



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Wednesday 12 August 2026

Members of the Legislative Council

60th Parliament

President

Shaun Leane

Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Lizzie Blandthorn

Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Bev McArthur (from 18 November 2025)

David Davis (from 27 December 2024)

Georgie Crozier (to 27 December 2024)

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Evan Mulholland (from 31 August 2023)

Matthew Bach (to 31 August 2023)

Member	Region	Party	Member	Region	Party
Bach, Matthew ¹	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Luu, Trung	Western Metropolitan	Lib
Batchelor, Ryan	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	Mansfield, Sarah	Western Victoria	Greens
Bath, Melina	Eastern Victoria	Nat	McArthur, Bev	Western Victoria	Lib
Berger, John	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	McCracken, Joe	Western Victoria	Lib
Blandthorn, Lizzie	Western Metropolitan	ALP	McGowan, Nick	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib
Bourman, Jeff	Eastern Victoria	SFFP	McIntosh, Tom	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Broad, Gaele	Northern Victoria	Nat	Mulholland, Evan	Northern Metropolitan	Lib
Copsey, Katherine	Southern Metropolitan	Greens	Payne, Rachel	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LCV
Crozier, Georgie	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Puglielli, Aiv	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Greens
Davis, David	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Purcell, Georgie	Northern Victoria	AJP
Deeming, Moira ²	Western Metropolitan	FFV	Ratnam, Samantha ⁵	Northern Metropolitan	Greens
Erdogan, Enver	Northern Metropolitan	ALP	Shing, Harriet	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Ermacora, Jacinta	Western Victoria	ALP	Somyurek, Adem ⁶	Northern Metropolitan	Ind
Ettershank, David	Western Metropolitan	LCV	Stitt, Ingrid	Western Metropolitan	ALP
Galea, Michael	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Symes, Jaclyn	Northern Victoria	ALP
Gray-Barberio, Anasina ³	Northern Metropolitan	Greens	Tarlamis, Lee	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Heath, Renee	Eastern Victoria	Lib	Terpstra, Sonja	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Hermans, Ann-Marie	South-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Tierney, Gayle	Western Victoria	ALP
Leane, Shaun	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Tyrrell, Rikkie-Lee ⁸	Northern Victoria	ON
Limbrick, David ⁴	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Watt, Sheena	Northern Metropolitan	ALP
Lovell, Wendy	Northern Victoria	Lib	Welch, Richard ⁷	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib

¹ Resigned 7 Dec 2023

² Lib from 26 Nov 2022 until 28 Mar 2023;

IndLib from 28 Mar 2023 until 27 Dec 2024;

Lib from 27 Dec 2024 until 28 Jul 2026;

Ind from 28 Jul 2026 until 6 Sep 2026

³ Appointed 14 Nov 2024

⁴ LDP until 26 Jul 2023

⁵ Resigned 8 Nov 2024

⁶ DLP until 25 Mar 2024

⁷ Appointed 7 Feb 2024

⁸ PHON until 3 Aug 2026

Party abbreviations

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

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Wednesday 12 August 2026

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

Business of the house

Notices

Notices of motion given.

Members statements

Metro Tunnel

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (09:44): The Metro Tunnel has only been open for eight months, but it is already slashing commute times and making the lives of those that work and study in our city easier. Earlier this week, alongside local councillor and candidate for Melbourne Davydd Griffiths, I met with Elly, Jimmy and Emma, all students studying at the University of Melbourne who have benefited from the brand new Parkville station and Metro Tunnel. All of them said so clearly to Davydd and me how the Metro Tunnel has changed their life at university. Elly told me how the tunnel has slashed her commute time in half, and with quick access to the Parkville medical precinct, it is also making it easier for her volunteer work at the Royal Children's Hospital to continue. All of them talked to me about how it has fundamentally improved their experiences at university, allowing many of them – some students along the Sunbury, Pakenham and Cranbourne lines – to take earlier classes, study late into the night and, more importantly, get a bit of sleep in the morning. Parkville is a world-class station serving a world-class university, and the students are all the better for it. It is Labor that delivered the Metro Tunnel, and it is only Labor candidates like Davydd that can deliver the public transport our university students rely upon.

China Guangxi Commodities Expo

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:45): On Saturday I was very pleased to attend two business events in the CBD. The first was the opening of the 2026 China Guangxi Commodities Expo at the Pan Pacific building. This was an expo very much in the spirit of the expos we had in the 1880s where new production products, new production methodologies were on full display, and I think this speaks to the untapped opportunity Australia has in dealing with China, because it is not just about the exchange of goods and services, it is actually about the exchange of technologies and production methods. This is an incredibly healthy engagement from the Guangxi trading association to bring this to Melbourne. They had a fantastic exhibition over Saturday and Sunday, and I congratulate the organisers.

Asian Business Association of Whitehorse

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:46): Equally, that evening we had the Asian Business Association of Whitehorse Business Excellence Awards, attended by me, Evan Mulholland and Jess Wilson, where we were very well received, particularly in the comments regarding –

Sonja Terpstra: Wasn't Albo there?

Richard WELCH: Well, yes. It was a bit embarrassing for Albo, because he had to talk about the capital gains tax, which of course went down very, very badly in a room of entrepreneurs and businesspeople, but we were very well received, especially our commitments to lower taxes.

Bill Saris

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (09:47): I rise today to pay tribute to Bill Saris, who, sadly, passed away, and to extend my deepest condolences to his wife Voula, his daughter Nikki, his son Pantelli, his mother Niki and his three siblings. Bill came to Australia from Greece when he was

just one year old with his parents Peter and Niki, who were in search of a better life, and they found one. Bill grew up embracing the Australian way of life and never lost his pride in his Greek heritage. He loved Australia and he loved his Greek culture, traditions and values, carrying them with him throughout every chapter in his life, and that life was defined by hard work, determination and a strong commitment to those around him. Throughout his life Bill was a dedicated small business owner, establishing and operating businesses across Melbourne. Most recently he opened Gateway Auto Wash in Brooklyn, a new venture that only opened its doors a few months ago. Bill was also an accomplished kickboxer in his younger years, competing at an exceptionally high level and earning great respect within his sport. Those who knew Bill will remember his unmistakable character, often recognised by his trademark hat and cigar, and away from work some of his happiest times were spent at the beach surrounded by his family and his friends. We know that the legacy of his life and his character will be carried on by his children, and he will be missed.

NAPLAN results

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (09:49): Victoria is the Education State, and that is confirmed by the latest NAPLAN results that show Victorian students have led the way on 16 out of 20 NAPLAN measures – a fantastic effort by students and their teachers. It means Victorian students are top of the class for the second year running, after the state's best ever NAPLAN results in 2025. I am absolutely delighted for all of the hardworking students across Victoria who have achieved these excellent results, particularly in numeracy and writing, in which students topped the mean rankings across the states in seven out of eight of the metrics. But these results do not happen without the teachers, who have worked so hard to make it happen. Our teachers in Victoria are second to none, and they are making a difference to our kids' lives every single day. We thank them for it, and we want to make them the best paid teachers in the country.

I am proud of this government's record on education. We have introduced best practice explicit teaching, including phonics, into our schools. We have improved school infrastructure. We have given kids a meal at the start of the day with our breakfast club programs. We have opened more than 120 new schools, with thousands of upgrades to existing schools by this Labor government. Labor always prioritises education.

Ministry

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:50): It would be remiss of me to allow the current chaos among those opposite to go unremarked.

