Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Tuesday 11 August 2026

By authority of the Victorian Government Printer

Members of the Legislative Council

60th Parliament

President

Shaun Leane

Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Lizzie Blandthorn

Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

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, Gaelle	Northern Victoria	Nat	Mulholland, Evan	Northern Metropolitan	Lib
Copsey, Katherine	Southern Metropolitan	Greens	Payne, Rachel	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LCV
Crozier, Georgie	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Puglielli, Aiv	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Greens
Davis, David	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Purcell, Georgie	Northern Victoria	AJP
Deeming, Moira[2]	Western Metropolitan	FFV	Ratnam, Samantha[5]	Northern Metropolitan	Greens
Erdogan, Enver	Northern Metropolitan	ALP	Shing, Harriet	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Ermacora, Jacinta	Western Victoria	ALP	Somyurek, Adem[6]	Northern Metropolitan	Ind
Ettershank, David	Western Metropolitan	LCV	Stitt, Ingrid	Western Metropolitan	ALP
Galea, Michael	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Symes, Jaclyn	Northern Victoria	ALP
Gray-Barberio, Anasina[3]	Northern Metropolitan	Greens	Tarlamis, Lee	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Heath, Renee	Eastern Victoria	Lib	Terpstra, Sonja	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Hermans, Ann-Marie	South-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Tierney, Gayle	Western Victoria	ALP
Leane, Shaun	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Tyrrell, Rikkie-Lee[8]	Northern Victoria	ON
Limbrick, David[4]	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Watt, Sheena	Northern Metropolitan	ALP
Lovell, Wendy	Northern Victoria	Lib	Welch, Richard[7]	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib

[1] Resigned 7 Dec 2023
[2] Lib from 26 Nov 2022 until 28 Mar 2023;
IndLib from 28 Mar 2023 until 27 Dec 2024;
Lib from 27 Dec 2024 until 28 Jul 2026;
Ind from 28 Jul 2026 until 6 Sep 2026
[3] Appointed 14 Nov 2024
[4] LDP until 26 Jul 2023
[5] Resigned 8 Nov 2024
[6] DLP until 25 Mar 2024
[7] Appointed 7 Feb 2024
[8] PHON until 3 Aug 2026

Party abbreviations

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

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Tuesday 11 August 2026

The PRESIDENT (Shaun Leane) took the chair at 12:03 pm, read the prayer and made an Acknowledgement of Country.

Condolences

Hon John Dyson Harrowfield

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:04): I move:

> That this house expresses its sincere sorrow at the death on 1 July 2026 of the Honourable John Dyson Harrowfield and places on record its acknowledgement of the valuable services rendered by him to the Parliament and the people of Victoria as a member of the Legislative Assembly for the electoral district of Mitcham from 1982 to 1992 and as Minister for Small Business from 1991 to 1992 and Minister for Finance in 1992.

On behalf of the government I would like to sincerely acknowledge the service of Mr Harrowfield to his community in the Mitcham electorate, having been a local member for 10 years after being elected at just 29 years of age. Prior to serving in Parliament Mr Harrowfield worked as an accountant and an economics tutor. I would also like to acknowledge Mr Harrowfield's contribution to the Labor government in serving as a minister in the Kirner government. He showed strong support for small business, the financial rights of the elderly and the plight of first home buyers. I extend my condolences on behalf of the government to his family and friends and to all who knew him.

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:05): John Dyson Harrowfield was a man whose sharp intellect was always guided by deep and genuine warmth; he possessed a rare knack for bringing both economic clarity and a sense of humour into every room. Long before he ever walked these corridors John was a person defined by an innate sense of fairness, a quiet humility and a generous spirit that drew people to him. John, it was said, was a fiercely loyal friend, an invaluable sounding-board and a colleague who treated everyone from premiers to shopkeepers with the same respect – the kind of person who preferred a quiet substantial conversation over a loud political argument – and his natural decency left a lasting impression.

Born on 19 February 1953 in Melbourne, John was first elected to the Victorian Legislative Assembly as the member for Mitcham at the state election held on 3 April 1982. He brought that deeply ingrained belief in social fairness straight to Spring Street. He also brought something quite rare for a new politician: a bachelor of commerce from the University of Melbourne and a background as an economics tutor. As anyone who has ever tried to decipher a state budget knows, economists are famously defined as people who look at something that works perfectly well in practice and wonder if it could possibly work in theory. But John was different. He stepped out of the university lecture theatre and into public life because he firmly believed that economic theory had a fundamental duty to look after real people. His insights were and remain even now a thoughtful reflection upon realpolitik. As he adroitly observed during his first speech in this building:

> It is an appalling indictment of the way in which the economy of Victoria has operated for so long that in all but a few cases there is no independent cost benefit analysis of important capital works projects.

John's core political philosophy, I think it is fair to say, was rooted in a classic Australian tradition: the belief that a fair day's work deserves a fair day's pay and that a community is ultimately judged by how it supports its everyday working families. This was not just a political talking point for John; it was a value system forged during his early days serving as the president of the Blackburn North branch of the Labor Party in the mid to late 1970s. John knew our local community inside and out, which is why the people of the eastern suburbs put their trust in him during the historic 1982 election. In John's inaugural address to this Parliament on 26 May 1982 he laid down a definitive blueprint for

his public life. He stood up in the other place and famously reminded his fellow members that economic policy should never be reduced to cold, unfeeling columns of numbers. As a trained accountant he would have known how to balance a ledger, but as a true representative he argued that the ultimate measure of any state budget was its direct, tangible impact on human lives, family stability and the welfare of ordinary citizens. He believed that numbers should serve the people, not the other way around.

John used his very first parliamentary speech to advocate for public education, a system he knew intimately and defended fiercely. Like me, John had been educated entirely within the Victorian state school system. John championed the idea that every single child in Victoria deserved access to high-quality schooling regardless of their background, their family's wealth or their postcode. For John education was a great equaliser, the ultimate tool to give every young person a fair go in life. He did not just talk about education from a distance; throughout his career he actively worked to bridge the gap between academic institutions and local communities, later helping to bring grassroots community representation directly onto regional university councils.

John also used his inaugural speech to shine a spotlight on the rapid growth of what were then known as Melbourne's outer-eastern suburbs. In the early 1980s places like Mitcham, Nunawading, Donvale, Blackburn and Vermont were booming with young families, and John made it his mission to ensure that infrastructure kept pace with that growth. Just like today, the cost of living and housing affordability loomed large over families and the household budget, and John advanced the cause of our locals, saying:

> … those who are buying homes, particularly first homes, those who are struggling to find rental accommodation and those who have perhaps paid for their homes but are now struggling in the face of increasing rate bills and energy costs to maintain those homes.

It was in this context that John called for cost relief from the then State Electricity Commission and its anti-family $18 quarterly supply charge, an impost John described as 'cynical' and hitting hardest 'people on low incomes and those who can least afford it'. He fought for better public transport, upgraded roads and improved community health care for his constituents, particularly the aged.

John loved his electorate and deeply understood that the true lifeblood of suburban neighbourhoods was not giant, faceless corporations but the local traders and family-run shops and the vibrant shopping strips. It was this grassroots philosophy that came full circle nearly a decade later. On 15 April 1991 his dedication was recognised when he was promoted to the frontbench as Minister for Small Business. Those who are familiar with those days and those opposite in those days – particularly the shadow minister at that time, who was Vin Heffernan – would know that that was no small undertaking. This was a portfolio where he could finally put his early ideas about supporting local livelihoods and protecting family enterprises into absolute statewide practice. He understood even during those difficult, indeed tumultuous, days for the Labor Party that small businesses were the actual engine room of the economy.

His considerable talents quickly led to further executive responsibility. On 20 January 1992 John was appointed to the position of Minister for Finance. In this role his longstanding call for absolute transparency and fiscal responsibility became his primary executive mission. Perhaps the state of Victoria's finances may have been different – in better shape – had John's ascension come sooner. It is written that those who worked alongside him in Parliament remember him as an evidence-based reformer who always insisted on substance over political style. He was a man who expected his colleagues and public servants to actually understand the intricacies of an issue before making a decision, which as you can imagine, occasionally sent a few minor shockwaves through the public service and I guess his colleagues too. Yet I understand his calm, his intellectual rigour and his fundamental fairness won him respect across political divides, proving that a commitment to social equity and a desire for financial discipline could comfortably live in the same mind.

John served as finance minister until 3 October 1992, when shifting political tides, just like the ones which had delivered him to this place a decade earlier, saw him lose his seat in the 1992 state election tsunami. While losing an election is part of the brutal reality of politics, John's departure from Parliament did not signal an end to his contribution to the state he loved. For the next three decades John worked productively as a dedicated public policy researcher and consultant, continuing to guide and advise future generations with data, insight and experience. John remained actively engaged with his former colleagues, earning a reputation within the Victorian Parliamentary Former Members Association as a fiercely loyal friend and a fair-minded professional who never lost his passion for good policy.

John gave his sharp mind to the economy of our state and his big heart to the people of Victoria and in particular to the people I now share in his shadow locally. Following his passing on 1 July 2026 we remember him not just for the titles he held but for the integrity he maintained throughout his entire life and his service to our community. To his family – his brothers Ian and Barry; his nephews and nieces Mathew, Emma, Michael, Sally and Jane; his cousins Greg, John, Lance, Julie and Allen – and extended loved ones we offer our deepest sympathies and our immense gratitude for sharing him with us. We thank John for his outstanding service; we honour his enduring legacy; and we will miss his wisdom, his warmth and his wit. May he rest in peace.

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

The PRESIDENT: As a further mark of respect the house will suspend for 1 hour.

Sitting suspended 12:16 pm until 1:19 pm.

Bills

Dangerous Goods Transport Bill 2026

Education and Training Reform Amendment Bill 2026

Health Legislation Amendment (Regulatory Reform) Bill 2026

Occupational Health and Safety Amendment (Dangerous Goods) Bill 2026

Royal assent

The PRESIDENT (13:19): I have a message from the Governor, dated 4 August:

> The Governor informs the Legislative Council that she has, on this day, given the Royal Assent to the under-mentioned Acts of the present Session presented to her by the Clerk of the Parliaments:
>
> **24/2026** Dangerous Goods Transport Act 2026
>
> **25/2026** Education and Training Reform Amendment Act 2026
>
> **26/2026** Health Legislation Amendment (Regulatory Reform) Act 2026
>
> **27/2026** Occupational Health and Safety Amendment (Dangerous Goods) Act 2026

Members

Ministry

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (13:20): I wish to advise the house that there have been changes to the government's ministries and the representing ministers in each chamber as well as the parliamentary secretaries. As has become the usual practice in the chamber, unless people would like me to read those out, I am happy just to have them circulated.

Members interjecting.

Jaclyn SYMES: President, with the house's indulgence, in relation to the portfolios, I have energy and resources, climate action, environment and the State Electricity Commission; Minister Blandthorn has children and disability; Minister Stitt has health, mental health and ambulance services, as well as being the Special Minister of State; and Minister Erdogan has finance, government services, and casino, gaming and liquor regulation.

Melina Bath: On a point of order, President, as the outdoor recreation minister's portfolio has vanished and the general orders of 7 August state that the Game Management Authority Act 2014 is jointly administered by the Minister for Environment and the Minister for Agriculture, could the minister please inform this house who is responsible and who would answer questions?

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Bath, please direct any questions in relation to the former outdoor recreation portfolio to the Minister for Environment. The general order is being updated as we speak.

Nick McGowan: On a point of order, President, I understand that under the act it actually defers to the Minister for Ports and Freight. Is that not correct?

Jaclyn SYMES: As I indicated, for the former portfolio, it would be best to ask me in my capacity as Minister for Environment given that the general order is being updated. For the avoidance of doubt, anybody is welcome on related matters to come to the Leader of the Government, and I will facilitate answers.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Parkville Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing Service

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (13:23): (1397) My question is to the Minister for Mental Health. Minister, it has been reported today that the Parkville Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing Service is in crisis, amid claims of violence, drug use and patient deaths in its first year of operation. It was also reported that the chief executive lives in Queensland and only attends onsite a few days a month. So I ask: how many days this year has the Brisbane-based CEO worked from the Parkville premises?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (13:23): I thank Ms Crozier for her question. At the outset, I want to reiterate our government's commitment when it comes to youth mental health services in Victoria and how we know that in fact 75 per cent of diagnosable mental health illnesses are presenting before people turn 25 years of age. So it is incredibly important that we continue to invest in youth mental health services. Of course PYMHWS is a health service that was created to support the west and north-west corridors in Melbourne. I have recently actually appointed a new chair to the board of PYMHWS, a very experienced health service chair who has hit the ground running. I have made my expectations very clear to her about the way in which the CEO's work arrangements ought to occur. Our government has created PYMHWS, and it is critical for everyone, not only in that service but across the community, that people who use the PYMHWS receive the best possible care. I am confident that the new chair has a very strong focus on the leadership requirements of the service and also of the clinical governance arrangements that are in place.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (13:25): I note that the minister failed to answer my question. Eminent youth mental health expert Professor Patrick McGorry has raised his concerns, telling the minister:

> There are serious concerns that clinical care is being affected and that an escalation in serious incidents involving … clients is creating significant risk for …patients and staff …
>
> … clinical practice guidelines are no longer being consistently followed. Patients are being discharged earlier than guidelines mandate and fidelity to evidence-based treatments is declining.

He said the 'absentee model of management' was a contributing factor. It is reported that the minister has not even bothered to respond. So I ask: Minister, what are you doing to improve care for patients and staff safety at this service, which is central to Professor McGorry's concerns?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (13:25): I thank Ms Crozier for her supplementary question. Can I indicate that I have a deep respect for Professor McGorry. He is an eminent expert in youth mental health in our state and indeed an Australian of the Year. He has a deep understanding of mental health priorities.

Members interjecting.

Ingrid STITT: I was about to go on to say, Ms Crozier, that I regularly engage with Professor McGorry. He sits on the ministerial advisory committee into our mental health reforms. I meet with him regularly. I met with him recently about these very issues. My department has been following up the PYMHWS in regard to the concerns that Pat McGorry has raised. In this I am very clear: both Professor McGorry and I share a very important principle here that it is incredibly important that the PYMHWS provides high-quality care to young people across the west and north-west.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (13:27): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Avian influenza

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (13:27): (1398) My question is to the Minister for Environment, and it is in regard to the response to the long-feared arrival of H5 bird flu in Victoria. I would like to ask the minister to outline how the government is seeking to minimise the death toll this virus poses to our wildlife and in particular if the minister is aware of whether the proposed job cuts at Zoos Victoria still pose a threat to the ability of the marine response unit to respond to sick wildlife and contain the spread of this massive biosecurity risk.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (13:27): Ms Copsey, I thank you for your question. At the outset I hope that members were able to take up the opportunity to be briefed formally yesterday by the chief vet, and if they were unable to do so, we are happy to rearrange some briefings so they are able to speak to Graeme Cooke in his capacity in that important role. He brings a wealth of experience, along with other experts that have been able to be prepared for the inevitable arrival of bird flu H5 to Australia, given the experience and connections across the rest of the world.

Of course we know that people are concerned about it. I am working closely with my colleague Minister Settle in her capacity as Minister for Agriculture. As H5 has been detected – and we know that it is moving across – we have ground teams, aerial surveillance, increased field operations and strengthened response capability. I have been working closely with the Commonwealth since coming into the role, getting briefed on the preparedness, and I have asked them to help secure urgent access to vaccines, particularly in order to better prepare for the protection of the little penguins on Phillip Island, and I am in discussions around any other species that may be appropriate in that regard. Today the Commonwealth have announced that they are beginning to roll out vaccinations to the state. That is a huge step forward, and I will have more to say on that in the coming days. We have been able to also provide more support for our wildlife carers, and I have announced some grants for Wildlife Victoria and wildlife organisations as well as regular information, webinars and PPE provisions so that they are well equipped to deal with any instances of unwell birds in particular.

In relation to your question on zoos, they are working to monitor and limit the spread of H5 to help manage the risk for animals across the zoos that we have in our state. They are connected in with other

zoos in the nation. Again, they are well connected, with international connections and having learned from experiences in other countries. In preparation for H5, DEECA have worked with Zoos Victoria experts and analysed data to identify Victorian species at increased risk of extinction should they be exposed to H5 bird flu. A lot of that has been focused on the orange-bellied parrot, the plains-wanderer, the helmeted honeyeater and the regent honeyeater.

Ms Copsey, this is an emerging issue. We are well prepared, and there will be information. Anything that comes to my attention I am very keen to make sure is in the public domain as quickly as possible. There is a lot of interest and concern, and I want to make sure people are as informed as possible. Again, if you were not able to attend the briefing yesterday with Graeme Cooke, I will make sure that we put another one on very soon.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (13:30): Thank you, Minister, for your response. Minister, will the Carroll Labor government undermine the bird flu containment response by leaving the door open to a duck-shooting season in March, with all of the disruption of habitat, likely close contact with infected animals and dispersal of native birds across the state that that entails, or will you finally act on the native bird hunting inquiry recommendation to ban duck shooting in Victoria?

The PRESIDENT: I am not too sure how that links with the substantive question and the answer, but I will call the minister to answer as she sees fit.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (13:31): Ms Copsey, you have managed to fit about four questions into your questions today. I have no doubt that the H5 outbreak has the potential to be devastating to a number of bird populations in particular, but I am not in a position to be pre-empting expert advice or speculating about future management decisions in relation to your supplementary question, which was loosely connected to your first question. I am very happy to continue this conversation as this very serious issue evolves.

The PRESIDENT: Before I call the minister, I acknowledge in the gallery former member of Parliament and minister Heidi Victoria.

Ministers statements: hospital workplace safety

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (13:32): Everyone deserves to feel safe at work. This is as true if you are in a complex, sensitive setting like a hospital as it is for any other workplace, and this government will always back our dedicated health workers and work with them on evidence-based solutions. I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the incredible health workers across the state, who dedicate their working lives to supporting their communities.

The Victorian government has been proud to invest more than $47 million in initiatives and training to prevent and respond to occupational violence and aggression since 2015. This work has included de-escalation training and the safe wards model, which is designed to enhance safety by creating a therapeutic environment in health settings. The Department of Health and Safer Care Victoria also provide guidance and resources to support health services, and we have also acted to ensure we can comprehensively close the loops when it comes to laws to ensure emergency workers are adequately protected while at work, including our paramedics.

We know, however, that there is more that we need to do, and central to that work is consulting with and listening to our health services and our workforce – the ones that are on the front line. I was proud earlier this year with Ms Shing to host a round table with experts from right across our health services, our worker representatives and our frontline workers. This is important. It is complex work and it is continuing, and I look forward to continuing to drive progress in partnership with our health system. Our diverse health system needs and deserves tailored solutions, and we are taking that work seriously, which cannot be said about those opposite, who just want to recycle failed previous policies.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (13:34): (1399) I have a question for the Minister for Mental Health, and it is a serious one. The Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission's recent status update into Victoria's mental health reforms was drastically censored before publication: the judging criteria were altered, progress on reforms was doubled from the original report, the most critical findings were removed and ratings were changed to favour the government's position. Minister, you received this report in December 2025. The report was released publicly on 24 June 2026, six months later. At least 75 of the original 270 status ratings suddenly improved in the doctored final version. Did you or your office direct these changes?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (13:35): I thank Ms Crozier for her question, because it gives me an opportunity to actually point out that these claims are wrong. The commission, as an independent statutory entity, is responsible for its own report, findings and assessments, including decisions about how that content is published, including decisions about the content and publication. The Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission is an important independent statutory authority that plays an important role in providing support right across the mental health and wellbeing system.

The facts of this matter are that an early draft of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission's report was provided to my department at the end of 2025. The department worked with the commission and provided factual and technical feedback, and this occurred between December 2025 and May 2026. That was simply to ensure that the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission had access to the most available and up-to-date information about our mental health system to inform its independent assessment.

To go directly to the assertions that are contained within Ms Crozier question, an embargoed copy of the final report was provided to my department on 23 June 2026 and shared with my office on 24 June 2026. I take my role very, very seriously, and the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, as an independent statutory authority, not only have the right to hold the government to account on the reforms that we are driving in the mental health system here in Victoria but have the right to publish their own assessment of that work.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (13:37): I am most interested in the minister's response, even though it did not answer the question. Minister, as you would be aware, many of the strongest concerns raised in the report, such as the impact of Labor's budget cuts, a lack of evidence supporting government claims contained in the report and refusals of stakeholders to work with the Department of Health, were conveniently omitted from the publicly released version. Why?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (13:37): I completely reject the assertions that are contained in Ms Crozier's questions. As a government, we are very committed to making sure that we continue to invest in mental health reforms. I would point you to the fact that our government introduced a mental health and wellbeing levy in 2022, which has seen investment in our mental health services more than double since 2019, before the royal commission handed down its report.

I want to just emphasise the nonsense that we are hearing from those opposite. The output funding in the mental health portfolio for this year, 2026–27, is over $3 billion. If you look at the Productivity Commission's report into the national agreement on mental health and suicide prevention, you will see that the commission actually calls out that record investment of Victoria.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (13:39): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Custodial health care

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:39): (1400) My question is for the Minister for Corrections, Minister Spence. VACCHO, Victoria's peak Aboriginal health and wellbeing organisation, has been campaigning for better health care for people living in Victoria's prisons. Their Transforming Care in Custody campaign calls for three things: (1) that prison health care be moved to the oversight of the Department of Health for a health-led response, (2) that all prison health care be delivered by a public health provider and (3) that an Aboriginal community controlled organisation led model of care be provided to Aboriginal people in prison. A 2022 report commissioned by the Victorian government described Victoria's approach as 'not working' and 'having devastating, intergenerational impacts on Aboriginal people and communities'. Minister, will you now work with Minister Stitt to transition prison health care to the oversight of the Department of Health and improve health care for people living in prison?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Finance, Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Government Services) (13:40): I thank Ms Payne for her question and her interest in health care in correctional settings. In line with the standing orders, I will pass that question to Minister Spence in the other place for a response.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:40): I thank the minister for referring that one on. The evidence shows that public health institutions deliver better health care to people in custody, including by properly focusing on prevention and more efficient spending. As you may be aware, prison health care in men's prisons has been privately contracted by the Victorian government to GEO Group. In November 2025 the Victorian Ombudsman found that a supervisor at Ravenhall, run by the GEO Group, restricted a man's access to medical help after punching him. GEO is currently under scrutiny for their operations in the US, where they are the largest recipient of private contracts with ICE to run immigration detention centres. Minister, as corrections minister, are you satisfied with the level of health care GEO Group is providing to people in custody in Victoria?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Finance, Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Government Services) (13:41): I thank Ms Payne for her supplementary question. In line with the standing orders, I will seek a written response from the Minister for Corrections in the other place.

Ministers statements: avian influenza

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (13:41): Building on my discussion with Ms Copsey, I would like to update the house on my visit to the state biosecurity operations centre in Attwood. It is an ops centre with a dedicated control centre with the capacity to locate all state operational functions within one site. Response activities are obviously underway, as we were discussing earlier, in relation to the response to the H5N1 bird flu.

This is the control centre where coordination of targeted surveillance and planning for how we can best protect our most vulnerable wildlife is operationalised. We know we cannot stop H5 bird flu, but what we have done, knowing it was coming, is we have invested $130 million since 2023 to strengthen biosecurity preparedness and emergency animal disease capability. Such things as a mobile command centre and a suite of field equipment are ready to be deployed. Agricultural and environmental experts are conducting targeted surveillance, testing, analysing samples, monitoring vulnerable species, identifying high-risk locations and providing information and advice to industry and volunteer organisations. Early reporting does make a real difference. As a community we are asking people if they come across a sick or dead bird or other wildlife to not touch it. Report it to the emergency animal disease hotline. That number is 1800 675 888.

I would like to extend my appreciation for the time that Charlotte, Darrin, Graeme and Julie at Attwood took to take me through the facility and give me insight into their critical work. There are a lot of

agricultural experts and Agriculture Victoria staff out there, as well as those from the environment portfolio. There are a lot of people that are spending countless hours and working tirelessly to best manage and care for both our native wildlife and other animals from the ag portfolio.

Electricity infrastructure

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:43): (1401) My question is to the Minister for Energy and Resources. Minister, will you rescind the 12 $814 fines issued last week to farmers in Ripon for refusing access to their land, even when Wallaloo East farmer Trent Carter had previously advised the department he was lambing and so entry would be unsuitable on that date?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (13:43): Mr Davis, thank you for your question. It is not within my remit as the minister for energy to be able to rescind a fine; I think you might appreciate that. But in the event of the fines that you have referred to, I have had some conversations with representatives of people that have received fines, and I am happy to have ongoing conversations with them. There is an approved process in relation to being able to appeal your fine or to demonstrate whether there were exceptional circumstances or perhaps that a fine was issued in error. If you have got any examples, then I am more than happy to have a look at those as I have given others that commitment already.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:44): That is sad news that the minister will not rescind those fines, although clearly her department has the power to do so.

Members interjecting.

David DAVIS: Her department does have the power to do so. They are issued on the department's push. A supplementary here: will the minister stop any further fines being issued under her watch under these extraordinary new laws?

The PRESIDENT: The minister to respond as she sees fit, seeing that this is not under her remit.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (13:45): It is an extraordinary position that you think that you make the laws. This Parliament made the laws, and I do not have the capacity to see when they should and should not apply. The fact that you think, as a member of Parliament, that a minister should not apply the law is actually an indictment on you.

Coming back to the issue that you asked about – it is an important issue, and I respect the fact that it is a contentious issue – there are some issues out there that I have been working through. That is different to the way you characterised your question. I actually expected a much more empathetic question from perhaps Mrs McArthur, who has probably dealt with these people. That was who I was expecting a question from, and I think it would have been done in a more appropriate manner.

Back to the question: VicGrid have been working with landholders since August 2023. They will always prioritise voluntary access agreements with landholders, which typically include payments and compensation for that access. It is about working with landholders within the existing legal framework, which I have no intention of saying should not apply. But when it comes to landholders that have received fines, I am happy to have the discussions. I encourage anyone who believes that they have received an infringement notice in error to seek an internal review.

Offshore wind energy

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:46): (1402) My question is again to the Minister for Energy and Resources. Will the minister tell the chamber on what day this month the offshore wind auction will commence, what day it will close and what financial support will be incorporated as part of the auction?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (13:47): Here in Victoria, we are proudly Australia's offshore wind leader. The auction will go ahead this month as planned, and I will have more to say –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Please, everyone, I cannot hear the minister. All sides of the chamber, please. The minister is trying to answer a question.

Jaclyn SYMES: The auction will go ahead in August as planned. I will have more to say in due course.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, it is a very specific question about what date it will start, what date it will end and what financial support will be put there. The minister has not answered any of those three.

A member interjected.

David Davis: No, she has not.

The PRESIDENT: She was relevant to the question, and –

David Davis: Nothing about the end date, nothing about the financial –

The PRESIDENT: You have asked multiple questions too, but she was relevant to the question.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:48): President, that was a pathetic answer. Minister, if the auction proceeds, will it apply to all areas designated by the Commonwealth government?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (13:48): Mr Davis, as I indicated, the auction will go ahead as planned. I am more than happy, when that process is announced, to provide you greater detail.

Ministers statements: kindergarten funding

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (13:48): I rise to update the house on how the Carroll Labor government is building and expanding hundreds of kindergartens across the state. I recently joined the member for Pascoe Vale in the other place to visit the site of the future Coburg North Primary School kindergarten. This brand new kindergarten will open in 2028 and will have three rooms, delivering 178 new kindergarten places for the local community. Importantly, it will be connected with Coburg North Primary School, which will support children to have a smooth transition to prep and will make drop-off times easier for families.

I am very pleased that this kindergarten is being built on the site of the former Coburg Special Developmental School. Many of us will be familiar with this school and the wonderful education and support that it has provided to students with a disability and their families since 1988. Indeed, as the former member for Pascoe Vale, I was proud to join with the school community back in my first term to advocate for and ultimately deliver more than $22 million in funding to move the school to a brand new site and build modern, fit-for-purpose facilities for these students and staff. Now with the school in a new home, there is a real opportunity to honour the legacy and the important work of Coburg Special Developmental School and build something new in its place: a kindergarten that will serve local children and families for years to come. That is what a Labor government does – backs local families with practical investment that makes a real difference. I remind the house that our government has now delivered more than 100 new and expanded kindergartens on school sites, and we are on track to build more than 30 over the next two years. Children who attend these kindergartens will have access to free kinder, an important cost-of-living initiative, which is now saving families more than $5000 per child across their kinder journey. For families with two or even three children who go

through kindergarten, that is a substantial saving that provides meaningful cost-of-living relief, and now those opposite want to rip that support away and allow kinders to charge fees. Labor is giving families a break. The opposition want to give them a bill.

Outdoor recreation

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (13:51): (1403) My question is to the Minister for Environment. Minister, the Outdoor Recreation Victoria Bill passed this house, the Legislative Council, on 19 June after the government accepted the Liberal and Nationals amendments and argued that the reforms were urgent. Given the government had the opportunity to pass the bill last sitting week in the lower house, why have you still not progressed the legislation and established fishing, hunting and outdoor recreation Victoria?

The PRESIDENT: I will let the minister answer as she sees fit. I am not too sure how she can.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (13:51): Whilst I acknowledge Ms Bath's interest in this matter, the way she has framed her question is that she has literally asked me, as the Minister for Environment, to comment on the operations of the Legislative Assembly. I am just not in a position to answer the question in the way it has been framed, because I do not control government business in the Legislative Assembly.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (13:52): Firstly, Minister, you have just acknowledged that you are the minister covering off on outdoor recreation. You are at the table, you are in cabinet and you are the leader here, and you have a right to respond. Minister, I ask: hunters were promised certainty, but now it appears you are about to renege. As minister, can you guarantee the future of sustainable duck hunting in Victoria?

The PRESIDENT: I do not know if that is relevant to the substantive question or the answer.

Melina Bath: On a point of order, President, the whole position on the outdoor rec bill was about amalgamating two authorities and the GMA going forward, and therefore part of that is duck hunting, so it is entirely relevant to the substantive question.

The PRESIDENT: I do understand all that, Ms Bath, but the response from the minister was that she is not responsible for the dealings of the other chamber, which is a fair answer, so I find it hard to find that a supplementary question. The minister can answer as she sees fit. She might answer the way I have explained it myself.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (13:54): I am going to try and help you out here. The bill is in the Assembly. I do not know, maybe they are doing it now. I do not have advice on their timing. So the fact that you have asked me a –

Members interjecting.

Jaclyn SYMES: President, I renege my offer to be helpful.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Yes, let us do that, because the minister was trying –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Am I some sort of ventriloquist or something? I cannot hear myself. My lips are moving, but it is being projected over there constantly. Anyway, I will let that go.

Data centres

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (13:54): (1404) My question is for the Minister for Environment. Minister, communities far north in the Northern Metro Region and in the west strongly oppose the Victorian Labor government's lack of regulatory approach to the AI data centre boom, with 58 already operating in Victoria. It is clear the social licence around data centres has shifted. It is no longer about investment in digital infrastructure; concerns have moved towards extreme water use, wastewater burdens, high energy consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, air and water pollution, and cumulative impacts on communities. Minister, what specific assessments has the department of environment undertaken to understand the environmental impacts of large-scale data centre developments in Victoria and their proximity to residential areas?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (13:55): I thank Ms Gray-Barberio for her question. Obviously it is a matter of interest to her community. You have put your question to the Minister for Environment. Obviously there are lots of portfolios that intersect, and I think my portfolio of energy is also quite relevant.

At the outset I would acknowledge that data centres in themselves are great for creating long-term jobs. The construction of them creates thousands of jobs in the construction sector and high-end, skilled, high-wage jobs in our tech sector. They are strengthened by local supply chains and support additional indirect jobs and jobs across related industries. We certainly know that it is an investment opportunity for our state, but there is a conversation around how you can facilitate that investment and how you get the benefit of those jobs whilst you are also ensuring that they are in the right place and conscious of the impacts that they can have, whether they are environmental, energy or water, for example.

Importantly, the data centre industry themselves are backing renewables. They know that there is a requirement for social licence to be able to make those investments. Ms Gray-Barberio, Victoria has around 54 data centres at the moment. They use approximately 3 per cent of our power, and that is why in terms of going forward we certainly support and are working closely with the Commonwealth in relation to their policy about data centres bringing their own renewable electricity, and there is legislation in development in relation to that. We want requirements that it be cost-effective and efficient for industry, but helping secure an additional supply of cheap, reliable renewable energy into our grid is a benefit of some of those conversations.

When it comes to the location of data centres, the Minister for Planning has a greater role in relation to ensuring that all of the regulatory requirements and assessments that would be required for any development on Victorian land –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Ms Gray-Barberio is not interjecting yet. She wants to hear the answer.

Jaclyn SYMES: I am more than happy to discuss any individual projects and your concerns directly.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (13:58): Minister, the Greens are calling for a moratorium on all new data centres so that regulation can catch up and necessary environmental assessments can be done. Will you commit to introducing stronger environmental accountability and rigorous safeguards to protect the environment and prevent the irreversible harms of data centre developments? Because, Minister, this is what the drinking water will look like if you continue to approve AI data centres. Right here: this is what is the future right now for communities.

Sonja Terpstra: On a point of order, President, Ms Gray-Barberio is holding up a prop, and it should not be allowed in the chamber.

The PRESIDENT: I will uphold the point of order and ask members to refrain from using props.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (13:59): In relation to the member's concern, our existing planning controls ensure that data centres are sited on existing industrial land and that they pay for the upgrades to the grid. There are other concessions and conversations that have to take place. In relation to some of the matters that you have raised, Ms Gray-Barberio, those are obviously very much at the centre of the conversations we are having with the federal government and the guardrails that we are all working towards, which pick up on the concerns that you have raised, absolutely.

Ministers statements: gambling harm

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Finance, Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Government Services) (13:59): Today I rise to update the house on the Carroll Labor government's ongoing commitment to reducing gambling harm across our state. We know that gambling harm can extend well beyond the individual, affecting families, relationships and communities. That is why, as minister, harm reduction and stronger regulation is a priority for me. We have already introduced and implemented nation-leading reforms – mandatory closure periods from 4 am to 10 am, lower load-up limits, reduced spin rates on new gaming machines – and we have already legislated a ban on static betting advertising within 150 metres of schools, on public transport and on our roads. Our focus is on ensuring a responsible gaming and wagering sector that minimises harm and protects communities, and making sure that the regulation keeps pace.

As part of my update today I am pleased to announce the successful recipients of the gambling harm research grants for 2026, Professor Nerilee Hing and Dr Amy Bestman. Our government is investing $281,000 in two research projects that will investigate the relationship between gambling addiction and family violence over the next two years. The funded research will examine the nature, extent, causes and impacts of economic abuse and other forms of family violence linked to unhealthy forms of gambling. These projects will help us test new approaches, strengthen prevention efforts and deliver better outcomes for Victorians experiencing gambling-related harm. Understanding how harm occurs is the first step to preventing it. These grants form part of the Carroll Labor government's ongoing commitment to tackling gambling harm and ensuring our policies, programs and services are informed by the latest evidence.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (14:01): Minister Erdogan, you will get responses in line with the standing orders for Ms Payne from the Minister for Corrections.

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, I would request that the first question asked of Minister Stitt be reinstated. She clearly did not answer it.

The PRESIDENT: I believe she did, in real time. I will review it and get back to the house as soon as possible with a response to your point of order, Ms Crozier.

Constituency questions

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (14:02): (2470) My constituency question today is to the Minister for Health: how has the Labor government's record investment in health care benefited the residents of the Southern Metropolitan Region? Labor has delivered upgrades right across the state –

David Davis interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Mr Davis, please.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Labor has delivered upgrades to our health system right across the state, but particularly in Southern Metro. We have got the new Victorian Heart Hospital, a great new addition to our health infrastructure; the upgrades to the Sandringham Hospital outpatient clinics; upgrades to Moorabbin Hospital; and upgrades at the Alfred. The public health workforce has grown by more than 40,000 additional nurses, midwives, doctors and hospital staff; more than 17,000 nurses and more than 1000 doctors. Labor is investing in health care right across Victoria.

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:03): (2471) Frank Schiefler and the Liberals have committed to opening a 24-hour police station in Hastings, and my question for the Minister for Police is: will you do the same? A Hastings man who coached intellectually disabled children to steal cars in exchange for drugs is about to be let out of prison. Last month the 30-year-old recruiter was finally sentenced to a year behind bars but had already served 328 days while on remand, so will soon be let out into the community. Detectives say that crime in the peninsula area had dropped by 40 per cent as soon as he went into remand. He is described as being a driving force behind crime in the peninsula. This man puts the community at a huge risk. He is preying on the vulnerable, and the community are afraid. We are asking for action, and we are asking for a commitment to open the station 24 hours a day.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:04): (2472) My question today is to the new Minister for Public Transport, who is also the member for Eltham. As you will be aware, Minister, the community in Eltham North have been advocating strongly for a safe pedestrian crossing at Coolabah Reserve. I have raised this before. This is currently a dusty track crossing the train line. People were shocked to find that instead of better access, they were last week greeted by more restrictions in the form of a fence blocking access. I know we want people to be safe and to use a proper pedestrian crossing. That is exactly what the community is asking for at this site. The fence did not stop people crossing. In fact it was damaged the very first day, potentially from someone using it as a handrail while the concrete was wet. Minister, the community have been clear: they need to cross the rail tracks at this point. It is an important thoroughfare. I have raised it before. The community have asked it of you themselves. Will you now commit to building a proper, safe pedestrian crossing at Coolabah Reserve?

Southern Metropolitan Region

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (14:05): (2473) I want to draw the house's attention to the Moorabbin planning zone, a high-density high-rise zone. I want to ask the Minister for Planning to step down while the matters surrounding that are dealt with. I want to explain here to the community what occurred. The minister, in drawing the boundaries of the Moorabbin high-density high-rise zone, corruptly drew the boundary away from her own home, her rental home in Hampton. This is absolutely shocking. It is deeply corrupt that a planning minister would be drawing lines right near their own home and drawing the lines to favour their home. This is corruption, pure and simple.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Mr Davis –

David DAVIS: Somebody can object if they want to.

The PRESIDENT: No, Mr Davis. I think you know where I am going. Why don't you ask a question to the minister?

David DAVIS: I ask the minister to stand down whilst her corrupt behaviour is investigated independently.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: I will review whether that action can be asked.

David DAVIS: I just want her to stand down. That is an action for her: 'Will you stand down?'

The PRESIDENT: I will review it and I will get back to you.

Northern Metropolitan Region

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (14:07): (2474) My question is to the Minister for Public Transport. The government recently announced more frequent services on the Craigieburn and Upfield lines, following longstanding advocacy from communities across Northern Metro Region and repeated calls from the Greens in this place. However, many of my constituents in Northern Metro Region continue to tell me that the cost of public transport is still a barrier to accessing public transport while juggling many other household and daily living expenses. Minister, will your Victorian Labor government finally make public transport permanently free so more Victorians and residents in Northern Metro can access free, affordable and accessible public transport?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:08): (2475) My question is to the Minister for Victim Support. Recently I was contacted by two constituents who were victims of a terrifying home invasion involving weapons while living in public housing. One of the victims suffered knife wounds to his hand and chest which caused long-term damage. My constituents are horrified by the lack of justice in the legal system. They say, and I quote, 'Offenders appear to be given a slap on the wrist for serious crimes committed.' One of the offenders only served a three-month detention, and the other offender is not serving time, but rather doing an intensive program. To make matters worse, my constituents are not kept informed on a timely basis of the decisions of the court. For people to understand the rule of law and the seriousness of a weapon assault there need to be consequences for their actions. Minister, why can't your Labor government deliver justice for victims of crime?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:08): (2476) My constituency question is for the Minister for Health. A constituent, Jacqui, presented to Frankston Hospital emergency department with extreme abdominal pain on Monday 3 August. At triage she was advised that there would be a wait and that she would receive pain relief shortly. However, the pain relief did not arrive, and Jacqui was required to make multiple requests to different nursing staff before she received the medication. Jacqui was eventually taken through to a bed at 3 pm, approximately 14 hours after presenting to the emergency department and spending that time in the waiting room. She was subsequently diagnosed by doctors with pancreatitis. In the recent media release by the government it states that since the Frankston Hospital was redeveloped in January the hospital has increased by 130 beds, and an extra 35,000 patients are able to access care every year. So, Minister, my constituent asks: despite the large amount of money spent improving this hospital, why is it still lacking adequate emergency staff in the department so that it results in patients waiting for over 12 hours to be admitted?

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:09): (2477) My question is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. Gippsland motorists are sick of the excuse that Victoria's pothole crisis is due to rain. Rain is not a new phenomenon. On the Princes Highway near Bunyip yesterday in West Gippsland there was a pile-up due to vehicles being damaged due to potholes. Precious police resources had to be deployed for emergency traffic management. The M1 at Moe has potholes. The M1 at Traralgon East, which has only been open for 18 months, is disintegrating and riddled with potholes. The South Gippsland Highway is a dangerous goat track of potholes, and while Labor ministers and members make ludicrous statements about regional people liking potholes, families and communities and tradies in my electorate are fed up with this situation. Minister, why have you allowed these roads to become so disintegrated, and why don't you adopt Danny O'Brien's four-year, $5 billion, 1-million-pothole policy and get stuff done?

Western Metropolitan Region

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (14:11): (2478) My question is for the Minister for Planning. My constituent in Sunbury is concerned about reports that HiQ are contemplating a hyperscale data centre alongside their proposed waste-to-energy incinerator. This really would be an all-you-can-eat smorgasbord of disgusting developments. My constituent is rightly concerned about the absence of any robust regulatory framework for either waste to energy or data centres. Furthermore, neither has a social licence. If the minister thinks Victorians will continue to accept this lack of transparency and opaque processes, she is sorely mistaken. My constituent asks: will the minister consider a moratorium on waste-to-energy and data centre approvals until genuine community consultation has occurred and appropriate regulations have been ventilated and are in place?

Western Metropolitan Region

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (14:12): (2479) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. A resident has raised ongoing safety concerns at the Leakes Road and Western Freeway interchange in Rockbank. VicRoads data shows that there have been 23 collisions on the Rockbank section of Leakes Road since the beginning of 2024 where emergency services have attended. Can the minister please update my constituents on what has been done to address this dangerous, hazardous interchange? Traffic volume has doubled, with up to 14,500 vehicles using Leakes Road each day and a significantly higher number projected in coming years. Over 1800 people have signed petitions calling for traffic lights at the intersection. Commuting numbers are a rising concern. I await the minister's comment.

