provide some information to him. He is not here at the moment, so perhaps acquitting that in writing might be the best way to go.

Finally, we come to Ms Lovell's adjournment, and this matter has been a really important part of delivering on a record investment across housing, whether it is the capital builds that we have got and that record funding delivered as part of the Big Housing Build, the Regional Housing Fund, the Social Housing Growth Fund or a range of capital programs that have totalled between \$8 billion and \$9 billion, amounting to between 16,000 and 17,000 new social housing homes, alongside a record investment in homelessness services, with around \$300 million allocated to people as part of a range of programs. This sits alongside intensive support and engagement for people in vulnerable cohorts, whether that is the record number of young people who are homeless or rough sleeping because of family violence, or older women who are victim-survivors of coercive control, financial instability or family violence themselves. I spoke earlier in this place and will continue to speak about the importance of supporting people right across the state, whether it is First Nations housing or whether it is housing for older people, women and children, young families or young people with complex needs.

The Education First Youth Foyer system has actually been part of delivering on the youth housing capital grants program. That is a \$50 million allocation, with 10 new sites pegged for over 130 young people across Victoria. Six of those youth foyers are already operating, with four due for completion in 2027. It has been wonderful to be able to go to these Education First Youth Foyers and to see the difference that they are making to the young people who live in them for up to two years. What we are determined to do is make sure that we are providing people with more than just housing, so there is wraparound support to help people to stay in education, gain independence and build a better future, and it is about combining time spent in leisure activities alongside study and work and also planning for long-term stable housing and accommodation.

We have done partnerships with a range of organisations. When I was, for example, at Wodonga, that included a partnership with Beyond Housing, Wodonga TAFE, Junction Support Services and the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and that is a really wonderful space which provides I think it is 40 fully self-contained studio apartments. There is also a really wonderful communal kitchen and open space for people to share, and it is about making and finding connections that then provide young people with a pathway through to their own identity, their own confidence and their own potential. We will continue to do that work because we know that it shifts the dial, and we also know that record investment across rural and regional Victoria into social housing is making a really important difference. It is also about, again, making sure that as we equip the entire state to manage the challenges of housing and homelessness and rough sleeping –

Wendy Lovell interjected.

Harriet SHING: Ms Lovell, I note your interjections about a specific geographic location. I just remember it was not too long ago, Ms Lovell, that you were saying that kids should not be going to Brighton because they could not afford sneakers and iPods. Again, let us just talk about the entire state, shall we? It does not serve your purposes to go down a rabbit hole.

Again, we have had a record amount of funding delivered to housing. This is housing funding which, again, the Liberal Party had indicated it would cut. Ten billion dollars was going to be cut under the Housing Australia Future Fund. The Liberals have indicated, as part of \$11.1 billion in cuts, that programs and frontline services, including capital upgrades, will no longer be provided should the government change in November. This is a very real set of wake-up calls for people who will not have access to programs, supports and services, who will not have access to the sorts of wraparound supports and care that they deserve and who will not have access to secure and stable housing to meet their needs now and into the future. I would urge the coalition–One Nation partnership to get on board with the work we are doing to deliver safe and stable accommodation to people in need. I would urge them to stop blocking and opposing the delivery of housing, which again, Ms Lovell, you have done on so many occasions with your voting record in this place. You have blocked and opposed and objected to housing being delivered for people in some of the most vulnerable circumstances imaginable. The doublespeak is not lost on this government, but actions speak louder than words, and the work that we have done has delivered a record amount of housing: 12,000 homes as part of the Big Housing Build, plus an additional 1300 homes as part of the Regional Housing Fund and that regional package. We will continue that work to deliver on education youth foyers. You may have cut funding when you were in government to housing and homelessness programs. You may have turned your back on people who were in extreme vulnerability, often living with trauma that required intensive wraparound support. That is not what we do. We do not cut, we invest in the services and supports that people need.

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, I am sorry to have to do this – we all want to go home – but the minister is just misleading the house. I mean, she is just –

Harriet Shing interjected.

Georgie Crozier: I said that to Ms Lovell: ‘Why don’t you move a motion against the minister with her outrageous comments that she’s making?’ They are not true and you know it. Desist from it, Minister, and move on.

The PRESIDENT: Making accusations about a member misleading the house is an opportunity to put a motion on the notice paper regarding that.

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Harriet SHING: Sorry, I ask you to withdraw that.

Georgie Crozier: I said, ‘You all lie.’

Harriet SHING: No, before that.

Georgie Crozier: I said, ‘You all lie. You’re shocking.’

Harriet SHING: As I have indicated to the house, and as I will continue to indicate to you, Ms Lovell, we will not turn our backs on vulnerable Victorians. We will keep making record investment. You keep cutting and you keep denying people the services that they need. We know that secure, stable and accessible housing, alongside practical cost-of-living assistance and alongside the work to help people into jobs and education, with the relevant health care that they need to reach their full potential, is of essential importance. We are delivering for all Victorians, Ms Lovell. It is a shame that you cannot see that and have it reflected in the sorts of opportunities that we are delivering to young people every single day, including right across your electorate. I am looking forward to being

ADJOURNMENT

780

Legislative Council

Wednesday 4 March 2026

able to see further announcements being made as part of the budgetary process, which goes directly to the heart of your adjournment and the first sentence of it.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 7:35 pm.