A member interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: Yes, chaos. That is right. You heard me correctly. It would be particularly remiss of me not to mention the fact that in addition to the two portfolios I have responsibility for, one being the environment, which we now have had five ministers for –

Harriet Shing interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: They are not portfolios for those opposite, former Minister Shing, because you guys treat them like playing cards. You swap them around so quickly we cannot keep track of who has got what – neither can those opposite. Five environment ministers in four years, but that is not the point of today's members statement. The point of today's members statement is actually to highlight one delinquent minister in particular, and that minister is Minister Ward. Minister Ward has to be the first minister in living history to have never attended a single fire station in this state. What an absolute disgrace. I am happy to be corrected and happy for the minister and those opposite to list the singular FRV-dedicated fire station, not a combined fire station with CFA –

Members interjecting.

Nick McGOWAN: Oh, so she does not want to represent the 4000 firefighters for whom she did nothing in her entire tenure, in addition to which that minister never once attended a graduation ceremony for a single FRV firefighter in her entire period. What a disgraceful service her period was.

Cannabis law reform

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (09:52): I rise to congratulate the member for Niddrie on becoming the Premier of Victoria. I read his recent interview in the *Guardian* and was buoyed to hear that Premier Carroll has a socially progressive leaning, is committed to evidence rather than ideological-based policy and supports treaty, early intervention for young people and working to elevate the disadvantaged, which all ties well, we hope, with his openness to follow the ACT in decriminalising the possession and cultivation of small amounts of cannabis for personal use. The Premier rightly noted that current cannabis laws disproportionately affect First Nations people, young people and lower income Victorians, leading to unnecessary contact with the criminal justice system and all the adverse consequences related thereto. Decriminalisation is why everyone from the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service to the Victorian AMA to the Victorian Trades Hall Council and to the ALP state conference support cannabis law reform. We very much look forward to working with the Premier and his team to realise cannabis decriminalisation. Eighty per cent of Victorians support it, and it can enable the urgent reallocation of policing resources to target real crimes.

Parliamentary internship program

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:53): I am pleased to rise today to congratulate Billy Chen, a bright young man who recently completed his Victorian parliamentary internship program in my office through the University of Melbourne. It was terrific, along with many other members in this place, to attend the graduation ceremony just a few days ago. I was very proud to see Billy on stage sharing some remarks on behalf of the cohort. Suffice to say that I was extremely impressed with his work ethic, dedication and approach to joining in with our office and working so thoroughly on his report, which focused on the SBS and its role in actually broadcasting the voices of outer suburban communities like mine in the south-east of Melbourne. It was great to see the level of detail and determination that Billy put into that work, and some wonderful recommendations for both state and federal levels of government that he has come through with as a result. I commend his report to members to read and look very much forward to seeing Billy continue to shine and prosper in whichever avenue he chooses next.

Matariki

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:54): Over the winter parliamentary recess I also had the great privilege of joining T'Pūaka mā Matariki, the annual Māori New Year celebration hosted by Te Hononga o Ngā Iwi. It was wonderful and really special to be able to join the iwi for this celebration in Hallam with members of the community from all over Melbourne, but particularly from the south-east and the west, and to observe and be a part of the celebrations which were deeply spiritual and meaningful to the whole community. Happy Māori New Year. Mauri ora.

Homelessness

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (09:55): On any given day in Victoria homelessness services have to turn away 96 people. That is approximately 672 per week, 2688 a month, that access services and get rejected. The three top reasons people look to homelessness services are financial hardship, family violence and the housing crisis.

The Victorian Labor government recently announced a new Minister for Homelessness, another first-of-its-kind portfolio. It reminds me of the government's short-lived and now abolished men and boys portfolio, also promoted as a first and created to address the manosphere and misogyny, which researchers say is a major cause for extremism in young men. This portfolio was touted to save lives yet lasted for months. Meanwhile, the women and girls portfolio remains, with the responsibility once again falling on us women to push for gender equality, speak up for our safety and protect ourselves

from violence that is entirely preventable. A standalone portfolio for homelessness is needed, but without consistent funding and clear commitment it means nothing to thousands of Victorians sleeping rough in cars, on couches and on the streets.

Victoria has the worst social housing provision in this country and the highest rate of people seeking homelessness support. On top of this are family violence services that remain chronically underfunded and cannot house women and children escaping violence because there is nowhere safely to house them. The solution? Build more public housing and stop demolishing these public assets.

Bills

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

Statement of charter compatibility

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:57): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

Opening paragraphs

In accordance with section 28 of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Charter), I make this Statement of Compatibility with respect to the Liquor Control Reform and Other Acts Amendment (Reducing Alcohol-Related Harms) Bill 2026 (Bill).

In my opinion, the Bill, as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with human rights as set out in the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

Overview

The Bill amends the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998 and the Transport Integration Act 2010 to tighten regulations around online alcohol sales and deliveries and alcohol advertising in certain locations. The bill establishes prevention of harm as the paramount objective and purpose of the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998 and expands the definition of harm to include sexual violence.

The Bill's primary aim is to reduce alcohol-related harms, particularly intimate partner and domestic violence.

The Bill introduces new conditions on liquor licences to restrict the delivery of liquor to the hours between 10.00 a.m. and 10.00 p.m. and to require a minimum two-hour period between the placement of an order and delivery.

The Bill strengthens restrictions on alcohol advertising by prohibiting certain forms of static alcohol advertising on public transport infrastructure, on or above public roads and related infrastructure, and within 150 metres of schools.

The Bill further amends the Transport Integration Act 2010 to introduce a public health principle, which includes consideration of the public health risks associated with alcohol advertising.

Human Rights Issues

In my opinion, the Charter rights engaged by the Bill are:

- freedom of expression (section 15); and
- protection of families and children (section 17); and
- right to life (section 9)

For the reasons outlined below, I am of the view that the Bill is compatible with the Charter because, to the extent that some provisions may limit human rights, those limitations are reasonable and demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.

Freedom of expression

The Bill engages the right to freedom of expression by restricting alcohol advertising in certain locations. The Bill also broadens prohibitions on advertising and promotional activities that are inconsistent with the objects of the liquor regulatory framework or the newly inserted public health principle.

These measures limit the ability of liquor suppliers, advertisers and other commercial entities to communicate messages concerning alcohol products in certain public settings. They do not prohibit alcohol advertising entirely but instead regulate where and in what circumstances such advertising may occur. Businesses remain able to advertise alcohol through a wide range of other lawful channels.

Accordingly, the Bill limits the right to freedom of expression. However, the Bill establishes prevention of harm as a paramount objective and purpose of the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998 and introduces a public health principle into the Transport Integration Act 2010, recognising the public health risks associated with alcohol advertising.

In my opinion, any limitation on freedom of expression is reasonable and demonstrably justified under section 7(2) of the Charter compatible with the lawful restrictions on this right under section 15, 3(b) of the Charter.

Protection of families and children

The Bill promotes the protection of families and children by reducing exposure to alcohol-related harms and encouraging responsible alcohol consumption. The recognition of sexual violence as a form of alcohol-related harm, restrictions on alcohol advertising near schools, and measures aimed at reducing harmful alcohol consumption support the wellbeing of children, families and the broader community.

Accordingly, the Bill promotes the rights protected by section 17 of the Charter.

Section 17(1) of the Charter provides that families are the fundamental group unit of society and are entitled to be protected by society and the State. Section 17(2) provides that every child has the right, without discrimination, to such protection as is in their best interests.

By reducing exposure to alcohol-related harms, including family violence, community harm and other adverse social outcomes associated with excessive alcohol consumption, the Bill promotes the wellbeing of families and children.

The restrictions on alcohol advertising in proximity to schools and on public transport infrastructure further support the protection of children from exposure to alcohol marketing in everyday public environments.

Right to life

The Bill promotes the right to life by putting in place measures to prevent alcohol-related harms that can threaten individuals' safety and wellbeing. The bill does this by:

- introducing measures to reduce risky alcohol consumption, including restrictions on alcohol delivery and advertising.
- ensuring that decision making within the liquor regulatory framework must take into account the prevention of harm as the new paramount objective and purpose of the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998.
- expanding the definition of harm in the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998 to explicitly recognise sexual violence as a form of harm along with the existing forms of harm as defined in the Act.