Northern Victoria Region

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (14:13): (2480) My question is for the Minister for Carers and Volunteers. Albury Wodonga Foodshare is a community organisation based within my electorate in Wodonga, working across the region to address food insecurity and reduce food waste. Foodshare rescues and redistributes surplus food to people and community organisations experiencing food insecurity, while also providing donated pet food to vulnerable people and local animal shelters. Its work is largely powered by volunteers and supports people experiencing homelessness and other forms of hardship. Foodshare has recently been gifted land by Wodonga TAFE for a new facility but needs approximately $5 million to $6 million to build a warehouse that would significantly expand its capacity to rescue and distribute food across the region. With the Victorian government investing in food relief infrastructure, will the minister commit to working with Albury Wodonga Foodshare to secure funding for its proposed new facility and help ensure people experiencing food insecurity in Northern Victoria can continue to access this vital service?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (14:14): (2481) My question is for the minister responsible for the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. The Mandurang South Recreation Reserve Committee of Management is responsible for the routine maintenance of the community hall, which is owned by DEECA. The committee has raised serious concerns about water damage, termite damage, structural deterioration and other defects affecting the safety and integrity of the building. DEECA has advised the committee that it has no staff responsible for assessing these types of building issues and no funding available. Minister, can you clarify whether DEECA accepts responsibility for structural repairs, asset renewal and safety issues affecting DEECA-owned community buildings and what funding pathway is available to volunteer committees of management when issues extend beyond routine maintenance? From a volunteer's perspective, community organisations are being stretched by a government that does not want to take ownership of its assets, which ultimately benefit communities. The Mandurang hall is an important community facility, and I would appreciate the minister's support to help resolve these issues.

The PRESIDENT: Mrs Broad, we will just direct that to the Minister for Environment.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:15): (2482) My question is for the Minister for Disability, and I am pleased that the minister is in the chamber in fact. Minister, I have been approached by a local constituent in respect to play-based therapies. This constituent of mine, who is a local mum but is also a professional in this space – and I will provide you, obviously offline, with her details – is very passionate about having play therapy included in the NDIS evidence advisory committee work plan. Can the minister or committee go and look at this as part of a plan that can be sponsored? Currently there is an issue around that with some of the reforms that are occurring federally. Certainly I would like to bring this to your attention and encourage you to take a close look at it. Obviously we know that inclusion in play therapy plays a fundamental role in the lives of some of our littlest constituents, and I would appreciate your time and consideration of that.

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (14:16): (2483) My question is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. A young woman from a farming family in my electorate was refused her test at Ararat because the family's manual ute was registered under the primary producer concession. She lost her test fee. The concession requires the vehicle to be used solely in the primary production business, and VicRoads apparently treats a licence test as outside that use. The result seems absurd. She cannot use the very vehicle she needs a manual licence to drive for farm work. What is her family supposed to do – buy and register another manual vehicle merely so she can sit the test? Passing in an automatic would restrict her to automatic vehicles. VicRoads' test-booking site unfairly fails to warn about this. Will the minister refund her fee and allow primary producer vehicles to be used for licence tests?

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (14:17): (2484) My question is for the Minister for Police. Will the minister allocate additional police to the Whittlesea police service area to tackle dangerous hoon driving in the Yan Yean electorate? Liberal candidate for Yan Yean Amanda Dow has been speaking to residents near Hazel Glen Drive and Yan Yean Road who are concerned about the noise, smoke and danger on the roads caused by reckless hoon drivers. I have also heard from residents near Upper Plenty who shared video footage of large meets taking place after midnight where drivers race and do burnouts that frighten neighbours and keep them awake at night. Police have been notified many times, and residents are totally fed up with the Labor government's failure to effectively tackle this problem. Under Labor, police numbers in the Whittlesea PSA are down to 40 to 60 per cent of allocation, which prevents officers being able to adequately address this problem. Only the Liberals have a real plan for community safety. We will hire 3000 more police and enforce tougher consequences for criminal offenders.

Petitions

Electricity infrastructure

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) presented a petition bearing 1300 signatures:

> The Petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the Victorian Government's proposal to include in the final version of the 2025 Victorian Transmission Plan (VTP) a new eastern section of the Central North Renewable Zone (REZ), between Shepparton and Glenrowan, without proper consultation.
>
> While there is a need for renewable energy, landowners and local communities who will be affected were not informed before the decision was made and were not given an opportunity to respond before the VTP was made public. VicGrid's retrospective six-week consultation is clearly deficient in contrast to the consultation and evidence gathering of over a year for stakeholders in every other REZ in the VTP. There is great concern that the inclusion of the new eastern section of the Central North REZ has failed to consider all the evidence for the importance of existing highly productive agricultural land use, landscape and tourism values, and Aboriginal cultural heritage sites.

The Petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council calls on the Minister for Energy and Resources and VicGrid to remove the eastern section of the Central North Renewable Energy Zone from the 2025 Victorian Transmission Plan until proper consultation with affected landowners and community is undertaken.

Wendy LOVELL: I move:

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

And I note that this adds to the more than 10,000 people who signed the online petition.

Motion agreed to.

Electric bikes

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) presented a petition bearing 421 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council to the recent broad-scale ban of all converted e-bikes on metropolitan and V/Line trains which is discriminatory in its application.

While the ban aims to mitigate fire risks from low-quality, directly imported DIY kits, usually installed in backyards, it unfairly penalises thousands of Victorians owning high-quality professionally built electric bikes and trikes, which have no greater fire risk than other e-bikes.

Professionally converted e-bikes are built in Australian factories by trained technicians, utilising high quality components, and undergo rigorous safety testing, distinguishing them from DIY installations. Custom e-bikes are often higher quality than most Chinese imported e-bikes.

Recycling old bike frames into e-bikes is more environmentally friendly and cost effective. New batteries are not made unsafe by mounting on old bikes.

Many people with disabilities require this type of customised solution and team it with public transport for commuting.

There are simple ways professionally built e-bikes could be quickly distinguished by public transport staff, eliminating the need for the blanket ban.

Denying exemptions to this ban adversely affects thousands of responsible and safe e-bike users and jeopardises the future of local pioneering and innovative custom e-bike businesses. The Transport (Compliance and Miscellaneous) (Conduct on Public Transport) Regulations 2025 should be amended so that exemptions can be granted for custom e-bikes built professionally by approved Victorian businesses. Criteria should be developed by which established e-bike conversion businesses can be approved as registered e-bike factories, and a means by which their suitably tested e-bikes, or more importantly, the batteries can then be given exemptions to travel on trains. One important criterion should be the use of batteries which meet any relevant safety standards that other e-bikes are expected to meet. When Victoria decides on which lithium battery certification standard to adopt for e-bikes, certified batteries should be allowed on trains, regardless of being mounted on a converted e-bike or otherwise. **The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to amend the Transport (Compliance and Miscellaneous) (Conduct on Public Transport) Regulations 2025 to grant exemptions for custom e-bikes built professionally by approved Victorian businesses to be allowed on metropolitan and V/Line trains.**

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Public transport fares

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) presented a petition bearing 5272 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that Victoria is the only state in Australia that denies concession public transport entitlements to full-time graduate students.

Graduate students undertaking a master's degree, graduate diplomas, and PhDs face severe cost-of-living pressures with limited capacity to work due to intensive study, research, and mandatory placements. Many are training to become Victoria's next teachers, nurses, doctors and engineers, completing unpaid professional placements while paying full price fares to travel to campus, placement sites and work.

High transport costs create financial hardship and inequity. Students from low-income backgrounds, those with caring responsibilities, international students, and those living in outer suburbs are hit hardest. Every other Australian state and territory provides concession fares to graduate students. Victoria is falling behind.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to immediately extend concession public transport entitlements to all full-time graduate students.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Planning and Environment Amendment (Agricultural Land and Food Security) Bill 2026

Introduction and first reading

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:20): I introduce a bill for an act to amend the Planning and Environment Act 1987 and the Environment Effects Act 1978 in relation to agricultural land and for other purposes. I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Melina BATH: I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Liquor Control Reform and Other Acts Amendment (Reducing Alcohol-Related Harms) Bill 2026

Introduction and first reading

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (14:21): I introduce a bill for an act to amend the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998 and the Transport Integration Act 2010 in relation to the sale of alcohol and for other purposes. I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Local Government Amendment (Stability of Councils) Bill 2026

Introduction and first reading

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (14:21): I introduce a bill for an act to amend the Local Government Act 2020 to enhance the integrity and governance standards of councils and to amend the City of Melbourne Act 2001 to increase the ratio between the lowest and the highest differential rates if the Melbourne City Council uses the net annual value system evaluation and for other purposes. I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Bev McARTHUR: I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Committees

Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee

Alert Digest No. 10

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:22): Pursuant to section 35 of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, I table *Alert Digest* No. 10 of 2026, including appendices, from the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee. I move:

That the report be published.

Motion agreed to.

Annual Review 2024: Statutory Rules and Legislative Instruments

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (14:23): I move:

That the Council take note of the report.

I am really pleased to speak today on the tabling of the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee's annual review. For those who may not follow the day-to-day workings of our committee, SARC does the incredibly vital, often unsung, work of scrutinising every bill and piece of subordinate legislation that comes through this place. The committee does the heavy lifting to ensure that our laws meet strict technical standards and, crucially, that they uphold all Victorians' rights under the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities. This keeps the legislation we pass fair, rigorous and respectful.

When I look back over this parliamentary session, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the sheer volume of work the committee staff has processed. Legislative scrutiny is highly demanding work that requires really long hours and phenomenal attention to detail. To all the staff and to the research team, and I particularly would like to honour Helen Mason and Jeremy Gans and the research team: thank you. Your expertise is exactly what keeps this important oversight mechanism functioning so well. I also want to take a moment to thank the outgoing chair, the member for Narre Warren South Gary Maas, who has led SARC with genuine dedication and a steady hand. I must also acknowledge the previous chairs who have guided this committee through this session of Parliament. Staying on top of the absolute mountain of legislation is no small feat, and their collective efforts have been absolutely invaluable. I am incredibly proud of the work this committee does. Can I take a moment in this chamber to say I commend this review and to I thank all members of the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee over this term of Parliament.

Motion agreed to.

Papers

Papers

Tabled by Clerk:

Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978 – Order of 29 May 2026 giving approval to the granting of a licence at Frankston North Public Park and Recreation Reserve.

Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission – Special report on Operation Richmond, August 2026 *(released on 5 August 2026 – a non-sitting day) (Ordered to be published).*

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

Ballarat Planning Scheme – Amendment C266.

Banyule, Casey and Darebin Planning Schemes – Amendment GC259.

Bass Coast Planning Scheme – Amendment C182.

Cardinia Planning Scheme – Amendment C283.

Glen Eira Planning Scheme – Amendment C277.

Latrobe Planning Scheme – Amendment C150.

Melbourne Planning Scheme – Amendments C492 and C502.

Mitchell Planning Scheme – Amendment C162.

Yarra Planning Scheme – Amendments C271, C273, C291 and C336.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 –

Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule Nos. 73, 96, 108, 109 and 110.

Legislative instrument and related documents under section 16B in respect of Ministerial Order No. 1514 – Order Amending Ministerial Order No. 1228 – Victorian Institute of Teaching Registration Fees, under the Education and Training Reform Act 2006.

Wrongs Act 1958 – Notice of scale of fees and costs for referrals of medical questions to medical panels under Part VBA *(Gazette G30, 23 July 2026)*.

Business of the house

Notices

Notices of motion given.

Sonja Terpstra having given notice:

David Davis: On a point of order, President, Ms Terpstra appears to have left potholes off her list.

Sonja Terpstra: Further to the point of order, President, that was not a point of order, it was a stunt.

The PRESIDENT: I am not taking any more points of order on this motion.

Further notices given.

General business

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:41): I move, by leave:

That the following general business take precedence on Wednesday 12 August 2026:

(1) order of the day made this day, second reading of the Liquor Control Reform and Other Acts Amendment (Reducing Alcohol-Related Harms) Bill 2026;

(2) order of the day made this day, second reading of the Planning and Environment Amendment (Agricultural Land and Food Security) Bill 2026;

(3) notice of motion given this day by Georgie Purcell on the use of electronic prescribing by veterinarians;

(4) notice of motion given this day by Bev McArthur on a royal commission into corruption, criminality and misconduct across all government-funded construction projects; and

(5) notice of motion 1552 standing in Rachel Payne's name on a plebiscite on cannabis legalisation.

Motion agreed to.

Members statements

Charisse Chan

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:42): It was my pleasure last week to drop by the CA Tritons swimming club down at Bulleen and talk to Charisse, who was a recipient of a sporting club grant. This grant helped Charisse and her family with the cost of travel as she participated in the 2026 Australian Age Swimming Championships, which were held at the Gold Coast Aquatic Centre in Queensland in April of this year. As a swimmer myself I know how the cost of participating in sports can quickly mount up. This grant helped with one aspect of participation that is really never

covered, and that is travel. Best of luck to Charisse in her swimming journey. I know you will do well. You show such dedication and commitment to your sport. I want to thank Carmen and Charisse for finding the time to meet with me in their busy swimming schedule, and I wish her all the very best for her future swimming journey.

Health workforce

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:43): Last Friday I attended the Australian College of Nursing's National Nursing Forum, where Australia's chief nursing and midwifery officer Adjunct Professor Alison McMillan addressed the challenges facing our nursing and midwifery workforce. Occupational violence was raised as an increasingly significant issue. It is an issue I constantly raise with hospital executives and one that doctors, nurses and midwives regularly raise with me. Too many health workers tell me of assaults, harassment and intimidation. They are being bitten, spat at and dodging missiles. Just months ago two midwives in Geelong finishing a late shift were assaulted in the car park. It was not an isolated incident: around 65 violent incidents are reported in our hospitals every day. Many go unreported. That is why on the weekend Jess Wilson and I announced a two-year trial of PSOs in seven major Victorian hospitals identified as violent hotspots. PSOs will support clinicians and existing security teams, with clinical decisions always remaining with health professionals. This will be just one of a suite of policies that will be used to reduce the pressure on our health work force. Yesterday the Police Association Victoria's Wayne Gatt backed the plan. His members have seen increasing call-outs to hospitals, and in his words:

> In a public place it deters crime, deters violent behaviour and provides people to respond to situations that are adequately trained when that is required.

Under Labor crime is out of control, and the crime in our hospitals cannot be tolerated. Enough is enough. A Liberal and Nationals government will act to make our hospitals safer and back the people who keep our health system running.

Nuclear prohibition

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (14:44): Australia must sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. I spoke last year as we marked Hiroshima Day and the 80th anniversary of the cataclysmic bombing that claimed 140,000 lives and the deadly blast at Nagasaki days later, which added 74,000 to the death toll. Countless survivors suffered lifelong health impacts and early deaths in the decades since. As 6 August passed again this year, I asked: how many more Hiroshima days will we count before Australia uses our power to stand against nuclear Armageddon as around the world violent conflicts rage and indiscriminate killing of civilians escalates, as the doomsday clock sits at 85 seconds to midnight, the closest we have ever been to global destruction? Despite recent statements confirming that AUKUS will not impede Australia's progress on the signing and ratifying of the treaty, still no timeline has yet been given by the federal Labor government to take this incredibly important step. It is past time for Australia to stand up for a nuclear weapon-free future, and for the federal government to go beyond words and actually act. No more excuses – sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

South West Healthcare menopause clinic

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (14:46): I am delighted to welcome the opening of South West Healthcare's new public menopause clinic at Warrnambool Base Hospital. Funded by the Victorian government through our women's health clinics program, this will give women across the south-west access to specialist menopause care close to home and completely free of charge. Menopause and perimenopause affect women differently, and for some women symptoms can have significant impacts on their physical and mental health. For too long women have been expected to simply put up with it. The Carroll Labor government is changing that. The new clinic brings together a multidisciplinary team led by gynaecologist and clinical director Dr Rosy Buchanan and midwife and nurse specialist Sarah Pohlner. They are supported by a range of physiotherapy, social work,

dietetics and continence services. They will also be able to receive referrals for support with pelvic pain, mental health, sexual health, sleep, diet and overall wellbeing. Women in regional Victoria deserve the same access to high-quality health care as women in the metropolitan areas. I congratulate South West Healthcare and all of the practitioners, and I encourage GPs and women in the south-west to reach out to that service.

Offshore wind energy

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (14:48): I want to draw the chamber's attention to the government's botched offshore wind process. Offshore wind has the potential to make a significant contribution to energy in this state, but this government is years behind time. They have delayed their auction once already. The auditor came out very clearly in December last year and said the government's targets will not be met. That is what the auditor said. The whole energy policy of this government is in a shambles. We know that they need to come clean on what financial and other support –

Harriet Shing interjected.

David DAVIS: Well, she has ridden off into the sunset, leaving something terrible behind her.

I say the state government needs to come clean on what financial support will be provided to offshore wind. The community is entitled to know what the scale and the form of that support will be. The state government has not come clean on the date they are going to go forward. They have not come clean on when the auction will occur. The truth is Ben Carroll was rolled on Thursday and Friday. He initially said he would review the offshore wind position, but by 4:45 on Friday, the statement went out to a couple of journalists to say, 'Oh, no, the auction is back on.' The truth is it is a shambles, it is chaos, and the government needs to get a grip on this. It needs to send good signals to those international investors and others, instead of the chaos that currently exists.

Health workforce

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (14:49): Today Victorian public hospital allied health workers are taking industrial action because for far too long they have been taken for granted. Our health system simply does not work without allied health professionals. They are the ones who help people to function across all aspects of their lives, and they are the technicians and scientists who help to keep our health services humming. Yet compared with other health workers, allied health professionals do not get the same recognition and support. They have endured a decline in real wages of around 10 per cent over the past four years, while not having access to the same career progression opportunities, leadership opportunities or education support as other craft groups who often perform similar or even identical roles. Meanwhile their workload and the complexity of that work have only been rising. This is a situation that is only leading to burnout. There are challenges with retaining the existing workforce, let alone with attracting new ones into it. It is unsustainable, and without urgent intervention our whole health system will fail. The thing is that investing in allied health simply makes sense; it is a good policy decision. If you want to stop ambulance ramping or clear emergency departments, invest in allied health. These are the people who keep people healthy and in the community, get someone home from an emergency department and avoid an admission or get people out of the hospital and home sooner. I call on Labor to show allied health professionals the respect they deserve and give them the pay and conditions they are calling for.

Transport Workers' Union

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:51): I recently had the opportunity to join many of my parliamentary colleagues, including the Premier, in meeting with leaders and representatives from my union, the Transport Workers' Union. As a former secretary of the Victorian branch of the Transport Workers' Union and former national president, I have spent 40 years fighting for the interests of transport workers across the states. We heard from several owner-drivers about their experiences in the transport industry and what they believe can be done to create fairer working

conditions. As people who are, officially speaking, small business owners but whose relationship with their contractor often resembles that of employer and employee, owner-drivers often have far fewer legal rights than they deserve. Trucking is the most dangerous job in Australia, with more workers dying in the trucking industry than any other occupation. It is only right that owner-drivers get a fair go just like anybody else. I applaud the work of the TWU in advocating for a fairer and safer system for owner-drivers in Victoria. In particular I want to thank the TWU national secretary Michael Kaine and the TWU Victoria and Tasmania director of organising Sam Lynch for their strong advocacy here, as well as the many delegates I had the privilege of meeting.

Police resources

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (14:52): Under Labor crime is up, police numbers are down and the opening hours of police stations in the Macedon district have just been cut. Kyneton police station is now closed two days a week and will shut at 4:30 pm on the days that it is open. Locals are now worried they will not be able to get help in an emergency. Kyneton needs a police station that is open 24 hours a day and ready to assist people when they need it. Kyneton station used to be open 24 hours, and locals could walk in at any time, day or night, to speak to a police officer, seek refuge or lodge a report. In 2023 Labor reduced the opening hours at more than 40 police stations across Victoria, including Kyneton station, which went from being a 24-hour police station to only being open 16 hours a day. But after the latest closures, Kyneton police station will be shut on Wednesdays and Sundays and only open from 9:30 to 4:30 on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. Under Labor crime keeps going up. Since 2022, assaults in the Macedon Ranges shire have increased by 34 per cent; burglaries and break-ins jumped up by 43 per cent; and theft of motor vehicles exploded by a staggering 207 per cent. Only the Liberals and our wonderful candidate for Macedon Kate Kendall have a plan to fix the crime crisis and restore community safety in the Macedon electorate by hiring an extra 3000 police across our state and imposing tougher bail and sentencing laws that will – *(Time expired)*

Silenced

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (14:54): I rise to speak in support of my friend Brittany Higgins ahead of the premiere of *Silenced* this evening at the Melbourne International Film Festival. When people stop me in public to speak to me, Josh often says, 'She's even better in real life,' which is very embarrassing. But it is how I think of Britt too. Britt is often described as strong, and she is, but it is in ways she should never have had to be. Since she, David, Freddie and of course Kingston coincidentally moved right nearby, I have had the joy of not only one of the special friendships you need most in this life and this job but of seeing Britt's incredible work as a lived experience advocate up close and in real time. Tonight our city gets to see that too. *Silenced* is a documentary featuring survivors like Brittany, Amber Heard, Catalina Ruiz-Navarro and human rights lawyer Jennifer Robinson. It tells the story of a legal system being used to victimise, discredit and ruin survivors, all while their lives are put on public display. These lawsuits are known as SLAPPs, strategic lawsuits against public participation, and they are used against survivors, activists and even journalists. Except for in the ACT, Australia has practically no legal protections against SLAPPs, and they are damaging people and their lives. Stories like those shown in tonight's documentary prove exactly why that desperately needs fixing, and I am incredibly proud to stand alongside Britt in her fight for change.

Van Viet Truong

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (14:55): I rise today to pay tribute to Mr Van Viet Truong, respected Sunshine business owner of Hong Hung grocery, devoted family man and valued member of our community, who lost his life in coming to the aid of another human being. Mr Truong, a fellow Vietnamese Australian, ran his grocery store in Sunshine for more than 30 years. He was known for his kindness, hard work and commitment to the people around him. Mr Truong's senseless death has left a family heartbroken, a wife without a husband, children without a father and a community in shock. The sadness felt across Sunshine in Melbourne's west is profound. Many in our Sunshine

community knew Mr Truong as a person who was always willing to lend a helping hand. To his family he was a source of love, strength and inspiration. The values he lived by were hard work, honesty, compassion and humanity, which will continue to guide and inspire future generations. Today, my deepest condolences go to his family and friends. We also acknowledge the many local traders, customers and neighbours whose lives were touched by his generosity and friendship. As we remember Mr Truong and the values he embodied, we are reminded of the importance of safe and secure communities. Local families, workers and traders deserve to feel safe in their neighbourhoods, and this tragedy serves as a stark reminder that we must continue working together for stronger laws, effective crime prevention and a safe community for all. May Mr Truong rest in peace. He will not be forgotten.

Tongala Avenue of Honour

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (14:57): This past week I had the pleasure of meeting Mick Thompson from the 3rd Cavalry Regiment (Vietnam) Association Inc, and he kindly gave me a personal tour of the Tongala Avenue of Honour and war memorial. The avenue of honour was entirely built by the local community's veterans, and they have proudly displayed the Sandpiper, an army tank bought and donated by Mick himself for the memorial – with a very entertaining transit story of her trip down from Queensland. With such dedication to and pride in these nationally recognised memorials, it is a shame that the community are stressing about the duration of the lease with VicTrack. The 10-year lease on the location of the avenue of honour really should be extended or, better yet, gifted to the community who maintain it. Thank you, Mick, for your tireless efforts to ensure the Tongala community and its visitors have access to this important history of ours.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:58): I move:

> That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 1517, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Electoral Amendment (Miscellaneous Matters) Bill 2026

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Ingrid Stitt:

> That the bill be now read a second time.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (14:59): I rise to speak on the Electoral Amendment (Miscellaneous Matters) Bill 2026. This bill has been a long time coming and I think calls for some celebration. It is an important bill. It addresses a longstanding flaw in Victoria's electoral system, and given the broad support for its central reforms, I will try to keep my remarks relatively brief – no promises – to assist with its timely passage through the Parliament. The most significant change before us is the abolition of group voting tickets. The Liberals and Nationals strongly support this reform because it closes a loophole that has allowed the electoral system to be manipulated for too long. I am pleased to be able to say this is an issue which we, and I, have been remarkably consistent on. In February 2023 I had just returned to Parliament from some parental leave. In what I am told was only my 14th contribution to this place as a member, I said –

A member interjected.

Evan MULHOLLAND: I am now over 1700 according to the Hansard database, but I want to point back to my contribution in February 2023 on a debate put forward by former member for

Northern Metro Dr Ratnam. I said in that contribution that I thought group voting tickets were an absolute affront to democracy. They game the system and people are not getting who they vote for. It is a lottery where no-one is the winner except for the candidate that snuck in through the back door on the back of a small number of votes.

This is an area of policy that is not new to me. I was an adviser in the Australian Senate when it abolished group voting tickets in 2016. If you look at some of the footage from that time, you can see a very young me looking very tired in the advisers box, because that sitting of Parliament at one point went for 28 hours and 56 minutes, which happens to be the longest continuous sitting without a break in the history of the Australian Senate.

We saw that affront to democracy that was group voting tickets in the 2013 Senate election, where we saw the Australian Motoring Enthusiast Party win a seat in the Senate with less than 1 per cent of the vote. After that election the Liberal federal government took the necessary steps to abolish group voting tickets. The Greens supported this – credit to them – the crossbench worked constructively with us, but who stood in our way at that time? Who kept the Senate sitting overnight? It was the Australian Labor Party, because it is in their DNA to stop democracy. I suppose we should be pleased that they have finally come to the table – kicking and screaming – to deliver this much-needed reform. You might begrudgingly support it now that you want to save your own political skin for those in the number 2 positions. I note that there is a deal in place that preselections be delayed until group voting tickets are abolished. That must be why it is finally here, so you can abolish group voting tickets and then you can approve all your preselections and no-one will be too upset. Then Mr Erdogan can move to the number 1 position, and the rest of the number 2 positions on that side can be slightly more comfortable about their positions.

I want to point out in particular – a significant point – how much of an outrage it is that for multiple elections the Victorian Labor Party have opposed this necessary reform. They may have indicated support and had members across multiple parliaments from the Andrews–Allan–Carroll governments indicate support in principle for abolishing group voting tickets, but each time they have got to the end of the term and then said, 'It's all too hard.' That has been a blatant subversion of democracy. Victoria has been out of step with the rest of Australia for too long. Every other jurisdiction has recognised that group voting tickets undermine confidence in elections, yet Victoria has persisted with a system that has allowed preference harvesting and backroom deals to determine who has been elected to this place. That was never how our democracy was intended to operate. Members of Parliament should be elected because they have earned the support of voters, not because they have benefited from a complex web of preference arrangements negotiated behind closed doors. We have seen too many examples, both federally and before reforms were introduced here in Victoria, where candidates with only a very small primary vote have found themselves elected because they participated in elaborate preference deals. These outcomes may have complied with the law, but they certainly did not and do not reflect the spirit of our electoral system. As the great Antony Green has noted:

> In Eastern Metropolitan Region, Labor won two seats from 37.0% of the vote (2.22 quotas), and the Liberal Party two from 36.1% (2.17 quotas). The Greens were the third placed party with 9.0% (0.54 quotas) more than twice the vote of the fourth placed Liberal Democratic Party.

This was in 2018.

> Remarkably, the fifth seat was won by Rod Barton of the 12th placed Transport Matters despite polling only 0.6% or 0.04 quotas. The Greens had 14 times as many votes as Barton but lost the seat to Barton due to deals arranged by group voting tickets. On the evidence of elections conducted since the abolition of –

group voting tickets –

> it would have been impossible for Barton to win from such a low vote and the final seat would have gone to the Greens.

So group voting tickets –

> … distorted the result.

Let us not forget the disgrace of Mr Barton voting with the government on that terrible pandemic legislation. But we know through leaked recordings from the preference whisperer Glenn Druery that he practically admitted that he made a deal with the Labor Party for an 'amenable crossbench'. He said that everyone involved in his tickets was part of his family, and they needed to create an amenable crossbench for the government so that you cannot just oppose the government all the time. He then called them a family. No wonder Mr Barton voted the way that he did. Going back to the results:

> In Northern Victoria Region in 2018, Labor polled 31.8% (1.91 quotas) for two seats, the Coalition 31.2% (1.87 quotas) for one seat, the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers 7.9% (0.47 quotas) missed out, as did the Greens 6.6% (0.39 quotas). The final two seats went to Derryn Hinch's Justice Party 3.8% (0.29 quotas) and the Liberal Democrats 3.8% (0.23 quotas). Those two seats were only won because of party control over preferences. With voters filling in their own preferences, the Coalition would have won a second seat and the last seat would have been fought out between the SFF and Greens.

So group voting tickets –

> distorted that result.
>
> In the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region –

this is in, I believe, 2018 –

> Labor polled 49.9% for 2.995 quotas and elected three members. The Liberal Party polled 29.0% (1.74 quotas) but only elected one member. The final seat was won by the 11th placed Liberal Democrats on 0.8% (0.095 quotas). Despite the second Liberal candidate polling 15 times as many votes as the Liberal Democrats, the preference deals embedded in the GVTs delivered victory to the Liberal Democrats. This result would not have occurred without the use of …

group voting tickets. This was repeated in 2022. In the South-Eastern Metropolitan region the Liberal Party achieved 1.6 quotas and 125,762 votes. The Liberal Democrats received 0.2 per cent of a quota and 16,971 votes. And as much as I like and respect David Limbrick, that is a seat that should have been democratically won by the Victorian Liberal Party – twice.

In 2018 in the Southern Metropolitan region:

> … the Liberal Party polled 38.2% (2.30 quotas) for two members, Labor polled 34.6% (2.07 quotas) for two members. Third place went to the Greens with … (0.81 quotas), six times the vote for the fourth placed party. Yet despite its high first preference quota, the Greens lost to the 9th placed Sustainable Australia Party who polled only a tenth of the Greens' vote, 1.3 per cent (0.08 quotas). Another result that could only be produced by …

group voting tickets.

In Northern Victoria the Animal Justice Party spiralled up from 1.56 per cent to beat seven other parties, including Labor, who had 7.8 times as many primary votes for their second candidate. Ironically, the elimination of the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, who received 23,374 first-preference votes, or 5.03 per cent, helped elect the Animal Justice Party to this place.

There has been bipartisan recognition for many years that reform was needed. The Commonwealth acted years ago to abolish group voting tickets, yet Victoria continued with a model that had already proven to be flawed. In my view that delay was no accident. I believe the Andrews government was comfortable with a system that produced a crossbench it could negotiate with, because it made it easier to assemble the numbers required to pass legislation through the Legislative Council. Whether those members represented only a very small proportion of voters seemed to matter less than the fact they could provide the votes they needed in the upper house. That may have suited the government's legislative agenda, but it did little to strengthen confidence in Victoria's democracy.

I was on the Electoral Matters Committee and have been for the majority of this term of Parliament and was for the report into the upper house system. It was a wideranging inquiry. It was really good to attend multiple different hearings into this particular report. It was a really important report, and I want to foreshadow an argument that we are bound to hear a bit later on in contributions: that we cannot possibly abolish group voting tickets until we abolish the regional structure and move to a statewide system. I particularly want to bring up the extensive work and submission of psephologist Dr Kevin Bonham, who appeared before the committee in May of last year. I asked Dr Bonham at the committee for his views on what would happen if we abolished group voting tickets and did not change the structure of the Council itself due to time constraints. He concluded his answer by saying:

> I would still stress again – I cannot stress enough – that this is better than keeping group ticket voting.

Dr Bonham had also written, in his submission to the committee on the 2018 election, that:

> The most important aspect of the simulation is that in no case would parties with tiny regional vote shares win seats. All seats would be won by parties with substantial support in their region and a real mandate from, and accountability to, their communities.

This is clearly the correct democratic outcome, and it is long overdue. I strongly believe the argument that we should delay abolishing group voting tickets until we remove the regional structure is just plain wrong. It is still, regardless of the regional structure of our upper house, a subversion of democracy. It is saying to voters that we will arrange who gets elected to this Parliament as political parties, not them, the actual voters. The voters should be in control of their preferences. The Liberals and Nationals have consistently argued that this system should be reformed. We have long believed that Victorians deserve an electoral system that reflects the choices made by voters, not the calculations of preference brokers.

I would also like to point out, and this is significant, that when the Liberals and Nationals supported the abolition of group voting tickets in the Electoral Matters Committee report in December last year, pollsters, election analysts and psephologists alike agreed that at the time the Greens would have had the most benefit out of the abolition of group voting tickets and would have won the final spot in almost every region. We still supported the abolition of group voting tickets back then, because this is something that we support on principle. That is really important in this debate, because I have seen some commentary in the media, and I want to state strongly to those that will use the argument that this will elect more members of One Nation that they are not making this argument on principle. What they are saying is we as politicians should decide to keep a system in place that subverts the democratic will of voters because we, the political elite, do not like the political views of another party that people may want to vote for, that polling shows some Victorians may want to vote for. I cannot stress how unprincipled this line of argument and narrative is. It is Third World, quango democracy behaviour, and I and the Liberals and Nationals are having none of it.

There is nothing wrong with preferences themselves. Preferences are an important part of our voting system, but they should be directed by voters, not by political parties lodging group voting tickets that most electors never read and rarely understand. That is precisely why these reforms matter. They return control over preferences to voters themselves, where it belongs.

We also, as Liberals and Nationals, as outlined in our report, believe that representation of regional Victorians is paramount to any future structure of legislative councils. Again, Labor has been aware of this issue but has failed to act. Their reluctance to fix our broken electoral system means that electoral outcomes in the upper house have been electoral outcomes of people that are here distorted by preference whisperers to reflect undemocratic intentions rather than the will of voters. Again, it is a subversion of democracy, and it has been allowed to continue in this place for far too long now.

As I have pointed out, twice in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region – the last two elections – it was the Victorian Liberal Party that was robbed of a democratically elected member of Parliament as was the will of the people of the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region. The Labor Party has been robbed of elected members of Parliament several times in the Northern Victoria Region. The Greens have been

robbed of members of Parliament countless times – I think probably the most times out of any political party. The will of the voters was to send those members of Parliament to this place. The will of the voters was never to send the Animal Justice Party or the Transport Matters Party – you can basically 'insert party name here'. Democracy should work for the people; it should not work for the political elite. Those running an argument to try to delay forward the group voting tickets reform until some structure is worked out would still attempt at this election that is coming up to subvert the will of the Victorian people.

Regardless of what system you have in place, a better outcome right now is to abolish group voting tickets. As I said, we should not look at the polling of who is likely to be elected at this election to make a judgement on whether or not we should abolish group voting tickets. As I mentioned, when the adoption meeting happened and the report was tabled in early December last year the polling was very different. We were voting for changes that would have elected a Green in every seat in the upper house. But we did that on principle, and the principle here is really important.

There are a number of other changes in this bill, and given the limited time, I will go through them quickly. There have been a number of amendments to improve the administration of elections, which we do not see as controversial. The first group of amendments relates to vote-saving provisions. These are sensible reforms that align with Victoria's electoral laws. This approach has already been adopted at a Commonwealth level. We support vote-saving measures because every valid vote deserves to be counted wherever the intention of the voter is clear. Democracy is strengthened when genuine votes are not discarded because of a minor technical error. Anyone who has worked as a scrutineer or participated in counting processes – presumably every one of the members in this chamber is among that group – understands this issue very well. I have to say, particularly in highly diverse electorates you see it all the time where the intent of the voters is quite clear but has been knocked out on a technicality. So this is a positive step forward that will reduce informal voting. Under the current system those ballot papers are often examined individually by the district election manager to determine whether a voter's intention can reasonably be identified. In many cases it is perfectly obvious how that person intended to vote. Existing practice already allows many of those votes to be saved through administrative guidance issued to those officials. This bill places those practices on a proper legislative footing. That is an important improvement, because it provides certainty, consistency and transparency rather than relying solely on administrative principle. The rules will be now set out clearly in legislation.

This bill also contains a number of amendments arising from the electoral reforms passed last year. My understanding is that these changes are technical rather than substantive and intended to ensure that certain powers sit appropriately within legislation rather than in regulations. In essence these amendments formalise powers that already exist in practice. They do not create significant new powers but instead provide the legislative authority the Victorian Electoral Commission considers necessary to administer the existing framework.

As I said, the abolition of group voting tickets is undoubtedly the most significant reform in this bill. It closes a loophole that has distorted electoral outcomes for many years and finally brings Victoria into line with every other Australian jurisdiction. For too long, candidates have been able to secure election with only a tiny primary vote because of intricate preference arrangements negotiated outside of public view. While those outcomes may have complied with the law, they did little to enhance confidence in our democratic institutions. Victorians should be able to look at the election result and have confidence that those elected have earned the support of voters, not simply have benefited from a complicated web of preferences. This reform restores that confidence by placing control of preferences back where it belongs: in the hands of voters.

The vote-saving provisions are equally sensible. They recognise democracy should not turn on harmless technical mistakes where a person's voting intention is clear. The remaining amendments, as I said, improve the administration of electoral laws, and taken together these reforms improve the

integrity, transparency and operation of Victoria's electoral laws. Practical changes will strengthen public confidence in the conduct of elections.

As I said from the outset, we know that group voting tickets have long been an issue in Victoria. Over the life cycle of this government, we have been given weasel words by this government, particularly by former Premier Daniel Andrews and the two premiers that followed as well, that, 'It is to come. We will fix it later. It is to come. These things usually happen at the end of a term,' for nothing to come. I want to point out again how outrageous that we continue to have a subversion of democracy in this state, and this government, which Premier Ben Carroll was a part of. They did nothing. They sat on their hands and continued multiple times to see the will of the voters subverted and did nothing because they wanted an amenable crossbench. It was and still remains an absolute disgrace.

The Liberals and Nationals do not support group voting tickets. We are glad that this Labor government have been dragged kicking and screaming to their current position to save their preselections and give them a little more comfort on their electoral position. As I said, the Commonwealth recognised the flaws in group voting tickets long ago – 10 years ago. Victoria should have been the grown-up and acted much sooner. Unfortunately, the reform was delayed, and in my view, the delay reflected the political interests of the former Andrews government, which benefited from a Legislative Council crossbench shaped by a preference harvesting system that no longer enjoys public confidence. Thankfully, we are now correcting that mistake. The opposition will assist the government with the swift passage of the legislation. We will not be entertaining amendments, unless any new surprise ones come along, and we will be assisting the government with the passage of this legislation.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (15:28): I rise to speak on this important bill and confirm that One Nation Victoria will be supporting the Electoral Amendment (Miscellaneous Matters) Bill 2026. For years Victoria has been the only jurisdiction in Australia to retain the use of group voting tickets. This is a system that has taken much of the power of preferences out of the hands of voters and placed it in the hands of political parties and preference negotiators. It has created what has become known as the 'preference whisperer industry' – people whose job it is to negotiate preference arrangements between political parties and candidates in an attempt to influence who gets elected. I believe that is fundamentally the wrong way to approach democracy. Preferential voting should mean that the voter gets to choose their preferences: number 1, number 2, number 3 and so on. Victorians have the right to know exactly where their vote is going. When someone votes for a particular party or candidate, they should be confident that their vote is being used to express their preferences rather than being directed according to a deal negotiated by political parties behind closed doors.

This bill takes an important step towards putting that power back to where it belongs: with the voter. That is a significant improvement. This is not about protecting one political party or another. It is not about Labor, the Liberals, One Nation or any other party. It is about a simple democratic principle: political parties should have to earn the support of voters. If a person receives a seat in this Parliament, it should be because Victorian voters have chosen to support them, not because that person has negotiated the right preference arrangement. We should not have a system where voters need to understand complicated preference deals or wonder whether their vote might ultimately help elect a candidate from a party they never intended to support. The voter should be in control.

There is already too much cynicism about politics and politicians. The last thing we should do is have an electoral system that creates further distrust. Voters should have the confidence that their vote means what they intend it to mean. This bill brings greater transparency, accountability and choice to Victoria's electoral system. It puts the power of preferences back into the hands of Victorians, and that is exactly where it belongs. Their vote belongs to them – to Victorians. For those reasons, One Nation Victoria will support this bill.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:31): I rise to make a contribution on the Electoral Amendment (Miscellaneous Matters) Bill 2026, and I am very pleased to be doing so. These are very important reforms. As previous speakers have highlighted, it is important for voters to know where their preferences go and to decide who gets elected, not faceless people in backroom deals.

I have been a member in this chamber for eight years, and I have seen over that time different iterations of the make-up of the crossbench. I find it really quite astounding, some of the commentary that the government was trying to somehow orchestrate a progressive crossbench that we could deal with, because having sat here through numerous debates on bills and numerous committee stages, I can tell you that, certainly from a government perspective, it has been anything but a crossbench that has been willing to work with government. In fact it is quite often the opposite – all you need to do is look at the voting records of some of the crossbenchers that have come into this place. We have been part of many a marathon debate in committee stages and the like that has gone into the wee small hours, debates which could have been avoided and were quite unnecessary.

We hear quite often from those on the crossbench lectures about how it is important for democracy, that the crossbench provides democracy, that it is important for people to have their say and these sorts of things. But the bottom line is when you look at where people make their decisions for a government to be formed, it is in voting for members in the lower house. That is where government is formed, through a majority formed in the lower house. I might again point to the previous terms in which I was fortunate to be a member of that house. On both those occasions the Labor government was formed with a thumping majority.

In this chamber it is very often the case that the people that are returned do not reflect the will of the voting public, which is to deliver government to one party or another. We have been in a system where major parties – either Labor or Liberal – form government in the lower house. When you look at this chamber, we do have more Labor members on the government benches and Liberal members on the opposition benches, but then we have Greens and crossbenchers. The will of the people and the imprimatur of the voting public are often not represented here.

I want to take a little bit of time to talk about – I think Mr Mulholland did unpack some of this in his contribution around what happened – why we need to change the system. I often sit here – and I know members of the Liberal Party would hear this too – and get lectured about how they are the progressive crossbench, how important they are and how they are standing here to give important views. But the reality is that most of the time – and I will go into the people in a moment who are here, who have benefited through this system through a range of means – they have bought a seat in this chamber and have done so quite often with very low votes.

I will just go through some of the details. I have had the benefit of working with many of the crossbenchers, and I like a lot of them; however, I do not like the means by which some of them have come to this place. Effectively due to group voting tickets in Victoria we have seen some of the most dramatic come-from-behind election wins in Australia's political –

David Davis interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Yes, that is right; they have come from behind, and this has been done by coordinating complex preference deals through the preference whisperer, whose name I will not mention, but we all know who it is. That basically has seen micro-parties polling under 1 per cent of the primary vote and then managing to leapfrog parties who might have been holding 14 times the support to secure terms in this place.

We talked about an example before. Look, I respected Mr Barton when he was in this place – you know, he did a good job in a whole range of areas – but for the Transport Matters Party in the 2018 election Mr Barton secured, I think, 0.62 of the primary vote. It was under 2500 votes in my region. At that time it was the Eastern Metropolitan Region, but now it is the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region. At that time he won the number 5 spot through a chain of group voting preference swaps, and

in so doing he defeated the Greens incumbent at the time, Samantha Dunn, who had started the count with 9 per cent of the primary vote, which was nearly 14 times Mr Barton's. Then we could also talk about Cliff Hayes from the Sustainable Australia Party, with 0.84 per cent of the vote – under 4000 votes – in Southern Metropolitan. Again, Mr Hayes won the fifth spot, despite starting with under 1 per cent support, and he leapfrogged Liberal candidate Georgie Crozier's running mate, who began the count holding 12.3 per cent of the primary vote – over 0.7 per cent of a full quota. So again, we saw some really ridiculous outcomes.

Also there were David Limbrick and Tim Quilty. Some of us who were here in the previous term would remember Mr Quilty from the Liberal Democrats. They started with around 0.84 per cent of the vote in South-Eastern Metro and 11.7 per cent in Northern Victoria. The outcome in those cases was that both the Liberal Democrat candidates won upper house seats from minuscule primary bases by funnelling cascading preferences from an array of disparate minor parties, ranging from Shooters, Fishers and Farmers to animal rights groups, under behind-the-scenes group voting arrangements. Again, these arrangements – swaps and the like – were hidden and clandestine for whatever purpose. Then people who were in this chamber not this term but the previous term would remember Catherine Cumming, who was with the Democratic Labour Party but then turned independent. She came through this place with 1.56 per cent of the primary vote, around 7000 votes, in Western Metropolitan. She was elected via the DLP ticket on just 1.5 per cent of the primary vote and defeated a higher polling candidate through micro-party preference swaps, and then she quit the party before she was even sworn in and then sat in this place as an independent. There are many other examples of this as well, but I think they highlight most of it. When we talk about the make-up of the crossbench I find it really quite ironic and distasteful that the constant catcalls of those on the crossbench say that they are progressive and somehow they are the bastion of public good being elected into this place, when really they have no imprimatur to be here. What they have done is benefit through preference deals.

I want to talk about preference deals and whispering. This has been something that has been the feature of much reporting in the press as well. We know that the preference whisperer operated a commercial arrangement for people to come into this place, and this has all been publicly reported, whether it be through the media or in the Parliament itself through inquiries and the like. The arrangement was, for example, that a $5000 deal-in retainer fee was asked to be paid to join his minor party alliance and participate in orchestrated preference swap meetings, and these things occurred. If you were successful, a $50,000 or $55,000 success fee per candidate elected to Parliament was due and payable. This was sometimes settled via direct payment or through post-election parliamentary staffing employment arrangements, such as appointing the whisperer as chief of staff or to some other parliamentary staffer position. There are a number of parties who have disclosed being paying clients. We know the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers is one of those. There was the Australian Sex Party, which is now Reason; Derryn Hinch's Justice Party – I do not think it exists anymore, but it did at the time; the Family First Party; and the lifestyle party. Again, the list of people who have come into this place is long.

At the end of this process what we did see was that at the last election a group of parties and MPs decided to try and do over the system. The Angry Victorians Party secretly recorded an online pitch meeting where the whisperer outlined his success fee, before leaking that footage to the media outlets. And then there was the infamous Animal Justice Party, who in 2022 engaged in months of preference negotiations with the whisperer in what they called a sting before pulling out at the final deadline to submit independent preferences and bypass his network. I have heard members in this place from the so-called progressive crossbench talk about this being a progressive bloc aiming to overcome the preference-whispering bloc. There were a number of people who had expected to be elected to this place who were very disappointed in that result.

As you can see, there are a range of things that have occurred in this place that have led people to come into this place in ways which defy democracy. Paying a fee of $50,000 or $55,000 to buy a seat in this chamber is offensive. It is wrong. However you want to say it, it is wrong. But then to be lectured by

members of the crossbench that somehow they are the bastions of good democracy is really quite fanciful and ridiculous. Again, I go back to my earlier comments about the will of the population and the people who are voting in these elections. That is what this group voting reform will do: rather than the current system, under which parties can direct preference flow through these group voting arrangements, this will see an end to preference whispering. The new above-the-line voting system will require voters to number at least five groups in order of preference, and basically those preferences will flow to candidates in the order they appear for each party. This puts the power into the hands of the voting public, where it should always be.

The reforms will also require the Victorian Electoral Commission to publish information about new political parties, because a party's name does not always tell voters who is behind it or where their preferences may flow. This is really important. We have seen some right-wing minor parties spruik their intention to use deceptive names and the way in which they might present that they are standing for something but then harvest preferences of parties completely the opposite of what they may advertise they are standing for. If anybody is considering another party, a minor party – however you want to describe it – it is important that the voting public can have a place to go to look at information and be fully informed, because we have seen some terrible examples of misleading voters.

The test around what is misleading in the vote is quite a difficult and tough test, and I can talk about my electorate. In one of the federal elections there were some voting signs that looked very much like official electoral commission signs that directed people, I think it was in Mandarin, to vote the 'right way'. Those signs were complained about, but the horse had bolted. When we see those sorts of stunts and tricks happen at polling booths on election day, it is always disappointing, so the more information that the voting public and voters can have in their hands to look at when considering candidates is incredibly important.

It is a good thing that this Parliament will bring an end to group voting. Today I believe the crossbench will have a number of things that they will want to say and amendments that they want to propose, but the bottom line is time is up. This has to go. It is long overdue, and Labor is very focused on making this election fair and free from influence. It is too important. We do see there are bad actors in the electoral landscape who have nefarious ideals and want to change and shape our democracy. All I know is when I am out and about in my electorate people say to me all the time, 'I am very concerned about the prospect of a Liberal–One Nation coalition government.' They see that as terrible and they are very concerned about that, so in this election they want to make sure that their vote does not go anywhere near flowing down to One Nation. That is their real fear and their real concern.

So I am really pleased to be able to speak on this bill today. It is a very important bill. As I said, we are making elections fairer and more transparent by removing these backroom deals and ensuring Victorians know exactly who they are voting for. Fair and free elections are the bedrock of democracy, and we are delivering these reforms to ensure that Victorians can be more confident in their electoral processes. Like I said, knowledge is power, and making sure voters have access to information and knowledge to be able to exercise their vote is critically important. I will end my contribution there, and I commend the bill to the house.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (15:46): I want to make a contribution to this electoral reform bill. I want to reiterate or support the points made by the deputy leader here in the chamber earlier. This is a bill that the Liberal Party has always supported. We see the importance of this bill in basic fairness, basic electoral evenness and transparency, and in doing so, we have not deviated from that, even where it may apparently have not been in our interests to see this bill go through. There have been discussions about this over a number of years. The Labor Party has been very tardy, being the party of government for the last three terms now and the party that could have cleaned these matters up. Indeed in the period of the Baillieu–Napthine government, we did go to –

Ryan Batchelor: You lot have never cleaned up anything.

David DAVIS: Well, we actually went to the Labor Party and we said, 'If you are prepared to support us, we will deal with this. We won't do it alone, we will do it where there is broad support.' But Daniel Andrews did not agree at that time, in the period to 2014. So there was an approach made there, there was a discussion there, and we would have supported it at that point in time.

Let us also be clear, there is every reason to be supportive of this because there have been some terrible undemocratic outcomes that have been engineered through the group voting tickets. Essentially, this bill abolishes the group voting tickets. It cleans up the transparency here to make sure that people can preference as they see fit, that the preferencing arrangements are fair and that deals done behind the scenes by preference whisperers or others are not going to unpick the democratic intent. I agree with Ms Terpstra and on some of the cases that Mr Mulholland brought forward that were part of this chamber and people who, whilst they themselves may be quite reasonable people, were amenable to doing terrible deals with the government of the day as it were, terrible deals with preference arrangements and terrible deals with preference whisperers – corrupt deals. Let us be clear that these deals were not the right thing to do, they were not honest, they were not transparent and they in fact in my view ought to have fallen foul of many criminal points.

Jeff Bourman: On a point of order, Acting President, Mr Davis, I invite you to say that outside the chamber.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Mr Bourman, that is not a point of order. If you wish to reframe your point of order, you are welcome to.

Jeff Bourman interjected.

David DAVIS: I am going to instance a couple of examples, as you have invited me to do here, Mr Bourman. I understand your party is a larger party. Your party is a party that has got a serious base, and has had for many years, and is somewhat different from some of the tiny micro-parties that try to appear and actively and discriminatingly try to influence the outcome of elections in particular seats and to do so in a way that I personally believe is corrupt. So I am actually drawing a distinction with your party, which has got a genuine policy base, and others, who might come from a party that has a genuine policy base but who have not always been honest, and I am going to pick on in this case a couple of those who I think have not.

We saw Mr Barton come to this chamber in 2018. He was a case in point where a set of deals were done in preferencing in 2018, and indeed Ms Terpstra laid out the very low number of votes and the tiny spread of votes that he had there, defeating in this case the Greens and others in that seat where there were many, many more votes. He was elected with one key point in mind, and that was about the taxi industry. I am happy to speak about that because it is actually something I feel personally very strongly about. I did not agree with what happened with the taxi industry in 2017. Whilst you might have wanted the reforms and the Uber changes and all of that – I actually can understand why people wanted that – I also believed that people who had legitimately bought licences deserved to be properly and fully compensated. It was really a compensation issue to me, and as Mr Bourman will note, I fought endlessly in this chamber in favour of the taxi owners, who were treated, in my view, so appallingly.

What struck me, though, is that when Mr Barton got here we put an inquiry out – one of the first inquiries that was done in that Parliament – to deal with this issue and to come back with a set of recommendations. Barton voted with Labor repeatedly through the amendments that were put by the opposition in the committee hearings. You can go and read the minority report; you can read the extract of proceedings. If you were a person who wanted to support the taxi industry and those who had owned licences and had been treated unfairly, it would make your hair curl, the things he voted for. He voted down compensation. He voted down steps to get proper outcomes for people who had been treated wrongly by the taxi industry. So I would instance him as one of the persons in this chamber who is most reprehensible and most impacted by these outcomes that are driven by the inadequate voting

system that has been in operation since the change, actually I might say, in the shape of the Parliament when the chamber was changed to a proportional system. 2006 was the first election that we went to with that arrangement.

Barton went further when the pandemic bill was here. People in this chamber will remember the pandemic bill. Mr Bourman and the Liberal Democrats did actually support the opposition in our amendments through that process. You did stick still all the way through that. We got to the end of the second reading, and it was clear that the bill would not go further, would not be passed, and the government panicked. The government froze the bill. It stopped. You will remember this, Mr Bourman – you will remember this quite clearly. Mr Barton, who used to sit next to you, was the one who welshed, who changed. It is hard to know what corrupt deal made him move, but he was able –

Jeff Bourman: On a point of order, Acting President, it is unruly for Mr Davis to be pointing.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Yes, there was a bit of pointing. Please refrain from pointing and talk through the Chair, Mr Davis.

David DAVIS: Those who were here will remember Mr Barton's extraordinary Damascus road conversion, where he changed from opposing the bill to supporting the bill and doing that over a couple of weeks hiatus. The government came back and there was a very late night sitting, but Barton had clearly done a deal for Labor preferences. Everyone knew that he was up to his neck in this. He was up over his neck. This was a clearly corrupt deal that had been done – a deal that should never have been done and a deal that to this day deserves to be exposed. What he did to the taxi owners, who he came to this chamber to support, was actually quite wrong. What he did on the pandemic bill was also quite wrong. This, I think, is one of the unfortunate examples of what these group voting tickets can do and the changes that they can force, because people can have behind-the-scenes arrangements – behind-the-scenes deals can be done. There were others in this chamber who were thrown up by chance, by pure chance, and Ms Terpstra has laid out some of those people.

Clifford Hayes – an affable fellow. Everyone liked him. Clifford got a tiny percentage of the vote.

A member interjected.

David DAVIS: No, I am just reminiscing a little here and pointing to some of the strange outcomes that were thrown up by the group voting tickets. Nobody expected that Mr Hayes would be elected and romp over the Greens, who actually had a very sizeable vote – somewhere around 13 per cent, from memory, at the time, and he had less than 1 per cent. So you are left with these very strange and unpredictable outcomes because of the preference deals that are done – the behind-the-scenes preference whisperer arrangements, the exchange of preferences between parties that are not natural bedfellows, parties that have divergent viewpoints that are actually entirely opposed on some occasions. That is what worries me about these preference arrangements, that they distort and divert the political process because of the capacity of external small groups to influence outcomes in a way that is clearly, clearly undemocratic.

It is for these reasons that I am supporting this bill. I believe the Liberals and Nationals think it is the right thing to support this bill. We have never changed our view on this. We have always been supportive, in principle, of these changes. As I have outlined, even back prior to 2014 we were open if Labor was prepared to do this. To the extent that Labor is now prepared to do it, that is an important step in improving democracy in Victoria.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (15:56): Mr Davis should be very, very thankful he has got parliamentary privilege for some of the absolute rubbish and aspersions he cast. I think he should try them outside the chamber and see how long it takes for a concerns notice to land in his inbox. Anyway, there is no interest like self-interest, as we are all finding out today. Yes, I want to keep this because of the self-interest. I want to be here to represent my people. The wider 'they' want to get rid of us because they feel they will get seats, and that is their self-interest. The system we are operating under

now was specifically designed to do what is happening now, maybe not through preference harvesting and all this sort of stuff, but it was to allow a wider representation of community. Whilst Animal Justice Party and I do not agree on many things, the fact that we are both here shows that there are voices unlike the Liberals, unlike the Nationals and Labor and of course the Greens, even though the AJP and the Greens are fairly aligned on a lot of things. But if you cannot say that people having Libertarians; Animal Justice; Shooters, Fishers and Farmers (SFFP); and One Nation is a representative voice, then what is?

I have noticed a few things. Mr Mulholland, you said that SFFP got AJP elected – wrong. We got One Nation elected. I have got a fair idea where you got your information from.

Georgie Purcell interjected.

Jeff BOURMAN: Yes. No, we got One Nation elected. Animal Justice were last on every single one of our tickets. One Nation were before the Libs, and I think that is why they are snotty about the whole thing. I do not invite him to withdraw that, but I will just point out that was an utter load of rubbish. It is also nice of Mr Mulholland to worry about the will of the people – I notice that term came up a bit – as long as it benefits him and his people.

Moving on, every single number 2 of the major parties in this place is here because of the group voting ticket. I predict that every single one – not every single one, but close enough for me to make the generalisation – of the number 2s in this place on both sides of the chamber will be gone because of this legislation. Whether you like One Nation or not, they are now a force to be reckoned with, and their primary vote is enough that everyone should have been paying attention. I have spoken to various people behind the scenes from both major parties about this, and no-one seems to be too worried. Well, South Australia should have given you a warning. We are a more left state than South Australia in general, but there is only one poll that counts. We will find out what happens. But if I was a number 2 in any of the major parties, I would be sweating buckets right now because this is going to give them basically zero hope. I do have an amendment to delay the commencement date – self-interest of course. I might ask for that to be circulated.

I have noticed that whilst there was a lot of talk, in fairness to the Greens – I do not like saying nice things about the Greens; it makes me feel a little uneasy – they have a number of times tried to fix this from their perspective. They have put up stuff and been voted down. But I have noticed that in the major parties, probably until about 2014 when I first arrived on the scene in the wave of the new crossbenchers, no-one really cared because it worked for them. Now it does not work for them. Now we basically have something that I feel has been put up by a bunch of bedwetters that sleep with the lights on at night. This is really what is going on. There were panic stations – Chicken Little, 'the sky is falling in'. Well, you reap what you sow, fellas and ladies. I feel that the next election will be studied for decades because of the disaster for the major parties. We will see. There will be more Greens, I am pretty confident of that. But One Nation will come here, and it is quite conceivable that they will be the largest party in this chamber, so enjoy what is left of it.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (16:01): I am very pleased to rise to speak on this bill, because Mr Davis and Mr Mulholland in their contributions tried to somehow suggest that it is the Liberal Party that is the champion of democratic reform in the Victorian Legislative Council. Frankly, nothing could be further from the truth. Over the 175 years that this place has existed, the Liberal Party, from the time it was created, and its forebears have been the party opposed to the democratisation of this chamber. The only party that has ever pushed for, secured and initiated democratic change in this chamber has been Labor.

It was the Labor Party in 1950 that made the removal of the property franchise for election to this Parliament a condition of their support for the Country Party government, which left the Liberal Party aghast. It was Labor pressure in the 1950s that saw the abolition of the property franchise that had existed hitherto for election to this Parliament. It was Labor in 1985, under the premiership of John

Cain, that first advocated a policy of having multimember, proportionally represented regions as the composition of this chamber, a policy that was opposed by the Liberal Party, who saw the protection of their own members and the protection of an electoral system that had served them well to that point as being more important than standing up for the principles of democratic reform and proportional representation. It was only when the Bracks government in 2002 secured, for the first time ever in Victoria's history, a constitutional majority in both houses of the Victorian Parliament that Labor initiated constitutional reforms to remove the old system of voting and representation from this chamber – after a constitutional convention, after considerable public debate – and replace the old provinces and members elected for eight-year terms with the series of regions, eight by five, that we have today. Those reforms were initiated by Labor, just as the reforms to remove the property franchise were initiated by Labor, just as these reforms to further extend democratic improvements to elections for the Victorian Legislative Council today were moved by Labor.

Evan Mulholland: It has only taken you 12 years.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Mr Mulholland, you have never done a thing to democratise this place, so I am not going to listen to a word you have to say. This party have always been advocates for democratic change in the Victorian Legislative Council and agents of democratic change in the Victorian Legislative Council, and no amount of bloviating from the Liberal Party can change the facts of history.

David Davis interjected.

Ryan BATCHELOR: It is disappointing that, in an attempt to find some way of enhancing their own credibility and credentials, the Liberal Party, and Mr Davis in particular, have spent their entire contribution to this place today denigrating others. Whatever you believe and whatever your reflections are on our electoral system in this place, you do not need to stand here and dump a bucket on your former colleagues. It is unbecoming, and it is not worthy of serious debate in this chamber.

What we have got today is a piece of legislation that is about improving our democratic system of government here in Victoria – about making a simple but significant change that has been achieved in all of the other second chambers and their electoral systems right around the country. It was achieved in elections to the Commonwealth Parliament and the Australian Senate a decade ago. It has been a feature of change in New South Wales, in South Australia, in Western Australia – other comparable jurisdictions that have similar voting systems for their upper houses. Obviously we do not have one in Queensland, because there was a successful move a century ago to deal with that, and it is a very different system in Tasmania. What we have here is a simple but important change to put decisions about voter preferences in the hands of voters. We have seen very clearly in the operation of the Australian Senate for the last several elections that voters know what they want to do with their preferences in upper house systems: they like to be able to direct preferences by party in a manner that accords with their own ideology and beliefs and preferences. That is what the bill before us today will do here in Victoria. It brings Victoria into line with all the other comparable jurisdictions in Australia, and it puts decisions about preferences in the hands of voters, not in the hands of political parties behind the scenes. If members of Parliament and political parties want to advocate to voters to give them their preferences in the upper house in the same way that they do in the lower house, then they are absolutely free to do so. Those arguments should be had both on the basis of merit and on the basis of openness and transparency.

I think one of the features of the current system, the existing system that we have here in Victoria, is that despite the lodged group voting tickets technically having been made publicly available to electors before they cast their ballots, we all know that in reality the public has not been aware. They were too hard to find. The system we are moving to now will put that information before their very eyes on how-to-vote cards as they walk into a ballot box and fill out their ballot papers. I think that sort of transparency is critical in a democracy, and it is something that all the political parties who participate in the debate, either in this chamber or out in the broader community, should absolutely welcome. This

reform is long overdue. It will place decisions about voter preferences in the hands of voters, and there can be nothing that is more fundamentally democratic than that. This is a reform that has been recommended by the Electoral Matters Committee, a joint committee of this Parliament, on several occasions, including most recently in two reports in the last couple of years.

It is a matter that has been well canvassed both with those who are interested and appeared before those Electoral Matters Committee inquiries and also in broader public debate and in debate amongst political scientists, psephologists and others who have an interest in our voting system. There is no world in which anyone can argue that the change before us today has not been well telegraphed, has not been well discussed and has not been on the agenda for a long period of time. If something has those characteristics, both of improving democracy and of being well canvassed, and with an election on the horizon, we have to see this chamber today taking this important step forward to improve the democratic features of the way it is elected. A move to delay that, such as what Mr Bourman has indicated he is seeking to do through his amendment, is an act of absolute self-interest. It is not in keeping with the spirit in which those Electoral Matters Committee inquiries and the broader public debate were done but also some fundamental principles about democracy and democratic action in this state.

It has always been Labor that has pushed the cause of democratic reform in the Victorian Legislative Council. That is absolute fact. If you go back and look at the history of democratic reform to this place, it has always been because Labor has insisted upon it or because Labor has delivered it. This is another example in that long history of where Labor has sought to improve the democratic operation of the Victorian Legislative Council, and that is exactly what it will do. I commend the bill to the house.

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:12): I rise to speak on this particular bill, given that it does affect me directly. The Liberals and Nationals back the removal of the group voting tickets and are open to engaging constructively with the government to ensure regional representation is preserved and to achieve a representative upper house that benefits all Victorians.

Having said that, I think there are a lot of people that will be trying to understand what all of this means, and we can go back to the fact that so many young people are not even getting to learn civics at the moment in schools or their civics understanding is very limited. I would just like to state that the upper house ballot when they go in to vote is not the tiny little slip that they get in which all the numbers have to be put into the little boxes; it is that great big long one that goes out as wide as your arms can go. In the past you would just pick one party – or 90 per cent of the people would do that, and another 10 per cent would vote below the line, picking so many names of people that they preferred. With a group voting ticket, when you picked the party of your choice you could not see where those preferences were going. What that meant was that preference deals could be worked out in little back rooms to make sure that a person that a minor party wanted to try to get up could, with a preference whisperer, as we call them, actually pay a certain amount of money to get those preferences into the direction that they want. Hence we have a crossbench that is very large and very diverse, but some of these people that have been elected onto the crossbench only represent about 1000 votes or maybe 5000 votes, and that is why it is not considered to be a democratic process.

The difficulty in the upper house is that each upper house member represents a region. There are eight regions in Victoria, and this has been put into the constitution. For each of those regions there are five upper house members, so there can be a variety of people representing a variety of parties among those five members. To get elected you need about 16.7 per cent of the vote, and if you do not get that through your primary vote, then you have to get it through other preferences. As I said, those have been done in the past through backroom deals, so you could not always see who was being preferenced and where those preferences were going. That is why we have such a diverse and large crossbench.

I found it a little bit rich to listen to Mr Batchelor saying that Labor have always been the champions of democracy when in fact this is the first time that they have been willing to change the group voting ticket system because suddenly they are under threat by a rising conservative One Nation. Until this

point they had absolutely no interest in changing the group voting ticket, because largely the crossbench served their own purposes and their own bills. In fact many of them would have been Labor voters prior to being representatives of whatever party it is that they represent. That is something that people do not really understand.

In my case of course I have been bumped down to number 2, which means that my chances with the change in the group voting tickets could be at a disadvantage. I am actually having to vote for something that may or may not disadvantage me personally. I think it is important for people to understand that on the issue of democracy it needs to be the voice of the people and not just a handful of people but people in general that are the larger body of people; that is what democracy is. It should be that the larger body of people has the say in what it wants and who it wants. I support democracy, so in this situation, irrespective of what the impact may be on me personally, I support the democratic system and will be voting obviously with my party on the group voting ticket and for this whole situation to be changed.

I think it is really important that people understand how this all works. Obviously the rise of One Nation is the fear of the Labor Party. The rise of One Nation is unknown. They are polling way over 20 per cent, maybe at 25 per cent. That means that they are most likely in some regions automatically going to be quite comfortable in getting representatives into the upper house in those five positions in many of the eight regions, maybe in all of the eight regions. I think that it is going to be an interesting outcome as we go forward into the election. Somebody like me as a number 2 candidate can no longer count on catching that massive wave of downstream preferences from minor conservative parties. I have to be left marooned trying to reach that 16.7 per cent or have those individual people within my community who actually know me be prepared to vote for me. That is something that people need to understand. They do need to understand how the voting system works, they need to understand what that group ballot looks like and they need to know what each one is for. I get so surprised when I am out in the community and people do not really understand the difference between the great big, long ballot and the tiny, little, small ballot. You would think that would be something that would be basic, but it actually is not being taught in schools and people do not really understand our system and how it works.

We have had this massive influx in the last couple of months of additional citizenship ceremonies for thousands of new citizens, and I have to question whether some of them are actually saying the affirmation and taking the oath, because I have noticed a number of mouths not moving during that time.

A member interjected.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: No, that is actually an observation. That is not a criticism; it is a factual observation which other people have noted as well. It is a concern to have people becoming Australian citizens who are not actually moving their mouths when they are making those commitments. That concerns me. That is technically not allowed. You are not becoming an Australian citizen unless you are actually taking those oaths and affirming them afterwards. I think that is something that councils need to be looking at and being more vigilant on. There has been this surge of additional citizenship ceremonies that have been pushed through in the last month, and they continue to be pushed through. There were three additional ones added in Dandenong on Sunday. There were two additional ones in Frankston. There are so many additional ones that are happening, and people are coming to me and saying, 'Why are they doing this? Has this got anything to do with the election?' I would have to say, 'Yes, it does.' On that note I am going to finish up, but I will say this: I wholeheartedly support my party and its changes, and I will be voting to see these changes made to group voting tickets.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (16:19): I rise to speak on this bill, and much like many of my colleagues on the crossbench I will be voting against it. I want to speak to what I think has been a bit of a consistent theme in this debate about the idea of so-called self-interest in doing that and making that decision. It would be very easy to be perceived that way, and of course a lot of us do very

much want to be back here in the next Parliament. But it is certainly not just about that. It is about a great belief in our parties, our policies and our issues and ourselves simply operating under the system that was granted to us to get elected. The process in which this has occurred, honestly, has been quite galling and incredibly difficult, particularly as someone who has had a more proactive working relationship with the government that has been longstanding not just in this term but in the previous term, when I worked for the first Animal Justice Party MP that was elected to the Victorian Parliament. We have obviously worked collaboratively and constructively where possible.

For anyone, like Mr Davis, who claims that there were so-called corrupt deals, I am standing here today at the end of the term with duck shooting, jumps racing and greyhound racing still here in Victoria because we have chosen to be collaborative and proactive members of Parliament and take our jobs representing our communities really, really seriously. Some of the commentary that has come up in this debate has been pretty disappointing, to be completely honest. We are all still your colleagues. We all still have to spend time together until the end of this term. I am hearing it not just from the opposition – whom, frankly, I expect it from – but from government MPs, especially about the progressive crossbench and the way in which we operate. Need I remind Ms Terpstra whom the government has relied on in order to progress the legislative agenda this term. I know she is certainly not doing the new Premier any favours in making those comments in this debate today.

This decision is one that we honestly all very much expected to potentially happen. We are not asking the government to keep the status quo. I want to make that really clear. In fact we have been asking, pleading, begging the government to change this system to abolish the group voting ticket (GVT) but to do it in a way that was not rushed, that was not like this – that actually still created a model that was representative of democracy and the people of Victoria and did not just cancel out the minor parties. We have seen that happen in New South Wales and WA. My crossbench colleagues all have colleagues in those parliaments. Of course Victoria has locked in a system that requires a referendum in order to do that. We have for eight years, from my experience, been asking the government to have that referendum – to take it to the people of Victoria to agree to change our voting system before putting legislation first. That is simply all we have been asking for. Hearing the debate in the lower house, government MPs, opposition MPs and other MPs were saying, 'We'll do this, then we'll do that and we'll have a conversation about the structure.' Believe me, that is never going to happen now, because putting one form of reform in place that will benefit some parties ahead of others is going to make working together to achieve the fairest model for everyone near impossible. In doing that we are going to see Victorians poorer for it.

All of us clearly come in here with different positions and parties, but I very much believe that no-one comes in here with anything but good intentions, wanting to do good things on behalf of the causes that they believe in. That brings me to how we got here today. Last sitting week we were notified, not in any way formally, that the GVT legislation would be entering the Parliament. That certainly was not a shock; we knew that if this legislation was going to be in place, it needed to be done by the end of August. What I naively thought, perhaps stupidly, having faith that the government would do the right thing, at least by the people that have worked alongside them for the last four years, is that that bill would follow the usual process of being introduced in the lower house, debated in the lower house the following week and coming to us the week after that, which would be next sitting week. I actually thought that Mr Bourman, when he came to me saying that this was going through urgently, was being, frankly, a conspiracy theorist and that there was no possible way that the government would do that to us, noting the relationships that we have made in this place, noting what is usual practice when it comes to an urgent bill, only to find that everyone knew about it except for us. The Greens knew, the opposition knew and the government knew. We did not know.

In trying to be a negotiator on behalf of the crossbench I was attempting to reach out to the Premier's office – of course the Premier's office was a little bit hard to reach last sitting week – to at least slow it down. We had not even been briefed. We had not seen the legislation. In fact I only got confirmation that it was definitely going to happen when I looked at the guillotine motion in the lower house to see

if the Outdoor Recreation Victoria Bill 2026 was up for debate and passing of the amendments from the sitting week before the break. To say that that realisation was bruising would be an understatement. As I said, none of us were surprised by this, but the process by which it happened meant we were completely blindsided by it, particularly those MPs who have worked in a way that was perhaps too generous to the government at times despite our issues not moving and despite having a really frustrating four years. To not even have someone pick up the phone and let us know that this bill not only was coming but was coming down on us like a steam train – I think it was already going to be a hard rest of the term with the passing of this legislation, but doing it in that way was a pretty difficult realisation for people like me – and I am sure Ms Payne as well – who have really, really tried hard to do the right thing and to support the government when they are doing things right. I think they have done many things right as well as many things wrong, and that is why I am here in the first place.

We have, as I said, gone to the government a number of times to try and talk about this and been told there was just no decision that was made, so then to not even be informed when a decision had been made was quite shocking. There was clearly a decision somewhere that they would simply shore up the people that they knew they needed. But what I would say is that they will certainly need more than those people at times in order to progress their legislative agenda until the end of the term. I do just want to say, in saying that, that this could have been easier for everyone, and that was not chosen in deciding to move through with this policy. It was decided to do it in probably in the worst possible way. It would have been worse if it had happened last sitting week, but it is still really not ideal.

We, as I said, would have supported this basically in any way but this. All we said throughout this entire term and last term as well was, 'We can do this with you. We can do this right. We can support you in this decision. We can abolish the GVT.' What we do not want is to find out at the eleventh hour, when our parties are ready for elections, when we have staff in our offices – I have staff whom I had to speak to about this decision who are having this pretty difficult realisation, on top of finding out that this legislation was potentially coming within three days last sitting week.

We have simply asked for these laws to be developed carefully, transparently and collaboratively, even if we do not all agree. Even if this decision was eventually made at the very end, we simply asked for us to at least know about it and to have a seat at the table and to have that conversation. I know that the government has said that they got told to do this by a parliamentary inquiry. They got told that by a parliamentary inquiry last term as well. That is exactly why we have been trying to find a pathway forward in making those changes. But the decision was made to rush it at the last minute, because it seems that there are some people out there who think that this is for their political gain. I think they are going to be incredibly shocked when they walk in here next term and see that it probably made no difference, that we have less representation and our democracy is poorer for it.

Many of these issues have been advanced in this state for a really long time – for decades – such as legalising cannabis, such as banning duck shooting and such as the things that Mr Limbrick does. They are often a bit random. He is my bench colleague and we have opposing views, but we often find really good areas of middle ground. That is a really beautiful thing about this place that is going to be really sad to lose, and Mr Bourman touched on that as well. When I speak to school students and they ask, 'What's the most interesting thing about Parliament?', I always say, 'Actually, one of the people I like the most is the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers MP.' I think that is a really nice story to tell about the workplace and about our Parliament and about how we have a system that allows this diversity and differing of views but we all see each other as people at the end of the day. Of course that was made in a really beautiful and meaningful gesture when Mr Bourman gave up his office for me so I could return to work one month postpartum and have my baby at work. That is certainly not in any way an argument to keep the GVT; it is an argument to say we could have had that same representation in a process that was not rushed, in a process that the government claims that they are going to do and I now believe they just will not be able to.

I want to talk about something that is often left out of these conversations and might not have been considered by others. In my party, the Animal Justice Party, I was one of the first 50 members in

Victoria. I got asked to join outside Flemington Racecourse in 2013. They said, 'We want to start a political party for animals, will you join? We are trying to get 50 members.' And I said, 'Of course I will,' not thinking it would ever go anywhere. We built that party up to be a really strong, powerful force running in elections. Even without members of Parliament, we were able to negotiate to get agreements from the government, and that is often what people do not see when it comes to the other side, that those puppy farm laws that were agreed to in 2014 were part of Oscar's Law and the Coalition Against Duck Shooting and the Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses and the Animal Justice Party joining together and saying, 'Let's work together on this election campaign, and if we can achieve just one thing, we'll all be really happy about it.'

Our party has only grown in strides. Mr Davis touched on having a substantial membership and policies, and we certainly do have that. We have thousands and thousands of members in our state. Something that has been difficult and stressful and a pressurised environment, again, having this come through so quickly, is that I have had to talk to my party about this and say to them that I do not think we can stop this, I do not think we can find a way forward. The staff that are employed under our admin funding agreements and all of the people that help us run our volunteers are probably facing an uncertain future. Of course we will run in the upcoming election, but it is going to be a really difficult battle and it is going to be so much harder. I really grieve for many of the minor parties who are legitimate parties who have done the work, who have built themselves up, who have gotten representatives elected in here that have helped them progress and grow and get their policy issues on the political agenda, only for that to be lost very, very soon. Many of us already have substantial election plans and positions and funding in place that will probably have to be reconsidered as a result of this move.

I do not really want to speak too much about who will benefit from this, because I agree that we should not set our electoral laws based on whether or not we like the political landscape of the day. Certainly I do not think we should make changes to our voting system because we do not like that it might benefit, say, the far right. We have been opposed to doing it this way for as long as it has been proposed, for the reasons that I have said. I certainly do think that it should be a consideration for the government that if they think this is somehow going to improve their electoral chances at the next election, that is going to be a pretty significant shock. What we will be missing is the ability to have a few people like us to work alongside. I know we can be a bunch of random weirdos at times that care about really obscure things, but certainly it has been much easier to work with us as individuals or as small groups than a big, large bloc who holds a balance of power, demanding things that will very likely not be in the interest of many Victorians come the next term.

I want to talk about voter education and voter literacy as well, ahead of this change. Again I think it is really irresponsible, when this has been on the government's agenda, to act like this is necessary to do right now, when it has been a live conversation for almost a decade, as many people have said. We already know voter literacy in the upper house in particular is so incredibly low. Making this change is one thing, but to hear the government saying they will then look at changing the system again – I mean, we are looking at a 2026 election with one system and potentially a 2030 election with another system, if that is successful. That is something else that should be taken into consideration – the demands on the Victorian Electoral Commission to get that work done, to educate voters, to train up staff on how to count votes now and also the taxpayer money that will go into making that decision. Once again, it could have been done in a process that was streamlined one time and set us up for the future in a system that we know works, in a system that parliaments across the country already have – a system that WA did very, very recently and a system that is working for them and certainly still reflects the ability to have these representative voices in our halls of power.

We heard a number of comments about former MPs, including Mr Barton. I just do need to say that I find it very upsetting, as someone who worked alongside Mr Barton last term. He was a lovely man, and for him to not be in this chamber when he is being called corrupt in a debate that is very difficult for many of us, I think is one of the most reprehensible things that has happened here in a long time. I

would like to say to Mr Barton, if he is watching this, that I would encourage him to do a right of reply. I would like to talk about some of the really wonderful things that Mr Barton was able to do in his time here, regardless of how he got elected, because as I said, that was just operating under the system that we did not create. Mr Barton established the parliamentary inquiry into the children of incarcerated parents. That was a very special inquiry, and it resulted in policy change in our state. Mr Barton also established the parliamentary inquiry into homelessness in Victoria. That was one of the final things that he did, and that report was delivered in this term of Parliament, and it was a really meaningful, important report.

I was also actually in those so-called corrupt meetings as an Animal Justice Party staffer at the time. Let me tell you, Mr Davis, they certainly were not as thrilling as you seem to think they were. To hear again about really difficult decisions that were made, whether people agree with them or not, with a view of trying to do the right thing by public health at the time and the advice that was given, I just ask that members are mindful that –

David Davis interjected.

Georgie PURCELL: I have never been in preference meetings. I am referring to the so-called meetings with the government on the pandemic legislation. That was an incredibly difficult decision for so many of the members who supported it, because they knew what was going to be accused of them, which is still happening here right now. It was an incredibly difficult time where we could make decisions in the interests of public health, knowing what the opposition and others were going to whip up and the rhetoric of fear and conspiracy, or do what would have been more politically convenient. Let me tell you, Mr Barton could have very easily done what was more politically convenient. I know that there are members here on these benches who do not agree with those decisions, but certainly to say that they were done for any other reason but to do the right thing I just find really offensive. As I said, I was up close to those negotiations, and it was an incredibly difficult time in our office as well.

David Davis interjected.

Georgie PURCELL: I am not referring to preference negotiations, Mr Davis; you were talking about pandemic legislation. Regardless, Mr Barton was someone, regardless of how we got in this place, who was an incredibly good person, and I just really want to put that on the record, if that is going to be one of the things that is said on the way out of here.

I want to talk about Mr Grimley, who was also in the last Parliament, and it was not lost on me when I was sitting in the chamber for the apology last sitting week in the joint sitting, to hear of all of the work that went into reaching that point and the victim-survivors who needed an advocate to speak on behalf of them, to hear their stories and, as other members said, to just listen and to hear their stories and to validate them and to get that apology. Throughout the debate we heard consistently that that work was done by Stuart Grimley. It was on the same day that I was trying to slow down the GVT legislation that was rolling through the Parliament, and the irony was not lost on me, thinking, 'Well, if he was never in here, we'd probably never be hearing this apology.' How difficult it is going to be for many advocates who, frankly, often do feel unheard by the major parties, or even if they are heard by the major parties, the individual MPs do not have the ability to speak openly about pushing further on those issues, because they are bound by the structures and the rules in which they operate.

I have many debates in my household about whether we would prefer to be a minor party MP on the crossbench or in a party of government. Certainly I do believe that there is the space to have that internal advocacy and internal change and fight from within your party system to bring about reform, but something that is also a critical part of that equation is having people like me and others who are out there having the public conversation, moving the government in the right direction and speaking and telling their stories. That very important advocacy piece inside the government and other systems can go on as well. I think that losing that, certainly for the many communities that I represent, will be a difficult realisation to have.

Just today the government made an announcement that is a very welcome one on victim-survivor reforms. Actually the first line of it was about adding family and domestic violence as a protected attribute in our equal opportunity laws. What was missing from that, obviously, is something that I have been pushing the government to do for almost a year now alongside a community legal centre who has actually found that it is common practice for victim-survivors to be sacked by their employers for disclosing that they are a survivor. When we were going to – apparently this week; it is not happening now – enshrine the right to work from home, I was not necessarily opposed to that, but I said, 'If you're going to enshrine the right to work from home, surely we can also protect discrimination on the basis of family and domestic violence in the same piece of legislation where it belongs.' That was not as easy a process as you would think it was. It was actually a real fight, and I am thankful for the government doing it. I am thankful that the Attorney-General made that announcement today, but anyone reading that media release this morning would think that that was a government decision, and it just would not have happened today without the advocacy of my office and the community legal centre who came to me, as I said, in the first place because they were not getting anywhere with the government.

That was very much demonstrated by other MPs. Of course we had Fiona Patten spend two terms in this place. She was a brilliant reformer – one of the most effective legislators and collaborators that our state I think has ever seen. I was really lucky to see it up close. Fiona is a dear friend, and she has been a mentor and a confidant and someone who has really helped me on my political journey. In fact I probably would not be here if it was not for her, because she helped me see that a sex worker could in fact step foot in this place and could be a politician, and not only that, but it would also be a really brilliant thing and a great thing for democracy, and people would see themselves in many different ways. It is because of her that I felt that this could be something that I could do too, that this could be a place for me, and certainly in sharing my story and feeling like that is a possibility – feeling that people do not need a certain kind of politician; they need politicians who represent them and feel like them and look like them and have the same experiences as them – she has given me the bravery to speak out in many ways that I just never thought would ever be possible in my lifetime. She has a legislative record that speaks for itself. I know that there are many MPs in here who unfortunately were not able to spend time watching her in action, but certainly she was instrumental in reforms to bring about voluntary assisted dying and put so much into that to see that happen, as well as sex work decriminalisation and abortion law reform. In fact I spoke about this in my inaugural speech – that because of Fiona Patten I was able to access abortion without being harassed walking into a clinic. That was my first realisation of what one single person on the crossbench in a minor party can achieve in working with the government.

Of course we need champions on the inside to progress these reforms. We saw it further with medically supervised injection rooms, medicinal cannabis and other reforms. I know the government will say that they ultimately did those reforms and they introduced their own legislation, but certainly it is my view that that would not have happened, or perhaps not at the speed in which it happened, if there were not other advocates who were willing to advance those through the Parliament and in ideal circumstances work with the government through parliamentary inquiries and other forms to secure that change. I was saying to someone before that I always said that we have been reflecting a lot on today. It sort of has come on very quickly, and many of us have not really had the ability to prepare or process or I guess work out what is next and how we are going to fight our elections and how we are going to operate in this new system that it seems is going to be put upon us. I always said that I planned on being here for a good time not a long time. Certainly that is going to be the case. Unfortunately, it was not a very good time either. I think that one of the things I find most difficult about this is knowing that many of the things that I came in here to do probably should have happened. I was gifted political circumstances out of my control and changes in leadership at times that were really sensitive to my issues. Knowing that, I would feel much more at peace with this decision if it felt fairer for all of the work that we have done.

I leave this debate ready to do the work to at least show that I believe in my party and my issues heading into the election and knowing that we did try to change our voting system in a way that was constructive and pragmatic and in good faith, and to negotiate and to actually open up the door to achieve this change in a way that could have been wholly supported and that did not deliver such difficult circumstances, not just for us and our parties but actually for me. I feel sad for animals, obviously, and for my stakeholders, who finally had someone in here who could speak consistently about their issues and not rely on larger parties who have a range of other issues and policies that they are also expected to champion. Certainly we have picked up a lot of those communities as well through our core issues of animals, people and planet. I have done significant work in the victim-survivor space and with women's groups and environmental groups and forest groups and community legal centres and various other stakeholders that we have really given a lot of time to.

I am probably not good at having work–life balance, and I really tried to make the most of my guaranteed time in here. Certainly we will be fighting to try and do that again, but I wish that we were moving forward with electoral reform under better circumstances. There have been amendments proposed to change the start date of this legislation so that we are not coming into a new system only months out from an election – a new system to educate voters about and for us on the crossbench, who thought we might be able to have this conversation again next term, for the third time around, and make that offer. Certainly we were not dealt those cards. But I will be supporting the amendment to make this start date. It is, again, just a reminder to the government that we could all be standing here today supporting this legislation if it was done well, if it was done right, if we were given more time. Certainly there is an ability for everyone in this place to support the legislation if it is not just going to be thrust upon us through circumstances outside of our control at the eleventh hour, after so much goodwill this term trying to work on a better way forward, so we can have a red house which I know can be a little bit different at times. I know the lower house certainly does not really understand what is going on in here, but something that I have always thought is really wonderful about this room is that because of the make-up of it we all have these relationships with each other, because there is no majority and there is no ruling party. I think that is a wonderful thing. I think it is going to be sad that that representation and those voices are going to be lost. I will leave my comments there.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (16:50): I rise to make a contribution to the Electoral Amendment (Miscellaneous Matters) Bill 2026. The bill makes a range of administrative and campaign finance amendments to the Electoral Act 2002 and some consequential changes to the Planning Amendment (Better Decisions Made Faster) Act 2026.