These amendments are particularly relevant to gender-based violence, given the well-established association between harmful alcohol use and increased risks of violence against women. By reducing alcohol-related harms and promoting safer consumption, the Bill promotes the rights protected by section 9 of the Charter.

Conclusion

I consider that the Bill is compatible with the Charter because any limitations on human rights are reasonable and demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society, and the Bill promotes the protection of families, children and public health.

Statement of treaty compatibility

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:57): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Statewide Treaty Act 2025:

In my opinion, the Liquor Control Reform and Other Acts Amendment (Reducing Alcohol-Related Harms) Bill 2026 (Bill) is compatible with the matters set out in section 66(3)(d) of the Statewide Treaty Act 2025 (Treaty Act). I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

Overview of the Bill

The Bill amends the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998 and the Transport Integration Act 2010 to tighten regulations around online alcohol sales and deliveries and alcohol advertising in certain locations. The bill establishes prevention of harm as the paramount objective and purpose of the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998 and expands the definition of harm to include sexual violence.

The Bill's primary aim is to reduce alcohol-related harms, particularly intimate partner and domestic violence.

The Bill introduces new conditions on liquor licences to restrict the delivery of liquor to the hours between 10.00 a.m. and 10.00 p.m. and to require a minimum two-hour period between the placement of an order and delivery.

The Bill strengthens restrictions on alcohol advertising by prohibiting certain forms of static alcohol advertising on public transport infrastructure, on or above public roads and related infrastructure, and within 150 metres of schools.

The Bill further amends the Transport Integration Act 2010 to introduce a public health principle, which includes consideration of the public health risks associated with alcohol advertising.

Consultation with the First Peoples' Assembly of Gellung Warl (Section 66(3)(a)–(c))

Due to the recent establishment of the First Peoples' Assembly of Gellung Warl, it was not possible to give the First Peoples' Assembly the opportunity to advise on the Bill or for them to otherwise make representations about the effect of the Bill on First Peoples.

Compatibility of the Bill with the objects in section 66(3)(d) of the Statewide Treaty Act 2025

In my opinion the Bill is compatible with the objects in section 66(3)(d) of the Treaty Act:

- advancing the inherent rights and self-determination of First Peoples;
- addressing the unacceptable disadvantage inflicted on First Peoples by the historic wrongs and ongoing injustices of colonisation; and
- ensuring the equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by First Peoples.

Advancing the inherent rights and self-determination of First Peoples (section 66(3)(d)(i))

In my opinion, the Bill is compatible with this object.

The Bill does not establish, remove or alter any rights, functions or institutions specific to First Peoples. It does not alter arrangements relating to First Peoples' governance, culture, lands, waters or decision-making authority.

However, the Bill's overarching objective of reducing alcohol-related harm and strengthening public health protections may support the capacity of First Peoples, communities and organisations to exercise self-determination by reducing barriers to health, wellbeing and community participation caused by alcohol-related harm.

To the extent that the Bill influences the social determinants of health and community wellbeing, it may support conditions that enable First Peoples to exercise their rights and self-determination more effectively.

Addressing the unacceptable disadvantage inflicted on First Peoples by the historic wrongs and ongoing injustices of colonisation

In my opinion, the Bill is compatible with this object.

Alcohol-related harm has been recognised as contributing to a range of adverse health, social and economic outcomes across Victoria. Although these harms affect all Victorians, First Peoples continue to experience disproportionate burdens arising from intergenerational trauma, social disadvantage and the ongoing effects of colonisation.

The Bill seeks to reduce alcohol-related harm through population-wide measures directed at the supply, promotion and consumption of alcohol. These measures include reforms that prioritise prevention of harm within the liquor regulatory framework.

While the Bill is not targeted specifically at First Peoples, it is reasonably expected that measures which reduce alcohol-related harms may contribute to addressing factors associated with ongoing structural disadvantage experienced by First Peoples.

Ensuring the equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by First Peoples

In my opinion, the Bill is compatible with this object. The Bill does not establish different rights, obligations or enforcement powers on First Peoples, but instead applies them uniformly across the community.

The reforms may support the equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by reducing alcohol-related harm and promoting health and wellbeing through a stronger public health focus.

While the Bill restricts certain commercial activities relating to the advertising, supply and delivery of alcohol, these measures apply equally to all relevant regulated entities.

Several measures in the Bill may advance the equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by First Peoples. In particular:

- the inclusion of harm prevention as the paramount object of the liquor regulatory framework promotes protection of life, health and wellbeing;
- the recognition of sexual violence within the statutory definition of harm reflects the significant impact of alcohol-related violence on individuals, families and communities;

I acknowledge that First Peoples may experience the impacts of alcohol regulation differently due to the continuing effects of colonisation. However, the Bill does not create new enforcement powers, criminal sanctions or regulatory mechanisms that specifically increase state intervention in the lives of First Peoples. Rather, the reforms are directed toward reducing population-wide harms associated with the sale, promotion and consumption of alcohol.

For the reasons set out above, in my opinion the Bill is compatible with the objects specified in section 66(3)(d)(i) to (iii) of the Statewide Treaty Act 2025.

Second reading

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:57): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

I rise to speak on the Liquor Control Reform and Other Acts Amendment (Reducing Alcohol-Related Harms) Bill 2026. At the outset I want to acknowledge all of those who have contributed to this bill, particularly those individuals and families with lived experience, advocacy groups, health experts and my staff, who have put a lot of time and effort into this, particularly Jasper Lees. I also want to acknowledge the work of my colleague Dr Tim Read, as a long-time advocate for alcohol reform.

From religious ceremonies to a toast at a wedding, alcohol has been an important part of human societies for thousands of years. For thousands of years it has been deeply ingrained in many parts of our social and cultural lives and something many people enjoy.

What has changed over time, particularly in the last 30 years, is the mass availability of alcohol, and the role of big liquor corporations. In 1995, 10 of the world's biggest spirits, wine and beer producers formed the International Centre for Alcohol Policies, which is now known as the International Alliance for Responsible Drinking, or IARD. This was a significant development and initiated a global effort to coordinate political activities.

They worked closely with the tobacco industry, sharing strategies and funding, and adopting their playbook to avoid public health regulation or measures that would reduce alcohol consumption.

These tactics are still being used today. They include political donations and lobbying to resist public health policies; sports and cultural sponsorship; aggressive marketing and advertising; low pricing and high availability. They run responsible drinking campaigns to individualise responsibility for alcohol control and avoid corporate regulation. And of course they promote alcohol as part of a healthy lifestyle. While it may be hard to believe now, this was also the case for tobacco prior to major public health campaigns.

I enjoy the odd drink myself, but I do so without any notions that it's good for me. Many people still believe now debunked data that showed that a glass of wine with dinner was actually more beneficial to health than abstinence – the so-called J-shaped curve. It was something I was actually taught at medical school and for a long time subscribed to that view. But the studies behind this have long since been disproven due to serious methodological flaws – and most major health guidelines now state that the safest level of alcohol for health is none. But the big alcohol industry still promotes that J-shaped curve, framing drinking as a part of a balanced, healthy lifestyle.

In 2009, Professor David Nutt, the UK government's chief drug adviser, was abruptly sacked. His crime? Claiming that cannabis, ecstasy and LSD were less dangerous than alcohol, in particular when you consider the broader harms to society. That position has since gone on to be demonstrated time and time again in study after study showing that alcohol-related harms, both individual and more broadly, are by far and away greater than any other drug, licit or illicit.

Part of the reason for this is related to the properties of alcohol itself – including its inherent toxicity, its addictive properties, the effects on the brain – but it is also because alcohol is so widely used. Over three-quarters of Australians drink alcohol. And while many people consume alcohol infrequently or within the recommended guidelines, 33 per cent of adults consume alcohol at levels that put their

long-term health at risk, and 25 per cent of people, particularly young people, drink amounts in a single session that put them at risk of acute injury or death. I mean, these are staggering statistics.