Evan Mulholland: On a point of order, Acting President, I note that there have been a number of rulings on political logos and branding for members of Parliament, and I note that the member's water bottle has a political party logo on it. I just seek your clarification on whether that is allowed under the standing orders.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jacinta Ermacora): I uphold the point of order. It might have been an oversight, but there certainly have been multiple rulings by our current President and by Mr Atkinson as well, so I think the item needs to be removed from view.

David ETTERSHANK: I only have it here, Acting President, because as you may have noticed, I am masked up with the flu. So if Mr Mulholland is happy for me to continue to rehydrate, I am sure I can keep it at an off-camera angle.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jacinta Ermacora): It is a matter of whether the Acting President is happy, and I am happy with that.

David ETTERSHANK: Thank you, Acting President – such small things that matters such as this can pivot upon.

These reforms have already been fully explained by other members, and Legalise Cannabis have no issues with those provisions. However, the amendments to the Electoral Act 2002 that seek to abolish

group voting tickets without addressing the electoral reform of the regions are deeply concerning. As they stand, these amendments will render it virtually impossible for minor parties, independents and new entrants, the fastest growing participants in the electoral landscape, to be elected to the Legislative Council. Instead the reforms will effectively lock in the old parties – the Labor Party, the Liberal Party, the National Party and the Greens – parties whose primary votes have at best plateaued or more often have in fact been in decline.

Before proceeding further I want to make it clear that Legalise Cannabis indicated our support for the removal of group voting tickets during the 2022 election campaign, and we have held consistent to that position ever since, and that remains our position now. So it is not about removing GVTs but how it is done and what they are replaced with. The provisions in this bill are both inadequate and undemocratic.

In the 2022 election roughly 28 per cent of voters voted for a candidate not belonging to the four old parties. Labor polled at 33 per cent, the coalition at 29, and then the next largest group was that 28 per cent who voted for other than the big four – way ahead of the Greens on 10 per cent – and that figure is growing exponentially. In 2014 it was 19 per cent; by 2018 it was 22 per cent. It is the strongest signal of the electorate's growing mistrust in the old parties, and it is happening both here in Victoria and nationally. So obviously this has been recognised as a threat by those old parties, and what do they do? They collude in a deal to consolidate their power and to eliminate those independent and diverse voices from the Parliament – the very voices that Ms Purcell was talking about in her excellent submission prior to my own. And in so doing this bill validates the concerns of those very people who have lost faith in the major parties. They see the cynicism. They see the dirty deals being done dirt cheap. It might result in a good outcome for those old parties in the short term, but it is a tragedy for democracy in Victoria, and it may very well contribute to One Nation holding the balance of power in the next Parliament, as that 28 per cent who would vote for alternatives to the old parties feel that they have no other way to express their disenchantment with the status quo. What is more, it is highly likely that this percentage will be even greater come the 2026 election.

There is no question that the upper house voting system in Victoria needs serious reform. During the 2022 election much attention was paid to GVTs, preference deals and payments to the preference whisperer Glenn Druery. All major parties, including Legalise Cannabis Victoria, publicly supported comprehensive reform of voting arrangements in the Legislative Council. In submissions to the inquiry into the conduct of the 2022 state election by the Electoral Matters Committee (EMC), of which I am a member, the issue of voting arrangements in the Council came up again and again, and the inquiry suggested a number of ways that group voting tickets could be abolished while still retaining the diversity of voices in this Legislative Council, including increasing the number of members for each region or having the same number of members but reducing or eliminating the regions and electing all members from the state as a whole.

Victoria is, as we have heard ad infinitum throughout this debate, the only Australian upper house to retain group voting tickets. GVTs were abolished in New South Wales in 2003, in South Australia in 2018 and in Western Australia in 2021. But here is the rub: these jurisdictions also abolished their regions, allowing voters to vote in one statewide electorate. That is how a range of minor parties and independents are still able to win and retain seats in those parliaments. It might be irritating for the old parties, but it is a win for democracy. Heaven forbid that I preach to the politically savvy veterans of this place, but it is called proportional representation. It may be politically inconvenient to the old parties, but it is at the very heart of our democracy.

Is it not an extraordinary coincidence that in the 2022 election Legalise Cannabis Victoria received about 5 per cent of the vote and we have 5 per cent of the members in this place. The Greens got 10 per cent of the vote, and surprise, surprise, they have 10 per cent of the members here. The numbers for the larger parties are likewise generally consistent with their share of the vote. It is a bit inconvenient, and yes, you can point to the micro-parties here as being over-represented individually, but collectively

they are generally numerically consistent with the remaining pool of votes that went to the dozens of micro-parties and independents. They have as much right to be here as anyone.

I would fully get behind an upper house voting system that abolished the regions as well as GVTs. Such a system has great merit and would give those 28 per cent of voters an alternative to the major parties they clearly disdain. But this bill instead cherrypicks from the present system, abolishing the group voting system but retaining the regions and handing themselves – the old parties, the big parties and the other major parties – an unbeatable advantage.

I listened with interest to the contribution of the member for Tarneit in the other place, the former chair of the Electoral Matters Committee, and he talked about the report's suggested two-stage approach. He said:

> … get rid of group voting tickets and get rid of them now … we do not have time to lose … then let us come back in the next term and have a conversation about what the structure of the upper house looks like … that requires a referendum, and as we know, there is no time for a referendum between now and the state election.

Please – this sudden urgency is so utterly contrived and laced with political opportunism. There has been ample opportunity and time to hold a referendum. Reform of the upper house voting system has been under consideration in this state since at least as far back as 2015, but nothing was done in 2015. Nothing was done when virtually the same recommendations that came out of EMC in 2018 came out from the inquiry in 2022; still nothing was done. What we find is the big parties have waited until 1 minute to midnight to put up this bill, even though the VEC, the Victorian Electoral Commission, told them that time was of the essence two years ago. They have let the clock run down, knowing that it would force the separation of voting systems from regional distribution and a one-off political sugar hit. Or will it be one-off?

If these GVT changes are so urgent, and it is so utterly morally repugnant for it to remain in place, why was there no urgent action to stop GVTs from being used in the last City of Melbourne election only about 18 months ago? The simple answer to knowing where preferences go is apparently the heart of this issue, and it is a valid question. What was the response? The response was that a booklet was provided with the ballot paper to document the preference flows, and thus it was made transparent. But of course, we would not want to take a simple, obvious and proven recipe; we would prefer to go the path that is being proposed here today. Seriously, does anyone really believe that whoever forms government after the next election, having rid themselves of these pesky minor parties and the independents and having pulled up the drawbridge to exclude those independent voices, will allow for their return? Who will be left in this chamber to advocate for its restructure? Will stage 2 of the reform process ever come to pass?

Now, it has been argued, and it is correct, that we recently passed section 182 in the previous electoral reform bill, and that establishes an independent inquiry into the electoral regions and related questions. But we all know the fate of so many of these independent inquiries over decades and over successive governments of both colours: if the findings of those inquiries are inconvenient, they are either ignored or they are metastasised into some unrecognisable form. There is absolutely no requirement for any government to accept the recommendations of such an inquiry.

I recently received correspondence from the father of modern Australian political science and psephology Professor Malcolm Mackerras, and he said that no-one seriously believes there will be any second step. Instead the need for a referendum will become an excuse to have no further reform, and they will rely upon the assertion that this 2026 legislation was itself a genuine democratic reform. It is nothing of the kind – beautifully summed. The only way to ensure that a fair democratic system prevails is to abolish group voting tickets and the regions simultaneously. To that effect, we will be supporting an amendment from Mr Bourman during the committee stage to delay the commencement of the GVT reforms and to link them to the reorganisation of the regions. Democracy is and should be vibrant and dynamic, and sometimes it may be a bit messy. It is an inconvenient truth, for example, that strangely, despite a flood of publicity about Glenn Druery and GVTs and preference whispering

in the 2022 election campaign – and let us remember it was front page on all the papers; it was in all of the electronic media – more than 90 per cent of Victorians chose to vote above the line. Despite all of the crashing democracy, all of the threats that were published and all of the cries, the overwhelming majority of Victorians went with the system as we know it.

Of course the attack on small and emerging parties and independents is not limited to this bill. In the last electoral reform bill, which I spoke about previously, three other changes were passed that significantly reduced the ability of citizens to form and operate smaller parties and for those parties or independents to compete in an election. Firstly, we saw the number of members required for party registration go from 500 to 750 – a 50 per cent increase. Secondly, we saw the number of people required to support someone to run as an independent for the lower house increase from six to 50 to support that nomination. And thirdly, we saw the time requirement to have a completed party registration lodged with the VEC increase from 120 days to 180 days.

I would like to raise another issue with regard to the separation of voting systems from regional distributions – and Ms Purcell alluded to this before. We know that the Electoral Matters Committee recommended adopting the inclusive Gregory method in the next election. I am not going to attempt to try and explain what that means, but it is a different way of weighting preferences in the count of the vote. That change could not be accommodated, because the VEC said it did not have the time to do that. They could squeeze in the request of the big old parties to abolish GVTs, but they could not do the referendum, and they could not do the inclusive Gregory method. It is entirely possible that if a fulsome discussion around electoral reform does occur in the next Parliament and an alternate configuration is agreed upon, that may in fact necessitate further changes to the voting system. What a triumph that would be – two different voting systems in two successive elections, when it could have all been done in one hit if the voting system and the regions were addressed concurrently. Do it once; do it right – but no.

This question about rushing reform is not simply shared by those who will be crushed by it. Those who have been watching this debate will doubtless remember that in both the previous electoral reform bill and this reform bill a leading role has been taken by the Centre for Public Integrity. They are, I think it is fair to say, an impartial body. I think it is fair to say that they enjoy broad respect across the community, and if I may read from a media release that they put out this afternoon:

> The Centre for Public Integrity urges the Government and Parliament to slow down the passage of the Bill, release an exposure draft for public and expert consultation on its specific provisions, and ensure it is subject to robust parliamentary committee scrutiny before it is put to a vote.

That does not leave much to the imagination, does it? It is pretty clear where the Centre for Public Integrity is standing, and it is not simply, as has been suggested by some other speakers here, being put forward for improper purposes.

There is real opportunity for reform of the upper house voting system that would bolster our democracy and possibly restore some faith in those voters who find the machinery of our major political parties abhorrent. But this bill is so contrived, it is so very opportunistic and cynical, and it is these very qualities that continue to drive the growth of new, smaller parties that speak directly to the people, often only a subset of the electorate but people who wish to express their political preferences. It is our democracy. It is our proportional representation system. I fear that in the future, if this legislation goes forward in its current form, this will no longer be known as the Legislative Council. It will be the 'old parties club' and the sign out there that says 'Members only' will have a whole new meaning.

We understand that the passage of this bill is guaranteed. The deals have been done, but nonetheless, Legalise Cannabis Victoria will not be supporting this bill. We will also be pursuing changes to it.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:12): I did not like the voting system in Victoria before I was involved in politics. I did not like it when I ran for election in 2014 and 2018, I

did not like it after I was elected, and I do not like it now. Nonetheless I did not make the system; I dealt with the system that we have. Imperfect as it is, our party, the Libertarian Party, or the Liberal Democrats as it was known at the time, dealt with the system as it is. But my ideal system is one that many have spoken about today and many in the community advocate for: a fully proportional statewide system, similar to what New South Wales has and South Australia, Western Australia et cetera have, where the entire state is allocated members of Parliament according to the preferences of the will of the Victorian people. That is by far my preferred option.

This bill that we have here today has been supported in a deal between the major parties – bipartisan support is always a worry, and anyone in the public that sees bipartisan support should always worry about what is going to happen next. My concern is that what is going to happen here is the incentives for never doing statewide proportional reform will be locked into the system, because whoever gets elected after this new system goes in, if this bill is to pass today, there will be no incentive whatsoever to do reforms to enable the Victorian people to have a fully proportional system in Victoria. I have seen no public commitments from the Labor Party. I have seen no public commitments from the opposition to push this forward. A couple of crossbenchers have spoken about it.

What I will say today is that the Libertarian Party will not be going down without a fight. I do not see this as the end; I see this as the start of a new battle, one in which we will have to change tactics. The very first thing that I will do is I will make the commitment that if the Libertarian Party is fortunate enough to have an MP elected in the next term, we will be the first to make the commitment to push for reform of the electoral system to a fully proportionate representative system.

The reasons why we have not already done this are rather convoluted, but I expect the Labor Party is probably regretting a decision it made many years ago when it put forward the reforms in Victoria, in that changing the make-up of the regions requires a referendum. That is a big deal. The Labor Party does not like referendums, especially after what happened recently. That is a big problem because they do not want to campaign on a referendum. I doubt that they would get bipartisan support for a referendum for something good like this. They only get bipartisan support for something which they think benefits them both, but not something that would benefit Victorians as a whole. The government have had lots of time – eight years, since I have been here almost – to put up a referendum and change the regional make-up and get rid of group voting tickets at the same time, but they have chosen not to do it. As has been said, they have waited until the last minute – almost the very last opportunity that the Victorian Electoral Commission said that they had to do it – and then put it up. And of course they are supported by the opposition.

Mr Mulholland made some comments earlier. I think Mr Mulholland was a bit salty about how in the south-east in the last two elections he feels that the Libertarian Party, or as it was known then, the Liberal Democrats, took a position in Parliament that he felt the Liberal Party would have otherwise been entitled to. I do not know if that is how it would have worked out, because the make-up of parties would have been completely different under that system, but let us assume that is correct. When I was first elected in 2018 – on a very small vote, as was pointed out by Mr Mulholland – we had very, very limited resources in the Liberal Democrats. In fact the whole thing was run on a shoestring. But nevertheless I got over the line, and no-one was more surprised than me. I did not expect to get elected. In fact it was the last thing in the world that I expected to happen. But I was elected as a representative of a party that is meant to represent a philosophy – the philosophy of Western civilisation, the philosophy of liberalism – and I took that seriously. I took that very seriously. Despite many members in this place disagreeing with me, maybe they would not disagree with the idea that I took that seriously – defending that.

What would have happened if that Liberal MP had been elected and there was no Libertarian representation in the Victorian Parliament? Well, in 2019 we would not have had an inquiry into nuclear energy in Victoria. That would never have happened. When the pandemic came, who would have stood up against the government and what they did with their overreach? It would not have been the Liberal Party. There were not many people on the crossbench that were speaking out. It was the

Libertarians that were opposing the government and what they were doing. I will remind people what the opposition did when push came to shove. Many Victorians were losing their jobs and had terrible restrictions. All sorts of awful things happened during the pandemic, and many people lost their jobs over vaccine mandates. They were forced to make medical decisions that they did not otherwise want to make. They chose not to make it, and they lost their jobs in the process. In order to make sure that Parliament had the same rules as workers, Parliament voted to enact the same thing. The Liberal Party supported that. I did not support it. Even though I had been vaccinated, I refused to hand over my paperwork. The Liberal Party voted to kick me out of Parliament. There was no opposition to the pandemic from the Liberal Party. They were pushed into opposing the government. After a lot of work by me and many others, eventually they ended up opposing the government during the pandemic bill debate.

On other things that would never have happened, we would never have had an inquiry into stamp duty. We would never have had an inquiry investigating Transport Accident Commission claimants. We have also done a lot of work on the local laws at Casey council and getting a review there. We saved a private wildlife sanctuary. We ensured a serial killer will never be able to harm women again. Who would have been talking about castle law and pepper spray in Victoria? Maybe Mr Bourman might have been speaking about pepper spray, I will give you that. But certainly, raising castle law in the public consciousness – I think that we can take credit for that.

Who in this Parliament has a perfect record on never voting for an increase in taxes? It is the Libertarians. We have never voted for an increase in taxes. We are the only party that has never voted for an increase in taxes. We were the ones talking about the underlying incentives and the government policies driving organised crime. Still the government does not talk about this. The opposition rarely talk about it. They just say, 'Well, we need more laws and we need more police.' But actually we are the ones talking about the incentives, the taxes, the procurement policies, the size of government projects – the things that are actually driving organised crime in this state. We are the ones leading the conversation on that. We were the ones in the last term and in this term talking about what we are doing on energy policy and opposing the government on net zero. We have been talking about this for years now. We actually introduced a private members bill in this term of Parliament to repeal the outdated Nuclear Activities (Prohibitions) Act 1983 in Victoria. We also forced the government to do a review into the rock climbing bans that were happening in Mount Arapiles. On top of this, we have also been the only ones that have really, truly stood up for freedom of speech in this state, because I think every party seems to like freedom of speech until it is someone speaking about something that they do not like, and then all of a sudden they are a bit flaky on it.

I would say this: in this new system, in this new battle, there are going to be new choices for Victorian people. I think that the Victorian people should look at the track record of the parties that are elected in this place, including the Libertarian Party – I am happy to stand by our track record – and look at who has actually been fighting for their constituents and who has been fighting for these issues. I am not resigned to failure on this. I think that with this new battle the Libertarians will not be going anywhere. We want to continue the fight to make sure that there is a voice in Parliament defending liberty, because we do not trust the Liberal Party to do this. We do not trust One Nation to do this. We do not trust any other party to do this. We are the only party that can be depended on to defend liberty at all times.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (17:21): I rise to speak in strong support of this bill. This bill will end group voting and make Victoria's voting system more democratic. Victoria is currently the last jurisdiction to still have group voting tickets (GVTs), apart from the City of Melbourne. We agree that is also something that should be dealt with, but that is a debate for another day. How did we even get here? Group voting tickets were introduced in Australia in the 1980s at the federal level and then into the Victorian Legislative Council in 2003. Under the system, for the 90 per cent of voters who cast their upper house vote above the line, they simply have to mark a single box with their first

preference. The rationale for this was to simplify voting and reduce informal voting, and for a time many felt that it was working, until it did not.

The problems with this method began to be exposed when candidates on a teeny, tiny fraction of the vote were getting elected above candidates with many times greater votes. In 2018 the then Liberal Democrats got a seat on just 0.84 per cent, as did the taxi advocate from Transport Matters, who was elected on a tiny 0.63 per cent. It also meant that there were some absurd situations, like in 2018 where in one region someone voting for the Animal Justice Party had their vote end up with the pro-gun Liberal Democrats. Unlike Mr Ettershank, I cannot subscribe to the view that anyone voting for a non-major party is happy with any non-major party. I am pretty sure that most voters you talk to in the community would agree with that. It is one of the most bizarre arguments in favour of GVTs that I have heard.

The fundamental problem at the heart of group voting tickets is that after a voter has indicated their first preference above the line, they lose control over how their vote is distributed. Parties, not voters, swap preferences with one another in backroom deals, and voters have no idea what these deals are when they cast their vote. When voters have no control over or even any knowledge of where their preferences are going, there is no world in which this can be considered democratic. What became even more problematic was the fact that some people worked out how to game the system and began offering to arrange deals for a fee. The so-called preference whisperer Glenn Druery charged micro-parties – he still does this – a $5000 joining fee to be part of a network where he arranged preference swaps and up to $55,000 in return for someone getting elected. In 2018 in this place at least eight MPs, or 20 per cent, won a seat due to these cash-for-preferences deals. These sorts of situations led the federal Parliament and other states to abolish group voting tickets some time ago.

The case for change in Victoria has long been argued and has been well established. Following the farcical 2018 election the Electoral Matters Committee, while raising concerns with group voting tickets, recommended that the Parliament refer an inquiry to the committee to consider possible reforms. This referral never happened. Then in July 2024 the same committee's inquiry into the conduct of the 2022 Victorian state election recommended that Victoria should scrap group voting tickets without delay. Then in December 2025 the committee's report into Victoria's upper house electoral system, an inquiry that I was part of, recommended that the Victorian government reform the upper house voting system by introducing legislation amending the Electoral Act 2002 to eliminate group voting tickets; it could not be clearer. Now it is at the eleventh hour we finally have legislation that seeks to abolish group voting tickets once and for all in Victoria.

I recognise that the repeal of group voting tickets will likely impact the future electoral prospects of some members of the upper house, and some of these members are people who I have great respect for and who have been excellent, hardworking representatives. I work closely with them. I genuinely like many of them. And I agree that maybe this process – the way this bill has been introduced – if it was not discussed with them in the proper manner, is not great. I do not agree with that. But this is not personal. I think it is really clear that this is not about individuals – who is a good representative and who is not a good representative. Those decisions are for the people to make. This is about the principle. Group voting is poorly understood by our electorate and produces outcomes that do not reflect voter intention. It is a blight on our democracy. Voting should not be an opaque process where a candidate with a tiny proportion of the primary vote can get elected thanks to dodgy and opaque backroom deals, and I cannot think of any ordinary voter who thinks it is acceptable to be able to buy a seat in this upper house for $55,000. I challenge someone to go and find a voter who feels that that is an acceptable outcome.

I have heard the criticism that the repeal of this law will undermine the diversity of voices in this place, despite those voices not representing actual voter preference. As my good friend Dr Tim Read pointed out in the Legislative Assembly, if that is genuinely the goal, we might as well hold a lottery instead.

I wholeheartedly agree with the words of the Honourable Anthony Carbines in his second-reading speech for this bill. He said:

> Removing GVT from the voting process will also not make it impossible for smaller parties to be elected to the Legislative Council. It will however require candidates to convince electors to give their party voting preference rather than relying on the GVT practice.

That sounds like democracy. No-one is outlawing micro-parties or minor parties. You just need to build a vote that is large enough to be democratically elected. The reality is that most Victorian voters still do not know what group voting tickets are. Victorians might not notice when they are gone, but our democracy will be healthier when this law is passed. We are very open to a discussion about whether there is a better structure that we could have in the upper house, but that is a separate question to whether group voting tickets should be allowed to continue, and those two questions do not have to be linked – and that was, in fact, the finding of multiple inquiries of the Electoral Matters Committee.

The other thing to point out is that changing the structure of the upper house requires a referendum, which therefore requires agreement across a majority of members of this place on what question would be put to the people in a referendum, and as yet there is no agreement on what an ideal structure is and there is no sense that that agreement would be reached any time soon. There is no ability to hold a referendum before the next election, so there is no certainty about how long that process might take, whereas the question about GVTs is clear. They need to go and they can go now, so we should get rid of them at this opportunity. It does not preclude any kind of discussion about the structure of the upper house happening down the track, and that is a discussion that the Greens certainly welcome. But abolishing GVTs at its core is about ensuring that elected members legitimately reflect the intentions of voters, and more broadly, it is about public confidence in our voting system and Parliament as an institution. These are things that are increasingly under threat, and it is therefore more important than ever that we work together to defend and strengthen our democracy.

We are here today debating a law to protect our democracy in large part due to the advocacy of my Greens colleague and dear friend Dr Tim Read. Since his first speech in Parliament eight years ago Tim has campaigned for group voting tickets to be abolished in a way only Tim could – through clear-eyed, relentless and evidence-based advocacy. When he spoke in support of this bill last month it was the 16th time he had raised this issue in Parliament. I want to use this moment to thank him for gifting us a template for how to do politics differently – a template for how to put into practice what he calls politics: hope in motion. He has shown us how to explain without talking down, how to disagree respectfully and still build trust with those who hold a different opinion, how to hold true to your values and still keep an open mind to a better argument and how to bring the campsite rule to politics – leave it better than you found it. Thank you for everything you have done, Tim. As he did in the other place, I commend this bill to the house.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:31): I rise to make a contribution to the Electoral Amendment (Miscellaneous Matters) Bill 2026. Democracy should never be taken for granted. Our democracy belongs to Victorians; it does not belong to political parties, governments or politicians. It belongs to every Victorian who takes the time to enrol, cast their vote and place their trust in this Parliament to act in the public interest. Reform should always be guided by what strengthens public trust and ensures that Parliament remains responsive to the people of Victoria.

I do acknowledge that this reform is aligned to the recommendations of the Victorian Electoral Commission's report on the upper house electoral system. However, abolishing group voting tickets without broader electoral reform benefits the major parties rather than strengthening our democracy. This reform is self-serving and motivated by all the wrong reasons. The government argues that abolishing group voting tickets will make Victoria's Legislative Council elections more transparent by ending preference whispering. I agree that voters should be back in control of where their votes go to ensure that voters rather than political parties decide where their preferences flow. However, electoral reform should strengthen democracy, not simply reshuffle political advantage. Without

broader reforms to the upper house electoral system, abolishing GVTs will simply see Labor retain seats, see the Liberals potentially gain additional representation and give One Nation a huge leg-up.

We have had some independent expert advice provided, looking at what the upper house will look like without group voting tickets. If I was to get out my crystal ball and make a prediction, the 61st Parliament will look like this: one party, an emerging party in Victoria, will end up with the balance of power, holding 12, potentially 13, seats – more seats than the traditional older parties. The upper house will be made up of the big four. How effective will the 61st Parliament be when you are handing the balance of power to one party? Victorians deserve an electoral system that puts voters, not political parties, at the centre. Real reform means protecting proportional representation and ensuring every vote counts fairly. When it becomes more difficult for smaller parties and independents to win seats, Parliament is more likely to be dominated by the major parties. This can mean that communities with views not represented by Labor or the coalition, such as members of the Legalise Cannabis Party and others, have fewer representatives advocating their interests.

This bill addresses only one part of the problem and in doing so creates another. If this Parliament is serious about electoral reform, then we must also be serious about ensuring that reform is comprehensive and consistent. If the objective is genuine electoral reform, it should be comprehensive rather than selective. Victoria's upper house electoral system requires reform that is fair. We should not be satisfied with only implementing reforms that advantage the larger parties while ignoring parts of the system that compromise and erode representation and accountability. Abolishing group voting tickets while retaining the existing regional structure risks creating an imbalance that advantages larger parties at the expense of smaller parties and independent voices. If both elements of the current system are considered flawed, then reform should address both together, rather than implementing only one change that favours almost always those already holding power. Electoral reform should never be driven by political convenience.

If the current regional structure is also considered to be flawed, then we should have the courage to pursue that reform as well. Of course, unlike the abolition of group voting tickets, changing or abolishing Victoria's eight Legislative Council regions requires a constitutional referendum. That means that the Victorian people, not the politicians, must have the final say. This is an appropriate safeguard for a change of such significance. It should ask whether every voter has an equal opportunity to influence the outcome of the election, whether Parliament remains representative of the diversity of our community and whether the electoral system gives the public confidence that elections are fair. If GVTs are abolished without the necessary changes to the regions, success in the upper house will become increasingly dependent on higher primary votes alone. This means substantial campaign funding and established party infrastructure will be critical, making it almost impossible for emerging parties and independent voices to get elected. Electoral reform should improve transparency without reducing political diversity or limiting genuine community representation. More than ever, voters are disillusioned and are feeling unheard, and this is why we need to ensure that reforms to our electoral system can restore faith in our democratic processes.

The Legislative Council was designed to be a house of review, not simply a chamber that endorses decisions made by the Legislative Assembly. This means that voices that may not be represented by major parties may still be able to have influence in decision-making. A diverse crossbench can hold the government to account by scrutinising legislation and demanding greater transparency. It is more reflective of the reality of the Victorian community. Many significant improvements to legislation come through this process.

We all know that I represent the Legalise Cannabis Party, a protest and grassroots party that was founded in 1993. For decades people involved in this movement have been advocating to bring the lived experiences of patients, families and advocates whose voices were often ignored. The possession, use, supply and unlicensed cultivation of cannabis remain illegal in most Australian states and territories. It has been so for nearly 100 years. Despite growing evidence of the harms associated with the criminalisation of cannabis and increasing public support for reform, I and my colleagues across

the country are still pushing for change. For too long, cannabis policy has been driven by ideology and stigma rather than evidence and public health. As a crossbench MP, I bring these voices to the chamber and I can scrutinise government decisions.

I am not alone as a crossbencher who has brought the government on the journey and pushed for meaningful reform. In fact last week I listened with interest as the Premier delivered his apology to victim-survivors of child abuse in state schools. Interestingly, the Premier, the opposition leader and Brad Rowswell MP all acknowledged former upper house crossbencher Stuart Grimley and the work that he did to bring the issue to the forefront. Stuart did not give up on survivors; he elevated their voices in Parliament until those in positions of power listened. This is the power of a diverse crossbench.

Another amazing former crossbencher and a dear friend of mine, Fiona Patten, was also pivotal in getting issues on the table and persuading government to act. Safe access zones, voluntary assisted dying, medically supervised injecting rooms, spent convictions – to name a few – were all campaigns initiated by Fiona and taken up by this Labor government.

My colleague Georgie Purcell raised the important work of former crossbencher Rod Barton. The thing about us crossbenchers is that we are brave enough to raise issues in this place that those from the major parties are too afraid to raise. All of the abovementioned have come from all sides of politics. Again, this is the power of a diverse crossbench. If Parliament becomes less politically diverse, governments will face fewer challenges to their decisions. The result will be a reduction in the checks and balances that are an important part of a healthy democracy. Crossbenchers are needed in this chamber.

I am also concerned about how rushed these changes are and how close to the election they are being made. I am proud to represent the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region, a growing, vibrant area and one of the most culturally diverse regions in Victoria. Over 45 per cent of our residents were born outside Australia and speak languages other than English. Any significant change to our electoral system requires education and understanding. It carries with it a responsibility to ensure that every voter understands how changes affect them before they cast their ballot. It is not enough to simply change the law; we must also invest in educating the community about what those changes mean in practice. Need I remind you that the overwhelming majority of voters – some 95 per cent – vote with that '1' above the line? How can the Victorian Electoral Commission effectively educate all Victorians about this electoral reform in the next three months?

We need to make sure that we are not rushing the reforms to our electoral system and that any changes that need to be implemented are done carefully. That includes ensuring that clear, accessible and culturally appropriate information is available to all Victorians, including people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people with disability, young voters and those voting for the first time. If we are asking Victorians to vote differently, then we have an obligation to make sure they understand how to complete their ballot correctly, how their preferences will be counted and what these reforms mean for their representation in Parliament. It should be guided by democratic principles and by what best serves the Victorian people to make sure that their voices are heard. Electoral reform should not create confusion or unintentionally disenfranchise voters. It should empower them to participate with confidence, knowing that their vote reflects their choices and that their voice matters. Every reform we consider should be measured against a simple question: does it give Victorians a stronger voice in the decisions that affect their lives?

Victorians deserve an electoral system that is coherent and transparent, not one that is selectively reformed according to what is politically expedient for the major parties. If we believe the system needs fixing, then we should commit to fixing it properly. Genuine electoral reform should be comprehensive, respect the voices of the people and strengthen, not weaken, the diversity and representativeness of this Parliament. Look around: voters are already disillusioned. We see the polarisation, the confusion and the anger. They do not feel seen or heard, and rigging the system to

give more power to the already powerful major parties will make them feel worse. We are at a critical time in our state's history. We need now more than ever to encourage greater engagement in our democratic process, strengthen public trust in our institutions and ensure that every Victorian has confidence that their vote carries genuine weight and importance. As such, we will oppose this half-baked reform of our electoral system and this bill.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (17:43): I rise to speak on the Electoral Amendment (Miscellaneous Matters) Bill 2026. People on both sides of this debate have argued that they are the ones that are protecting democracy, they are the ones who are protecting Victorians against corruption, but the truth is that if people in this place truly cared about ensuring that every single Victorian and every single vote was represented fairly in this place, then we would not be debating a bill to just remove group voting tickets, because that is only half the problem.

This bill, based on the 2022 election, cuts out the first preference votes of 25 per cent of Victorians; together, Labor, the Liberals, One Nation and the Greens got the other 75 per cent. To make this system fair, the upper house regions should be abolished, as in New South Wales, Western Australia and South Australia. That would give every Victorian the ability to vote statewide for their preferred representative in the upper house. If we did that, everybody could get what they wanted. They would vote in the lower house for their local representative and in the upper house for their statewide representatives. Every vote would count. That is it: that is what democracy is supposed to be.

Let us not forget that this bill, in an attempt to stop parties with 2 per cent of the vote from getting 2.5 per cent of the seats, means that parties with as low as 10 per cent of the first preference votes will get 20 per cent of the seats – and in case anyone is wondering, yes, I am talking about the Greens. Forgive me if I cannot take the lectures being given by some here in this place today seriously at all; this bill does not seem to me to be about what is best for Victorians or democracy.

People in Victoria work hard. They have to, considering all the taxes they have to pay – tradies, young families and mums and dads juggling bills and school runs, trying to keep a roof over their heads, seeing if they can build something up that is not taxed away to nothing to hand on to the next generation. It should not actually be asking for much. They just want a fair go, and they want to pick someone to vote for who actually listens and represents them in Parliament. Victorians are not all the same. We think differently and we want different things. That means sometimes there are messy arguments, but that is fine; that is democracy. I would rather that than the other kind of fighting. A healthy democracy makes room for all these discussions and for all these debates to take place, and you cannot have that debate if you do not have all the voices in the room.

We need to have the voices at the table in proportion to the way they were voted for, but that is not what this bill does. The upper house regions need to be abolished so that 75 per cent of the vote equals 75 per cent of the seats and 25 per cent of the vote equals 25 per cent of the seats. It is simple and it is fair. As it stands, this regional system sets the highest bar to get elected of any upper house system in the country, the highest quota in Australia in fact. Nowhere else makes it this hard for those outside the establishment to get representation in Parliament. The quota for the federal Senate is 14 per cent, for the South Australian upper house it is 8 per cent, for the New South Wales upper house it is 4.5 per cent and for Western Australia's upper house it is 2.7 per cent. The quota for getting elected into this place is higher than all of those, at 16.7 per cent. It is a set-up to make it virtually impossible for minor parties to get elected unless they band together and combine their votes. This rigs it so only the establishment parties get to do that kind of rigging. Other states vote statewide in the upper house and get good, fair representation in their parliaments. It might not be the kind of representation that we would all vote for, but at least everyone gets their say.

Some have been arguing that it is too late: 'It's too late. The election is upon us; we just can't get it done.' But this could have been done under the former Liberal government, and it could have been done in the last two terms of Labor government. This was all about choices. Nobody did it because

nobody wanted to do it, and after 28 November this bill will lock out the one in four Victorians who want to choose a minor party first.

It is especially interesting that over the last 20 years the primary vote for Labor and for Liberals has been falling – falling, falling, falling. Meanwhile, minor parties keep rising. Those in this Parliament who like to call themselves a party of government can barely get 30 per cent first preferences on their own and just manage to scrape over 50 per cent to 60 per cent when they are combined. This does not really strike me to be a bill about reform. It looks like a bill about protection – protection for themselves. They are serving themselves and not actually serving Victorians. If they cannot win voters back, they are going to shut out the other choices that voters had, but one day soon the parties voting to silence Victorian voters today may find themselves to be minor parties.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) incorporated the following:

President, I rise to speak in favour of the Electoral Amendment (Miscellaneous Matters) Bill 2026.

This is important legislation which will make our elections fairer and more representative of the will of the Victorian people.

I believe that the abolition of Group Ticket Voting is a reform which an overwhelming majority of us in this place will be able to support enthusiastically.

In that spirit, I do want to acknowledge the bi-partisan nature of these reforms.

Members of the opposition worked constructively with government MPs on the Inquiry into Victoria's Upper House Electoral System, producing a report in December last year which recommended abolishing Group Ticket Voting.

Abolishing Group Ticket Voting was something which produced consensus between parties, and that is why we are acting on it through this bill.

In fact, the report concluded that the process towards upper house reform should run through first abolishing Group Ticket Voting, and second, that if further reform is to be pursued, a process whereby consensus can be reached should take place.

Generally speaking, it is a good idea to seek consensus before going ahead with this sort of reform.

We initiated a process by which members from across the political spectrum and from both houses of parliament were given the opportunity to contribute.

That inquiry produced a report to which the government is now providing a legislative response in the form of this bill.

To understand the historical context of how we arrived at a system which made use of Group Ticket Voting, it is very useful to understand the system which was used prior to 2006 and the reasons why that was seen as outdated and in need of replacement.

To put it simply: the old unbalanced system which the Group Ticket Voting System replaced needed to go.

Before 2006, members of the Legislative Assembly did not represent regions.

Instead, they represented 'provinces' covering very different parts of the state.

Under that system, each province would have two MPs, with one of them being on the ballot at each election, much like the way that we elect half of the Senate at each federal election.

This meant that a member of this chamber could serve a term of up to eight years off one election, though at the time we did not have fixed term parliaments.

That meant that often elections would be held more frequently than our current system of electing members every four years.

Replacing that way of electing members was another change which was introduced when the old upper house system was reformed.

The introduction of fixed terms of parliament, with elections regularly held on the last Saturday of November every four years was a common sense and well needed change.

Some argued at the time that, in the old system, the risk of parliamentary gridlock was too great, with instances of one party forming government in the lower house and another party holding a majority in this place blocking any legislation which was proposed to them.

However, the optimist in all of us might hope that this would incentivise parties to work together collaboratively in the best interests of the people whom they represent.

Though, we can all agree, that ideal scenario was not always successful, and politics sometimes overrode effective governance.

Gradually, a view emerged that this system should be reformed and replaced with a system which allowed for a more representative voting system in the upper house.

As a result, the Bracks Labor Government passed the Constitution (Parliamentary Reform) Act 2003, creating the upper house that we know today: 40 seats, 8 regions, elected with Group Ticket Voting.

And, for the time, Group Ticket Voting seemed like the best possible way to go about reforming such a broken system due to a number of considerations.

The then-Bracks government in 2003 introduced a system to elect this chamber in a proportional way similar to the rest of the states, and similar to the Federal Senate.

We mimicked the upper houses of the various states and the Commonwealth, with the exception of Queensland, which insists on not having an upper house at all.

At the time, Group Ticket Voting was seen as a way of allowing people to vote in a more complicated, proportional, system without seeing an increase in informal votes as a result of the complexity of the system.

It would have been no good to introduce a supposedly more representative electoral system if it led to a sharp increase in ballots being thrown out due to minor mistakes made by voters who had intended to cast a valid vote.

The system that existed prior to the 2003 act, to be clear, had accomplished what it was originally set out to do.

It's main goal was to help improve the democratic representation of the people in this state.

Prior to 1951, the Legislative Council was elected based on a strict property franchise, meaning that only those wealthy enough to meet certain thresholds of property ownership were eligible to vote in upper house elections.

For an international comparison, in Britain, the fourth Reform bill passed in 1918, abolishing the property franchise for men, and another bill in 1928 abolished the property franchise for women, meaning that we were very much behind the times when we got around to abolishing it ourselves several decades later.

On the other hand, Western Australia took another decade before they finally got around to abolishing their property qualifications to vote in upper house elections in 1964.

In 2026, it would probably seem ridiculous to us if someone were to suggest going back to that old system of the property franchise, because it appears to go against every instinct we have as people who understand democracy as being fundamentally about giving equal power to the vote of each citizen, on the basis that they are citizens, not land owners.

The reality is that the Legislative Council was originally seen as a champion of the land-owning classes within colonial Victoria.

Even earlier iterations of the Legislative Council had seen large portions of the chamber being appointed by the colonial governor rather than elected.

It is great to see that we have come far since then, and made a genuinely democratically elected representative chamber to review legislation.

So, putting this bill into the broader context of this chamber's history, abolishing Group Ticket Voting does seem like a fairly technical adjustment to electoral law when compared with making the chamber fully elected, abolishing the property franchise, or giving women the right to vote as we did in 1908.

Coming back to this issue at hand of replacing Group Ticket Voting with a system which asks above the line voters to number at least five preferences.

Group Ticket Voting is certainly not the worst system which we could have, as a quick look through the history of this chamber would show, but is not the best system we could have either.

That is why we are debating these changes to it today.

Before abolishing Group Ticket votes, we need to understand why they were implemented in the first place.

As I have already referenced, it was because the government of the day did not want to see a more complicated electoral system, which could have resulted in a higher informal vote.

For whatever flaws it has, under Group Ticket Voting, it is very simple for the voter to cast a formal vote.

Ensuring that voters would continue to be able to cast valid, formal votes despite the change in voting system was an important consideration back in 2003, when the system was introduced.

What is important to consider when replacing Group Ticket Voting, is that we should introduce a new system which will not lead to a strange increase in informal votes because of confused voters who intended to vote for a candidate, making a mistake and filling out the ballot incorrectly.

What we have seen from the system introduced to the federal Senate by the Turnbull Government in 2016 is that a system which asks voters to distribute their own preferences above the line can in fact work.

The system being proposed within this bill is very much comparable to the system currently used in the Senate.

People trust it, people know how to use it, and people are largely able to cast their votes with confidence that they will not be struck off for a minor mistake.

In last year's federal election, roughly 3.08% of Senate votes cast in Victoria were informal.

In the 2022 state election, 3.22% of ballots cast for the Legislative Council were either invalid or blank.

Of course, there may never be an election with zero informal votes, given that some voters spoil their ballots intentionally.

The aim here is to ensure the system sees as few people as possible spoiling their ballots inadvertently, due to not understanding the voting system or through making a mistake in how they fill out their ballot.

Over time, Group Ticket Voting has fallen off use from other states and the Commonwealth, as voters stopped supporting the system.

This has come about as a result of the ability of some candidates to get elected with vanishingly small primary votes.

The public understand that preferences in the upper house, under Group Ticket Voting, are not the same as handing out a how to vote card for the lower house, through which a party provides a recommendation of who to preference.

Under Group Ticket Voting, parties are distributing preferences on behalf of the voters.

While the VEC does publish where each party will be distributing its preferences at the commencement of voting, the vast majority of voters do not consult this before deciding whether to vote above or below the line.

The Inquiry into upper house reform found that, overall, voters did not walk into the polling booth knowing how their preferences would be distributed if they voted above the line, and the results do not always reflect the preferences of voters.

For example, in the 2018 election, two candidates were elected to the Legislative Council with less than 1% of the primary vote in their seats.

These preference deals are widely seen as opaque and lacking in sufficient transparency.

While the direction of preferences is published publicly, voters seem to mostly not look this information up ahead of voting.

Ultimately, with the results of elections increasingly being determined through preference deals, skewed away from reflecting how people voted, we risk the public losing faith in our system of representation in this chamber.

When the public sees a voting system as being opaque and unrepresentative, the prestige of the Legislative Council is diminished, and so too is the perception of its legitimacy among voters.

This can negatively impact the public's satisfaction with democracy, and can create a sense among people that their votes don't matter, or that their votes will not be respected by the system.

Furthermore, President, we remain the only jurisdiction in Australia which still uses group voting tickets.

Every other upper house in the country has moved onto new representative methods of casting and counting votes.

This bill proposes to create a new system of voting above the line which would require voters to number at least five groups in order of preference.

While the instructions for how to cast a valid vote will stipulate that voters must number at least five groups, ballot saving provisions will be included to ensure that those who do not number five or more groups will not be considered informal.

This matters because an election with a high percentage of votes being counted as informal may not accurately reflect the voting intentions of the public.

These ballot saving provisions will also apply to ballots with non-consecutive preferences which have a clear indication of a first preference and will count a tick or a cross placed in the square next to a group will be counted as a first preference vote.

While these ballot saving measures are important, they are for last resorts where a ballot does not meet the requirements for how a ballot should be cast but nevertheless does give a clear indication of voting intention.

At the end of the day, I do not find it unreasonable to ask voters to number at least five parties or groups when they vote above the line.

Given how important preferences are in a proportional electoral system, it is important that voters distribute their own preferences according to which party they believe deserves them.

This bill does not seek to amend the below the line voting system for the Legislative Council, nor does it seek to amend how preferences are counted in local government elections.

Also important is the fact that this bill does not exist to make it harder for smaller parties to get elected.

Small and minor parties have every right to contest elections, and if enough voters choose to vote for or preference them, then they will be elected to parliament and given the opportunity to serve the Victorian people.

An election should be a contest of ideas and an exercise in persuasion.

To keep our democracy strong, voters need to know what they are getting when they vote for a party.

And equally, maintaining the confidence in the political system, and in particular the democratic mode which we elect people to chambers such as this, is critical.

This is why having a system which is in line with other states, which these guardrail provisions to ensure ballots are not falling into an informal vote pile, is essential to maintaining public support for our democracy.

That means a fair system, which the public trust and feel represents them best, and it means a system where candidates from both major parties and minor parties have an equal shot at representation.

Minor parties and independents who want to seek election to this place should continue to have the right to do so an independent or as a member of a minor party, this bill preserves that right.

To put it simply, this bill seeks to create a fairer and more representative voting system for the Legislative Council in which voters will distribute their own preferences when voting above the line.

I commend the bill to the Chamber.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (17:49): I thank all members for their contributions on this important bill. There has been a lot said in the chamber today. I am sure there will be a lot more said in the committee stage, but I would like to place on record the government's support for this reform. It is an important reform for the future of our democracy. Preferences should be determined by voters, not in backroom deals. I appreciate that this is a policy decision that the government has arrived at that not everybody agrees with. This is certainly not about anyone in this chamber, nor is it about the legitimacy of those in this place who have been elected under the current system. In the government's view it is an essential reform to remove group ticket voting ahead of the upcoming election, because Victorians do deserve to know where their votes are going and do deserve to have confidence that when they vote they are selecting their own preferences.

Essentially this legislation will kill the business model of the so-called preference whisperers who seek to subvert our democratic processes in the way in which they game the system. The changes to require the ordering of at least five groups above the line will put voters in control of their preferences, making our elections fairer and more transparent. As a number of members have already highlighted, these changes will also align Victoria with the rest of the country. There are amendments in this bill that also go to improving transparency as well, so that Victorians can make informed decisions on election day.

I do want to acknowledge the significant work of the Electoral Matters Committee on the two reports that they consulted widely on, the review of the 2022 election and the inquiry into Victoria's upper house electoral system. I understand that there are a number of members who have amendments. I know not all of those amendments have been circulated yet, so I will hold my comments about those amendments to the committee stage. But just to be very clear about the government's position, we will

not be supporting any of the amendments. I am looking forward to taking all those questions in the committee stage of this bill.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (33): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Gaelle Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Shaun Leane, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Evan Mulholland, Aiv Puglielli, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

Noes (5): Jeff Bourman, David Ettershank, David Limbrick, Rachel Payne, Georgie Purcell

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Committed.

Committee

Clause 1 (18:00)

David ETTERSHANK: If we could circulate my amendments, that would be appreciated. This is a fairly simple amendment. There has been much said about the evils of preference whispering – 'profits for preferences' might be one way we could describe it. This has been used in turn as an argument for why we need to now go to this cumbersome two-stage process that will disenfranchise and remove all of the smaller parties in this place and the independents. This amendment is quite simple. It inserts a new section 84A, which makes it an offence to do preferences for profit. It is that simple. This has been prepared by a senior counsel at our request. Basically it defines what actions are prohibited in the form of advice or the sale of preferences. It provides for penalties, and that is really all we need. Despite all the drama and all the theatre and everything, it is very simple. In that context we would like to advance that. I would also indicate, as I should have done previously, that I will not be proceeding with my other amendments, which are amendments 1, 2 and 5.

David LIMBRICK: I would like to circulate my amendment too. I will speak on it later, when we get to clause 30.

Jeff BOURMAN: If I may, with the will of the house, I might do my questions in clause 1. Is the minister okay with that?

Ingrid STITT: Yes.

Jeff BOURMAN: Minister, starting with clause 13 – this is on page 6 of the bill – in clause 13(1), under paragraphs (ca)(iii)(A) and (ca)(iii)(B), and on the next page in clause 13(2) there is massive use of the word 'must'. It says 'number 1 must be placed above the line' in paragraph (ca)(iii)(A) and 'number 1 must be placed below the line' in paragraph (ca)(iii)(B) and so on. Everywhere seems to be 'must'. Taking the usual dictionary meaning of 'must' – that they have to – why are there savings provisions in this bill?

Ingrid STITT: The savings provisions are intended to make sure that voters are not disenfranchised. They mirror the provisions that apply to the Commonwealth's savings provisions. The bill does include savings provisions so that a Legislative Council ballot paper will not be treated as an informal vote if there are fewer than five boxes numbered or if there is non-consecutive numbering above the line. The ballot paper will be taken to be formal in relation to the preference marked by the number 1 or up to a break in sequence. If a ballot paper is marked with a tick or a cross, the act will continue to provide that the ballot paper will be taken to have been marked with the number 1. The savings provisions in the bill apply to ballot papers that have been marked with the

number 1 or a tick or a cross, and any ballot papers that are not numbered in this way will be treated as an informal vote. The savings provisions are really designed to make sure that allowing a tick or a cross is taken to have been marked with the number 1, or if there is more than one number, up to a break in sequence. That, as I said, aligns with the Commonwealth savings provision.

Jeff BOURMAN: I understand all that, but why was the word 'must' chosen when 'must' is a fairly declarative word – you have to. Why did the word 'must' get used when there is a savings provision? Why was the word 'should' not used?

Ingrid STITT: Amendments need to be consistent with the rest of the drafting of this legislation, and this is consistent with the way in which the legislation applies when it comes to electoral matters.

Jeff BOURMAN: I understand that it is consistent, and I also understand it is consistent with the federal Senate legislation, but – I do not want to use the phrase 'copy and paste' – it seems to have brought across what is an error. You can take this as a statement or whatever you want, but it seems to me that the word 'must' and then having a savings provision which says, 'Well, you can have a cross, a tick or whatever,' is shoring up a problem with this system. For the moment, I will just say that this leaves the legislation open to challenges. Whether it is a High Court challenge or not, I do not know. I cannot afford to do that. But this would have been an opportunity for the government to fix what I see as an error in the whole system.

Also, it has just given me a thought: how will a tick or a cross be treated in the event of – this is bit of a hypothetical – a sequence of numbers and then there is a tick or a cross as well? What is going to be the outcome of that when you cannot discern whether it is meant to be at the beginning, at the end, in the middle?

Ingrid STITT: As I have already indicated, the savings provisions in the bill only apply to ballot papers that have been marked with the number 1 or a tick or a cross or if there is more than one number up to a break in sequence, that aligns with the Commonwealth savings provisions. I am sure that you will want to go into the details of how the savings provisions will apply, but I can only reassure you that these are entirely consistent with the Commonwealth savings provisions. As you would expect, the government has had regard to legal advice in the development of the bill.

Jeff BOURMAN: You are right, but I do not have the advantage of that legal advice in front of me. Again, these are slightly hypothetical, but I think they are very important: in the event someone puts a tick and a cross or a cross and a tick or two crosses – pick whatever sequence you want – will something of that nature be covered by the savings provisions?

Ingrid STITT: Any break in the sequence would be an informal vote. It has to be clear that it is a consistent number – or a tick or a cross – so if there is any break in that sequence, then that would be an invalid vote.

Jeff BOURMAN: Minister, I am going to harp on about this a little bit; it still confuses me. If we have two ticks – I am using that as an example – that is a sequence, or a tick and a cross. If it is like '1, 2, 3, 4, tick, 7, 8, 9,' I can appreciate that. But if it is a number of ticks or a number of crosses, will that be informal or will that be covered by the savings provisions, providing there are enough ticks or crosses or whatever it might be?

Ingrid STITT: Perhaps I can just go through this carefully again. Two ticks would be informal, and a tick and a cross would be informal. But as I indicated earlier, the savings provisions provide that a Council ballot paper will not be treated as an informal vote if there are fewer than five boxes numbered or if there is non-consecutive numbering above the line. The ballot paper will be taken to be formal in relation to the preference marked by the number 1 or up to a break in sequence.

Jeff BOURMAN: I am just going to make a quick statement – and this goes to the Senate legislation too. I think it is an appalling thing that you say you must do at least six, but if you do less than six, it is okay. I want people's votes to count – five or less, whatever. People's votes need to

count, but to say 'must' and not really mean 'must' I feel is really, not abhorrent, but I think an example of legislation that is written to basically give the major parties what they want at the expense of other people. Let us be honest: the Senate election changes, which were done in 2016 I think, were aimed at Ricky Muir, and they did the same thing.

One last point, which I should have brought up in my speech, is that it was said that the Senate reforms did not get rid of the minor parties. But in the Senate it is different in that each state has six senators. Tasmania and the ACT have such small populations; if you get a small portion of the vote in relation to the other states, you can be a senator. Now, this: we still have the regions. This was really a missed opportunity for the government, where we should have had a statewide model. As I said, I just make that as a statement.

David LIMBRICK: In 2003 the Bracks government introduced group voting tickets (GVT) as an integral part of the new proportional representation system for the Legislative Council. The constitution commission and the government at the time justified above-the-line voting with group voting tickets on the grounds that it would give electors a simpler option and help deliver a more representative upper house. Can the minister explain why the same mechanism that was presented as essential to a modern, accessible and representative Council is now being abolished?

Ingrid STITT: I think I said in my brief summing-up that I appreciate that not everybody agrees with the policy position that the government is taking here. But I would point to a number of issues and the way in which the government has arrived at this policy position. Of course there were two important reports by the Electoral Matters Committee (EMC), first of all on the inquiry into the conduct of the 2022 state election. The Electoral Matters Committee received a large number of submissions in relation to that inquiry. They held 27 public hearings. They heard from a number of expert witnesses and others in the community who had views about these matters. They also had an inquiry into Victoria's upper house electoral system, which again was a wideranging inquiry, with submissions from 62 individuals and organisations, 141 people providing comments through the online form that was set up for that and 16 public hearings, with 29 witnesses. These issues have also been in the public domain, and there has been much debate about the relative merits of group ticket voting systems versus the proposals that are contained in the bill today. So there are a range of reasons why the government has come to the view that it has, has adopted this policy position and is presenting the bill to the house. We want to make sure that voters have the power when it comes to exercising their preferences in upper house elections.

David LIMBRICK: I would point out to the minister that voters have always had the option of exercising their preferences through below-the-line voting.

Ingrid STITT: That is true.

David LIMBRICK: Yes, they have always had that option, and many people do take that option, including me. Was consideration given to region reform as well? As I brought up in my second-reading debate speech, I am concerned that doing this reform independently just before an election has the danger of locking in incentives that will make it nearly impossible for region reform, which was also something that was recommended by the Electoral Matters Committee and many submissions and has been spoken about publicly by many people who are interested in proportional representation in democratic systems. What consideration was given to region reform?

Ingrid STITT: The decision that the government arrived at in bringing forward the amendments in today's bill also recognises the fact that we are only four months off, or a little bit less than four months off, from the state election, and we are mindful of the ability of the Victorian Electoral Commission to implement these changes and operationalise them in time for the state election. That was certainly one consideration. Again, I appreciate that others may have a different view in the chamber, but the VEC has been very clear that it would not be possible to implement further changes,

and the government has taken the view that this is the most appropriate set of amendments to put before the house.

David LIMBRICK: I would point out that the timing of this bill is solely at the government's discretion. In fact the government could have brought forward this bill any time after the recommendations of the Electoral Matters Committee. Was the consideration of regional reform deemed too hard because it would require a referendum?

Ingrid STITT: No. That certainly was not a defining factor in the bill before the house.

David LIMBRICK: In 2010 this government's predecessors made the lodging of group voting tickets mandatory and attached a penalty for noncompliance with this lodging. Why did Labor strengthen the group voting ticket system in 2010 if it now believes the system undermines voter intention?

Ingrid STITT: As I indicated earlier, 16 years is quite a long time, Mr Limbrick. A lot has changed in the electoral system and in the electorate in that time, and we have of course seen great concern expressed in a number of parts of the community about what is considered by some to be the unethical practice of preference whispering and the way in which the current system enables that.

David LIMBRICK: One of the explicit aims of the 2003 reforms, and this was something that was proposed by the Labor Party at the time, was to increase the number of parties represented in the upper house through proportional representation. Does the government accept that removing group voting tickets alone without regional reform will reverse that outcome and produce a less diverse Council?

Ingrid STITT: I think the way in which I would respond to that, Mr Limbrick, is to go back to what I said in my summing-up, which is that in bringing this legislation, we want to ensure that Victorians know where their votes are going, and they have confidence that when they select their preferences, that that is actually what they get at the end of the democratic process. It is also always going to depend on how people vote in any given electorate or election.

David LIMBRICK: Back to the timing of this bill, why has the government left this bill down to the wire, basically? There is only one more sitting week, I think, that this bill could be passed and the VEC would have sufficient time to implement it. Why was it left so late?

Ingrid STITT: We have had a very busy legislative agenda in this term of Parliament. There are, as you know, many bills that are on the notice paper, and we only have how many sitting days left? I do not think that we would want you to criticise us for being a very busy government.

Jeff BOURMAN: Just for the record, there were quite a number of sitting weeks where we were doing take-note motions and bailing early, so we have not been that busy. My question is about consultation on this. Not consultation with the wider thing, but consultation with the parties represented in here. Did the government consult with the opposition and the Greens prior to crafting this legislation?

Ingrid STITT: I think it is important that consultation occurred through the very important Electoral Matters Committee processes – the review of the 2022 election and also the inquiry into the Victorian upper house electoral system. The government certainly consulted with the VEC on the bill. I do not think that anybody's position in relation to this bill across the political spectrum has come as any surprise to anybody.

Jeff BOURMAN: I am going to ask the question about the actual bill, not the consultation leading up to the bill. I can only speak for myself, but we were not consulted on this bill before it appeared in the Assembly or anything like that. Why were we – and I am going to presume the other crossbenchers too – excluded?

Ingrid STITT: My understanding, and I have not had specific ministerial carriage of this bill, is that briefings were provided in accordance with the way in which briefings are normally undertaken with the opposition and the crossbench and other parties.

Jeff BOURMAN: Minister, that is once the horse has bolted. I am quite sure I was not consulted before. Once the briefings got there, the bill is not done, there is obviously time for amendments if we can, but it is my understanding, and I am happy to be corrected, that the Liberals and the Greens were consulted before the briefings occurred.

Anyway, moving on, given voter disengagement with politics, call it what you want, voter fatigue, rather than a wholesale half-baked attempt at reforming the system when the next reform may come next Parliament, which we all know will not, why wasn't a decent education campaign about the group voting ticket, how it works, how you can work your way around it – 'You can vote below the line, a minimum of 1 to 6' – considered rather than a blunt object like this?

Ingrid STITT: I think we appreciate that we are coming at this from different positions, and I accept that you are opposed to this legislation, but I do not accept your characterisation of this as 'half-baked'. This is a bill that does important things. I think that the other point I would make is that the VEC always undertakes education campaigns. As they operationalise these changes, should the bill pass the chamber today and get royal assent, these issues will be dealt with by the VEC, who always have an ongoing campaign around voter education, and these changes would be no exception to that.

Jeff BOURMAN: I was not asking about these changes, I was asking about the previous system. I might also point out this is actually half baked. This is only half of the reforms, and the other half, as I said, may or may not come. Whilst my characterisation is a bit over the top, it is still accurate: this is only half of them. The VEC advised that it requires legislation to be passed no later than August 2026 to implement the group voting ticket change. I do not recall whether it said at the beginning or end of August; I always presumed it would be at the beginning. What is the government's plan if the VEC actually run out of time? We are now getting towards halfway through August.

Ingrid STITT: The advice that I have is that there has been close consultation with the VEC about their requirements to be able to implement this successfully before the election, and the end of August is the timeframe that they indicated they would need these changes passed.

Jeff BOURMAN: Okay. Again, I did not quite get an answer. It was more about what the government's plan was, but we are just going to presume it will make it because the VEC said so. That is not as snotty as it sounds. Did the government seek advice from the New South Wales, South Australia or WA electoral commissions on the lessons learned from their transitions away from group voting tickets? I would suggest that there would have been issues. No-one can see the future – I would be very rich if I could see the future – but did the government check with the other states what lessons they learned and implement them in the legislation?

Ingrid STITT: The models of other jurisdictions certainly informed the development of the bill, and so too did the work of the Electoral Matters Committee that I have already gone to a couple of times.

David LIMBRICK: Clauses 3 and 4 in the bill remove the wording and the definition of 'Order in Council', and the explanatory memorandum says that this is to provide clarity about above- and below-the-line voting, but this repeal also has the effect of removing the requirement for decisions under sections 12(6) and 13(6) to be published in the gazette which pertain to conditions of employment for the commissioner and deputy commissioner. It appears that this was an item of consideration as clauses 5 and 11 retain the gazette reporting requirement, where this term is also amended, but it explicitly includes gazette reporting requirements. So my question is: is it the government's intention for these conditions of employment arrangements to not be published in the gazette?

Ingrid STITT: Deputy President, I am in your hands. I suspect we might need to get some instructions on that question, so noting the time, I am in your hands.

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

David LIMBRICK: I was wondering if the minister might be able to answer my rather detailed question that I gave before the dinner break.

Ingrid STITT: I can, and the advice that I have is that these are technical changes. The amendments to section 12(6) and 13(6) of the act will not change the practice of publishing in the *Government Gazette* the order made by the Governor in Council to appoint an Electoral Commissioner or Deputy Electoral Commissioner.

David LIMBRICK: So just for my understanding and clarification, it is the intention that, regardless of this omission as per this bill, the appointments will continue to be published in the gazette.

Ingrid STITT: Yes.

David LIMBRICK: If that is the case, what is the point of removing those definitions?

Ingrid STITT: It is to ensure that the drafting is consistent with all the other integrity agencies' drafting.

David LIMBRICK: I will move on to a question about clause 6. Clause 6 makes it a requirement for ungrouped or cross-party candidates – which is rather unusual, but I have seen it once before – to nominate the order in which their names will appear below the line. My first question is: is this request regulated by the use of a form?

Ingrid STITT: It will be at the discretion of the VEC as to how they approach the operationalisation of these changes.

David LIMBRICK: Maybe that answers my next question. So the format and content of this form – is the minister saying that that will be determined by regulations or that it will be determined by the VEC?

Ingrid STITT: By the VEC, Mr Limbrick.

David LIMBRICK: Is it the intention that the candidate handbooks will be updated to reflect this new requirement?

Ingrid STITT: Yes, that is right, and there will obviously be work undertaken by the VEC in making sure that they implement the changes that are contained in the bill.

David LIMBRICK: With regard to the work required by the VEC, I understand there would be a number of things, including managing the design of the ballot papers and educational materials and things like this, but would there be a requirement by the VEC to undertake any IT development in order to implement the directions or the new voting system under this bill? Does that require an IT project?

Ingrid STITT: I will have to seek some advice from the box on that, but we understand that they can do it under their current platforms. One of the reasons why it is possible to implement these changes before the end of August or before the election commences is because there is not a requirement to implement any major changes to their systems.

David LIMBRICK: So is the minister saying that their current software that they use is capable of handling this without any software development – is that what the minister is saying?

Ingrid STITT: That is our understanding, based on what the VEC has advised.

David LIMBRICK: I note that one of the other recommendations from the Electoral Matters Committee was to implement changes to the inclusive Gregory counting system. Was the reason that that was not included in this bill because it would require software development and therefore increase the timelines required by the VEC? Is that the reason the government did not do it in this bill?

Ingrid STITT: I would have to confirm whether the reason was anything to do with IT systems. But the advice from the VEC is that it would be very challenging to introduce that weighted inclusive Gregory method ahead of the 2026 election.

David LIMBRICK: Did the VEC give some indication of what advance notice would be necessary to implement that sort of technical change?

Ingrid STITT: I will have to take that one on notice and see if we can get you an answer to that.

David LIMBRICK: Surely the government would know the answer to this, though, because they would have had discussions with the VEC, and surely the VEC would have outlined timeframes for these types of activities to happen. They have said quite publicly that to implement group voting ticket reform, they need it passed by the end of August. I am guessing that they gave the government a range of other things that the government might want to do. Does the government not actually know how long this might take?

Ingrid STITT: The VEC advice was that any change to the method would require at least 18 months lead time, but the proposal before us today does not change the method of counting upper house ballots.

David LIMBRICK: What sort of work actually is required by the VEC to implement this change? It sounds like they do not require changes to IT, to software, which is good, because I know how government IT projects normally go, but what sorts of changes are actually required? I can imagine some. There would be voter education, there would be staff training, things like this, but what other things does the VEC actually need to do to implement what the government is proposing here today?

Ingrid STITT: There are a number of different things, Mr Limbrick, including guidance materials and education of VEC staff and also obviously of the voting public.

David LIMBRICK: Clause 7, which is the one that removes the group voting ticket provisions, includes removal of section 69B(7), which enforces statements under sections 69B(1), 69B(2) and 69B(3) by means of a fine. Will any current or future calls to action for this provision be extinguished or disallowed or will outstanding fines issued under this section be waived?

Ingrid STITT: That would be a matter for the VEC.

David LIMBRICK: Understood. Just to clarify, is the minister saying that the waiving of these fines would be at the VEC's discretion?

Ingrid STITT: That is correct.

David LIMBRICK: Clause 10 requires that the VEC allocate a letter of the alphabet to each candidate or group of candidates after ballot draw. What should the VEC do if there are more than 26 candidates?

Ingrid STITT: Has that ever happened? One moment. Yes, it has happened. When they have exhausted the alphabet, they start with AA, BB, CC and so on.

David LIMBRICK: I sort of anticipated that. Proposed section 74(1A) prescribes that the VEC use a letter of the alphabet – but not multiple letters of the alphabet. Whilst it is accepted practice already for the VEC to remedy this issue using common sense, such as using AA, for example, why is this practice not codified in this amendment?

Ingrid STITT: It does already, Mr Limbrick.

David LIMBRICK: So can I take it by the minister's answer that even though the bill prescribes a letter, it actually could mean a bunch of letters, like AA, for example?

Ingrid STITT: They are still letters.

David LIMBRICK: I will have to come back to what the minister said, because my notes say that it says 'a letter', which would seem to indicate a single letter, but I will wait for advice on that. On another question that I was going to ask, if we go back to motivations, recently there were a number of parties registered. We all would have received notifications from the Victorian Electoral Commission about those new parties. One of those parties received much attention. It was called the Free Palestine Party, and it was publicly stated that the reason for establishing this party was to redirect preferences in a certain way. Did the registration of this party have any effect on the government's decision-making process in bringing forward this bill?

Ingrid STITT: Broadly, as I indicated in my second-reading contribution, the motivation for bringing forward this bill was based on a number of things. The government has taken a policy position based on a range of factors, including the reports that I have already mentioned in respect to the Electoral Matters Committee work, but the answer to your specific question is no.

David LIMBRICK: When did the government form a final position on whether to proceed with this bill or not?

Ingrid STITT: It went through the normal cabinet process.

David LIMBRICK: What date was that cabinet process finalised?

Ingrid STITT: On 27 July.

David LIMBRICK: Clause 12 of the bill requires how-to-vote cards to indicate the order of preference for electors voting above the line or below the line. Can a how-to-vote card indicate how to vote above the line and below the line, given safeguards implemented by this bill to address informality caused by votes indicated both above and below the line?

Ingrid STITT: Can I just double-check I am answering the right thing here: is this in respect to a how-to-vote card or the validity of a ballot paper?

David LIMBRICK: This is in respect to a how-to-vote card. There are safeguards in the bill to address informality caused by votes both above and below the line, but I am asking: if a party issues a how-to-vote card, can they indicate to voters how to vote above the line and below the line simultaneously? They may wish to do that for whatever reason – that I am not sure of.

Ingrid STITT: A how-to-vote card can explain how to fill in both above and below the line.

David LIMBRICK: So just to clarify, a how-to-vote card that says, 'If you support party X, you can either vote above the line with these numbers or below the line with these numbers,' would be totally legal under this bill. Is that correct?

Ingrid STITT: A how-to-vote card, Mr Limbrick, can show how to vote 1 to 5 above the line or how to vote 1 to 5 below the line.

David LIMBRICK: So just to clarify, it is important that it says 'or'.

Ingrid STITT: It says 'or'.

David LIMBRICK: Okay, understood. Clause 14 repeals definitions from section 83. This includes the definition of 'donor', which referred to a definition under section 206(1). The in-force version of the principal act does not appear to have a definition of 'donor'. What does this definition refer to now?

Ingrid STITT: The definition of those matters is contained in section 83(4) of the act.

David LIMBRICK: Clause 15 requires that votes marked by an elector in the elections use the number 1 and then sequentially numbers 2, 3, 4 and 5 to nominate their vote. Is there a requirement that these numerals be in Arabic format, or can they be in other formats – for example, Roman numerals?

Ingrid STITT: Yes, as long as the voter's intention is clear.

David LIMBRICK: I thank the minister. That is actually helpful. Clauses 16 and 17 describe circumstances where an informal vote can be accepted as formal up to a break in a sequence. If there is a break in the sequence, up to that point it can be accepted. Will a vote which is accepted as formal under these provisions be recorded for electoral data purposes as formal, informal or some other categorisation? It is not really a formal vote, but the savings provision capture it. So is it formal or informal or something else?

Ingrid STITT: I think I went to these questions a little earlier in terms of what would be considered valid or invalid. If the savings provision captures it, it would be a formal vote that would be recorded.

David LIMBRICK: These provisions also allow for a tick or a cross to be treated as a 1. What other symbols could be recognised? Is it only a tick or a cross?

Ingrid STITT: Just a tick or a cross, the same as the Commonwealth legislation, Mr Limbrick, which is what we modelled the GVT savings provisions on.

David LIMBRICK: I would point out, though, that in many cultures – and I know in the Japanese language and I think also in Chinese language – a cross has a very different meaning, and in fact a circle would be considered selecting something. Would a circle not be considered similarly to a tick or a cross?

Ingrid STITT: Again, I think my previous answer clarified that, in that we have modelled these provisions on the Commonwealth savings provision. And I think I have gone through that a couple of times now in respect to numbers or a tick or a cross, and any ballot papers that are not numbered in this way will be treated as an informal vote.

Rachel PAYNE: Minister, I just want to go back to a question about timing. This bill was introduced in the Legislative Assembly on 28 July and passed both the second and third reading in that chamber the following day. Why did a bill that changes the fundamental architecture of how Victorians vote for the Legislative Council receive only a single sitting day of debate in the Assembly?

Ingrid STITT: I mean, I would not seek to be intruding on what is a matter for the Assembly, and in the other place the government business program and the way in which legislation moves through that chamber to our chamber is a matter for them.

Rachel PAYNE: Well, given the government controls the Assembly's government business program, why did it set a guillotine requiring debate on this bill to be completed by 7 pm on 29 July 2026 rather than allowing extended scrutiny of a bill of constitutional significance?

Ingrid STITT: I mean, some would argue that the scrutiny happens when it comes here. But again, I am not in a position to comment on what is a matter for the other place.

Rachel PAYNE: The VEC advised that it required legislation to be passed no later than August 2026 to implement the abolition of group voting tickets in time for the election. Given the bill was not passed by that date – I am assuming that would be 1 August – what advice has the government received from the VEC about the residual risks to the timely and accurate conduct of the November election?

Ingrid STITT: I think I answered this question earlier, Ms Payne. The VEC have advised the government that they would require the legislation by the end of August.

Rachel PAYNE: Thank you for clarifying, Minister – end of August is appreciated. Just in relation to consultation – and I know that Mr Bourman asked about consultation with other parties, including

the Liberal coalition and the Greens, and Minister, I note that you responded to say that the government had sought legal advice – can you please confirm: was this internal legal advice or did the government seek independent expert advice around consultation?

Ingrid STITT: I think just to clarify, what I said on the record was that the government has had regard to legal advice in the development of the bill.

Rachel PAYNE: Minister, thank you for your clarification. Mr Bourman also made reference to consultation with other states who have abolished group voting tickets and have proportional representation such as New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia. Mr Bourman, you asked questions about the electoral commissions and engagement with them. Were there any implementation problems, count delays or disputes in other states following their abolition of group voting tickets that the government has taken into account in preparing this bill?

Ingrid STITT: Again, I think I have already gone to these matters, Ms Payne. To a similar question I indicated that the work of the Electoral Matters Committee was important in this regard, particularly their report into the upper house electoral system. As to what engagement the VEC has with its counterparts in other states and territories, I am not in a position to know, but I would be surprised if there was not regular engagement. But again, the model that we are bringing forward in this bill today is modelled on the Commonwealth model.

Rachel PAYNE: Just in regard to voter education and the ballot paper design, what evidence does the government have that voters actually understand the proposed system that will replace GVTs?

Ingrid STITT: I would point you to the work that is ongoing that the VEC undertakes to continue to educate both the voting public and also the staff of the VEC. Again, these are modelled consistently on the Commonwealth arrangements, but obviously that is a matter for the VEC in terms of how they operationalise and educate around these changes should they pass.

Rachel PAYNE: What assessment has the government made of the risk of an increased informal vote at the November election, given voters will be required to number a minimum of five boxes above the line for the first time in the Victorian state election?

Ingrid STITT: The savings provisions are a very powerful example of how the government has considered important guardrails. Again, VEC education will be another important factor.

Rachel PAYNE: Minister, as far as you are aware, will the VEC also be capturing informal votes where someone may just vote 1 above the line? Is that something that is a requirement of the VEC to record, and is it something that the government will seek advice on?

Ingrid STITT: The savings provisions allow a tick or a cross to be taken to have been marked with a number 1 or if there is more than one number up to a break in sequence aligned with the Commonwealth savings provisions, but to the specifics of your question, that is an operational matter for the VEC.

Rachel PAYNE: Minister, you have made reference to the Commonwealth structure around their Senate-style voting. Why was the decision made to make it five above the line rather than, as the Senate-style voting indicates, six above the line? What was the rationale behind this?

Ingrid STITT: It is in line with the Electoral Matters Committee recommendations.

Rachel PAYNE: I think Mr Limbrick asked some questions around the design of a new ballot. Has it been user-tested by the VEC, to the best of your knowledge?

Ingrid STITT: Again, that is a matter for them, and they are very adept at operationalising changes to the legislation that impact on the conduct of elections.

Rachel PAYNE: Was the VEC advised to prepare for voting reform ahead of this legislation passing Parliament?

Ingrid STITT: Whenever the government considers changes to the electoral system, we always consult with the VEC on the development of and the timelines for legislation, and this was no exception to that practice.

Rachel PAYNE: I am going to make reference now to the 2003 constitutional committee. The 2003 Parliament of Victoria constitutional commission committee recommended proportional representation for the Legislative Council as part of a coherent package of reforms. How does the government reconcile abolishing group voting tickets in isolation with the broader integrated reform envisaged by that committee in 2003?

Ingrid STITT: I think I answered that question earlier this evening, Ms Payne. The government has taken the decision that the priorities for this bill were the abolition of group ticket voting. I have actually answered that question already.

Rachel PAYNE: Apologies, I must have missed that response. Recommendation 4 of the inquiry into the Victorian upper house electoral system reform recommended:

> That, following the 2026 election, a new process be established to consider and negotiate different views about the best electoral structure for Victoria's Upper House and make a recommendation if it reaches general agreement. The independent process could be:
>
> • an expert panel
>
> • a citizens' assembly
>
> • a constitutional convention.

That report was tabled in December 2025, allowing ample time for the government to move legislation to establish such an independent process. Why has the government not done this, or is there an intention to do this in the next Parliament?

Ingrid STITT: It will essentially be a matter for the next Parliament, but it is not within the scope of the bill before the house tonight.

Rachel PAYNE: What guarantee, if any, can the government give this Parliament that proportional representation will actually happen within the next term of Parliament?

Ingrid STITT: Far be it from me to predict what may happen at the next election, Ms Payne, but again, it will be a matter for the next Parliament to determine.

Rachel PAYNE: Will the government commit to an independent post-election review of how the new above-the-line system operated at the November 2026 election, including its effect on informal rates and counting outcomes?

Ingrid STITT: There is a review that will be undertaken as a result of the previous legislation that we passed in this place a couple of months ago. That review will go to the specifics of that legislation. You would know that after each election the Electoral Matters Committee undertakes a review of the previous election.

Rachel PAYNE: If such a review does identify problems with the new system, assuming that the bill will pass this evening, what mechanism exists to make further changes before the 2030 election, given how compressed this process has already been?

Ingrid STITT: That will be a matter for the next Parliament.

David LIMBRICK: Clause 19 expands the scope of determinations by the VEC for expenditures to include claimable administrative expenditures. Will the VEC be able to make these determinations for expenses retroactively against past reports for previous electoral funding periods?

Ingrid STITT: It will not be retrospective past 15 April.

David LIMBRICK: Just to clarify, any new scope of determinations under these expenditures cannot be used to reopen a historical audit. Is that correct?

Ingrid STITT: That is correct.

Georgie PURCELL: Minister, does the government believe that electoral laws should not be changed immediately before an election unless there is an overwhelming and unavoidable reason?

Ingrid STITT: Could you repeat the question, Ms Purcell?

Georgie PURCELL: Is it the government's position that electoral law should not be changed right before an election unless there is an overwhelming and unavoidable reason? And if not, why not?

Ingrid STITT: The government is bringing this bill based on its policy position that it believes it is the appropriate thing to do to abolish group ticket voting in Victoria.

Georgie PURCELL: Apologies, you touched on this earlier, but I guess the point to my question is: what is the urgency currently now, after 12 years in government?

Ingrid STITT: I have already touched on these issues in answers to previous questions from members, Ms Purcell, and I talked about reports from the Electoral Matters Committee, but I also talked about the conduct that has been the subject of public discourse around preference whispering and the fact that we believe strongly that the Victorian voting public should be in control of their own vote.

Georgie PURCELL: I agree with those statements, and I have watched the rest of the committee stage, although I was not in here. More to the point of the question is that evidence came to light some time ago, in fact at the start of the term, and then the report was handed down some time ago, but this decision has been made now. What is the reason for the change at such late notice instead of the usual processes or acting immediately when that evidence came to light, as I would note many crossbenchers called for?

Ingrid STITT: I would contend that this has gone through the normal cabinet process when determining policy and legislation to bring forward to the Parliament. I do appreciate that not everybody will be supportive of this bill or the government's policy decision.

Georgie PURCELL: Has the government done any modelling of whether abolishing GVTs will advantage larger or more established parties or particular parties in the Parliament?

Ingrid STITT: No, we have not. But we have taken account of the Electoral Matters Committee reports and also the fact that we are the only jurisdiction in the country who still has this voting method. I will not repeat myself in relation to the policy drivers behind bringing in this bill; I think they are well understood.

Georgie PURCELL: There was a lot of discussion in the lower house debate about this being the first stage of reform and the next stage will be looking into restructuring the make-up of the upper house when it comes to regions or statewide proportional representation or another model. Why are GVTs being done before that stage?

Ingrid STITT: I have addressed this question already. It is a matter for the next Parliament as to what, if any, electoral reforms they see fit to progress. The government of the day, I am sure, will have a view about those matters.

Georgie PURCELL: I know that you have answered it. I am seeking more information about why the government has decided to do GVTs before reviewing the structure of the upper house and if there is any particular reasoning behind that given that they have said that that will be the intention if they come back into government.

Ingrid STITT: This has been asked and answered on a number of occasions already.

Georgie PURCELL: I promise I am not trying to be a pain. I do not believe this was answered: is it the government's position that this is the correct order in which to do it? I know you think it is the same question, and I have watched the rest of the committee. I know this has been explored. I am seeking understanding of if the government's position is that this is the preferred order in which to do it or if any consideration has been made of why it is being done this way, noting that the intention in the lower house was that a new model will be explored if the government maintains government.

Ingrid STITT: I cannot speak to what members' contributions were in the other place, other than to say that it is on the public record, but the clear objectives of this bill are to remove group voting tickets from Legislative Council elections and to improve the operation of the Electoral Act 2002 and the electoral system in Victoria. There are a number of other minor amendments, but the primary objective of this bill is to remove group ticket voting.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Just quickly on that, this is something that the upper house voting system inquiry, I do recall, looked at. You also had psephologists like Kevin Bonham, who stated that a referendum prior to any change to group voting would likely be a disaster that could risk a populist backlash and that any failure of that referendum could also be seen as a failure and a vote against abolishing group voting tickets overall. So this is probably the neatest way to do this, and that is the prevailing view amongst the experts. It is certainly what I would look at in regard to that line as well.

Georgie PURCELL: Thank you, Mr Mulholland. I appreciate your view. I am seeking the government's view, and exactly actually what I am seeking to understand from the government is the order of the decision, which I am particularly interested in only because there has been an ongoing discussion about restructuring the upper house and what this place looks like. So my next question would be: is there a concern that doing GVTs before a referendum and having agreement from the people to change our voting system could result in it no longer being possible?

Ingrid STITT: I think you are drawing a few conclusions there, Ms Purcell. Essentially the reforms are about making sure that the Victorian voting public have control over their upper house votes. That is certainly the driving factor behind the government taking this policy position and bringing the bill to the house. I do not know that you are going to agree with the timing of the bill coming, but I do not think we are going to be able to agree on that point tonight. I respect that there are different views in the chamber about the timing of this bill, but given the timing of this bill, the clear advice from the VEC is that it would not be possible to implement a broader set of reforms in the timelines available, and we have prioritised removing group ticket voting and those other minor consequential amendments that are in the bill.

Georgie PURCELL: Minister, absolutely, we probably will not reach agreement on the timing. However, given that the government did not consult with us or collaborate with us on this, we are just seeking explanations of how this decision was made, so I do appreciate your answers. I would like to move to consideration of the cost of this reform and if the government has looked into or allocated any funding for doing this reform, especially at the last minute, and if so, how much it will cost.

Ingrid STITT: I want to take issue with the way that you are putting that question to me, Ms Purcell. You are asserting that this is rushed. I think I answered a question from another member earlier about this having gone through the normal and proper cabinet consideration and cabinet process, and that is why the bill is in the Parliament now. The VEC has not asked for any additional funding in order to operationalise these changes, and there has been regular contact and consultation with the VEC on the development of this bill.

Georgie PURCELL: Forgive me, Minister. I am just speaking from my own position, because certainly the bill did not follow its usual process for us on the crossbench, so it does feel rushed for us. I appreciate that that is not your position. However, moving further into the cost of the reform, is this something that the VEC had been working on prior to this decision, noting that it could be a possibility, or does all of this work begin following the passage of this legislation?

Ingrid STITT: I am not wanting to labour the point, but the crossbench briefings occurred in the normal way. The difference, I guess, is that the Legislative Assembly were a bit quicker in dealing with the bill than they might ordinarily have been. In respect to the VEC, there have been conversations with the VEC, as you would expect, about the proposed changes, but ultimately if the Parliament changes the electoral system through changed legislation, then it is always important to make sure that there is contact with the VEC about how that is operationalised. The actual work of operationalising it is a matter for the VEC and something that they are adept at doing. Again, these are questions that I have already answered in previous members' questions earlier this evening.

Georgie PURCELL: I do not want to labour the point, but it absolutely did not follow the usual processes. We get briefed on bills introduced to the lower house when they are going through the lower house. We got briefed on this last week. However, more on the costs of this reform, noting that they have not asked for extra money now, will there be any costs associated with training or new systems as a result of the passage of this legislation following that?

Ingrid STITT: I can only reiterate that the VEC have not asked for any additional funding in order to operationalise these changes, but they have an ongoing role in the training of their staff and also of course education for the electorate. That is business as usual for them. Again, I can only reiterate that there have been no additional funding requests made.

David LIMBRICK: One of the good things about the current system is that votes do not exhaust. If an elector chooses a number above the line, then votes do not exhaust. Has the government done any modelling on what the exhaustion rates might be under the new system – for example, by analysing the Senate system?

Ingrid STITT: No.

David LIMBRICK: It is the government's expectation then, considering that the current exhaustion rate for above-the-line voting is 0 per cent, that exhaustion will increase but at an unknown amount. Is that correct?

Ingrid STITT: The short answer is yes.

Georgie PURCELL: Will postal vote certificates, early voting centre materials and overseas voting arrangements all be updated in time to reflect the new above-the-line requirements given that postal voting typically opens several weeks before election day?

Ingrid STITT: Yes.

David LIMBRICK: I would just like to go back to my questions before about how-to-vote cards and their specifications. I have just received advice that in recommendation 17 of the EMC report it said that ballot papers should only direct voters to select at least five preferences above the line. Does the minister have a response to that? It seems that the government's legislation is actually in conflict with the recommendation from the EMC.

Ingrid STITT: It is consistent with the recommendation of the Electoral Matters Committee. That is the advice I have.

David LIMBRICK: I would just like to draw the minister's attention to a previous discussion we had where – please correct me if I am wrong – my understanding was that a how-to-vote card can show five or more preferences above the line or five or more preferences below the line, and it has to say 'or'. However, recommendation 17 – I have it right in front of me – from the inquiry says it should amend the Electoral Act to 'have ballot papers direct voters to select at least five preferences above the line'. That would appear to be in conflict with what the minister said earlier.

Ingrid STITT: Sorry, that was because there already is for below the line. I believe I answered that earlier.

David LIMBRICK: The minister said earlier in her response to Ms Payne's question about the review of this system that it would be conducted by the Electoral Matters Committee. Why was the decision made to do that rather than incorporate it into the independent inquiry that was set up with the last electoral bill that this Parliament set up? Why was the decision made to send it through to the Electoral Matters Committee rather than this independent committee that we discussed at length on the last electoral bill that went through this Parliament?

Ingrid STITT: Mr Limbrick, I believe this issue is the subject of your amendment, which I am sure we will get into when we get to talking through and dealing with the amendments. But we do not support that as the approach. We believe that the review must also examine and make recommendations in relation to the operation of the Victorian electoral system, including the operation and the effectiveness of any political donation disclosure scheme and the effectiveness of the Electoral Act in addressing risks of undue influence arising from political donations. It was a very specific review that was agreed to as part of the previous bill that the chamber dealt with a couple of months ago. The Electoral Further Amendment Bill 2026 introduced the current part 12 of the act containing the legislative framework for political donations, state funding and reporting in Victoria. They are quite significant changes, and it was rightly flagged for review given the issues and the significant interest in those matters. We do not support expanding the scope of the review to include the review of the removal of group voting tickets or the findings and recommendations of the Electoral Matters Committee inquiry into the upper house electoral system. It would significantly alter the focus of that review, and there are other mechanisms available to review these matters through the committee process after the 2026 election.

David LIMBRICK: If I draw my mind back to that last bill, though, when we all agreed, I think, that setting up an independent committee was a good idea because we did not want politicians deciding whether or not the current donation scheme was a good idea, surely a change to the electoral system, which arguably is a bigger deal than the donation system, should also be independent. Is it not the case that the members on the Electoral Matters Committee in the new Parliament will most likely be beneficiaries of this new system?