Alcohol is a leading cause of preventable death in Australia. According to the latest data, 1765 deaths were directly caused by alcohol – around 90 per cent due to chronic heavy alcohol use and conditions like alcoholic liver cirrhosis, and 10 per cent due to acute alcohol poisoning or overdose. However, it is linked to a far greater burden of morbidity and mortality. It is well established that alcohol is a carcinogen, with strong links to many cancers, including bowel, mouth, throat and stomach cancers, breast and liver cancers. It is also linked to cardiovascular disease, dementia, osteoporosis, depression, anxiety, and many other conditions. It is a significant contributor to road trauma and death, accidents and falls, suicide, and is frequently a factor in violent assaults. Studies that have attempted to capture all of this estimate that alcohol-related deaths are more likely to be over 9000 per year, placing it in the top five causes of death in Australia.

But the harms are much greater than simply individual. Last year La Trobe University launched a landmark study right here in the Victorian Parliament, *Alcohol's Harm to Others in Australia: Patterns, Costs, Disparities and Precipitants*. Over six years data was compiled and analysed to understand the health, social and economic burden of alcohol harm beyond the individual consumer. Its findings should be a huge wake-up call. Around half of Australians have been negatively impacted by the alcohol use of others.

Of all police-reported family and domestic violence incidents, alcohol was involved in 47 per cent of cases, largely by perpetrators. In 2023 Victoria Police responded to 94,170 family violence incidents, which shows the scale of harm where alcohol was a contributing factor. While alcohol is never an excuse for violence, its role as a contributor must be acknowledged. And over 17 per cent of parents and caregivers reported harm to children from someone else's alcohol use.

In 2021 alone, the economic cost of the harms from others' drinking was estimated at \$34.3 billion. This includes \$81.8 million in healthcare costs, including assaults and road trauma, \$18.42 million in premature deaths, \$10.5 billion in informal caregiving, \$21.15 billion in loss of quality of life, and \$149 million in social services, as well as \$1.476 billion in loss of productivity. Again, staggering figures. The scale of harm is undeniable. Yet the response of policymakers is completely discordant and reflects the power of the alcohol lobby and their ability to deflect attention from this staggering problem.

While regulations were already inadequate, in a digital age the way alcohol is marketed and sold has totally outpaced our Liquor Act and regulatory controls. The current liquor laws in Victoria were largely designed for traditional 'bricks and mortar' premises like pubs, clubs and bottle shops. In these venues there are some safeguards in the form of physical oversight, regulated trading hours, and face-to-face service requirements. Today, alcohol can be purchased via apps or websites and delivered, with minimal safeguards.

Online alcohol sales have almost quadrupled over the past decade, meaning the current laws have fallen out of step. In effect, every smartphone has become a bottle shop. Alcohol companies are engaging in predatory marketing practices online that are greatly exacerbating already unacceptably high alcohol-related harms in our communities. Increasingly, marketing online – on social media platforms and elsewhere – is taking advantage of people's data to target ads to those who are already vulnerable to drinking harms. This includes things like direct targeting of people who have already ordered significant amounts of alcohol online and therefore are more likely to be at risk of problematic use. Or even more sinisterly, those who have used search engines to find information about alcohol detox programs. Their ads ramp up over certain times of year – summer, sporting events and other holidays – and they use push notifications and so-called 'specials offers' to prompt people to buy more. They include direct click-to-buy links, usually through delivery services, which can deliver alcohol to the person's home in under 15 minutes, with few checks or requirements enforced. This is very different to a physical venue, where there are responsible service of alcohol requirements, including

ID checks, laws against selling alcohol to someone who appears to be intoxicated and laws against selling alcohol to someone who is under-age.

This isn't just a theoretical problem. The cost is very real and very human. In 2023 Kathleen Arnold was, tragically, found dead in her Heidelberg home as a result of alcohol poisoning. She was just 30 years old. The coroner's investigation into her death found that she had bought 319 alcohol-based products via delivery services in the six months before her death. The coroner recommended a curfew on alcohol deliveries and a 2-hour delay between orders.

The coroner's recommendations mirror similar findings handed down by the rapid review of prevention approaches to end gender-based violence – set up in response to the public outcry over an alarming number of domestic homicides two years ago. As part of the review, it identified evidence-based approaches to gender-based violence and explicitly highlights alcohol's role. This was reinforced in the South Australian Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence in 2025. Both found unprecedented growth in alcohol availability, including extended online delivery hours, is statistically linked to increased alcohol-related violence.

At national cabinet in 2024, following the rapid review, recommendations were made for state governments to strengthen alcohol laws with respect to online alcohol sales and delivery timeframes, as well as advertising. Specifically, the recommendations called for changes to: regulatory objectives, by adding clear aims to prevent gender-based violence to state and territory liquor laws alongside existing harm reduction rules; availability limits, by restricting physical outlet density and trading hours, especially in locations prone to high risk; delivery controls, by strengthening rules on online sales and delivery timeframes to limit late-night access; and advertising curbs, by restricting alcohol marketing and advertising, particularly during major sporting events.

While each state and territory agreed at national cabinet to review their liquor laws in line with the review's recommendations, only South Australia has commenced this process so far, with draft legislation released last year but then put on hold due to pushback from industry. Two years down the track, and countless deaths later, there has been no movement at all from the Victorian government. Families, frontline services and advocates for reform have tried meetings, they've tried letters, they've tried events and awareness campaigns. We have tried asking questions in Parliament to the minister. And yet nothing. So we've decided to write the bill ourselves. The Greens' bill seeks to take action where the Victorian Labor government hasn't. Our bill amends the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998 and the Transport Integration Act 2010 to regulate the online sale and delivery of alcohol and regulate alcohol advertising with the purpose of minimising alcohol-related harms, particularly domestic and intimate partner violence.

The bill has four main areas of reform. First, it amends the purpose and objective of the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998 to include the promotion of responsible consumption of liquor and the minimisation of alcohol-related harm as the paramount purpose and objective of the act. To support this new purpose the bill amends the definition of 'harm' in section 3(1) of the Liquor Control Reform Act 1998 to expressly include sexual violence. This amendment recognises the significant relationship between alcohol misuse and incidents of sexual violence and ensures that this form of harm is specifically considered in the administration and interpretation of the bill. Second, the bill amends a number of liquor licence conditions for venues that offer online delivery of alcohol. The first is that delivery of alcohol to consumers would be limited to between 10 am and 10 pm. Delivery outside of this window would be a breach of licence. The second is the introduction of a 2-hour cool-down period between ordering the alcohol and delivery to the consumer. Third, the bill significantly expands restrictions on static alcohol advertising by: prohibiting static alcohol advertising on public transport infrastructure; prohibiting static alcohol advertising on or above public roads, road infrastructure and road reserves; and retains existing restrictions near schools; as well as updating exemptions applying to certain vehicle advertising. Finally, the bill inserts a new public health principle into the Transport Integration Act 2010. The new principle requires that consideration be given to the promotion and protection of public health and specifically recognises the public health risks associated with alcohol advertising.

The amendment is intended to ensure that transport planning, management and infrastructure decisions take account of public health considerations relating to alcohol exposure and promotion.

Given the scale of the problem, and the extraordinary power and influence of the alcohol industry, these changes may seem relatively minor. But they would make a meaningful difference in reducing some of the alcohol-related harm our communities are currently experiencing. The fact that they haven't been made yet by this government says everything you need to know about their priorities.

The Greens are proud to table this bill today and hope it marks a step forward in reducing alcohol-related harm in Victoria.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:11): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for two weeks.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for two weeks.

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

Statement of charter compatibility

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (10:12): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*, I make this Statement of Compatibility with respect to the *Planning and Environment Amendment (Agricultural Land and Food Security) Bill 2026*.

In my opinion, the Bill is compatible with the human rights protected by the Charter.

Overview of the Bill

The Bill amends the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the *Environment Effects Act 1978* to strengthen the consideration of agricultural land and food security within Victoria's planning and environmental assessment framework.

The Bill establishes a framework for identifying Strategic Agricultural Land, requires Agricultural Land Impact Assessments for prescribed developments, strengthens consultation and decision-making processes through the inclusion of agricultural expertise, introduces rehabilitation obligations and bonds for prescribed developments, and enhances transparency through public reporting and registers.

The Bill does not prohibit development on agricultural land. Rather, it establishes additional procedural requirements to ensure agricultural impacts are appropriately assessed and considered in planning decisions.

Human Rights Engaged

Property Rights – Section 20

The Bill may engage the right to property under section 20 of the Charter because it introduces additional planning considerations that may affect decisions relating to the use and development of privately owned agricultural land.

However, the Bill does not authorise the compulsory acquisition of property, extinguish existing property rights or prevent lawful use of land. Instead, it strengthens existing planning processes by requiring agricultural impacts to be assessed and considered before planning decisions are made.

Any effect on property rights is indirect and occurs through the operation of Victoria's existing planning framework. The Bill does not alter existing rights of compensation or existing appeal mechanisms.

Accordingly, any limitation on property rights is reasonable, proportionate and justified having regard to the legitimate objective of protecting Victoria's long-term agricultural capability and supporting informed planning decision-making.

Fair Hearing – Section 24

The Bill promotes the right to a fair hearing by improving transparency and procedural fairness within planning processes.

Requirements for Agricultural Land Impact Assessments, consultation with Agriculture Victoria, publication of statements of reasons, public registers and annual reporting enhance accountability and ensure decisions affecting agricultural land are supported by appropriate evidence.

These measures improve, rather than limit, procedural fairness.

Freedom of Expression – Section 15

The Bill supports public participation in planning processes by increasing the availability of information relating to developments affecting agricultural land.

The publication of registers, reports and statements of reasons promotes transparency and assists members of the public to participate in planning processes on an informed basis.

Conclusion

The Bill strengthens the quality, transparency and accountability of planning and environmental assessment processes affecting agricultural land.

To the extent that any Charter rights are engaged, any limitation is reasonable, demonstrably justified and proportionate to the legitimate objective of protecting Victoria's long-term agricultural capability and ensuring planning decisions are informed by appropriate agricultural expertise.

Accordingly, in my opinion, the *Planning and Environment Amendment (Agricultural Land and Food Security) Bill 2026* is compatible with the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*.

Melina Bath MP

Shadow Minister for Public Land Management

Statement of treaty compatibility

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (10:12): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Statewide Treaty Act 2025:

In accordance with section 66 of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025*, I table a statement of Treaty compatibility for the Agricultural Land and Food Security Bill 2026.

In my opinion, the Bill is compatible with the matters set out in section 66(3)(d) of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025*. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

Overview of the Bill

The purpose of the Agricultural Land and Food Security Bill 2026 is to provide greater recognition and protection of Victoria's agricultural land and long-term food security in relevant land-use and development decisions.

The Bill provides a framework for consideration of the agricultural capability and significance of land and the potential impacts of prescribed developments on agricultural production and food security.

The Bill also provides for measures relating to the rehabilitation of agricultural land affected by prescribed developments and financial security associated with relevant rehabilitation obligations.

Consultation with the First Peoples' Assembly of Gellung Warl

The First Peoples' Assembly of Gellung Warl was not given an opportunity to advise on the Bill and the Assembly has not otherwise made representations about the effect of the Bill on First Peoples.

Compatibility of the Bill with each of the objects in section 66(3)(d) of the Statewide Treaty Act 2025

I have considered whether the Bill is compatible with the objects in section 66(3)(d) of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025* of:

- advancing the inherent rights and self-determination of First Peoples;
- addressing the unacceptable disadvantage inflicted on First Peoples by the historic wrongs and ongoing injustices of colonisation; and
- ensuring the equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by First Peoples.

Advancing the inherent rights and self-determination of First Peoples

The Bill establishes generally applicable requirements relating to the consideration and protection of agricultural land and food security. The Bill does not distinguish between First Peoples and other Victorians and does not alter or limit the existing rights or interests of First Peoples.

In my opinion, the Bill does not adversely affect the object specified in section 66(3)(d)(i) of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025* and is therefore compatible with this object.

Addressing unacceptable disadvantage inflicted on First Peoples

The Bill applies generally to agricultural land and prescribed developments and does not impose any differential requirement or restriction on First Peoples.

In my opinion, the Bill does not adversely affect the object specified in section 66(3)(d)(ii) of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025* and is therefore compatible with this object.

Ensuring the equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by First Peoples

The Bill does not limit the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by First Peoples. The protections and requirements established by the Bill apply without distinction on the basis of whether land is owned, occupied or used by First Peoples or other Victorians.

In my opinion, the Bill does not adversely affect the object specified in section 66(3)(d)(iii) of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025* and is therefore compatible with this object.

Melina Bath MP

Member for Eastern Victoria Region

Second reading

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (10:12): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

In moving the Planning and Environment Amendment (Agricultural Land and Food Security) Bill 2026 I am very proud to not only read this but to support our Shadow Minister for Agriculture Emma Kealy and the Liberals and Nationals in bringing this forward to this house.

Victoria is Australia's largest agricultural producing state, accounting for approximately 28 per cent of Australia's gross value of agricultural production, with a farm gate value of around \$22 billion each year. Our state is home to more than 21,300 farming businesses, representing around one-quarter of all farming enterprises in Australia. Together they produce the fantastic food and fibre that feed and clothe millions of people, generate billions of dollars in exports and underpin one of Victoria's most important industries. But agriculture's contribution extends well beyond the farm gate.

This sector supports thousands of jobs across transport and logistics, food processing, manufacturing, agricultural technology, research, science and innovation. It is the economic backbone of many of our regional communities and a vital driver of investment, employment and prosperity across our state.

Farmers are also the custodians of our landscape. Every day they manage our soils. They care for our waterways. They protect biodiversity and safeguard the natural assets for future generations that can depend upon them. They carry the responsibility of producing the food and fibre the world needs while ensuring the land remains productive for those who come after them.

That is why this bill is important. This bill is about protecting capability, not preventing opportunity. It recognises that Victoria's most strategic agricultural land should be protected, while ensuring development elsewhere only proceeds where our long-term agricultural capability can be maintained. Yet despite agriculture's enormous contribution to our economy and our communities, agricultural land receives surprisingly little recognition within Victoria's planning system.

When major projects are assessed, we rightly consider biodiversity, cultural heritage and native vegetation as well as landscape values and environmental impact. But too often, agriculture is treated simply as another land use rather than a strategic asset that underpins food security, regional economies and export industries.

This bill seeks to change that. Its purpose is straightforward. It is not to prohibit development. Its purpose is to ensure that when decisions are made that affect agricultural land, those decisions are informed by agricultural expertise and are made transparently, consistently and with proper regard for Victoria's long-term agricultural capability.

Agriculture is unlike almost any other industry. We cannot manufacture more high-quality agricultural land. Once productive land is unnecessarily fragmented, sterilised or permanently degraded, its productive capacity may never be fully restored. That is why decisions affecting agricultural land deserve careful, informed and transparent consideration.

This bill seeks to establish a new framework within the Planning and Environment Act to ensure agriculture is properly recognised within those planning decisions.

It establishes clear objectives recognising the importance of agricultural land and food security. It provides for identification of strategic agricultural land. It requires decision-makers to give significant weight to protecting that land.