Ingrid STITT: I cannot predict what the make-up of the next Parliament will be, Mr Limbrick, and I would not want to predetermine what their views might be about these matters. I know you have got an amendment, and I know that we will deal with it when we get to amendments to the bill. I appreciate that you hold those views, but the government is not going to support that amendment, and I guess we will deal with that in due course in the committee stage.

David LIMBRICK: Regardless of my amendment, I think it is a matter of factual observation that regarding the new members of the Electoral Matters Committee in the new Parliament, there is no way other than that their parties could be beneficiaries of this new system, and therefore by definition it should be biased in favour of the current system. I cannot see how there could be any other reality than that.

Ingrid STITT: It is a bit of a statement, but you are also asking me for an opinion about the next Parliament, and I am not in a position to be able to crystal-ball what may happen in the new Parliament.

Rachel PAYNE: Is the government committed to seeking a referendum for a constitutional amendment regarding changes to the regional structure or adopting a model like other jurisdictions in the regions?

Ingrid STITT: Not at this time.

Rachel PAYNE: Just in relation to the VEC and funding, has the VEC been allocated any additional funding to support public education regarding the new above-the-line requirements for numbering with voting?

Ingrid STITT: I have already answered this question on a number of occasions, Ms Payne. The VEC has not sought any additional funding in order to operationalise the changes that this bill contemplates.

Rachel PAYNE: I think that that may be alarming, considering that we are changing how people are expected to vote above the line. If there is not additional funding, would there be an assumption that there would be additional education, and how would that public education be expected to be done in line with the new requirements?

Ingrid STITT: They are already funded in their base funding to do this work on an ongoing basis, Ms Payne – but again, that is a matter for the VEC in terms of how they determine to expend their funding. I know that they do take very seriously education for the community and for their own staff on any changes to the electoral laws.

David LIMBRICK: In 2003 when the reforms first went through, these reforms were actually referred to the Minister for Education to ensure that they were incorporated into the school curriculum. Many schools in Victoria do civics education. Has the education minister received any request to ensure that the curriculum is updated for next year to ensure students are being taught the current electoral system in Victoria?

Ingrid STITT: I may need to take that one on notice, Mr Limbrick, and we will see if we can get you an answer on that this evening. I know that the previous education minister, the Premier, has been very passionate about the curriculum, and it is being reviewed on a regular basis. If it is okay, I will probably need to take that one on notice and see whether we can make contact with the education minister's office. I think the other place has gone home already.

Rachel PAYNE: I note that you have indicated that the VEC has its operational duties, but can the government confirm what information has been provided to the community in other languages to inform communities of the changes to upcoming elections?

Ingrid STITT: Noting that we have not passed the bill yet, again, those are matters for the VEC. We have a very diverse community, and I know that translation into community languages is a high priority for the VEC. In terms of this particular legislation, we have already, as I have indicated, been in contact with the VEC around timeframes and operationalising this change, should it pass the Parliament.

Rachel PAYNE: Has there been specific engagement by the government towards people with disability, people who may be blind or have low vision and older Victorians about new above-the-line voting requirements? Was this part of the consideration of the Electoral Matters Committee review?

Ingrid STITT: Earlier I indicated that there was quite extensive engagement with the Electoral Matters Committee inquiry into the conduct of the 2022 general election and also the inquiry into Victoria's upper house electoral system. Whilst I do not have the demographic breakdown of all of the individual Victorians that interacted with those inquiries, I can indicate that there were 114 individuals and organisations that made submissions to the 2022 general election inquiry. There were 27 public hearings with various stakeholders. In addition, they conducted a survey of voters with disability, a community round table with voters from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and they also did a survey of members of Parliament – a special group. The Electoral Matters Committee inquiry into the upper house electoral system received written submissions from 62 individuals and organisations, 141 people provided comment through the online platform and the committee conducted 16 public hearings with 29 witnesses. So I think that the work of the committee was quite extensive and engaged with a large and diverse group of Victorians.

Rachel PAYNE: Interestingly, I have spent quite a bit of time looking at interpreting services, and so discovered that I am the only MP in the Victorian Parliament who has interpreting services on my website, which is fascinating. But anyway, I will continue.

Has the VEC identified any risks to the delivery of the November election if this bill is implemented, and if so, what are they?

Ingrid STITT: No. They have just indicated the timeframes that would be required by them for the bill to have passed the Parliament.

Rachel PAYNE: Has the VEC identified any risks around sufficient staffing, facilities and resources to implement these changes effectively?

Ingrid STITT: No.

Rachel PAYNE: We touched on the 2003 constitution commission review. What consideration has the government given to the 2003 commission's reasoning that piecemeal changes to the electoral system risk unintended consequences for proportionality and representation?

Ingrid STITT: I think we have answered this previously, Ms Payne. I indicated that that was a long time ago, and a lot has changed, both in terms of the electorate and also the concerns that have been publicly aired around the model that we have currently. The constitutional work that you are referring to is quite old now. It was important at the time absolutely, but we have, as a government, the prerogative to address issues as they arise, and this is certainly one of them.

Georgie PURCELL: Has the government sought advice on how the removal of group voting tickets interacts with the filling of casual vacancies in the Legislative Council, given that the process has historically relied on the ticket lodged by the outgoing member's party and if there will be any impact on that?

Ingrid STITT: It has no effect.

Clause agreed to.

Clause 2 (20:46)

Jeff BOURMAN: I move:

1. Clause 2, line 2, omit "This Act" and insert "(1) This Act (other than sections 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 29 and 30 and paragraph (a) of section 3)".
2. Clause 2, after line 3 insert –

   "(2) Sections 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 29 and 30 and paragraph (a) of section 3 come into operation on 1 December 2026.".

Amendments 1 and 2 are basically removing a whole lot of stuff and inserting a whole lot of stuff, the difference being that section 3 would come into operation on 1 December 2026, which is obviously post the election. What that means is we can have our feel-good change of everything here and still give people time to go through an election and do this. The VEC will have a lot more time and it will not be just one of the things done at the last moment. I do not feel the government will support this – I am just predicting that – but I think it is a way of making this fair as well as getting the job done.

Ingrid STITT: The government does not support the amendment. The effect of the amendment would be that the bill would not commence until after the election, and this would allow group voting tickets for the 2026 election. The government's position is very clearly that group voting tickets should be removed ahead of the upcoming election.

Evan MULHOLLAND: I thank Mr Bourman for moving this amendment. Similarly, the Liberals and Nationals do not support this amendment. I was speaking before to the impact of delaying the removal of group voting tickets. While there is debate on whether or not the regional structure or statewide structure should be done before or afterwards, we have to deal with what is before us now and what is possible now. For us, the abolition of group voting tickets now, even with the regional structure, is a far better outcome than another election with group voting tickets in place and the regional structure.

David LIMBRICK: The Libertarian Party will be supporting Mr Bourman's amendment. As stated, my fear is that we will never reach a fully proportional regional system in Victoria if we do this now, independently of regional reform. This amendment would put us in a position where both could be done simultaneously, and therefore it makes sense to support this amendment, in my view.

Sarah MANSFIELD: The Greens will not be supporting this amendment, for similar reasons to the ones Mr Mulholland outlined. As I said in my second-reading contribution, we are very open to a discussion around upper house reform, but there is absolutely no certainty about when this would occur. The process is complicated, and it has been well established that removal of group voting tickets and upper house reform do not need to be linked. As has been said, we do not support another election being held with group voting tickets still in place given they are just fundamentally undemocratic.

Council divided on amendments:

Ayes (5): Jeff Bourman, Moira Deeming, David Limbrick, Rachel Payne, Georgie Purcell

Noes (33): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Gaelle Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Shaun Leane, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Evan Mulholland, Aiv Puglielli, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

Amendments negatived.

Clause agreed to; clauses 3 to 14 agreed to.

New clause 14A (20:57)

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Ms Payne, I invite you to move Mr Ettershank's amendment 3, which tests his amendment 4.

Rachel PAYNE: I move:

3. Insert the following New Clause to follow Clause 14 –

'**14A New section 84A inserted**

After section 84 of the **Electoral Act 2002 insert** –

"**84A Preference whispering**

A person must not sell, or make any other commercial arrangement for, any services that, in exchange for a fee, provide advice or purport to advise, whether in writing or orally, a person or registered political party on how to allocate preferences for candidates or groups in an election.

Penalty: In the case of a natural person, 60 penalty units or 6 months imprisonment;

In the case of a body corporate, 300 penalty units.

Note

Section 179A applies to an offence against this section.".'.

My colleague Mr Ettershank has already spoken of the rationale for this amendment – amending clause 14, adding a new section 14A – that would just see that rather than proceeding with the highly problematic two-stage process for the reform that we have before us today, we can remove that preference whisperer issue. It can be addressed in a handful of lines that are contained in these amendments. The clause clearly defines what is being outlawed, how it may apply and the appropriate penalties for breaches. It is noted that this issue is not around political advice. Everyone is entitled to seek such advice. Rather, it is an amendment to remove that pursuit of commercial activity in association with preference negotiations or agreements that lend to this issue – so defining that principle around commerciality.

Ingrid STITT: The government will not be supporting this amendment. The bill, in removing group ticket voting from Legislative Council elections and introducing a new method for above-the-line preferential voting, negates the need – or the incentive, for that matter – for preference whispering, and consequently a statutory offence is not required.

David LIMBRICK: Although I appreciate the intent of this amendment and it would have maybe made sense if the previous amendment had passed, as there will not be any elections where group voting tickets will happen, assuming this bill passes, I do not feel that this amendment makes sense. That is my first objection to it.

My second objection to this amendment is I am not actually sure of the consequences of this. I feel like actually all political parties – or major parties, at least – have people that professionally work for them to manage these negotiations, and I feel that that is sort of necessary and might be outlawed by this. I am concerned about the consequences if this was to pass; therefore the Libertarians will not be supporting this amendment.

Evan MULHOLLAND: The Liberals and Nationals will not be supporting this amendment, for similar reasons to the government. While a unique way of putting forward an amendment, it does rather go against Mr Ettershank's – I was hoping he would be here – previous comments in this place, arguing against the incarceration of nonviolent offenders. I would also think that this amendment, while unique and interesting, is probably not the best solution to this bill. I think the bill in itself is the solution.

Sarah MANSFIELD: The Greens will also not be supporting this amendment. The best way to get rid of preference whispering is to get rid of group voting tickets, and that is what this bill does.

Council divided on new clause:

Ayes (3): Jeff Bourman, Rachel Payne, Georgie Purcell

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

New clause negatived.

Clauses 15 to 19 agreed to.

New clause 19A (21:03)

Jeff BOURMAN: I move:

3. Insert the following New Clause to follow Clause 19 –

'**19A Instalment payments of public funding entitlement**

After section 232(4) of the **Electoral Act 2002 insert** –

"(4A) Subsection (4) does not apply –

(a) in respect of a registered political party if the party loses a member of Parliament at a general election as a consequence of the removal of group voting tickets from the Legislative Council by the **Electoral Amendment (Miscellaneous Matters) Act 2026**; or

(b) in respect of an independent candidate if the candidate loses their seat as a member of Parliament at a general election as a consequence of the removal of group voting tickets from the Legislative Council by the **Electoral Amendment (Miscellaneous Matters) Act 2026**.".'.

Basically, we as parties get advance funding, and as a number of minor parties are about to have the rug pulled out from them, we could be left with a debt through no fault of our own. This is not a normal election where you take it as it comes. This has been done to us. This is basically that the VEC will forgive any debts, this one time only, of the people that are getting the cold loving hand of the government in this bill.

Ingrid STITT: The government will not be supporting Mr Bourman's amendment. The effect of the proposed amendment is that any party or independent candidate who loses their seat as a result of the amendments contained in the bill will have any debt arising from an obligation to repay payments of any advance public funding forgiven. For the provision to be operationalised the VEC would need to establish that the registered political party or candidate has lost their seat at a general election as a consequence of the removal of GVTs. We do not think that it is possible to establish causality. This amendment places an impossible burden on the VEC to be the arbiter of such a loss, so we will not be supporting this amendment.

David LIMBRICK: Can I just clarify from the minister, then: is it the government's position that it is not possible to implement this amendment that Mr Bourman is proposing? Is that what you are saying here, because the causality is unable to be determined? Is that the government's position?

Ingrid STITT: I think I clearly articulated the reasons why the government will not be supporting the amendment. We think that it would be extremely difficult and not possible. It would place an impossible burden on the VEC for them to become the arbiter in these matters. We do not support this approach.

Jeff BOURMAN: I might just point out for the minister's edification: 'in respect of a registered political party if the party loses a member of Parliament at the general election as a consequence' of this – basically, it is only us.

Sarah MANSFIELD: The Greens will not be supporting this amendment. While I understand Mr Bourman's point here, and I hope that the VEC will apply some discretion in its decisions around these things and take people's personal circumstances into account, it is very hard to establish whether someone would have retained their seat whether there were GVTs or not, quite frankly, in advance. It is hard to attribute the change in the electoral system to the loss of a seat. I am not sure how anyone here could predict that they are still going to have their seat post election, short of them getting a full quota. I am not quite sure how this amendment would be able to be interpreted by the VEC.

Evan MULHOLLAND: The Liberals and Nationals will not be supporting this amendment. I agree with the reasons put forward by both the government and the Greens. I think foreshadowing and looking into the future and trying to work back from that and saying that somehow these changes might cause a person to lose their seat rather reflects that people might have been elected to this place through reasons other than popular support and voter support anyway. Without foreshadowing what might be to come as a result of this bill, I would not want to support this amendment that might foreshadow an outcome and tie it to the bill itself.

Council divided on new clause:

Ayes (5): Jeff Bourman, Moira Deeming, David Limbrick, Rachel Payne, Georgie Purcell

Noes (33): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Gaelle Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Shaun Leane, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Evan Mulholland, Aiv Puglielli, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

New clause negatived.

Clauses 20 to 30 agreed to.

New clause 30A (21:11)

David LIMBRICK: I move:

1. Insert the following New Clause to follow Clause 30 –

'**30A Section 182A amended**

(1) In the heading to section 182A of the **Electoral Act 2002**, after "**2026**" **insert** "**and Electoral Amendment (Miscellaneous Matters) Act 2026**".

(2) In section 182A of the **Electoral Act 2002** –

(a) in subsection (1), after "**2026**" **insert** "and the **Electoral Amendment (Miscellaneous Matters) Act 2026**";

(b) in subsection (6)(i), for "Victoria." **substitute** "Victoria;";

(c) after subsection (6)(i) **insert** –

"(j) the findings and recommendations of the Electoral Matters Committee Inquiry into Victoria's Upper House electoral system.".'.

This amendment is rather simple actually. We spoke about it earlier. Basically what we are doing here is that after the last bill there was an independent committee set up to review the donations system, and it makes total sense to me that this also should be part of that independent committee. It is my concern that the Electoral Matters Committee in the new Parliament will actually comprise members of Parliament who are beneficiaries of the new system and who therefore will not be independent at all. Therefore I think it is entirely appropriate for this independent committee to add these things to their scope, and that is all that this amendment does. It just increases the scope of the committee that we have already set up and agreed to set up.

Ingrid STITT: As I indicated earlier in the committee stage, the government will not be supporting Mr Limbrick's amendment. I went to the specific reasons why the review that will examine and make recommendations in relation to the operation of the Victorian electoral system from the previous bill passed in this place, including the operation and effectiveness of any political donation disclosure scheme and the effectiveness of the Electoral Act, is an important review in and of itself. We do not support further extending that review and taking the focus away from the original intent of the review. I do note, notwithstanding Mr Limbrick's concerns about the make-up of any Electoral Matters Committee in a future Parliament, that it does have the ability to inquire into elections and any other matter that the committee sees fit.

Evan MULHOLLAND: The Liberals and Nationals will not be supporting this amendment, for similar reasons to the government. We cannot predict, as the minister said, who might be on the Electoral Matters Committee and what they might look at. Lee Tarlamis will probably be on it, I think it is safe to assume. I would not support this amendment. It is up to the government of the day to commission the EMC as well.

Sarah MANSFIELD: While we are very much in favour of reviews post election, as the minister said, this review and committee process was set up with a very specific purpose in mind. I think it is important that they are able to look at what are already very substantial changes to our donation laws, and that warrants a dedicated review. The Electoral Matters Committee will undertake a review after the election, as will the VEC. I am sure the next Parliament if it sees fit could also instigate an independent review, but to tack it onto the work of another committee with a very well-defined purpose is not quite the appropriate mechanism.

Council divided on new clause:

Ayes (5): Jeff Bourman, Moira Deeming, David Limbrick, Rachel Payne, Georgie Purcell

Noes (33): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Gaelle Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Shaun Leane, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Evan Mulholland, Aiv Puglielli, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

New clause negatived.

Clauses 31 to 33 agreed to.

Reported to house without amendment.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (21:21): I move:

> That the report be now adopted.

Motion agreed to.

Report adopted.

Third reading

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (21:21): I move:

> That the bill be now read a third time and do pass.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (33): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Gaelle Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Shaun Leane, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Evan Mulholland, Aiv Puglielli, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

Noes (4): Jeff Bourman, David Limbrick, Rachel Payne, Georgie Purcell

Motion agreed to.

Read third time.

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

Firearms Amendment Bill 2026

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Lizzie Blandthorn:

> That the bill be now read a second time.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (21:28): I rise to speak on the Firearms Amendment Bill 2026, and I am going to start by saying I am extremely thankful that we live in Australia. In my lifetime we have lived through an incredible arc of history, one that has been incredibly safe, peaceful and prosperous. I love the state of Victoria and the nation of Australia. It is a place that has long been known for the peace we enjoy, for the social cohesion and also for the fact that Australia has been a safe haven for many people that have escaped all types of terror. We are a nation with an Indigenous heritage where the spirit is connected to the land, a connection that runs deep and long; a British foundation where the rule of law is applied evenly to everybody, regardless of their background; and

a nation with a multicultural character. It is this character that is the reason that we have been held up as a model and praised as the most successful multicultural nation on earth. It is this reality, though, that is under threat at the moment, and that is why we are here debating this legislation today.

The events that led us to this point prove more than ever that guns need to be kept out of the hands of criminals and terrorists, and we will support reform that does that. In America we see from time to time some mass shootings, and they spark debate about gun reform. It is always a divisive argument where the left and the right both come out swinging, and every time that happens I am extremely thankful that that is not our story. The reason that guns are not readily available here, however, is one that is born of tragedy – a tragedy that has been etched in our collective memory. I will read what happened from the National Museum of Australia's website. It says:

> On 28 April 1996, 35 people were killed and many more injured in a mass shooting at the historic Port Arthur tourist precinct in south-east Tasmania.
>
> Armed with three high-powered firearms, the perpetrator murdered the owners of a nearby guesthouse before driving to Port Arthur where he shot multiple visitors and staff in and around the site. The young Hobart man later murdered a hostage at the guesthouse, before he was captured by police as he fled the building.
>
> The massacre provoked national debate about private ownership of guns, especially automatic weapons.
>
> Within weeks of the tragedy, Australian Prime Minister John Howard implemented critical changes to gun safety legislation with bipartisan state, territory and Commonwealth support. The endorsement offered by Coalition partner and Nationals leader Tim Fischer, and Labor's Kim Beazley, leader of the Opposition, was crucial to achieving the reforms.
>
> In November 1996 the perpetrator was sentenced to imprisonment with no eligibility for parole on 73 charges, including 35 life sentences for murder.

In the wake of this event the decisive action that was taken and the incredible leadership shown by Prime Minister John Howard in my opinion have made Australia one of the safest places on earth, one where parents can send their kids to school knowing that there are not going to be shootings taking place. I understand and acknowledge that many people at the time had and even now have various opinions, but personally I feel quite certain that the action that we took together as a nation was in fact the correct one. I believe as well that it struck the right balance. Recreational shooters have been able to continue their sport and farmers have been able to continue going about their work, and until 14 December 2025 there were no mass shootings.

However, 14 December 2025 was I believe one of the most shameful days in our national story. If we look at this through the lens of gun laws alone, we completely miss the point. It prompted a rapid review led by Ken Lay into firearms, aimed at supporting the national approach and bringing Victoria's firearm laws up to date with the risks of today. It highlighted much more than that, though, and we cannot talk about one issue without reflecting on the other. The events of that day took place because antisemitism was allowed to fester until it resulted in a terrorist attack that saw 15 innocent lives killed and 41 people injured at a Hanukkah celebration at Bondi Beach. Every single one of those lives mattered. One story, however, that kept coming back to my mind was the story of Holocaust survivor Alex Kleytman, who was murdered that day in Bondi. I am going to read a little bit of his story because this is the backdrop to what we are debating here today. This is an article from the *Guardian* from about seven months ago. It says:

> On the 75th anniversary of the Holocaust, Alex Kleytman took to social media to remember his mother, who was a prisoner of the Pechora camp in Ukraine when she was just 16 years old.
>
> "The purpose of this camp was not to kill, but to make people die of hunger and hard labor," he wrote in January 2020. "She managed to survive. Her memories can be heard in Yad Vashem [the Holocaust memorial in Israel]."
>
> Kleytman, too, survived the Holocaust, going on to have two children and 11 grandchildren, settling in Sydney and always tightly preserving his Jewish heritage.
>
> "Each year," he wrote, "there is fewer of those who were released from the camps [who remain alive].

> "Against the backdrop of love and memory, more and more photos and messages about desecrated cemeteries, painted swastikas on the walls of synagogues and attacks on synagogues appear.

He said this:

> We must be strong and be able to stand for ourselves … not to forget about those Jews who fought back the enemy in the distant years of the WWII.

This man is an incredible man. He was born in 1938 in the Ukrainian city of Odessa. Two years after the war broke out he then fled and went on the most amazing journey to Siberia with other evacuees, finally reaching a Russian city. They later moved after the war, as their home in Odessa had been bombed.

> Two decades later, his family applied for emigration to Israel but were rejected, and the family fell into the ranks of "refuseniks", an unofficial term for Soviet Jews who were unable to leave the bloc, and were badly mistreated.

Their second attempt at emigration, however, was successful, and the family landed in Sydney in 1992. Soon after, he began working for a large construction company, where he remained for 20 years. This man, after surviving the Holocaust, after surviving all the horrors that it meant to be Jewish during World War II, was still not free. He lived as a second-class citizen in the Soviet Union for two decades under a Soviet bloc, unable to leave. He was not allowed to leave for Israel, not because of their rules but because of the Soviet rules.

Still, there was that dream of freedom. He applied to emigrate again and he finally succeeded, and he moved to Australia. For almost three decades he lived here as a free man. He had a beautiful family, and he could finally celebrate his traditions. But this is the part that we must remember: after living through so much, surely he would have felt like he could finally relax; however, after surviving the Holocaust, after surviving Hitler and after surviving Stalin, he was murdered here on our shores by the same hate and the same antisemitism that he had tried most of his life to escape. Australia has been one of the most successful multicultural nations on earth, but this story here proves just how fragile that is. It is important to set the scene of this, because this is the backdrop of this legislation.

As we take on this topic I want to state clearly my true belief: any attempt to somehow bundle lawful, law-abiding gun users – people that use guns for recreational shooting, for hunting, for farming, for any sort of pest management – in with the reason that this legislation is coming before the house today would be to ignore the real issue that has nothing to do with lawful gun users but has everything to do with violent extremism. There is a pattern that is shown by those who perpetrate terror-related violence: that these extremists will use absolutely anything as a fatal weapon. I think that it is important to raise this to put into perspective exactly what we are talking about today.

On September 11 in 2001, when al-Qaeda attacked America, it was a plane that was their fatal weapon of choice. The attack killed just shy of 3000 people, thousands were injured and the world changed forever. On 20 January in 2017 there was a terrorist attack just outside here on Bourke Street which led to the death of six people and 37 being hospitalised. In that attack it was a car used as a fatal weapon. In 2018, in the event that is now known as the Melbourne stabbing attack, a young man that was inspired by the Islamic State killed one person and injured two, using a knife as his weapon of choice. The same type of weapon – a knife – was also used in the Wakeley church stabbings in 2024, also motivated by religious extremism. In 2024 the Adass synagogue was targeted with an arson attack. We have since found out that, horrifically, that was a state-sponsored attack that happened here on our shores in Melbourne. There is a pattern of terror-related violence from the past that shows us that extremists will use anything they can get their hands on as fatal weapons: cars, planes, suicide vests, bombs, buses, knives or guns – you name it.

While I believe that it is vitally important to debate the Firearms Amendment Bill, I will also point out that the Bondi attacks happened in a nation with some of the strongest gun controls in the world, and I would caution us against using guns as a scapegoat and ignoring what actually happened in its full context. Guns in the hands of law-abiding citizens are safe. Guns in the hands of terrorists and

criminals are not. It is that simple. The driver of this event was hateful antisemitism, and that cannot be erased. I do not mind if people in here are completely pro gun or anti gun. We must have this debate. I am happy to stand here and debate it today. I am happy to stand here and champion the rights of recreational shooters, farmers and law-abiding gun owners. We cannot afford to muddy the waters by bundling in responsible, law-abiding citizens with what happened on that day, because they are two worlds apart.

What happened on 14 December last year was just a tragedy of monumental proportions, and what made it even more painful was that for years the Jewish community saw it coming. They feared it, they warned of it and they were ignored – and all while they were being victim shamed. They lived to see their worst nightmares play out. In this debate I am not going to repeat that mistake and ignore those voices again, because what happened was the result of what happens when antisemitism is allowed to go on uninhibited.

This is where it all started. It started when terrorists had a coordinated attack inside Israel proper on 7 October, leading to the biggest loss of Jewish life since the Holocaust. Around 1200 people died, and 251 were taken hostage. We watched it happen in real time on live stream. These brutal attacks were online. They were so brutal, they were so graphic and they were so violent, yet it was the truth of what was happening. It included women with bloodied pants getting dragged into cars as they were taken hostage, and it included – and this is something that plays over in my mind – the head of a Thai tourist being hacked off with a garden hoe. That is how brutal it was, and that just plays over in my head. But what happened in the days following, and it was only days, was that censorship kicked in and these videos were taken down. I was not expecting to see what happened next, but what happened was that the truth of what we saw was replaced with a narrative, and it was beyond anything I had witnessed before.

Within a day we saw protesters in Sydney chanting 'Gas the Jews' and 'Eff the Jews'. It was not 'Gas the Israelis' – that would have been bad enough – but 'Gas the Jews'. It was the targeting of Australians here. We were being told on the one hand that this was about a foreign war, but on the other hand we were seeing Australians – people that were born and raised here – being targeted. Those are two narratives that there is no way you can possibly reconcile with each other. We heard women who had been raped being blamed in Australia. I saw the biggest explosion of Jew hatred that I have ever seen in my lifetime, and it just went relatively unchallenged. For years antisemitism was given a megaphone. In fact every Sunday the streets of Melbourne became a runway for this type of hate as antisemitism began to spread and became the latest craze. Jewish schools were vandalised, Jewish businesses were attacked, Jewish artists were doxed and synagogues were vandalised in protest – not Israelis, Jewish Australians. Every step of the way we witnessed these Jewish people being gaslit. Victim blaming became the norm.

All over the nation this was happening. Australian Jews, not Israelis, came under threat because antisemitism, the oldest hatred in the world, came out of remission. Political leaders became bystanders who were too afraid to stand up, and I believe this lack of political leadership turned the most successful multicultural nation on earth into a hotbed of hatred. Every cry for help from Jewish people was ignored until that day, on 14 December, when thousands of people gathered, families went to Bondi beach, one of our most iconic beaches, and to our collective shame terrorists turned up with the one goal, to kill Jews, and they succeeded 15 times. They were being hosted on one of Australia's most iconic beaches. There were thousands of others there – surfers, swimmers, sunbakers, people having a party. You cannot get more Aussie than that, with people from all different walks of life in one place together. But not long after it started, these two terrorists, with the intention of killing Jews, started firing shots.

The names of the people that were murdered that day include Matilda Bee Britvan, aged just 10 years old. I will read you what her dad said. He said:

> We came here from the Ukraine … I named her Matilda because she was our firstborn in Australia. And I thought that Matilda was the most Australian name that could ever exist.
>
> So just remember… remember her name.

They were Rabbi Eli Schlanger, Rabbi Yaakov Levitan, Dan Elkayam, Peter Meagher, Marika Pogany, Tibor Weitzen, Reuven Morrison, Boris Tetleroyd, Boris and Sofia Gurman, Adam Smyth, Tania Tretiak and the Holocaust survivor that I spoke about, Alex, who was murdered while shielding his wife from gunfire. That is one of the issues that needs to be addressed, and every single one of us must play our part in that and not just leave it to the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion. Every one of us has to take responsibility for that and stand up. These events caused the nation to stop and review. A nation-led response, causing every state to carry a responsibility, is what has brought us here.

Former police commissioner Ken Lay has done a power of work that forms this legislation, and this legislation here adopts 15 of the 16 recommendations. I am going to read out from the Ken Lay report some of the things and the reasons that were given. Now, this is unbelievable to me. This is under recommendation 8:

> Victoria's current firearms laws do not fully address all pathways through which firearms enter the illicit market, including theft, unlawful manufacture, and diversion or trafficking activities.

Isn't that amazing? In Victoria guns have been largely illegally trafficked and have gotten into the wrong hands of people, of criminals and of terrorists. I just want to point out that that there is the issue, and I hope that nobody in here tries to muddy the waters and say that it is about law-abiding firearm holders. It states:

> Victoria Police rely on fragmented internal systems and have limited real-time access to interstate intelligence, meaning decision-makers may not have a complete picture when assessing fitness to hold a licence.

Amazing stuff. Further, it states:

> Current Victoria Police systems need updating to support a near-real-time national register and integration with state-based digital platforms.

I would love to read more of that, but I do not want to run out of time to go through our amendments.

This bill contains a number of elements. It imposes a citizenship requirement and a firearms background check; it amends the Firearms Amendment Act 2018; it makes amendments to the firearm prohibition order offences, including penalties for failing to notify the chief commissioner of change of address; it gives new powers to the chief commissioner to reclassify firearm categories for 12 months; it implements a national AusCheck system; it defines a new threshold for trafficable firearms; and it includes a new insert for the chief commissioner's cancellation rights of a dealers licence. In the report you can read about the justifications for all of these. I am very happy that the one that was rejected was the one that puts a cap on firearms. That was one that they did put forward. It says within the report why essentially that is and that there are different types of firearms that might be used for different sorts of pest control and different situations in farms. It goes through all of these things. So I think that we have come to a good point.

I am just going to speak now to the Liberals and Nationals amendments to this bill. I am not sure if now is an appropriate time to have them circulated, but essentially what they do is this. The first one is around the readiness of the AusCheck system. This amendment is about delaying the commencement of part 7 until the Commonwealth arrangements, information-sharing agreements, IT systems, administrative processes and guidance materials are fully operational. It requires publication of costs, privacy protections and implementation arrangements before the commencement. What we want from this is to ensure that the firearm background checks scheme does not commence before the necessary systems are in place. We believe that putting that forward would be jumping the gun.

The next lot of amendments is around procedural fairness for firearms licence holders. The amendments remove the requirement for automatic cancellation of firearm licences following an adverse background check and replace it with a suspension process, including notice to the licence-holder and an opportunity to have a review and to provide the evidence. This would maintain public safety through suspension powers while ensuring the licence-holders are afforded procedural fairness before their licence is permanently cancelled. Procedural fairness for firearm dealers is really a similar reasoning. It removes the automatic cancellation of dealers' licences and replaces it with a suspension process that includes notice and a time for them to respond, and review rights. This would provide them with the same procedural safeguards as individual licence-holders while preserving police powers to act when necessary in response to public safety.

The next amendment is around service standards and transparency. This amendment would require the Chief Commissioner of Police to establish service standards for firearm background checks, including targets and communication standards for applicants. It would require annual public reporting against those standards. What this would do is promote accountability, transparency and the timely processing of firearms background checks.

The next amendment is around an independent review of the scheme. It requires an independent review of the firearms background check regime after implementation. It will examine the effectiveness, public safety outcomes, cost, privacy impacts, resource implications and effects on licence-holders. What this aims to do is ensure that Parliament receives an evidence-based assessment of whether the reforms are working as intended and whether further legislative changes would be required in the future.

Overall the Liberals and Nationals package of amendments aims to retain the government's firearm background-checking regime but introduce implementation safeguards, transparency measures, procedural fairness protections, service standards and independent oversight. In submitting these amendments, I commend the bill to the house.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (21:54): It gives me no pleasure to be doing this. My lack of pleasure comes in two parts: (1) as a member of the Jewish community, albeit a peripheral member, and (2) as an almost lifelong shooter. I need to correct a few things from Dr Heath. 1996 was the first time we were betrayed by the Liberal and National coalition. I remember this clearly because ironically 28 April 1996 was when it happened and 29 April 1996 was when I started at the police academy. Law-abiding firearms owners were forced to hand in our guns, not all of them, that some of us had had for a lifetime – in my case probably 20-something years – when we had done nothing. In the end there could have been a justification for that if there was a demonstrable change in the rates of firearm deaths. I must also point out that firearms deaths on the Australian Institute of Criminology site include suicides. But if you look, since the mid to late 1980s there has been a consistent drop in firearms deaths in Australia. In 1997 there was a blip, because they were so low in general that an event of that magnitude could not not have an effect, but then they kept on going, hence why you have all this rubbish about firearms deaths having decreased since 1996; therefore the 1996 laws must have been good. If you look before 1996, the story changes. I just get a little – not cranky. I just feel it needs to be clear, because there seems to be this thing that 1996 magically fixed everything until December 2025, but in September 2014 there was another mass shooting. It was a result of a domestic incident in New South Wales where some coward killed his family and himself, but that was five people. We also had, as Dr Heath and I will agree on, the Bourke Street massacre or killings – whatever you want to call it – where a car was used. I do not believe I saw anyone calling for a change of registration requirements for cars, but I digress a little bit.

My issue with this legislation is that we do not really need it, in that in Australia and in Victoria we have a robust system, we have robust licensing and we have registration, which you can believe in or not. We have safe storage, which I do believe in. I believe in licensing, just for the record in case there is any clarity needed on that. None of these changes contained in this bill would fix what happened on 14 December 2025, because there was a failure of government. There was a failure of the federal

government, there was a failure of the New South Wales government – somewhere in between, because no-one is giving us a clear picture. We can have all the royal commissions we like, but whilst everyone is busy butt-covering, we are not going to get the truth. But the facts remain. I do not use names of offenders. The younger offender came to the attention of ASIO twice, I do believe. He came to the attention of the Jewish community safety group once, and at no point in time apparently did anyone think, 'There might be a firearms licence involved in this guy's life. Let's check.'

Back in the day there was a thing called CrimTrac, which was where us firearms owners had our data on the same system as criminals. Never the twain shall meet, but I do not want criminals having guns, so you can put up with this thing. But what happened to CrimTrac? What happened here could have been avoided if New South Wales police had known and had put a firearms prohibition order on the young bloke, and then his dad would not have been able to have his guns. Evil exists in the heart, not in the gun safe. Maybe they would have found another way, but we will never know.

It brings me to a few of the problems. One of the offenders was born here; citizenship requirements will not fix that. They only used three firearms; caps will not fix that. The firearms prohibition order I covered. Both the federal and New South Wales governments really wet the bed on this one. Eight days after the event the New South Wales Parliament had changed the laws, and they are still trying to figure out how to do it. How many months are we down the track? That is not how you should be doing legislation. I will be opposing this. There is the continuation of the firearms prohibition orders thing, which I do not really mind, but there is also a lot of stuff that we should not be subject to. I have amendments, and I would like them circulated.

Business interrupted pursuant to standing orders.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Pursuant to standing order 4.08, I declare that the sitting be extended by up to 1 hour.

Jeff BOURMAN: Actually some of my amendments are out of scope, and we will go through the appropriate thing for that. I will quickly just go through them. Someone wanting to try recreational handgun shooting can only do it at a club under supervision, and you must fill out what is called a notice of receiving instruction. It is called a NORI. The legislation where these were created way back when was, in my opinion, faulty in that these NORIs never expire. What you have is a situation such as I have had myself. For a while I had a recreational handgun licence. All was good. You needed to do some attendances before that and have a few of those NORIs chucked in to get your licence – all good. In the early part of my tenure here I struggled to make attendances; in fact it was basically getting towards COVID, and I decided I was not going to renew my licence. Moving forward, here I am again. Mind you, it was February when I put in my application, and I still have not heard much; that is a go at the funding of licensing and regulation, not a go at licensing and regulation. I run the risk of ending up with too many notices of receiving instruction. After the 13th one you become a prohibited person. My amendments effectively say that those NORIs should expire after five years. After five years, I think it is a fair bet. This has no implication on public safety. It is just fairness, because if you have a few instances where you cannot participate, you do the right thing and you either sell your guns or you give them to a dealer and your licence expires. But then when times change and you go back to get it, it is conceivable that you will not be able to do any training as required by the club. So that will fix that.

The part 4A amendments relating to approved handgun shooting clubs are actually a streamlining of administration. At the moment all handgun target clubs must report all attendances. We trust people enough to have these things at home. We trust these people enough to go to a range and use them. So what we are saying is the clubs – and they need to be audited of course – can report the people that do not comply instead of everyone. That is going to take a big chunk of business away from the licensing and regulation division, who can then go and do something else. Again, there is no public safety implication on this. It is in the club's interest to make sure that they are on top of this, because if they are not, the club gets shut down. There have been clubs over the years that have done the wrong thing, and the police have dealt with them.

Now we get down to the other parts. This is number five on my sheet. I am not a fan of having only citizens being able to have lawful firearms. The reason I say this is I know for a fact there are police officers in Victoria Police that are not citizens of Australia for personal reasons. I am not going to go into them, but they need to be that way. We trust them to have firearms and to carry them around. We train them to shoot people, which is what the police have firearms for, in self defence. We trust them with this. In the end, when you think about it, we can trust someone enough to put them in the police, in the special operations group with actual machine guns, all the flashbangs, all the tactical stuff and all the whiz-bang stuff, but we are not going to give them a licence to go shooting rabbits on the weekend. That also goes to the Australian Defence Force. It is conceivable we can have someone in the SAS that does all sorts of stuff for this country but we will not give them a licence to go shooting rabbits or targets on the weekend. So my amendments to the citizenship stuff are basically to, first of all, either get rid of it or to align it with the police and military, because it is patently unfair and patently racist to say that we will take you as a police officer or in the ADF, but we are not going to give you a .22 or a .223 or whatever it might be – uh-uh.

Also, moving on – there are a few of these – the last two are just consequential stuff. But with AusCheck, AusCheck is going to cost up to about 500 bucks, give or take a bit. My intention is not to stop AusCheck. My intention is that the government absorb the cost for these checks. This should have been done decades ago. CrimTrac should have been joined properly decades ago. A stuff-up of the federal government's and possibly the New South Wales government's making should not become our costs. I am all for the checks. I do not want the wrong people having recreational firearms – I have always made that very, very clear. But if all of a sudden you chuck 500 bucks onto the end of a shooters licence fee, you are going to start to hurt most of the people that are of lower socio-economic status. They are making less; they have still got to pay the same. So I feel that this amendment is just bringing the spirit of egalitarianism back to this. Yes, if you are going to do it, do it. I have not got a problem with that. But if you are going to do it, I think the government should bear the costs of it. So on the whole of this, the Liberals' and Nationals' amendments look okay to me. It will be no surprise to anyone that I am not supporting the Greens' stuff. I will allow – when I say 'allow', I mean I will not oppose it – their instruction motion, but I will get a fair amount of joy from opposing their actual amendments.

I do not recommend this bill to the house. It could have been done better. We law-abiding firearms owners, whether you are a hunter or a target shooter or whatever, should not have been subject to any changes. But I will also say on the whole of things, we did a damn sight better than New South Wales.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (22:07): I am also pleased to rise to speak on the Firearms Amendment Bill 2026, a bill which makes a raft of changes to our state's firearms laws. As has been extensively discussed in the previous contributions, a major catalyst for these reforms were the horrific events in Bondi in Sydney late last year. I have already spoken repeatedly about that event in this place, and I will not seek to dwell too much on it other than to reflect, perhaps, on the words of the Prime Minister, who said at the time, in the aftermath, that the terrorists at Bondi Beach had hatred in their minds but guns in their hands. It was a very true and apt comment. And indeed, whilst there is a significant power of work that is being done in this jurisdiction and in other jurisdictions to combat that most insidious of hate – of racism and antisemitism – I will confine my remarks today to this bill, which deals with not so much the intent but the means: the gun in the hand, as it were.

Following that atrocity, this government commissioned former police commissioner Ken Lay to undertake a rapid review into our state's firearm laws. It made a number of recommendations, the vast majority of which have been accepted by government. The government released the review and its response to the review in May of this year, so this bill is the coming to life of a number of the recommendations from that review as well as some other measures which were agreed to by all state and federal jurisdictions as part of the national cabinet process.

At the outset as well I do want to acknowledge that we know that the vast majority of firearm users in this state are decent, honest people who want to do the right thing. This bill is intended in no way to

infringe upon their continued use of them, be it for work or be it for sport or recreation or other completely legitimate means. I acknowledge it is a popular sport, with one of the largest shooting ranges in Victoria in my electorate – in our electorate, Mr Limbrick, in the south-east. I acknowledge that this is not a bill that is targeted at those people. This is targeted at those who use guns unlawfully, and it makes sure that Victoria Police have the powers and the information that they need to respond effectively to those risks.

It does do a number of things, and one of the most consequential reforms in this bill before us today is the introduction of the Commonwealth firearms background check requirement. This will operate through the Commonwealth AusCheck scheme, and once these provisions are in effect a background check through AusCheck will be required for all new firearms licence applicants. Existing licence-holders will also be required to undergo the check when their licence is next reviewed. This of course will allow that intelligence from organisations like ASIO and similar – that national intelligence information – to be considered as part of the firearms licensing process. It allows a check to be initiated outside the normal relicensing cycle as well if new information becomes available which suggests that a person may present a security or organised crime risk.

It is really important that Victoria Police should have access to this most critical information in a timely fashion, considering the dangers that can occur when those checks and balances are not applied, as we saw so tragically in New South Wales last year. These changes will commence in the future once the necessary Commonwealth arrangements are in place and Victoria Police has progressed work on its upgraded firearms licensing system – an upgrade for which this government has invested many millions of dollars. There is also a new citizenship requirement for firearms licensing, as has been discussed by Mr Bourman, and under these changes firearms licences will generally be available to Australian citizens and also New Zealand citizens who are permanent residents of Australia. The purpose of the citizenship requirement is to improve the reliability of information that is available when a firearms licence application is being considered.

I want to take this opportunity to address some of the concerns raised by Mr Bourman, acknowledging that this has been the subject and focus of much debate in the shooting community, who I understand are broadly supportive of many of the other reforms in this bill. But it is important that I take a moment to address this. Firstly, having just spoken about the importance of that Commonwealth-level national security data and intelligence in assessing firearms applications, it is important that we are able to hold such a stringent test equally for all applicants. As it stands, relying on external advice from other countries, which there may not even be strong security relationships with, degrades the level of trust that we can have that every person who does go for a firearms licence the government should be satisfied does meet a very high and very stringent threshold, and when you are dealing with security from other countries you simply do not have the access to the same amount of information. It is imperative that Victoria Police have the most accurate and thorough information possible.