It introduces agricultural land impact assessments for prescribed developments. It requires consultation with Agriculture Victoria before significant decisions affecting agricultural land are made. It requires agricultural expertise to be represented on advisory committees and Environment Effects Act inquiry panels. It is very important to have that local agricultural expertise. It strengthens rehabilitation obligations through mandatory rehabilitation in terms of bonds and ongoing monitoring. And it establishes a public register and annual reporting requirements so Victorians can better understand the cumulative impact of development on agricultural land.

These are practical reforms. They improve decision-making. They improve transparency. They improve accountability.

Importantly, this bill does not presume every proposal should be refused. Nor does it elevate agriculture above every other public interest. Rather, it ensures agricultural impacts are properly understood, properly assessed and properly weighed alongside all other relevant considerations.

Projects that can coexist with agriculture should be able to demonstrate that they can do so responsibly. Projects that permanently reduce Victoria's agricultural capability should be required to justify those impacts and why they are in the broader public interest.

Victoria faces increasing pressure on agricultural land. Urban growth. Renewable energy generation. Electricity transmission. Extractive industries. Major infrastructure. Each of these developments may be necessary. But each also has the potential to permanently alter productive farming landscapes. As these pressures increase, our planning system must evolve to ensure that agriculture is no longer the forgotten consideration.

Regional communities deserve confidence that agricultural expertise will be at the table when decisions affecting their livelihoods are made. Farmers deserve confidence that the long-term productive capacity of their land will be properly considered. Developers deserve certainty about the information expected of them and the standards they will be required to meet. And government deserves access to better information upon which to make balanced decisions. This bill provides that framework.

Ultimately, this bill asks a simple question. Not whether Victoria should choose between agriculture and development. But whether development can occur without compromising our long-term agricultural capability. The Liberals and Nationals believe it can.

We need to see, and we should be able to see, that we can protect Victoria's most strategic agricultural land. We can support responsible development in appropriate locations. We can strengthen rehabilitation, improve transparency and ensure agricultural expertise informs major planning decisions. And we can leave future generations with a planning system that values both economic opportunity and productive capacity of the land that sustains us.

I commend the bill to the house.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:21): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for two weeks.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for two weeks.

Production of documents

Box Hill brickworks site

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:21): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes that:
 - (a) the Box Hill brickworks site, disused for 40 years, was never contemplated for residential use under the Whitehorse planning scheme, given its contamination;
 - (b) the most recent Environment Protection Authority report identifies buried benzo(a)pyrene, a known carcinogen, and advises against development without remediation;
 - (c) the Allan government rezoned the site in 2025 for high-rise residential development at substantially increased heights, now gazetted;
 - (d) no study demonstrating site safety has been released, nor the rezoning's basis explained;
- (2) in accordance with standing order 10.01, requires the Leader of the Government to table in the Council, within 14 days of the house agreeing to this resolution, all documents created since 1 January 2022, including briefs, correspondence, advice, reports, assessments and minutes, held by the minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Planning, Suburban Rail Loop Authority, Department of Transport and Planning or Environment Protection Authority, relating to:
 - (a) the decision to rezone the site for residential use and its justification;
 - (b) any preliminary risk screen assessment, environmental audit, audit overlay assessment or other contamination or human-health assessment relied on in that decision, under the Environment Protection Act 2017 or otherwise;
 - (c) any advice on whether the rezoning complied with planning, environmental and due-process requirements, including any need for updated assessment;
 - (d) any communication between those bodies or ministers on the site's residential safety; and
 - (e) any communication, negotiation or agreement with the landowner, Phileo or associated entities, concerning the rezoning or built form.

I am pleased to speak to this short-form documents motion 1554 in which I am seeking documents regarding the rezoning of the Box Hill brickworks from unusable, contaminated landfill space to suddenly being suitable for high-density high-rise apartments. Briefly on the history of this, from 1880 to about 1990, it was an open-cut mine used for excavating clay and other things to make bricks. At that point it was closed and used as landfill for about 10 years. That landfill, as community memory allows, was pretty unregulated. There were all sorts of things that went into that landfill. When it was finally closed and there was some environmental testing done, it was found that the only safe thing to do was to put a clay cap across the entirety of the site, lock it in and put in some ventilation methods to ventilate methane and other gases that were percolating below. The most recent EPA report in 2019 said there are carcinogens in the groundwater – benzo(a)pyrene in particular. There is a risk of leaching groundwater into various areas.

The community itself has always held that in due course this should become open space because that is the traditional Melbourne solution to contaminated landfill sites: to make them parkland. If you put it in the context of Box Hill, where we have extraordinary growth in the population – in fact the population of that suburb alone is due to double with no additional open space being provided – then it seems absolutely the most perfect solution.

It was a shock to many when the government and the Suburban Rail Loop Authority decided that they would rezone this out of the blue into high-density high-rise housing. This is despite copious amounts of local contributions on why this should not be so but also engineering contributions saying that this will disturb the contaminated soil below in undesirable ways. You would have to do extraordinary amounts of engineering to make it safe to the local streets. I give credit also to the local group, the Box Hill Brickworks Parkland Association, who have been instrumental in bringing this to the attention of the community and identifying the fact that the need for passive open space is not a luxury in a growing

high-density area, which Box Hill is becoming. It is essential for health and recreation and for young people to have somewhere to move. There are already five 50-storey towers planned just streets away from this site, which will have no other open space.

The mystery of how it has suddenly been rezoned has been raised. I have raised it several times in this chamber, asking, 'Where is the new environmental study that says this is safe?' Even the engineering report says you could not put residences on the ground floor because of the gas risk. You could only have residences from the first storey upwards. There is obviously an inherent risk, but there has been no new environmental study. How this has come about is a mystery to the community. It is contrary to all logic, so something is up. Therefore I would like to see the documents on how this rezoning came about. What was the correspondence with the owner? What was the correspondence within the ministerial group? What was the decision-making process that took place to allow this to be arbitrarily – it seems arbitrary – rezoned to high density against every bit of logic that we see and every community wish as well?

I will pre-empt slightly here as well: there cannot be any objection to the production of these on the basis of them being commercial in confidence, because there has been no commercial transaction. There is nothing commercial in it; this is a rezoning. It would be highly suspicious if commercial in confidence was raised as a reason to not produce these documents, because that would suggest that the rezoning was done under some sort of financial deal, against environmental requirements. It would be equally suspicious if cabinet in confidence was called on to stop these documents being produced, because surely the rezoning of a piece of derelict land in the middle of an urban area is not something that requires cabinet debate unless there is something more to the story that is not being told to the people of Box Hill.

I will just sum up by saying that I am not just saying that this land should be open parkland; I am saying this land must be open parkland. It must be for the future citizens of Box Hill. This is an intergenerational decision that is going to be made, and if any other use of this land is going to take place, then it is absolutely a requirement that the community have transparency on how this came about. What was the decision-making process? What was the quid pro quo? What was the transaction? What were the motivations? I think the people of Box Hill deserve nothing less. I conclude by saying the people of Box Hill will also be expressing their demand for this to be open space at a community rally run by the Box Hill Brickworks Parkland Association on Sunday 23 August at 1:30 pm at Surrey Dive. We are expecting and hoping for a large community turnout for that event.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:27): I rise to make a contribution on Mr Welch's motion in regard to the Box Hill brickworks site. This is a documents motion, and as per convention, the government does not oppose documents motions. But having sat here and listened to the contribution of Mr Welch and also having read the motion, it should come as no surprise to anybody in this chamber that of course it is riddled with misinformation and poor facts. I just want to address some of the misinformation in this. What is important to note – and again, government speakers on this side have 5 minutes to respond to a documents motion, so we get gagged and nobbled from giving this a proper response, but that is the want of this chamber and the treatment of government by the people in this chamber. Nevertheless, the Box Hill brickworks site has been identified via precinct planning, and it will be the catalyst for building thousands of new homes within walking distance of new stations in Cheltenham, Clayton, Monash, Glen Waverley, Burwood and Box Hill because that is what people have told us they want. They want affordable homes within walking distance of public transport.