I segue into my next point, which is that there are of course work and other exemption permits. This is an important exemption and will indeed apply to those who may not hold Australian citizenship but may, for example, be police officers. There will be exemptions in place which will allow them to continue to work as they otherwise would. This is an important exemption because there are people, particularly in our regional communities – it is not just police, it is also primary industries – who do need access to firearms as part of their work, and this is a bill that recognises that. It also enables other groups of people to be allowed through regulations where appropriate.

There are changes to the firearm prohibition orders as well, and this is an important reform that this Labor government brought in, in 2018, in the previous parliamentary term. They were introduced to give Victoria Police stronger powers to prevent serious and organised criminals and other people considered unsuitable from accessing firearms. A person who is subject to an FPO is prohibited from acquiring, possessing, carrying or using firearms and firearm-related items. This scheme also gives police important powers to make sure that those orders can be enforced. Since the scheme was introduced Victoria Police has issued 2767 FPOs and there have been slightly under 2000 charges laid

relating to breaches of FPOs. I think these figures show what an important measure this scheme is, and it is for that reason that this bill seeks to continue that program. Under the existing legislation the FPO scheme is due to sunset in May 2028. This bill will remove those sunset provisions, meaning that the FPO scheme will remain permanently in Victorian law. Given the frequency of its use by Victoria Police and the demonstrated effectiveness of it, it is appropriate that we do keep this in place, and this bill will do that. It also increases the maximum penalties applying to five offences relating to FPOs, so if someone has been prohibited from possessing a firearm and then chooses to ignore that prohibition, that is a serious matter that is dealt with through the charges increased under this bill.

There are also changes to offences related to firearms trafficking, with the introduction of graduated offences and penalties for the unlawful possession, acquisition and disposal of trafficable or large traceable quantities of firearms. The penalties will increase depending on the number of firearms involved. This means that more serious offending involving larger quantities of firearms can attract a stronger penalty. Under these reforms the most serious offending can attract imprisonment of up to 15 years.

Indeed, as we are seeing rapidly evolving technologies, and with firearms and other weapons of war from conflicts overseas, it is also appropriate that we update and amend the legislation to ensure that we are capturing emerging technologies insofar as they relate to firearms. This bill will expand the Chief Commissioner of Police's power to temporarily recategorise firearms, allowing them to respond when a particular new type of firearm or even a new type of modification to an existing firearm becomes a new or emerging risk. This temporary reclassification will be able to apply for a period of up to 12 months and expands the regulation-making powers so that longer term changes can then be implemented as necessary and detailed and considered work can be done without delaying the immediate response that will be provided through these changes. This is a particularly important change as indeed we are seeing evolving technology, whether it be through drones, through 3D printing or through artificial intelligence, and it is entirely appropriate that we are fully equipping our police in a legislative manner to be quick and efficient when it comes to detecting and responding to emerging threats from firearms.

We do have strong laws in Victoria, as we do across the rest of the country, and I will note that, contrary to a previous speaker, it is a remarkable achievement of the political system in this country that we were able to come together and make significant firearm reforms in the late 1990s. Indeed I acknowledge a tremendous contribution by – this is probably the only time I will say this in this chamber – John Howard. He showed remarkable strength and courage to do that, given opposition from some on his own side. However, it was a remarkable reform which has been held up internationally as a source of inspiration for many others as well and as an example of successful firearms regulation. It is important, though, of course that all jurisdictions in Australia continue that work and that we do not rest on any laurels. We do see new and emerging patterns of offending in offender typologies, in technologies and in other forms as well. That is why keeping our legislation updated is so critical. Whilst many of the reforms in the bill today do stem directly from both the horrific Bondi attack and the Ken Lay review, it is also important to note that this is not simply about one incident. This is part of an evolving package of works considering, acknowledging and responding to evolving needs and the threats that our community faces and that Victoria Police faces in keeping us safe. With that I commend the bill to the house.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (22:19): I am pleased to rise to speak on the Firearms Amendment Bill 2026 and, following on from my colleague Dr Heath, just reiterate that the Liberals and Nationals will not be opposing this bill. However, we will seek to amend and improve the bill before the house. The firearms bill implements a number of the recommendations that have arisen from the Ken Lay report and review, following on from the heinous terrorist attack on innocent Australian lives on Bondi Beach on 14 December last year.

The bill introduces citizenship requirements for firearm licences, it expands the powers regarding firearm classification and prohibition orders, and it seeks to implement the Commonwealth AusCheck

firearm background checking framework into Victorian law. As I said, we have many comments to make on this. I do want to flag that I have a number of questions in the committee stage that I would like to interrogate on behalf of many of the stakeholders and individuals, from farmers to local residents, the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia, the Australian Deer Association, Field & Game, and many people that have written to me, as well as me seeking their assessment, their views and their understanding on the implications of this bill.

Just reflecting, certainly etched into all of our psyches, I am sure, was that heinous crime committed on innocent Jewish Australian families in Bondi. As the footage emerged and we saw those just horrendous, horrific details coming through our screens, we saw acts of heroism from passers-by, from emergency responders, from people putting their bodies in front of small children. These are all heroes of many different nationalities, but certainly our Jewish families deserve our utmost respect and condolences as they try and heal their lives post this terrible crime.

Of course, like every Victorian, we want answers. We want answers to ensure that this does not happen again. Like every Victorian, we want stronger actions against the terrorists, and they were terrorists that did this to our community. Like every Australian, we want to ensure that those people that perpetrate these actions first of all come to justice but are also inhibited through stronger oversight, stronger targeting, stronger enforcement and stronger deterrence of trafficking and criminality. What we do not want – and we have said this from the outset – is to see punishment of those who do not deserve this punishment.

The Prime Minister I think was very weak in his response. He went for a kneejerk reaction of 'First of all, let's institute a buyback system, and by the way, the states can pay for it across the board. And also, let's look at gun caps.' That is something that we, the Nationals in particular but the Liberals and Nationals, have stood firmly on. We saw two guns in the hands of recalcitrant, vile, demonic people, and two guns was two guns too many. Ten to 20 guns for law-abiding citizens has no impact on community safety or threat or risk to community safety. We have listened and we have travelled and we have asked and we have engaged. We have sat down with farmers, sporting shooters and hunters, and we know the importance of getting this right. I do not believe that this bill is right, but I think we have to try and strike a balance. Having that feedback is really important. My colleague Senator Bridget McKenzie tabled a petition in the federal Parliament – over 70,000 signatures – saying no to overreach, no to caps. Indeed in this Parliament I did a short and sharp contribution on behalf of a Brunswick-living, duck-hunting and harvesting, Sri Lankan–born Australian – a fantastic gentleman who approached me. He harvests for his table. We presented a petition, which was really important, about balance and called for any implementation to be evidence based.

Now, this is the other term. When evidence came, we approached Ken Lay and I spoke with Ken Lay, as did Tim Bull, and brought various people in – farmers, pest controllers and hunters – to speak and for Ken Lay to hear this, and he promised evidence based. I have the utmost respect for Mr Lay; however, when we saw that report come through, one of his recommendations was with regard to caps on guns. It was not about protecting the community. In essence there was no evidence to say a gun cap would produce greater protection for community safety. In effect it almost said that there have been many different reviews on this, the jury is out and the repercussions or the outcome would be that we may actually save people from committing suicide – those people possessing guns. That was the only thing that really came through. Clearly, gun caps are not required. Thankfully, in either a moment of sanity or a moment of pressure from the Electrical Trades Union and other unions, then Premier Jacinta Allan decided not to put caps and to reject that particular recommendation. That is something that we stand with law-abiding firearm owners on and accept and appreciate.

In relation to what the bill does, very briefly, it continues the firearm prohibition order scheme, the FPO scheme, and expands categories for that framework. In talking with people, there was not a great deal of consternation, but I do have some questions in relation to that. A key change is in part 3 around categorisation of firearms. The bill allows regulations to reclassify them and the Chief Commissioner

of Police to declare categories temporary or permanent. Some others made some comments around this, and I will have some questions in the committee stage.

In terms of firearms trafficking, there is a new definition of 'traffickable', from two to nine firearms – a 'large traffickable quantity' is over 10 firearms – and a new offence of possession of a large amount of a trafficable quantity, 15 years imprisonment, and there are other amendments. In relation to the firearm prohibition order offences, as I said, there is an increase to 15. So there is an increase in penalties, and in discussing that with various stakeholders they were not certainly not opposed to that.

There is the citizenship requirement in relation to being an Australian citizen, a New Zealand citizen with permanent residency or in a prescribed class, and we will go through that. I would like to make sure that there is some clarification about those classes to ensure that there is clarity. I have heard from various people, but I will not have time for that now, so I will do it in the committee stage.

In relation to background checks, that is where our amendments come in in force. I will go to those and go through them in detail. I thank our lead speaker Dr Heath for circulating them. Brad Battin, as our shadow minister in charge of this, highlighted this in his contribution, as did Danny O'Brien, the Leader of the Nationals. One of the key things on this relates to the operational readiness of AusCheck. AusCheck has been around for a long time – over 20 years – and indeed it was often used in its early years in relation to maritime safety and aviation safety. But actually around 2024–25 in the federal space – and this is a federal piece of legislation – it was updated to do firearm background checks. The issue we have is that we certainly support that background-checking regime, including against terrorism, against violent extremism and against organised crime. That should be the utmost aim of all of this, but what is happening is that the government has basically said the minister can bring it in at any time, into this Parliament, into law. However, the system is not up and operational in the federal space. So it is introducing and accepting legislation and regulation and the whole gamut when it actually does not exist in proper implementable form in the federal space. Our point of view is Parliament should not create a system that is operationally incomplete on day one. Good public policy requires it to be ready. We want to ensure that with AusCheck if it is worth doing, it is worth doing properly – after it is in proper existence in the federal space.

In terms of other amendments, there is cost transparency. Before a new major Commonwealth–state screening framework commences firearms licence holders should know what this costs. The bill introduces significant administrative impact, and we want to understand, on behalf of many of our stakeholders, what it costs. What are the operational costs? What is the impact on licence fees? I think Lucas Cooke, the former CEO of Field & Game, has done some research. It could add up to 500 additional dollars on top of a licence renewal, and that could be very preclusive for people either getting a new licence or getting a licence. We need to understand what it actually costs in the first place and have that transparency.

In terms of publishing service standards, the Liberals and the Nationals want to ensure that Victoria Police will publish processing targets, escalation pathways and procedures for dealing with delays and errors in these licensing decisions. I note very clearly: this is not about sensitive material, this is not about ASIO material, this is about Victoria Police publishing if it is expediting the process as efficiently as it can. We want to see the publishing of service standards.

We also want to make sure that the privacy and information management systems that will come into play are clarified for people. There will be additional information. It will come through. Simply, what our amendment does is ask the government to explain how information will be shared, how it will be stored, how it will be audited and what complaint mechanisms are available. Also, privacy and cyberspace are not peripheral issues. We need to make sure that we get across them. We want to ensure that that occurs. We want stronger information for sure, but we also want to ensure that there is accountability around that information.

It is also about procedural fairness. This is a really important one that I will go into in detail in the committee stage. The amendment protects public safety while ensuring administrative mistakes can be corrected. I will go into that; I do not have the time for that now. Finally, it is about an independent review of this system to ensure that there is a public safety outcome, that there are processing times, that the costs are not overburdensome, that there is privacy protection and that procedural fairness is in place.

We always will stand by our law-abiding firearm owners, whether they be farmers, pest controllers, clay target shooters or duck hunters. We also want to see duck hunting continue. I see the Minister for Environment is here. I put that on the record once again, and I will have more to say in the committee stage.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (22:34): I rise this evening on behalf of the Greens to speak to the Firearms Amendment Bill 2026. The Greens will support this bill. There are necessary reforms here and they should pass, but the government has really not finished the job with this bill. This bill implements useful parts of Ken Lay's *Rapid Review of Victoria's Firearms Laws* while leaving out its most important recommendation – a limit on the number of firearms that one individual can own – and much of the review's work remains to be done on another day.

The starting point for the Greens on this topic is straightforward, and it is a widely accepted one after the Port Arthur massacre: firearm ownership in Victoria and indeed Australia is not an unrestricted right, it is a privilege, and that privilege is regulated because firearms are lethal weapons – dangerous products that are flogged by the gun industry – and because public safety must come first. People's right to be safe comes first. Possession and use of firearms are conditional privileges, and they are conditional on the need to ensure public safety and peace.

This bill does several things that the Greens welcome. It updates existing firearm categorisation procedures to account for higher risk firearms and accommodate emerging technologies and future firearms manufacturing developments. It installs a new citizenship requirement limiting licences to Australian citizens, New Zealand citizens with permanent residency and certain others. It institutes a Commonwealth firearms background check to leverage criminal intelligence in firearms licensing and prohibition decisions. It makes the firearm prohibition order scheme permanent rather than allowing it to sunset in 2028, it increases penalties for breaches of those orders and for people who knowingly supply firearms to a person subject to an order and it introduces graduated trafficking offences with a higher penalty where 10 or more firearms are involved.

I need to draw attention in the chamber and for the public to how much of Ken Lay's review this bill leaves undone. The rapid review was of course commissioned in December following the horrific antisemitic terrorist attack at Bondi Beach, which killed 15 people and injured a further 41. That review received more than 19,000 survey responses and more than 500 submissions, and former chief commissioner Ken Lay made 16 recommendations to the government. The government has said publicly that it accepts 15 of those recommendations and rejects only one. But the parliamentary library's analysis and our review of this legislation is clear: only four of the recommendations from Ken Lay's review – 2, 4, 8 and 10 – are receiving immediate legislative reform through this bill and through, therefore, this government. Those four recommendations deal with classification, citizenship, illicit firearms and trafficking and criminal intelligence in licensing decisions, and they are absolutely worth doing. But accepting recommendations and implementing them, especially when we are in the sunset of this term of government, are not the same thing.

Not the only omission but an absolutely glaring and preposterous omission by this government, I have got to say, is their rejection of recommendation 1, which is a cap on firearms. Ken Lay recommended a cap of four firearms for individual category A and B licence holders. The government has rejected that recommendation outright through political cowardice, I would say, and influence from the shooting lobby.

Mr Lay observed that the average licence-holder in Victoria does hold around four firearms, and for that reason this recommendation would have made no difference to a large number of owners in Victoria. The review also noted that some recreational hunters in Victoria have up to 68 firearms and some sporting shooters have as many as 288 – dozens or hundreds of firearms being amassed in private arsenals in this state. Mr Lay did not suggest that there could never be legitimate circumstances that require exemptions, and a sensible cap can accommodate genuine occupational, sporting and other exceptional needs. But the proposition that there should be just no upper limit on how many guns someone can own in this state does not go with community expectations, and I think it is incredibly difficult for this government to defend.

Other states are moving ahead of us now on this. New South Wales has introduced a general firearm cap with higher limits for specified purposes. Western Australia has also introduced limits, and the ACT is considering these. Victoria is now deliberately choosing to be a laggard state and undermine national consistency and approach on this topic. As my colleague Ellen Sandell made clear in the other place, the real question is not whether or not firearm owners are law-abiding; the important question that we should be answering here is: what laws minimise risk across our whole community?

The government's response has been to say that it wants to focus on the wrong person getting hold of even one gun, which is frankly the shooting industry's line and reveals the influence of them over this government's choices. That is a false choice, though. We should stop dangerous people from getting access to even one firearm, and we should also ask whether any individual needs dozens or hundreds of firearms. Those two objectives are not either-or; they are entirely compatible. The rapid review clearly identified the 'strong and well-established correlation between lower levels of firearm availability in the community and reductions in firearm-related harm'. To be clear, the evidence shows that much of that harm, contrary to what people might assume, occurs in private and domestic circumstances rather than, as you might think, public spaces. The rapid review noted that the level of harm being experienced in the community from gun prevalence is high. Over the last 10 years there were 104 deaths from firearm assaults and many more injuries. There were also 342 firearm suicides in that time period. The presence of firearms in a home dramatically changes the risk factors, particularly if they are overlaid with mental health, family violence or acute distress circumstances. Firearm harm was more concentrated in regional Victoria than it was in metropolitan areas, and firearm harm disproportionately affects older people and men. That is interesting, I note, when you consider that this is also reflective of the demographic make-up of gun licence holders, and it is consistent, I think, unfortunately with those suicide statistics that we saw.

This rapid review concluded that:

> … effective firearms regulation is as much about preventing self-harm and family violence as it is about preventing the kind of public mass casualty events that drive political and media attention.

The number of legally held firearms also matters because legal firearms can be stolen or diverted even when properly stored, and we know that there is a challenge in maintaining levels of inspection and so on around storage arrangements. Gun Control Australia has pointed out that more than 9000 firearms were stolen nationally over six years, with only around a quarter of those recovered. More guns in circulation means more guns that must be kept securely stored and kept from diversion into the illicit market.

The Alannah & Madeline Foundation has also welcomed elements of these reforms but described the rejection of a cap as a missed opportunity. Gun Control Australia similarly supported aspects of the reform package, but they have described the government's refusal to consider and implement a cap as a serious failure of public safety leadership. These organisations, whose sole focus is reducing firearm harm, come from lived experience of firearm harm, and their concerns and views deserve to be taken seriously. I note that the rapid review also considered that, in terms of current consultation and input into shaping firearms regulation, there is a slant towards industry perspectives and shooter groups. Victoria Police is also in favour of a cap because it will assist with effective management of legal

obligations to inspect and, as I have noted, will reduce overall firearm harm in the community. That is probably the most glaring omission in the government's response to the rapid review that has informed this legislation today.

The Greens have also been very clear about our concern at the government's enthusiasm for promoting shooting to children. Victoria currently allows junior licences from the age of 12, and just last month we learned that the government's proposed outdoor recreation body could now go further to legally promote participation in shooting by children. This beggars belief, frankly. It goes against community expectations, and I think it is also very inconsistent for a government that wants to ban machetes and have amnesty bins for machetes, ostensibly to keep these weapons out of the hands of young children, to then, on the other hand, be going and trying to promote shooting to kids. It also is completely nonsensical when you consider the government's approach to social media bans at the federal level. These are kids that apparently are not capable of having a social media account, yet this government is happy to continue putting weapons in the hands of those children. It is a real blind spot for this government, I must say. The Greens have amendments to address these two glaring omissions from the bill, and I ask that the amendments in my name be circulated now.

Broadly, our amendments do two things. The first set of amendments introduces a cap of up to three firearms per individual category A and B licence holder, and this includes – I will just go into some detail now – the provisions that were in recommendation 1 in Ken Lay's report, which we have tried to incorporate into these amendments before the Council tonight. The amendments provide for a strengthened requirement to demonstrate a genuine need for each firearm, supported by formal and verifiable evidence, and where an applicant seeks to hold firearms beyond the base cap of three, there is a requirement to demonstrate a compelling need for each additional firearm, which is supported by strong, specific and evidence-based justification – not just a tick box. Thirdly, where an applicant seeks approval beyond any exemption threshold, there is a requirement to demonstrate an exceptional need, reflecting rare and extraordinary circumstances that justify approval beyond the cap. Specific exemptions should be available where a compelling need can be demonstrated to hold firearms above the base cap of three, specifically for primary producers and sports shooters, and where an exemption applies, consideration will be given up to an additional seven firearms per licence-holder, allowing for a total of up to 10 firearms. This would likely affect approximately 23 per cent of licence-holders.

The following conditions would also apply to any exemptions: applications for firearms above three and up to 10 must demonstrate a compelling need for each additional firearm, and applications to hold firearms beyond a total of 10 must demonstrate an exceptional need, reflecting rare and extraordinary circumstances. Exemptions apply to professional hunters where firearms are required on the basis of employment, as distinct from recreational hunting, and subject to appropriate oversight and compliance requirements, and exemptions should apply to licensed firearms dealers, licensed firearm collectors and corporate licence holders, subject to existing regulatory control, with all exemptions subject to appropriate oversight conditions and compliance requirements at the discretion of the chief commissioner and no exemptions considered for recreational hunters beyond the up-to-three cap. That is the function of our first set of amendments, which is introducing a cap. I will note that Mr Lay's recommendation was for a cap of four based on, it seemed, the average licence-holder's number of guns. The Greens have taken the position that we think three will be adequate for most people's purposes and also that we would like to see an overall reduction in the number and prevalence of weapons in our community. That has informed our selection of three for the cap that we are putting forward.

Our second amendment bans junior licences. There is no need for the state of Victoria to actively cultivate firearm use amongst children. Lawful adult sporting shooting can continue without the government encouraging 12-year-olds into firearm use or maintaining a licensing pathway for children.

That is the function of the Greens' amendments, and I look forward to discussing those in committee. As Mr Bourman noted, our amendments are also outside scope and require a motion in order to consider them, and I would ask parties to support that procedural scope motion so that we can debate

all of the amendments being brought forward by members of the crossbench and opposition tonight in good faith. Before I close today, there are other parts of the Lay review that require action. Recommendation 7 called for stronger oversight across the entire licence life cycle and raised a possible mandatory health reporting pathway which would support the fit and proper person test. This is one of the things that I struggle to understand – why the government has not proceeded with this. It seems such an obvious way to reduce harm, particularly I will note amongst some of those suicide stats that we saw, where people continue to have access to lethal weapons. That is one of the interventions where a mandatory health reporting pathway could really bring down fatalities and injuries from guns in our community.

Any model for a mandatory health reporting pathway would need to be designed carefully with health professionals, disability advocates and the community, but the underlying principle here is so important. Suitability to hold a firearm licence cannot just be assessed once, a set and forget, and assumed indefinitely, as risk changes over time and people's circumstances change over time. This is also important to stop interpersonal gun violence, particularly I would note in cases, as Mr Lay pointed out, of family or domestic violence: where a gun is in the house it raises the stakes and the potential for injury greatly. The Greens have previously called for time-limited licences with repeated character and family violence checks, in line with what Mr Lay has called for.

The government should now really clearly set out how it will implement the remaining Lay recommendations, including the licence life cycle recommendation, and what further safeguards it proposes and when it will advance those. What is its pathway for implementing those recommendations that it states it has accepted? Recommendations 12 and 13 on information sharing are said in the government's response to be underway, but there has not been any information or update as to the progress or implementation for that work, which needs to be completed alongside the implementation of the national firearms register. The government has allocated $38.4 million to upgrade its firearms licensing systems for that purpose, and we hope to see timely delivery.

Another thing that just beggars belief for me is that Victoria has turned a cold shoulder on participating in the national gun buyback. What a moment there was for unity at a national level to tackle gun violence, as we did in the wake of Port Arthur. Victoria should participate constructively in the buyback. The government has said that it will not participate in the Commonwealth's scheme as it currently stands, essentially because of disagreement about the cost-sharing arrangement. That cannot be the end of the discussion. WA's recent buyback removed more than 83,000 firearms from their community, and it reduced the number of registered firearms in the state by around 24 per cent. Victorians would like to see less prevalence of weapons in our community, and I think the government should back that in and reconsider its position on the buyback. The lesson that we learned so painfully after Port Arthur was that national consistency really matters. A patchwork of weaker jurisdictions undermines the strength of the national framework. The Greens have called for the buyback to remove excess and high-risk firearms as well as stronger restrictions on rapid-fire and high-powered weapons. The flexibility that is created by this bill to recategorize emerging firearms is useful, but it just does not complete that broader task which still needs doing.

Another positive feature of this bill is the decision to make firearm prohibition orders permanent. The Greens support strong measures to stop people who pose a genuine risk from accessing firearms, but permanent police powers I will note do require permanent scrutiny. The government's treaty compatibility statement has acknowledged that First Peoples are disproportionately the subject of firearm prohibition orders. Between 2021 and 2025, 7 per cent of FPOs were issued to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, although First Peoples made up less than 2 per cent of Victoria's population. The statement also acknowledges the significant search and detention powers that are attached to these orders and the potential for their disproportionate application to result in unequal impacts on the human rights of First Peoples. All of that may be justifiable in service of the broader aim of reducing harm in the community. But what I do observe is that the newly established First

Peoples' Assembly, Gellung Warl, was not given an opportunity to advise on this bill prior to its introduction, and oversight, transparent reporting and scrutiny of these powers are essential.

This debate should not just be reduced to a contest between people who want to own guns and everyone else. Even those who partake in shooting have an interest in a system that is safe, coherent and trusted. Ken Lay was asked by this government to complete a substantial review, and he did just that. The government asked him to consider limits on gun numbers, classification, licensing, licence monitoring, illicit firearms, emerging technologies, intelligence and information sharing. And it received the answer – a well-researched, evidence-based answer. This government should not now cherrypick the recommendations that it finds politically easiest due to influence from the shooting lobby and fear about losing marginal Labor seats.

Indeed it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the government has been prepared to go only as far as the shooting lobby will allow. In May, when the government announced that it had rejected the cap, the Greens called out this capitulation to the gun lobby. And more recently I have said that Labor keeps finding ways to advance the interests of the gun lobby when what Victorians actually want is stronger regulation and stronger gun safety. We support the measures in this bill that will give us stronger intelligence checks, trafficking laws, classifications and licensing rules. But the government cannot credibly say after tonight that it has delivered on the Lay review; one, because it has rejected the first and clearest recommendation; and secondly, because it is leaving many of the remaining recommendations outside the scope of this bill. There should be a sensible cap on the number of firearms a person can own. There should be stronger life cycle monitoring of licence-holders, and Victoria should be part of an effective national buyback. We should finish the work on national information sharing in the firearms register, and we should not be encouraging children as young as 12 to take up shooting.

It is a devastating missed opportunity, this bill. It falls far short of what is needed, far short of what the government promised, and it leaves Victoria ultimately as a laggard state, holding back an effective national approach to reducing harms from weapons and the gun industry. Firearm regulation works when governments are willing to act before a tragedy, not only after one. We should not wait for another terrible act of firearm violence before making reforms that the evidence has already told us, and the government's own review has told us, are sensible, practical and necessary. The question we start with should always be the same: what laws will best reduce firearm harm and keep the community safe? That is the standard the Greens apply to this bill, and our amendments are in service of taking us closer to that. We will support the passage of this bill today, but we urge the government to continue to pick up the reforms it has rejected and to continue the implementation of those important Lay recommendations it says it has accepted.

Business interrupted pursuant to standing orders.

Jaclyn SYMES: Pursuant to standing order 4.08, I declare the sitting be extended by up to 1 further hour.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (22:59): I rise to speak on the Firearms Amendment Bill 2026, which will amend the Firearms Act 1996 to impose a citizenship requirement for gun licences, require a national background check for licences, provide further powers to categorise firearms, increase penalties for firearms trafficking, make the firearms prohibition order scheme permanent and increase the penalties for breaking firearms prohibition orders. The bill has come as a response to a terrible tragedy: the appalling terrorist attack at a Hanukkah celebration on the Bondi Beach foreshore that took the lives of 15 people and injured 41 others. That awful tragedy prompted the Commonwealth and state governments to review their laws around firearms licensing and ownership to consider if there were legislative changes that could improve community safety.

In Victoria the widely respected Ken Lay was asked to conduct a rapid review of Victoria's firearms laws, and his final report made 16 recommendations to government around firearm laws and

regulation. The bill immediately implements four of those recommendations from the Lay report: recommendation 2 relating to updating existing firearms classifications, recommendation 4 relating to introducing a citizenship requirement for firearms licence holders, recommendation 8 relating to strengthening the laws on firearm trafficking and recommendation 10 relating to how intelligence is used in licensing reviews and appeals.

The Victorian government did not support the recommendation to cap the number of firearms an individual can possess, and the Liberal Party actually believes that this was the right decision. We know that the large majority of gun owners do the right thing, and the Liberals are strong supporters of lawful and responsible gun ownership among sporting shooters, primary producers and recreational hunters. A cap would have been an overcorrection that penalised those with legitimate reasons to use firearms without significantly improving community safety or preventing another Bondi. There are some in this chamber who are completely anti-gun, and the truth is that they do not understand the reality of life in rural Victoria. I received numerous emails from my constituents in the lead-up to this bill coming to Parliament, and many were concerned about the possibility of caps being imposed. For primary producers in particular, firearms are necessary tools for animal management and pest control, and they require a range of firearms with different calibres and rates of fire. Many recreational hunters are also sporting shooters and typically own several firearms, all with different uses. A cap of four or five firearms, as implemented in Western Australia, would have interfered significantly with responsible gun use without any clear improvement to community safety. A cap on gun ownership would not have prevented the Bondi terrorist attack. A total of three guns were used in that attack, and that would have been below the caps of four or five firearms that have been implemented in New South Wales and Western Australia respectively.

The changes that are proposed in this bill are largely sensible, and we will not be opposing the bill. When the firearm prohibition order scheme was introduced into Parliament, it was an emergency measure subject to a sunset clause after 10 years. Clauses 4 and 5 of this bill will repeal section 4AA of the Firearms Act 1996 and make the firearm prohibition order scheme permanent. Clauses 15 to 19 increase the penalties for various offences related to breaching firearm prohibition orders, and we support such tougher penalties on criminals and those who do not respect the rules around lawful and responsible possession of firearms. This bill is about criminals and organised crime, and these changes are about doing whatever we can to stop guns getting into the hands of extremists.

I do have some concerns with parts of this bill, and several of the constituents who contacted me shared the same concerns. First, clause 34 requires licence applicants to satisfy a firearms background check. We understand the reasons for introducing a national background-checking scheme. However, we are concerned about the long wait until the scheme is ready and the potentially high cost of carrying out the checks and duplicating state processes. There is currently no commencement date for this to come into effect, because it depends on the Commonwealth finalising the AusCheck scheme, which is not operational yet and may take several years before it is up and running. We have heard that getting an AusCheck done could cost $500, and when you add that to the cost of a licence application or renewal and other administration costs, you could be looking at $1000 to get a firearms licence. For farmers already doing it tough or recreational hunters who want to shoot a few weekends a year, the cost starts to become prohibitive.

After the bushfires in January this year, many farmers had to perform the heartbreaking task of shooting injured livestock. They needed high-calibre rifles and hundreds of rounds of ammunition. They also needed a lot of time and a tough constitution. I know farmers hate putting down their own livestock; they would prefer someone else to do it. But imagine if they had let their licence lapse and sold their guns because of a big jump in cost – the animals would have been left suffering for even longer while they waited for a licensed shooter to arrive.

If the AusCheck scheme makes it too expensive for recreational hunters and farmers to obtain and keep gun licences, then responsible firearm use will drop and we will not have enough experienced shooters when we need them. Additional layers of complexity or cost do little to improve community

safety while hindering lawful activity. Right now deer numbers are out of control in Victoria and feral pigs are causing millions of dollars of damage. One farmer in my electorate recently sent a bill to the state government for $40,000 after losing 160 sheep and lambs to wild dogs. The reality is that we need primary producers and recreational hunters to continue shooting regularly to help control feral animals. When the AusCheck scheme finally does come into operation, it must not become a giant hurdle to legitimate firearm ownership.

I also have some concerns over the expanded powers to classify and reclassify firearms. Of course we know that with 3D printing it is possible to have rapid development of new and unconventional guns, and the Chief Commissioner of Police will need to be able to quickly classify novel firearms. These powers are necessary, but they must be used responsibly. There are examples from the recent past where restrictive classifications were imposed as a kneejerk response to firearms that were different or unfamiliar.

I was contacted by numerous constituents concerned about this legislation. They stressed that law-abiding firearm owners in Victoria already operate within a highly regulated environment with ongoing fees, licence conditions and storage requirements. They strongly feel that they should not be penalised with additional restrictions because of the unrelated shortcomings in vetting and intelligence sharing that contributed to the Bondi terror attack. The Liberals do have concerns with this bill, but we believe that on balance the bill will make improvements to the licensing and regulation of firearms. It will strengthen penalties for those who breach firearms prohibition orders, and so we will not oppose this bill.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (23:07): One Nation Victoria will not be supporting this bill in its current form. While I can see the merit in its motives, there are far too many cracks and incomplete clauses, and it still requires vital consultation from key stakeholders and industry bodies. One Nation has always been supportive of responsible gun ownership and use. We understand that many licensed gun owners are not always Australian citizens. These licensees have demonstrated, in some cases for decades, that they are responsible, safe and law abiding. These people contribute to local community economies in the Northern Victoria Region, which rely heavily on game shooting tourism and sport shooting associations. These non-citizen licensees are part of a community. This is the Victorian shooting community, a community that is like a family. They camp together on hunting trips, their kids grow up together on weekends and school holidays and they celebrate with Easter and Christmas parties, just like many other organisations. They pass on a world of knowledge and respect and demonstrate the safest practices when using and storing registered firearms. This bill discriminates against people who have simply not gained Australian citizenship, regardless of their past unblemished gun ownership licences.

Here is where it gets messy: AusCheck checks on licensees can be unreliable and errors can be made which result in the wrong people being licensed and the right people having their licences taken away. There have been cases of people on watchlists having their family members issued with or being allowed to keep their firearm licences. Victoria first needs to establish a – no pun intended – bulletproof system of screening, background checks and information sharing amongst agencies to ensure that firearm licences and ownership do not fall into the wrong hands. The AusCheck process is also very expensive, somewhere in the region of $500 per check. Who will pay this, the taxpayers? A licence-holder application is on top of the $300-plus licence fee they must pay. While I agree that extra checks are necessary, the burden of the cost should not be placed on people who have followed every law and regulation to the tee.

Another messy, half-baked portion of this bill is the carve-outs for the exemptions of the citizenship requirements. There is still unmet consultation and input from key stakeholders and industry bodies that will provide necessary and skilled advice on how this bill will impact those it is intended for. This, in a nutshell, is creating a bill blindfolded and will very likely have damaging and costly repercussions as soon as it becomes law, whenever that may be.

The wording of this bill seems clumsy, ill thought out and somewhat lazy. While I can appreciate that an inquiry and a responsible amount of consultation was done before this bill was brought to the house, the government has still presented us with incomplete clauses and sections that need to be consulted on and then put into regulations by the minister at the time. Why waste the house's time like this? Why not give the members of this chamber and the Victorian people the respect of bringing a finalised, completed bill with all the finer details worked out? It seems like another overreaction from a Labor government. Every law-abiding firearms owner must not be punished or forced to bear the costs of those who do wrong. They must not be treated like criminals. The government needs to go back, do the work and bring a completed bill to the house for us to debate.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (23:11): I am pleased to be able to speak on the Firearms Amendment Bill 2026. This chamber certainly does reflect a range of different perspectives, and we have heard some of those different perspectives during this debate. In April this year I spoke after a petition about firearm regulation was tabled in Parliament by my colleague Ms Bath. Over 12,500 people signed the petition, and it raised serious concerns about rushed reforms. It sought fairness rather than rushed decisions that are not based on evidence.

The attack at Bondi was horrific – absolutely horrific – and the federal government in response flagged legislative reforms. As we saw, other states like New South Wales reacted and introduced very stringent reforms, and the Nationals at both the state and federal level highlighted that Australia already has some of the toughest gun laws in the world and highlighted the need to ensure that law-abiding firearm owners are not penalised unnecessarily.

Victoria undertook a firearms review led by former police commissioner Ken Lay. I know my colleague Tim Bull in the Legislative Assembly spoke very highly of his approach, and I think Ms Bath did as well. Tim Bull held a round table with Ken Lay that included Olympic and international shooters, vermin controllers and a gun shop owner, and they all explained very respectfully why a cap on guns will not work. I have also spoken with many residents across northern Victoria who share this view, and one I recall referred to firearms being like golf for them. Shooting was like golf for them: you need different clubs for different purposes, and they were pointing out that it is the same with shooting. They also mentioned guns owned by their ancestors and the heritage value of that and how important it is to them. They talked about all the restrictions and requirements that are on them as responsible firearm shooters.

I spoke with Russell Hill, a member of the North East Muzzleloaders, a club not far from Wangaratta, and he wrote to me. To quote his letter, he said:

> My passion is pistol target shooting. To compete in all of my disciplines, I require a minimum of four pistols. In black powder target shooting, I compete in eight different longarm categories, each requiring different firearms. I also hunt feral animals and deer, which require different firearms suitable for different purposes.
>
> …
>
> A limit of four firearms would prevent me from participating in the various shooting disciplines in which I currently compete and have participated safely for many years.
>
> In addition, I use a variety of historical firearms when educating the public through historical re-enactments, including events depicting the Ned Kelly era, the Colonial Redcoats, and the Eureka Stockade. These events provide an opportunity for Australians to learn about our colonial history in a safe and controlled environment.

I think it is important to remember the various different types of firearms that people use.

We held a firearm forum in Bendigo, and hundreds of people did attend. Senator Bridget McKenzie came and Danny O'Brien, the Leader of the Nationals, came. Hundreds of people were there because they care about the impact of this legislation, and they enjoy shooting and use it for so many different purposes. I am very grateful to represent Northern Victoria, the rural life that exists and the understanding that firearms are used by farmers and used by recreational shooters and hunters. It is an important part of life and part of our regional communities, and it contributes to tourism. We know that there is a lot of conservation work that occurs through those clubs. There are businesses selling

goods for people to enjoy our great outdoors. People do enjoy participating in it as a sport, and we are fortunate in Australia to have people that are competing on the world stage and who do us proud because of their skills and abilities in shooting. Others use firearms for controlling feral animals. There are different sizes, and that is very important. I have been to a number of clay target clubs. They are very social clubs, and I know people enjoy going there each week. Competition is so important, and that supports the local community as well through accommodation for those that are attending those competitions.

Others enjoy duck hunting. Duck hunting is a multigenerational family sport where there are grandparents, fathers, sons and daughters. They go away and they make a tradition of doing duck shooting together. I note that the Greens also referred to their desire to restrict junior licences, and I think that is such a concern because, as we know in our regions and in our clubs, junior licences are very important for training young people. Just like a learner driver with a car, it is about equipping them. I have heard from a number of them about how much they enjoy doing that activity with their parents.

In considering this legislation I received correspondence. One noted that the tragic event at Bondi was a failure of intelligence sharing and communication between ASIO and the New South Wales police. Another highlighted that organised criminals, illicit firearm traffickers and individuals intent on violence are unlikely to be deterred by additional administrative requirements imposed upon licensed firearm owners and businesses, and they highlighted really the need for Parliament to require clear evidence that each amendment will deliver a measurable improvement in community safety before imposing additional obligations on compliant Victorians. I strongly agree. Another wrote to me – they are a retiree – and said they have got no criminal convictions or terrorist affiliations and that once again they feel they are being punished for the actions of criminals. Their concern with the bill is the proposal to use AusCheck, which they said is notoriously expensive and will become a barrier to entry for firearm sports.

I do want to thank Brad Battin, who is the shadow minister, for his work on this bill, and I know Dr Heath spoke earlier to our amendments, which include delaying part 7 – AusCheck – until the Commonwealth systems are fully operational and being clear on the costs before commencement. While the objective of a nationally coordinated system is broadly supported, concerns remain regarding the timing of its legislative inclusion. AusCheck is still under development and key details regarding its operation have not yet been settled. Advice provided indicates the system may take several years to be fully developed and operational. As I mentioned, the cost of AusCheck has not been disclosed, and we certainly do not want to see exorbitant or ramped-up costs because there is a government at the time that may want a bit of extra money. One thing that I had not heard before but have certainly heard from people in my electorate is concern about the licensing and regulation division being profoundly under-resourced. I have heard from people that are concerned about delays with their licensing, and I think when we consider the impact of any reforms and the importance of monitoring licences, it is concerning to read that the unit is under-resourced and rarely staffed. That is the feedback that I have had.

We support sensible and proportionate changes, such as ensuring firearm licences are limited to Australian citizens, but we do not want to make changes that make life harder for law-abiding firearm owners without making any difference to terrorists and criminals. Law-abiding firearm owners should not be punished for the actions of terrorists, and as the Nationals have said time and again, we do not have a gun problem, we have a terrorist problem. We are not opposing this legislation, and we appreciate the chamber's consideration of the amendments put forward that seek to improve it. We also want to see a review down the track to monitor the impact of any changes.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (23:20): I rise to speak briefly in relation to the Firearms Amendment Bill 2026. Like many others, in doing so I would like to acknowledge again the circumstances in which this bill has come about. I obviously spoke about the antisemitic terrorist attack at Bondi Beach quite extensively when we held a condolence motion debate in here. This issue is

personal for me and my household, as it is for Mr Bourman, as he noted. Despite our differing views on this bill, we see the impacts and the harms of antisemitism up close and in real time in our households, in our daily conversations and in the way that it is showing up in society and came to the worst possible outcome last year. As the mother of a beautiful Jewish daughter who is now eight months old and who was born only days after that terrorist attack, I feel really strongly the need to share my feelings and concerns about this issue if it goes unaddressed for any longer, as a family member and a parent of people in the Jewish community. I hope that in the spirit of this debate today, even though there will be differing views, we can come together on the importance of addressing that incident. Many people will not think this is the right way to address it. I do not believe that removing weapons is the only way to fight hate and to fight harm and to fight discrimination, but like this one and the way in which it happened, these reforms are incredibly important, and I will be supporting them.

This came about from a rapid review conducted by former Chief Commissioner of Police Ken Lay. It ran over eight weeks between January and February 2026 and received almost 2000 survey responses, many of which were from members of my community who feel very deeply and passionately about this issue. I know there were comments earlier about people in regional Victoria. The people that I work with in regional Victoria care very much about gun safety and gun reform, certainly sensible reform that enhances community safety and reduces the likelihood of incidents like we saw happen last year. The rapid review received more than 500 written submissions and conducted 40 face-to-face consultation sessions, hearing from regional and metropolitan Victorians.

We watched that review very closely. I am no stranger to this debate. When it crosses over my patch it is in relation to the harms inflicted upon animals. We spoke about limits and caps on firearms during the parliamentary inquiry into duck shooting when we had Victoria Police appear. I was disappointed that not all of the recommendations Mr Lay made in his final report were accepted, because I believe some of them are really meaningful and really important. I know that there will be commentary that people only use one gun at a time, but one of the things that can increase gun harm and gun violence is stolen firearms. Tracking them when there are a number of them can be more difficult for the firearm owner, and that is certainly what many people have expressed to me with their concerns in relation to this bill and how far it goes.

The bill introduces a citizenship requirement for firearms licensing, which will be satisfied by an individual who is an Australian citizen or New Zealand citizen who is a permanent resident. It introduces a Commonwealth firearms background check requirement, and for firearms licensing that will leverage ASIO national intelligence information checks through AusCheck. Once these provisions commence, an AusCheck criminal history check will be required for all new license applicants and existing licensees when they seek to renew their licence. It also creates greater flexibility for the chief commissioner to temporarily recategorise a firearm or type of firearm and expands regulation-making powers to better enable police to respond to emerging firearms technologies of concern.