After several years of planning, consultation and review, the Minister for Planning has approved the planning scheme amendments for SRL East stations. We have had more than 10,000 responses and submissions, and the feedback has actually helped shape the final planning controls and structures. The privately owned former Box Hill brickworks site has been identified as a strategic site in the SRL structure plan for Box Hill because of its size and location and its potential to deliver housing, employment and community benefits, which is why we want to make sure we get it right.

Mr Welch wants to talk about what the government has done, but what he has failed to address in his motion is that Whitehorse City Council rezoned the site for future residential use in 2006, identifying it as a strategic redevelopment site.

Richard Welch interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: There you go. Let us not talk about that. He does not want to talk about what Whitehorse council did. But this is not the first time that Mr Welch has blatantly and unashamedly misled this place. He says council never contemplated residential use at this site – they did. I may have missed any announcement this morning, but I cannot see where Mr Welch or the Liberals have made any announcement about their plans and whether they would acquire the site. I have been advised by the Suburban Rail Loop Authority that the cost of acquiring this site along with the necessary remediation works would exceed \$200 million. I hear nothing from those opposite other than stirring up community concern and fearmongering, but there has been no announcement from them about what they might do. If they claim they want to make this site open parkland, then they should stump up the \$200 million to make it happen.

I am telling you right now what the EPA has been telling us. Whoever acquires this site and whatever happens to it, of course there will have to be remediation works. Any change to the use of the Box Hill brickworks will require the soil conditions to be suitable for use. For residential development the soil must be remediated to meet human health guidelines and to the satisfaction of an EPA-accredited environmental auditor. This is standard practice, and it has been done across several landfill and industrial sites across Victoria and Australia, including the Epping renewal site, the Highett Gasworks, Arden precinct, Fishermans Bend, Docklands, Cairnlea estate and Carlton United Breweries on Swanston Street, just to name a few. These are examples of urban renewal with residential, commercial and employment outcomes that show that changes in land use can be done safely over former landfills, gasworks and other former industrial sites if done appropriately, properly and thoroughly.

We have been clear with the public throughout the structure planning process on how this site could enhance the broader community. But as I said – I will go back to my earlier comments – it is time for the Liberal Party to come clean. I have not seen any announcement. Mr Welch and the Liberals might talk about what they think should happen, but how about they stump up with an announcement of \$200 million? How about it? No. All they are interested in doing is frightening the community, scaremongering and spreading misinformation. We know that people want homes closer to public transport, but how are those opposite going to achieve that if they are going to cut \$40 billion from the budget in their costings? The acquisition of the Box Hill brickworks site does not appear to be part of any announcement they have made yet. We know all we get from those opposite is more politics, no substance and just more garbage. They are happy to sit on the sidelines and use misinformation as fearmongering, but they have no interest in actual delivery and are just consistently and continuously whipping up fear.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (10:32): I rise to strongly support motion 1554 brought by Mr Welch. It is a motion that is in two parts. It is a motion that first looks at the details of the Box Hill brickworks and reprises some of its history and some of the key matters around it: the 40-year history as a disused site; the EPA report; the Allan Labor government's extraordinary rezoning for high-rise high-density development without any community support; and the fact that there has been no study demonstrating site safety and nor has the basis for rezoning ever been explained.

The second part of the motion is a pure documents order. It seeks documents, correspondence, briefs, advice, reports and other matters held by the minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, the Minister for Planning, the Suburban Rail Loop Authority, the Department of Transport and Planning and the Environment Protection Authority Victoria. These documents relate to the decision to rezone it – and this extraordinary rezoning has never been properly explained; the minister has done this behind closed doors – and whether there has been any risk-screening that looked closely at the human health risks and impacts. It is very clear, given the history of this site, that these risks are material and need to be

dealt with properly, professionally and with high scientific standards. I do not think anyone would disagree with that, although the government appears to be happy to put housing on the site without undertaking these steps. That is how it appears. The motion seeks advice on whether the rezoning complied with planning, environmental and due process requirements; any communication between the various bodies or ministers on the site's residential safety; and any communication, negotiation or agreement with the landowner Phileo or associated entities concerning the rezoning or built form.

We know we need more housing capacity, but running with that is a need to have proper infrastructure. Infrastructure is transport infrastructure. It is education infrastructure, it is health infrastructure and it is parkland and open space. If you are going to whack huge numbers of new people into a municipality, if you are going to force them into sites in around the Suburban Rail Loop, if you are going to force them into other sites in the City of Whitehorse, or neighbouring municipalities, you will need more parkland and you will need more ovals. Where will the children play? Where will people recreate? These are legitimate questions. We say the government has misunderstood the importance of this site. It is a historic opportunity to get more contiguous open space in a really strategic location. So why would we not proceed with that direction? And why would we not thereby open up these documents to see how the government's decision-making has gone so wrong, how the decision-making has gone astray? I do not agree with this centralised decision-making. I think the City of Whitehorse should have a central role in this rather than the Minister for Planning. I understand that there are statewide implications to every major development, but the City of Whitehorse should be the primary planning authority on the future of the City of Whitehorse. It should reflect the community's views, and it should work with the local community.

Mr Welch has worked hard on this issue, and I support his activities. Indeed I have had a number of approaches from the City of Whitehorse and from constituents in and near the City of Whitehorse, who have got quite a lot to say about these matters. They actually want the open space. They do not want dense towers on this location. As I say, given the neighbouring density that is planned and the neighbouring proposals that the government has for intense high-rise development, actually make this strategic site of open space even more important. So we say: let us take a longer term view here. Let us look at this as something that is part of the future.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:37): I rise on behalf of my Greens colleagues to contribute to today's production of documents motion regarding the Box Hill brickworks site. This is a site that has garnered a lot of interest in this part of my electorate, out in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne in and around Box Hill, an area that has a lot of density that has built up over the years. It is a really vibrant community. I feel really proud to represent this part of Melbourne. It is home, for example, to the largest Chinese diaspora community in the country. It is a really amazing place to be. Any time you can get out there, I encourage everyone to go down. There are some amazing things to see down in Box Hill.

This documents motion seeks documents relating to decisions regarding rezoning of the site at the brickworks site for residential use and what that process was. It seeks documents around any preliminary risk screening assessment, environmental audits, audit overlays or other contamination or human health assessments relied on in and around these decisions, whether that is through the Environment Protection Act 2017 or otherwise, as well as advice on whether decisions around zoning and rezoning have complied here with planning, environmental and due process requirements. Is there a need for further updates to those assessments as well as communications between those bodies or ministers around things like the site safety, as well as broader communication or negotiation with the landowner or associated bodies?

The Greens are really proud to help secure these documents. I think it can put to bed a lot of concerns that may be out there around the processes that have been undertaken regarding use of this site, and it is a really important site if you factor in how much density there is in the area. It is a really important opportunity to make sure we get the use of the site right. You can see it on the map currently. It is a

really large amount of space. You want to make sure that the community are involved and supportive of the decisions that are made with respect to that land.

The motion does also talk about the fact that this is a site that was disused for 40 years. It notes the contamination of the site, the presence of particular carcinogens in and around the site and that there has been advice given to government regarding the need for remediation of the site prior to any development. That has been mentioned by government contributions here today, noting of course the government's decision, particularly in and around development of the Suburban Rail Loop, that this is intended for residential development. The Greens, I and my colleagues, have been clear from the beginning, in talking with the community who are behind this campaign and its origin, that we are supportive of a combination of open green space and genuinely affordable housing in and around this site. I think ultimately it should be the community that are in the steering position on what goes here, because as we see more density come across these parts of Melbourne, which are really amazing places like Box Hill, we have to make sure that people are given the open space that they deserve and that we have the amenity required to make sure that everyone has an optimal quality of life. These things should not be either-or.