I spoke about my views on the cap on gun ownership, which of course has already been adopted by Western Australia and New South Wales and is under consideration in the ACT. Some Victorian hunters possess as many as 135 firearms and some sports shooters have as many as 288. I was just having a conversation with my colleagues about whether or not I have ever shot a gun before or used a firearm, and I certainly have not, but I do find it hard to understand how someone could possibly need almost 300 guns in order to participate in their recreational pursuits. I think more guns create greater risk and that this cap on ownership – which was recommended by Commissioner Lay in the rapid review and which was supported by Victoria Police, gun control advocates and multicultural organisations – should have been accepted. It would reduce the number of firearms in circulation and limit opportunities for theft or misuse in a single incident. It would also ease the pressure on the regulatory system and allow for closer scrutiny of licence-holders seeking to acquire high numbers of weapons. In rejecting a cap on ownership, the former Premier said:

> Where we need to place our focus is on the criminals who get their hands on one single gun.

The truth is the more guns an individual is allowed to own, the more a criminal can steal. The evidence on the connection between legal firearm numbers and illicit supply is actually stark. The Australia Institute has found that over 9000 firearms have been stolen since the start of 2020 and at least 44,600 have been stolen over the past 20 years – that is one firearm stolen every 4 hours. Police recover only around a quarter of those guns that are taken. The more legal guns there are in Australia, the more illegal guns there will be as a result of it. Gun Control Australia described the decision to reject a cap as 'a green light for more illegal firearms on our streets'.

I also want to speak briefly to 'genuine reason' and the National Firearms Agreement signed by all states and territories after the Port Arthur massacre in 1996, which requires anyone who possesses a firearm to have a so-called genuine reason, such as farming or hunting. However, the standard of evidence for hunting and sport shooting as genuine reasons is low in Victoria. For sports shooting, all someone needs is to be a paid-up member of a shooting club to qualify. Club membership is also enough for hunting, as is owning a rural property or just having a permission slip from someone else who does. This is something that regularly comes up in the duck-shooting debate when we talk about the number of licensed duck shooters in Victoria and whether or not those licence-holders are actually active duck shooters or whether that is just in order to have a genuine reason to own a firearm. Applicants can in effect buy a genuine reason by joining a sporting shooters association, which also boosts gun lobbying power. Certainly we have seen plenty of gun lobbying power in this term of Parliament. Most Victorians with a firearm licence who use the genuine reason of hunting or sport shooting do not regularly participate in those activities according to data from the Victorian Game Management Authority and the Australian Institute of Sport. Combining the most recent figures on game hunting activity with general sports participation data produces an estimate of almost 40,000 Victorians who participated in sports shooting or hunting in 2025. Almost 150,000 people have a firearms licence justified by either activity statewide. So according to this data over 100,000 people did not use their firearms for the genuine reason on their licence in that last year. The government are effectively allowing their decision-making on what is an enormously significant issue of community safety to be guided by an incredibly tiny population of Victorians. Certainly that, again, was evident in the duck-shooting decision, where now less than half a per cent of people are duck shooters in Victoria and half of those are actually active according to the statistics.

The Coroners Court has data that shows 459 people were killed by firearms in Victoria in the decade to 2025. This included 342 firearm suicide deaths and 104 assault-related firearm deaths. Both firearm-related suicides and assaults are far more common in regional areas, and a recent coronial inquest into a firearm-related suicide recommended that Victorians applying for and renewing firearms licences must first prove mental wellbeing. Currently, those applying for or renewing a gun licence must tick a box indicating whether they have been treated in the last five years for any mental health, alcohol or drug related issues. In making this recommendation the coroner noted that this has the hallmarks of a rubber-stamping process rather than a genuine vetting process around the use and control of dangerous equipment. I would strongly encourage the government to at least consider this.

I note that the Greens have a number of amendments which I will be supporting, including introducing a cap on the number of guns owned by one person, which, as I stated, I believe should have been in the government's original bill – there is very, very clear evidence to guide that decision – and to prohibit people under the age of 18 from having gun licences. Of course we canvassed this issue very recently in the Outdoor Recreation Victoria debate, when it was confirmed by the government that that agency, much like the Victorian Fisheries Authority, will have promotional powers if they wish to encourage junior firearm licences. I have seen many people under the age of 18 out operating firearms during the recreational duck shooting season, and we had an incident very recently, in March this year, of a Game Management Authority officer telling gun owners how to flout rules to allow children to head out on wetlands and breach those safety regulations and that safety advice, so I think this is a really good proposal. I believe that with many decisions in life we cannot make them until we are 18. Certainly owning a firearm is a very, very serious decision and one that should not be put in

the hands of people who are essentially still children or promoted to them through education or schooling programs.

I will be supporting this bill, although I think it has really been a missed opportunity. It does not go far enough. It is devastating that we had such clear evidence and clear advice before us, and once again, we had an expert – actually it is the second time the expert Ken Lay has delivered a meaningful report on something that should be implemented in our state that the former Premier rejected. Both of them were big failures and big mistakes, and I just hope that we do not see an incident that requires us to reconsider these, like the circumstances that brought this about. I feel really deeply about this change, not just because of my own policy areas but for my family and ending hate and violence against marginal communities. I commend the bill to the house, but I urge the government to consider going further and reconsidering many of the very sound recommendations that were also made in the report.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (23:33): I rise to speak against the Firearms Amendment Bill 2026. Victoria's licensed shooters and hunters are among the most disciplined and law-abiding people in this state. They complete safety courses, pass repeated background checks and store their firearms securely, as well as maintaining clean records. Yet the government and opposition continue to demand that they jump through ever more hoops simply to prove that they have remained good citizens – far more than the hoops that must be jumped through when applying to look after our children in day care centres. This regulation of licensed firearm owners is just too much. It restricts access for people who have already demonstrated that they can be trusted. These 240,000 Victorians deserve to be rewarded for their safety record and personal responsibility, not treated as though they are the criminals deserving to be crushed more and more. Recreational shooting and hunting are skilled activities. They are competitive sports, and law-abiding people who wish to participate should be able to do so without such unreasonable barriers.

Victoria was a very different place when I was growing up, but families no longer feel secure in their own homes or on our streets. People of every age feel vulnerable in public places. There are home invasions, carjackings, firebombings and other violent crimes which are an all-too-common reality for Victorians these days, and they all just get told not to interfere, to call 000. And if they do interfere and, sadly, their lives are lost or they are very badly injured, rather than getting an award, they are used as a warning for people not to get involved, not to do anything and to rely on the police, whose numbers have been cut and whose ranks are already too thin.

I used to be completely anti-gun. I have really turned around on this issue, and one of the things that actually made me reaffirm my changed position was, sadly, watching the Bondi massacre live on X. Watching those poor people pinned down, defenceless, and watching the other people watch them, unable to do anything to help them, was one of the most distressing things I have ever seen. I just cannot believe that we are left without any way to defend ourselves or defend others. We need to be able to trust adults to assess their own risk and to be willing to be assessed by the government, especially when the lives of their families and the security of their property are at stake. The law does already recognise the right to self-defence, including the use of lethal force in extreme circumstances, yet in practice ordinary Victorians are denied the means to exercise that right. We cannot even carry pepper spray in this state. Responsible adults cannot obtain a firearm for the purpose of defending themselves or their homes. The result is that law-abiding people are left as sitting ducks while the criminals operate with illegal weapons completely without restraint, as they do because they are criminals and they do not care what the law is anyway.

Victorians are the kinds of ducks that I can agree with Ms Purcell and the Animal Justice Party do deserve defending. Victorians who are prepared to meet some reasonable, sensible standards of safety, training and accountability should not be prohibited from defending their homes and their families. And a society that tells people that they can defend themselves but systematically removes every effective tool to do so is not protecting citizens, it is abandoning them and then shaming them for feeling unsafe. Our focus has to remain on the criminals who traffic illegal firearms and commit violent

offences and on the violent ideologies behind them. Strong laws against illegal activity are essential, but treating responsible, licensed shooters as the problem is not the way to go and is completely unfair.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (23:37): I will start by saying this: the Libertarian Party will never support using the actions of Islamic terrorists as justification for taking away the rights of Victorians. What is happening with this Firearms Amendment Bill 2026 is rights are being taken away. Every time there is a firearms bill there are always more rights being taken away. It is never anything else. What we are seeing with this bill are some things that are wishful thinking and highly irrational.

I would like to deal with two recommendations from the Lay report, one of which the government apparently agrees with me on and the other which I disagree with the Lay report on. The first one is the cap on the number of firearms. The government, happily, has disagreed with the Lay report and refused to implement that recommendation. The restriction that was proposed in the rapid review does nothing to improve the safety of Victorians. In fact, what it does is merely place restrictions on people who otherwise would be law-abiding people. A single gun in the hands of a bad person is far more dangerous than a thousand guns in the hands of a peaceful person. The number of guns does not bear any resemblance to the amount of danger that someone proposes. The ideas behind the evil that has been committed in Australia are the problem, not the tools that those evil people use to commit them. In fact, rather than take away the rights of Victorians when we are confronted with evil ideologies and terrorism, what we must do to protect Australia and defend ourselves against them is double down on the principles of Western civilisation, which means the defence of freedom and the defence of individual liberty.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! There are a lot of conversations everywhere. If the house could just come to order.

David LIMBRICK: Thank you, President; it was rather distracting. One of the things that this bill seeks to do is take away the ability of non-citizens, so people with permanent residency – except for New Zealanders, for some reason – to be able to obtain a firearms licence. The justification in the recommendations from the rapid review was that for non-citizens it would be more difficult for police to obtain a lengthy history and therefore it was a valid restriction on those people's rights. I would say this in response to that recommendation: there are many people who have lived in Australia for decades and pose no risk to anyone who currently own a firearms licence. Conversely, we may have people who have been here as little as four years and have become a citizen who may pose a danger. Therefore one's citizenship status bears no relevance to the amount of danger or the amount of history that the police can collect. Indeed if the recommendation had said something like 'Someone needs to live in Australia for a certain period of time before obtaining a firearms licence so that we can understand from their criminal history whether or not they should have one', that would have been a reasonable suggestion, I think, because it takes some time and, as has been pointed out, some foreign governments do not keep very good records or we do not have very good relationships with them.

I have two amendments on this bill which I would like to circulate now, please. The first of these amendments simply removes the citizenship test in line with my rejection of the idea that this is a valid proxy for risk. The second amendment is rather more interesting. There is an interesting story behind this. The second amendment is about a particular class of non-citizens, and that is British subjects who came to Australia before 1984. In 1984 the federal laws changed so that these people required citizenship before they could vote. But I think that the government when they drafted this bill – as with many bills throughout this place where they either tax or take away the rights of someone who they think cannot vote – thought that non-citizens could not vote. In fact that is not true. There is a class of people who can vote, and it is these British subjects who came to Australia before 1984. According to the Australian Electoral Commission, nationwide there are about 100,000 of these people and in Victoria there are about 25,000.

I know this because one of those people is my stepfather, who also happens to have a firearms licence. He came here as a child with his father. There were many of these so-called ten-pound Poms that came to Australia, but the reason that my stepfather's father came to Australia is rather interesting. Before World War II broke out he was an officer in the British army. When World War II broke out, he was deployed to France. As people would know, France was overrun by the Nazis – by the German invaders – and the British expeditionary force was in France defending against the Nazis. They had the battle of Dunkirk, which was effectively a huge evacuation exercise to stop the entire British expeditionary force, just about, being captured or killed by the Nazis. In order to facilitate this evacuation they needed a rearguard: soldiers that would stay behind on an extremely dangerous mission. Their mission was to slow the Nazi advance so that the British expeditionary force could evacuate. My stepfather's father – Bert his name was – was one of these rearguard soldiers. He was not killed by the Nazis like many of these rearguard soldiers were, but he was captured by the Nazis. He spent most of World War II in a Nazi POW camp. Under the Geneva Convention officers are meant to get paid by their captors, and he was an officer. The Nazis, being sneaky, figured out a way to pretend that they were complying with the Geneva Convention when they really were not complying with it by paying them this currency which was basically Monopoly money.

When these officers went back to the UK, they were horrified to find out that actually the British government deemed them to have been receiving their pay whilst they were POWs, and many of them were left with very little money indeed. They did not get their back pay, basically, or what they were entitled to. Decades later this was sorted out after many inquiries and campaigns and this sort of thing. But Bert was so disgusted with the British government that when he saw an offer by the Australian government – the Australian government advertised to British ex-servicemen and said to them, 'If you come to Australia, we will give you and your family the same rights as Australian ex-servicemen, the Australians that fought the Germans and the Japanese. You will have the same rights when you come to Australia.' For the most part we kept that promise. They came here, we allowed them to vote, we gave them access to veterans services and this sort of thing and their children also were allowed to vote. One of those children that immigrated to Australia was my stepfather.

The promise that we made to them, this bill is breaking. This bill is breaking a promise that was made to those British ex-servicemen that they and their families would have the same rights as Australians. We are saying, with this bill, 'Well, actually, you might be able to live in Australia, you might be able to vote in Australia and you might even be able to obtain an Australian passport, but you're not actually Australian.' That is what we are saying to these people, even though many of them have never known any other country. They grew up here. They came here as infants. They do not know any other country. They are Australian. The idea that we just say they cannot have a firearms licence anymore is wrong; it is absolutely wrong. That is why I am putting forward an amendment, and that is why I am hoping that I will get the support of the chamber to pass this amendment, because I think that Australia needs to honour its promise that it made all those years ago.

I would like to respond to a couple of things said throughout the debate, one by Ms Copsey in particular about children and firearms. I take offence to that, because in my family I have got three sons, and on their 12th birthdays I took them down to Springvale rifle range – it is in my electorate – and taught them how to safely use a rifle, and they all loved it. They thought it was great, and all of my boys know how to safely use a bolt action firearm now. If you go down to Springvale rifle range, what you will notice is it is very popular, for a start. It is almost always full on the weekend. It is crazy how busy it is, with so many young people, all types of people – fathers with their children, fathers with their sons and daughters, all different backgrounds. It is hugely popular. I do not know if they are citizens or not – I have got no idea – but the idea that they are dangerous because of a bit of paper that they do not have and someone else who has a bit of paper is less dangerous I do not accept and I think is wrong.

There is one thing that the bill does that, although I have some concerns about it, I am supportive of, which is the intelligence sharing between the state government and the federal agencies. I am supportive of this because it is clear that one of the things that really did lead to disaster in Bondi was

an intelligence failure – the failure to share intelligence between our federal and state agencies. Therefore I support that, although I do share the concerns that have been raised by many about the potential delays that this would cause and also the cost. AusCheck is apparently quite expensive. I am hoping that maybe the government can somehow make it more efficient now that it is getting more scale, apparently. Maybe it can be a bit more efficient and maybe a bit cheaper, although asking for a government IT system to become cheap and efficient is a big ask, I know. With that in mind, the Libertarian Party will not be supporting this bill, and I would urge all members of this chamber to support the amendments that I have proposed.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) incorporated the following:

Victoria has a long and proud history of strong and sensible firearm laws, and this Labor Government is committed to continue this legacy to ensure community safety is maintained.

In the wake of the Bondi Attack late last year, now is not the time to take a step back on gun laws.

There is understandable angst and concern among Victoria's Jewish community, many of which reside within my electorate of Southern Metropolitan, and for whom have endured an uncertain period in recent times.

They deserve and expect to be kept safe from hate-fuelled events like we saw on that dark day last December on Bondi Beach, and through this bill and other measures, the Labor government is taking action to ensure their safety, and the safety of the wider community.

Following the attack at Bondi, this government undertook a rapid review of Victoria's firearms laws, ensuring any gaps or potential vulnerabilities in the system are identified and corrected.

And what that review reveals is that now is not the time to step back on gun laws.

It is the time to make real change and ensure all Victorians can put their trust in a strong system.

This bill ensures their safety through 6 amendments, acting on 4 recommendations from the Rapid Review into Victoria's Firearms Laws.

Firearm licenses will now be restricted through new citizenship requirements, only allowing Australian citizens, New Zealand citizens with Australian permanent residency or a non-citizen who requires a firearm for work.

This strengthens the licensing process by ensuring background information such as criminal record checks are as reliable and accurate as possible when supplied from other jurisdictions.

Additionally, the background checks themselves will be strengthened through the establishment of the AusCheck scheme.

This bill will also put in place harsher penalties up to 15 years in prison for those caught trafficking firearms.

By toughening the penalties for trafficking firearms, we can stop gun violence at its source, by keeping firearms away from the people most likely to do harm.

Everyone deserves to go about their daily lives in peace, without the threat of verbal, physical, or lethal attacks.

We never want to see a repeat of Bondi. In Victoria, Australia, or anywhere else.

As a Labor government, we stand by minority groups who face these threats.

From passing anti-vilification laws to criminalize hate speech – laws the Liberal party voted against – to strengthening police powers, establishing help forums and taking action to prevent extremism from the start, the Labor Party stands with our Jewish community in their right to go about their daily lives.

Because when Labor says we'll do something to protect communities, we mean it.

When we said we'd legislate against hate speech, Labor did it.

When we said we'd strengthen security at schools and places of worship, Labor did it.

When we said we'd strengthen gun laws, we're doing it right here, right now.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) incorporated the following:

I rise to make a contribution to the Firearms Amendment Bill 2026.

The bill implements certain recommendations of former Victoria Police Chief Commissioner Ken Lay's *Rapid Review of Victoria's Firearms Law* and aligns with recent commonwealth reforms. Specifically the bill will:

- continue the existing firearm prohibition order scheme beyond 8 May 2028

- introduce a citizenship requirement for firearm licences
- increase penalties for firearms trafficking offences
- increase penalties for offences under the firearm prohibition order scheme
- impose a firearms background check requirement for certain licenses

Critically the bill fails to implement the Lay reports first and arguably most important recommendation, which is to introduce a cap on the number of firearms an individual can own to four, with certain exceptions.

The former Premier failed to support this recommendation, despite the fact that Victoria Police supported the cap based on the fact that most gun owners only had a small number of firearms and that it would – logically – remove firearms from circulation.

At the same time, I'm not especially surprised. The former premier in particular did more to weaken gun laws in this state than any other. Time and time again, she ignored evidence in favour of promoting the interests of the gun lobby in this state.

At a time when community safety is said to be the number one priority of this government – and recalling the whole furore over machetes and the government line about the importance of 'getting dangerous weapons off our streets' – I find it hard to square how allowing individuals to own as many of these lethal weapons as they want is making our community safer.

It sounds disingenuous to say the least.

I'm not sure why anyone needs to own more than four firearms – unless they're planning on forming a militia of some sort. Surely four lethal weapons are enough.

The Lay review found some recreational hunters own up to 68 firearms and some sports shooters have as many as 288.

Ironically while we are continually blocked by this government on sensible drug reform – with their lazy arguments about community safety and protecting children – they seem entirely comfortable with increasing the number of guns in circulation and the extraordinary argument that law abiding citizens should be able to own as many guns as they like.

Whether gun owners are law abiding citizens or not, having more guns in circulation is not a good thing. Nationally, some 9000 licensed firearms have been stolen over the last six years – an extremely conservative estimate I would say given that not all firearm thefts are reported – and police have recovered very few of them. So there's probably around 6000 guns floating around out there.

At the end of the day more guns in circulation means just that – there are more guns in circulation – and more likelihood that these will fall into the wrong hands.

We recognise the valid use of firearms by farmers and that shooting and hunting are legitimate sports. There are legitimate reasons for owning firearms. But we need to get the balance right.

I would also hazard I am not the only person alarmed to learn that an aim of the new Outdoor Recreation super agency is to boost participation levels, and will promote shooting as a recreational activity to children as young as 12.

To quote Alannah & Madeline Foundation chief Sarah Davies:

> "There is no public benefit to this practice, aside from potentially fostering a new generation of firearm enthusiasts.

Ms Davies also pointed out the absurdity of the proposal in light of the social media ban for children.

> "… a 13-year-old cannot use Facebook, yet they can legally use guns," she said.

Incredibly the very modest protections in this bill have the Nationals "up in arms". Gun owners are under attack! They are busy consulting with their communities through multiple firearms forums around the state.

Peter Walsh argued, and I quote:

> Why should we all be penalised for a crazy, absolute miniature minority who have done some bloody horrible things with guns and shot people? It is like everything. It is the honest people that suffer, and we do not believe we should be suffering any more than we already have been.

Well, he would say that!

And the former premier agreed:

> The vast majority of firearm owners, the overwhelming majority, are law-abiding.
>
> 'What we have to really target our focus on and our effort on are those evil actors, the criminals who get their hands on one single gun.'

It's chillingly similar to that old NRA fallback **'Guns don't kill people, people kill people'** – the one that is consistently trotted out after another tragic mass shooting in the US – an event so common these days that it barely rates a mention in the news. For those who are interested, in 2026 alone there have been 281 mass shootings in the US.

For all the bleating from the usual suspects about law abiding owners being penalised for the actions of a small minority, that minority is still able to inflict an awful lot of carnage. And I remind members that one of the assailants in the recent Bondi shootings did in fact hold a gun licence.

We are fortunate that we have seen relatively few mass shootings in Australia in recent years, largely due to the strict gun laws introduced after the Port Arthur massacre by that peace-loving hippie, John Howard – restrictions which are incredibly popular among the Australian public.

Shooters and hunters love to talk about recreational shooting, pest control, the absolute necessity of owning a gun – but they don't much like dwelling on the role of guns in domestic violence or suicides.

A recent longitudinal study by Stanford University in the US analysed data on handgun acquisitions and deaths in a cohort of over **26 million** Californians who had not previously owned handguns. The researchers compared death rates among those who did and didn't acquire handguns, with a particular focus on suicides by firearm compared to other methods. They found that access to firearms posed a 'substantial and enduring risk', and that gun owners had suicide rates nearly four times higher than people living in the same neighbourhood who did not own handguns.

In Australia these trends are consistent with those in the US. While we have a relatively moderate overall suicide rate, we have an extremely high male firearm suicide rate.

The Royal Commission into Family Violence heard many examples in community consultations and in submissions of how firearms were used as threats or to cause actual harm. Victoria Police confirmed that the 'the high prevalence of firearms in such communities increases the risk of serious family violence.'

Other concerning statistics provided to the royal commission showed that:

- Gunshot wounds are the third most common cause of death in domestic homicide incidents in Australia.
- Violent intimate partners are more likely to engage in severe domestic violence if they have access to a firearm, and that
- A woman is 20 times more likely to be killed if their abuser has used or threatened to use a weapon.

As a member of the Legalise Cannabis Party, I have spent nearly four years in this place arguing for the legalisation of a plant-based substance that has resulted in exactly zero deaths.

Of course, gun violence perpetrated by crime gangs running our cannabis market is another thing, but that lends more support to my argument that the government should be regulating cannabis rather than leaving it to criminals.

But there has been not one single fatality that has resulted from consumption of cannabis.

We can't say the same of firearms and yet apparently we can't even put a cap of **four guns** per individual on extremely dangerous – lethal – weapons.

This legislation is of a piece with the government's backing out of federal gun buybacks and opening up more national parks to hunting. They've maintained the status of deer as a protected species to appease recreational hunters. This is despite all the evidence of the damage deer are wreaking on our native fauna and flora – prioritising the recreational activities of a small group of people over the protection of our irreplaceable wilderness and farming communities.

This government has made any number of captain's calls to reduce gun restrictions in Victoria in order to placate the shooters and fishers or to shore up marginal regional seats.

LCV will support this bill because it does make some reforms, but they are pretty ordinary and won't do much to increase community safety.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (23:49): I move:

That debate be adjourned until the next day of meeting.

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

Adjournment

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (23:50): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Belgrave–Lilydale train services

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (23:50): (2665) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Public Transport in the other place. Victorians look to Labor governments to help ease cost-of-living pressures, with initiatives such as half-price public transport and slashing fuel prices at the petrol pump. Our public transport system benefits Victorians by offering cheaper and faster ways to commute to work. Of particular importance to my constituents in the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region is the increased frequency of train services on the Belgrave–Lilydale line, which was the first train line in Melbourne to become level crossing free. The action I seek is for the minister to update me on the benefits commuters in my region will experience as a result of the increased services on the Belgrave–Lilydale line.

Mernda Community Hospital

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (23:51): (2666) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health. The action I seek is for the minister to extend the opening hours of Mernda Community Hospital and increase the range of healthcare services on offer. In June 2022 the Minister for Health appointed contractors to build Mernda Community Hospital, but the facility only opened recently – a year late due to Labor's financial mismanagement – with restricted operating hours and a limited range of services. Our fantastic Liberal candidate for Yan Yean Amanda Dow has been on the ground speaking directly with local residents, and the message from the community is clear: the early closing hours and limited services are failing them.

The government has said that community hospitals are designed to be open for extended hours to provide day and after-hours services, but what is the reality in Mernda? General services are only available Monday to Friday, and the hospital closes at 5 pm, before most people have even finished work. The urgent care clinic does not open until noon and shuts its doors at 8 pm, and it is closed on weekends. Dialysis is the only service available on Saturday, and on Sundays the hospital is not open at all. Mernda Community Hospital was intended to take the pressure off Northern Hospital in Epping, which has the busiest emergency department in Victoria, treating over 300 patients every single day. But how can the Mernda facility deliver after-hours and urgent care that meets the needs of local families with such restricted opening hours?

Melbourne's northern corridor is one of the fastest growing areas in the state and is expected to expand by 74 per cent in the coming decade. Thousands of homes have been built in areas like Donnybrook, Doreen and Mernda but without the essential healthcare infrastructure to support them. Financial mismanagement delayed the completion of this project, and when it finally opened Labor delivered a scaled-back facility that is closed on weekends and shuts on weeknights before people get home from work. The hospital is designed to allow for a greater range of services to be delivered once it is fully operational, but right now Mernda Community Hospital is operating below its capacity. Suburbs in the Yan Yean electorate are growing fast, but residents cannot get the urgent health care they need, because the Carroll Labor government cannot manage money and cannot manage health care, and Victorians are paying the price.

Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Project

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (23:53): (2667) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Water, and the action I am seeking is for her to put a halt to the nine projects under the Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Project, or VMFRP. The VMFRP is the Victorian Labor

government's creative attempt to meet their environmental water obligations under the Murray–Darling Basin agreement. These projects have selected a small number of wetlands along the Murray to see if they can survive with less water. The so-called water 'savings' that these projects generate will be used to offset the government's failure to return water to other parts of the system.

Naturally, being Victorian Labor, these are big infrastructure projects that cost an extraordinary amount, have no plan for funding them and have no evidence base to back them up. Three years ago the Productivity Commission released an analysis of the VMFRP, describing all nine projects as poor value for money and unlikely to be delivered on time due to budget blowouts and deliverability challenges. In 2024 Labor's Minister for Planning Sonya Kilkenny rejected the Burra Creek floodplain restoration project, concluding that the engineered, managed flooding would cause unacceptable habitat loss and damage over 300 large old trees.

Just last month Wadi Wadi man Vince Kirby won a historic legal victory in the Supreme Court regarding the Nyah flood plain restoration project. Vince argued successfully that traditional owners were not properly consulted by the Victorian government, resulting in a flawed cultural heritage management plan and erroneous approval. He is taking on the Labor government again over the same failures on the related Vinifera flood plain restoration project. The Friends of Nyah Vinifera Park are supporting calls from traditional owners and calling for an end to these artificial engineering projects that use pumps and pipes to create unnatural flooding. Instead they are campaigning for genuine First Nations water rights and the removal of physical constraints to allow natural river flows, which is exactly what the science shows works and what stacks up economically.

But when it comes to water, this Labor government has form on ignoring the evidence. In 2023 the Murray–Darling Basin Authority commissioned and published a peer-reviewed report from the University of Adelaide which concluded that the studies relied upon by successive Labor water ministers to justify their Murray–Darling Basin policies were of low quality and not fit for policy advice. As of today not one of the nine sites is operational, and yet Labor are persisting with this expensive failing agenda. These are projects that will sacrifice our river red gums, birdlife, fish and river ecosystems, as well as the communities that depend on them, because Labor is putting the interests of the deep pockets of big corporate agribusiness ahead of everyday people and the environment. I urge the new water minister to do what her counterparts have not and listen to the evidence and traditional owners and put an end to the VMFRP.

NAPLAN results

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (23:56): (2668) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Education, Minister Williams. With Victorian students again achieving the best NAPLAN results in the nation, the action I seek is an update on how the Victorian government's education reforms are supporting teachers and students.

Period products

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (23:57): (2669) My adjournment is to the Minister for Women and Gender Equality. The action I seek is for the minister to support biological women and girls experiencing period poverty in Victoria by providing appropriate resources, including female nurses in all schools, to administer period pain relief, offer medical and pastoral support and provide essential education. Minister, I recently attended a forum in Frankston with local high school students. I was incredibly moved by a group of young female secondary students who talked openly about the impact of period poverty on their lives. These young women spoke with passion, intelligence and insight. I promised them that I would raise their voices in Parliament.

In Australia 64 per cent of women have found it difficult to buy period products, and nearly 30 per cent have purposely rationed products to cut costs. With the current cost-of-living crisis hitting Victorian families hard, the reality for teenage girls today is undoubtedly worse. Parents are facing soaring mortgages and bills, leaving many financially stretched, exhausted and time poor. Parents are

often not emotionally or physically available to have the conversations or provide the support their daughters need. Some parents cannot even afford the safest yet more expensive basic necessities for their daughters. Furthermore, nearly four in five women experience painful, heavy or irregular periods. For many girls, these symptoms are so debilitating that they are missing school. Victoria calls itself the Education State, yet only two-thirds of Victorian government schools have access to a school nurse. The students at the forum explained that teachers are not permitted to provide any pain relief medication, not even a single tablet of paracetamol. Consequently, desperate teenage girls are forced to negotiate with each other to share pain medication. This creates a dangerous environment where students are taking unknown dosages or mixing medications without medical oversight.

Members often debate the cost-of-living crisis, yet the hidden, painful impact on teenage girls remains largely forgotten. These students asked me to remind the chamber that females make up 50 per cent of our population. Period poverty directly impacts biological women and girls, and it deserves urgent attention. Minister, it is time this government stops ignoring this hidden crisis and starts giving the biological girls and women of Victoria the resources, health support and dignity that they deserve.

American football

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (00:00): (2670) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Major Events in the other place. Sports fans across my constituency are excited for Australia's first-ever regular season NFL game, which will be played at the MCG in September. This is great for Melburnians who might be interested in attending a game of American football, whether as interested locals, overseas fans or American expats. It is also great news for our tourism industry, and it will bring people from all across the country down to Melbourne for the weekend. It is not an accident that Melbourne is the major events capital of Australia. It is a status that we continue to carry as a result of the hard work of this Labor government. The action that I seek is for the minister to provide me an update on how much of an economic boost this event is expected to provide for Melbourne.

Mullum Primary School

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (00:00): (2671) My matter this evening is for the Minister for Education in the other place. I would like to read, if I may – and I will provide this to Hansard, because I have a letter here – a speech, in fact. It is from two students from Mullum Primary School, a primary school we are incredibly proud of. It is particularly from Ernie. Ernie is from grade 4, and he writes on behalf of not just himself but also Mika. Mika is in grade 2. I think the letter speaks for itself and also addresses the question that we would ask the Minister for Education. It says:

> Thank you Speaker
>
> This speech was written by two kids from Mullum Primary School, named Mika (Grade 2) and Ernie (Grade 4). These two boy want an accessible playground for their school, but they also believe that all schools should have an accessible playground for kids who need it.
>
> So, Mullum Primary School needs a playground so that Mika, and other students, can play together. Much of our other playgrounds cannot be accessed by Mika in his wheelchair because he has to go through the basketball courts and Mika is worried about getting hit with the balls. Even when Mika gets to the other side of the courts some of the equipment is not accessible.
>
> It would seem that all schools should have an accessible playground, when the child is at school. We are worried that Mika will have left school by the time we get a playground that he can play in. We are sure that other schools would need an accessible playground to play on too.

That is the speech, as I said, written by both Mika, grade 2, and Ernie, grade 4. I had the great privilege of having Ernie and his mother in the Parliament a number of weeks ago, and it was a great delight for me to see Ernie's enthusiasm for this place. I can only hope that the likes of Ernie and very many other children can aspire to be members of Parliament. It is one of the great privileges of being in this place, the opportunity we have to interact with children of all ages but also, hopefully, along that journey to inspire others to take our positions in the future and – I can only hope – to do somewhat better than I

have done in this place in the time I have had. It is a great credit to the principal of Mullum Primary School that these students have taken it upon themselves to write such a beautiful speech and that I can tonight present that to the Minister for Education and ask for that action to give consideration for that accessible playground equipment at Mullum Primary School. It is not the first time a primary school and primary school children have raised with me the issue, including their parents, of an absence of accessible play equipment for those who are particularly in wheelchairs right across the state. It is critical for those children to have that inclusive opportunity, and I commend their speech to the minister.

Northern Metropolitan Region police resources

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (00:03): (2672) My adjournment is for the Minister for Police, and the action I seek relates to the desperate need for a new police station in the outer northern suburbs. I recently saw this sort of bizarre Instagram clip from the member for Yan Yean saying there was a new police station coming to service the community of Donnybrook. I got excited because I thought this meant that the community in Donnybrook and Kalkallo were finally going to get a new police station, but it seems I was wrong. I think the member for Yan Yean must have mixed a few things up, because the police station she was talking about is actually going to be built in Craigieburn Road East in Wollert, about 14 kilometres away by road, or a 20-minute drive, in a different electorate to the member for Yan Yean. I was left a bit confused as to why they would claim there was a police station that was going to service Donnybrook when in fact there was not. In fact the police station in Craigieburn is actually closer to Donnybrook than this newly proposed police station in Wollert. But the issue still remains that Donnybrook and Kalkallo are left stranded without the essential police resources they so desperately need. In fact that police station in Craigieburn happens to be temporarily closed at the moment despite already having reduced hours and despite being just 3 minutes drive away from the awful fatality that we saw in Craigieburn a few weeks ago. What good is proposing new police stations when we cannot even staff the existing ones that we have?

The new Premier and the new minister have said they want police stations open. I remember a couple of premiers ago those opposite in this chamber, the minister and others, saying, 'How dare you demand that police stations be opened. That's going against the advice of the chief commissioner. You can't possibly do that.' Only the Liberals and Nationals have a policy to hire 3000 new police to reopen the over 40 police stations closed or that have had reduced hours under this government. The action I therefore seek is for the minister to address the significant under-resourcing of police within the northern suburbs, including urgently looking at opening a new police station in Donnybrook or Kalkallo to keep my community safe.

Planning policy

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (00:06): (2673) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Planning, and the action I seek is for the minister to release all departmental advice that led to changes to the proposed Ormond and Bentleigh activity centre boundaries around McKinnon, including when those changes were recommended and who authorised them. For months residents in McKinnon, Bentleigh and Ormond have rallied against Labor's egregious plans to impose high-density development across their established neighbourhoods. They organised, they attended meetings, they wrote to the government and they made their opposition very clear. On 2 June I presented a petition to the Parliament bearing 658 signatures specifically calling on the government to reduce the enormous catchment areas and remove streets within the catchment radius of McKinnon station. The final plans have now substantially changed the boundaries around McKinnon. That is a win for a determined local community that refused to be ignored.

But it raises a very simple question for the minister. What changed, given communities right across my electorate have exactly the same concerns? What planning evidence suddenly justified changing these boundaries? Was it new modelling? Was it infrastructure capacity? Was it accessibility and walkability, or did the political calculations simply become too difficult for Labor, or did Nick Staikos

intervene? These questions have taken on even greater significance following revelations concerning the planning minister's own investment property in Hampton. The minister participated in improving the activity centre boundaries despite owning a property just metres away. Her property remained outside the activity centre while properties across the road were included and could face four-storey developments next door. She has since conceded she should have delegated the decision, calling her failure to do so an oversight. I mean, spare me. Really? Honestly, what was she thinking? That is precisely why transparency matters. Tens of thousands of Victorians are going to be subjected to Labor's activity centres, with no appeal rights and significantly increased development permitted in their neighbourhoods.

David Davis interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: That is exactly right, Mr Davis – high-density high-rise zones. They are entitled to know that boundaries are determined by sound planning principles, not personal circumstances, political pressure or electoral convenience. The McKinnon community should be congratulated for fighting hard and forcing the government to listen. But what about every other community asking the same questions? Why McKinnon? Why these streets? Why now? Minister, release the documents. Show the community what changed, when it changed, who recommended it and the planning justifications for doing so. Because after the minister's extraordinary 'oversight' involving her own property, Victorians, and especially those Victorians in my electorate of Southern Metropolitan Region, should not be expected to simply take her word for it.

Film industry

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (00:09): (2674) I want to raise a matter for the Minister for Creative Industries, and my hope is that she takes action by raising this with her federal colleague, specifically the federal minister for creative industries, Mr Burke. There may be forums that she can raise this in, whether they be ministerial forums or taking this up directly. Obviously film production and technical production of that type in Australia is a shared activity between the Commonwealth and the state, with subsidies and support from both levels of government. There are a number of tax matters that have not been dealt with by the Commonwealth government, which are causing serious issues and serious delay. There has been a more than two-year delay to legislate changes to the producer offset scheme that were originally promised in the May 2024 budget to support independent films, and this is now having a significant effect. There are some films that are now leaving Australia because of that, and obviously we want to see as many of these in Victoria as possible.

A recent article by Tim Douglas says:

> At the heart of the issue is the government's unfulfilled commitment to abolish the 20 per cent "above-the-line" cap within the Producer Offset – the refundable tax rebate for productions with significant Australian content'.

New Zealand has recently legislated changes to the comparable arrangements of the international screen production rebate:

> … removing the above-the-line salary cap rebate for producers, directors, writers and actors, and allowing for rebates on those high-profile expenses.

To explain this a little further, and I am conscious I have only got a short period of time, the producer offset rebate is based on qualifying Australian production expenditure, or QAPE as it is called.

> The current rebate is 40 per cent for eligible feature films, 30 per cent for other eligible formats, and 20 per cent for those formats …

if principal photography began before 2021.

> To qualify, a production must meet minimum requirements … The guidelines state that above-the-line expenditure that can be counted for QAPE is capped at 20 per cent of the total film expenditure.

> The removal of the Australian ATL cap – widely lauded when it was announced – effectively would allow producers to hire major directors, lead actors and writers without penalty when calculating their total QAPE.
>
> The ATL rebate promise is advertised on the government agency Screen Australia's website …

under the list of pending changes to the producer offset legislation.

This delay is causing significant damage to the industry, to the sector. The state has got a role but so does the Commonwealth, and the state minister needs to get in and talk to her federal colleague and make sure that he responds and fixes this longstanding delay that is hurting Australian film and television production.

Electricity infrastructure

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (00:12): (2675) My adjournment matter is for the Premier, and the action I seek is that he accept Leader of the Opposition Jess Wilson's demand to halt all final decisions on the Western Renewables Link, including planning approvals and compulsory acquisition powers, before the state election. The proposition Jess put to the Premier is straightforward: no final planning sign-offs and no land grab powers for AusNet before Victorians have their say at the ballot box. There is no engineering emergency requiring these approvals in the coming weeks, only a cynical political urgency to lock this project in before Labor faces the electorate. An outgoing government has no business binding taxpayers, landholders and a future administration to massive, irreversible liabilities on its way out the door. Having spent years meeting affected farmers, attending rallies and visiting properties across western Victoria, I know these communities well. They are reasonable, informed people who understand Victoria's energy needs. They are not necessarily opposed to renewable energy; they are opposed to being ignored, overridden and treated as collateral damage by a government that decided the route first and pretended to consult them afterwards. Those communities have endured years of uncertainty while Labor expanded its coercive powers and refused to listen to them.

The government's secrecy is indefensible. The independent inquiry completed its hearings in March and delivered its final report to the Minister for Planning on 8 May. That report remains secret. Yet while landholders are kept in the dark, AusNet has formally applied for compulsory acquisition powers. Granting those powers on the eve of an election would be one of the most cynical acts of this government's term. The financial justification for rushing Western Renewables Link through has also collapsed. It was originally put to Victorians at $479 million in 2019. It is now estimated to cost $1.53 billion – more than three times the original figure – before the planning minister has even issued a final assessment. Transmission is not free. Every single month Victorian families and small businesses will pay for it through higher electricity bills. The leadership change provides an opportunity to reset a deeply damaged relationship with regional Victoria. Premier Carroll claims to offer a fresh start. Well, he can prove it by accepting Jess Wilson's proposal and halting these approvals. The Liberals and Nationals have committed to pausing the Western Renewables Link and subjecting it to a rigorous independent review. The Premier must allow Victorians to vote before Labor makes their project irreversible.

Crime

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (00:15): (2676) My adjournment is to the Minister for Police to address continuing high rates of crime occurring in Victoria. I have lost count of the number of residents across Northern Victoria who have shared their personal stories with me of how crime has impacted them directly. Behind every statistic is a person and a family who has been affected, and the trauma of a victim of crime can and does have a lasting impact. A close friend of ours was on a bus recently when a person impacted by drugs and alcohol hit him in the face with a bottle without warning, breaking his eye socket and cheekbone. It demonstrates the risk to community safety that exists when someone is under the influence.

I recently spoke with a lady. An intruder came into their home in Strathdale, and as they tried to stop him stealing their car, her husband was stabbed. That was over 12 months ago, and her husband is still suffering from the experience. Last week another resident contacted me about a home invasion in Flora Hill. She said an intruder wearing a balaclava entered their home while her husband was in the next room, and it was chilling to watch the security footage. She said, 'You never think it is going to happen to you,' but now she knows it can happen to anyone.

I know people whose cars have been stolen from the front of their house and a family that had intruders come into their home to find their car keys and steal their vehicles while their kids slept upstairs. In a single year, from March 2025 to March this year, there have been over 132,600 car thefts in Victoria. That means a theft occurs every 16.5 minutes. In just one year both Indigo and Loddon shires have had over 100 cars stolen; Swan Hill and Wangaratta shires, both close to 250 cars; Macedon Ranges, nearly 530 cars; Campaspe, over 750 cars stolen; in Wodonga, over 760; in the Yarra Ranges, over 1300 cars stolen; Greater Bendigo, 2223 cars stolen in a year; and in Whittlesea, nearly 3780 cars stolen. But that is not all; there are more, and every car stolen has a big impact. Recently I have had residents contact me to raise concerns about the increasing number of vehicles on roadsides that have been dumped and remain there for months.

Right now in Victoria bail laws allow repeat offenders to return to the community without consequences, and youth offending has become a significant concern in regional centres. The Nationals in government are committed to recruiting 3000 new police officers, introducing 'break bail, face jail' laws so offenders who breach bail conditions face jail, strengthening legal protections for Victoria Police officers involved in pursuits and increasing sentencing for pursuit-related harms. The action I seek is for the minister to urgently address Victoria's crime by strengthening bail laws, increasing police numbers and ensuring repeat offenders are held accountable and to outline what immediate steps the government will take to reduce vehicle theft and ensure the prompt removal of stolen and abandoned vehicles on our roadsides.

Responses

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (00:18): A number of members have raised a number of matters for different ministers, and I will refer them accordingly.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (00:18): Before we adjourn, I will respond to a point of order from Ms Crozier during question time on whether Minister Stitt answered a question regarding a mental health facility. I was concerned about the level of detail that was asked in the question, but I do believe the minister did not go towards answering the question, so I will call for the minister to give a written response under the standing orders, but I will add an extra day given the lateness of this morning.

The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 12:19 am (Wednesday).