In noting that, I want to acknowledge the work of my colleague down in Box Hill Aaron Qin, who is proud to be our Greens candidate for that state seat in the upcoming election. He is an amazing member of the local Chinese community down in that area and is seeking to represent the broader community in the Box Hill district at the upcoming election. He came to Australia as an international student to study nursing, and he has done an amazing job advocating for and representing community in this area.

Motion agreed to.

Data centres

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (10:42): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes that:
 - (a) the Victorian Labor government has publicly committed to aggressive investment in artificial intelligence (AI) data centre development across Victoria;
 - (b) Victoria's data centre energy demand has nearly doubled over the last 12 months to 187 megawatts and some estimates predict data centres could consume 8 per cent of the state's electricity by 2030 and up to 19 per cent by 2050;
 - (c) there are at least 30 more data centres currently proposed for Victoria, which will consume 9 gigawatts of power, or the equivalent of 5 million to 7 million homes;
 - (d) the Climate Council forecasts that data centre growth will inflate Victoria's wholesale power prices as much as 23 per cent by 2035;
 - (e) the Climate Council also identified that the enormous electricity demands of AI data centres will threaten Victoria's net zero target by prolonging our reliance on burning coal and gas; and
- (2) requires the Leader of the Government, in accordance with standing order 10.01, to table in the Council, within four weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution, all modelling, including under different scenarios, and briefings that the government has received from departments and commissioned advice regarding data centres and the current and anticipated impact on wholesale and retail energy prices.

Labor is rolling out the red carpet for data centres without any safeguards to protect our energy system, water security, environment, community amenity or jobs. The threat to our energy system is one of the most pressing issues that needs to be addressed. We know that members of the government themselves are worried, and they are right to be worried. Data centres are huge industrial warehouses filled with servers and storage needed to process vast amounts of digital information required by tools like ChatGPT and Claude. Data centres, particularly hyperscale data centres that do things like AI training, house thousands of specialised chips called graphics processing units and are very energy intensive. There are over 40 operating in Victoria now, but this is expected to grow substantially, with over 30 new ones planned.

At the moment data centres in Victoria use about 2 per cent of the state's grid-supplied energy. Conservative estimates by Oxford Economics Australia predict AI data centre energy demands in Australia will more than quadruple by 2030. As AI data centres put increasing strain on the grid, there is a real risk the Labor government will keep dirty coal-fired power stations open for longer than planned to meet that demand. It is already happening. Our coal use is not declining despite more renewables coming online, in part due to the existing data centres. As things stand, most AI data centre electricity needs will not be met by additional renewable energy, regardless of the wishful greenwashed thinking of some Labor members. Consequently, the AI data centre boom represents a massive threat to Victoria's transition to clean and cheap renewable energy, unless the government urgently intervenes. Most AI data centres also produce their own climate emissions and use diesel generators and gas turbines to maintain a constant supply of energy in case the grid fails. Gas companies are jumping on board the AI data centre boom and are quietly joining the data centre lobby group Data Centres Australia. Given the Victorian Labor government's love of gas, the prospect of data centres setting up new gas-fired power plants is very real.

All of this not only puts our emission targets at risk and our energy grid under pressure but is going to drive up electricity prices. Because data centres draw substantial amounts of power continuously and their use is inflexible, this tightens the balance between supply and demand and raises market prices. The increased need for infrastructure – that is, the poles, wires and substations – adds to those prices, and the increased reliance on dirty, expensive fossil fuels driven by data centres further adds to this mix. This is not a theoretical risk. We only need to look overseas to see our potential future. In Ireland, for example, data centres use over 23 per cent of that country's energy, not dissimilar to predictions for Victoria over the next two decades. Over an eight-year period this data centre expansion has added the equivalent of over A\$580 to the average Irish household power bill. People are already struggling through an energy crisis, and this is only adding to household financial stress. It is predicted that data centres will add between a further A\$480 and over A\$1000 to the average Irish energy bill.

The Climate Council predicts that the next at least 30 new data centres currently proposed for Victoria will consume over 9 gigawatts of power. That is the equivalent of 5 million to 7 million homes. Just one data centre, the project proposed in Plumpton in Melton, would use more electricity than Victoria's largest coal-fired power station, Loy Yang A, can produce. That is incredible.

Knowing all of this, it would be incredibly negligent if the government did not do some of its own modelling before adopting a huge data centre growth and investment strategy. Surely they would want to have an idea of just how much power these data centres are going to need, what effect it is likely to have on our grid and what effect it is going to have on household bills. And given how volatile our energy markets are right now and the different unknowns, you would think they would want to model a range of different scenarios. Of course given past form, it would be entirely unsurprising if Labor have not actually done any of this, but I am pretty sure they have. That is why we are calling for the release of this modelling – because the public deserves to know what Labor know about how high energy bills are going to go because of their own reckless embrace of hyperscale data centres.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (10:46): Thank you so much for the opportunity to rise and make a contribution on this short-form docs motion brought to us by Dr Mansfield, and in making a contribution today can I just highlight, as is convention in this place, that the government will not oppose this documents motion. Certainly there has been so much movement and change with respect to artificial intelligence and data centres that it is hard to capture it in the time that I have, but I will just say that it is very clear to all that artificial intelligence is not just an emerging technology of the distant future, it is here, it is right now and it is already shaping how we live and how we work. Victoria is home to Australia's largest AI cluster, with 188 companies choosing to invest here in our state. The digital economy currently contributes more than \$36 billion to the state, supporting over 300,000 specialist jobs, which equates to about 30 per cent of Australia's tech workforce. Looking ahead, AI has the potential to generate up to \$30 billion for the Victorian economy over the next decade, which means thousands of new highly skilled jobs.

It is important to note that data centres are not new to our state. We already have nearly 60 of them operating in Victoria, which is new in the scale of the opportunity that is before us. Our government certainly deeply recognises that this vast opportunity must be managed with incredible responsibility. We welcome the recent statements made by the Prime Minister which noted that there is a need to embrace AI to create good-paying jobs, but we also need to ensure that clear, strong guardrails are established. To this end the Commonwealth government is undertaking critical work. They have established the office of artificial intelligence within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, which will oversee a national framework and legislation to govern large-scale AI data centres. They will continue to work closely with Commonwealth partners to ensure that this investment benefits Victorians, while managing any impact on our land, water and energy.

At a state level the government is proactively creating the artificial intelligence and digital economy portfolio to lead this important work, and can I acknowledge Anthony Carbines, who has taken on that role, which is of course supported by the \$5.5 million investment into the sustainable data centre action plan – a plan that will harness our state’s resources to unlock up to \$25 billion worth of projects through an evidence-based approach using transport, energy and water usage data to determine where these centres can be built sustainably.

We know that data centres have significant energy and cooling requirements. It has been discussed in this place a few times, which is exactly why renewables are key to this transition. We are backing the energy system that underpins the growth of data centres by restoring the SEC to publicly drive the renewable transition, keeping us on track for 65 per cent renewable generation by 2030 and 95 per cent by 2035. Crucially, it is worth noting – perhaps it was as recently as in the last couple of weeks – that the Commonwealth has issued a direction that data centres will need to provide additional renewable energy supply and cover the cost of doing so.

We are also protecting our natural resources. Before any approval is granted, water corporations must be satisfied that water security and supply can be met without negatively impacting local communities, utilising Victoria’s position as having the largest supply of class A recycled water in the country. Every single project must go through a rigorous assessment process under the Planning and Environment Act 1987, carefully evaluating potential environmental impacts such as noise, air pollution, traffic and fire risk.

We are also ensuring that Victorians are ready for the jobs this industry will create, because we need to make sure that the people who are being affected by this technology and using it every day are also the ones leading it. To make this happen we have invested over \$8 million into the digital jobs program, an AI career-conversion initiative that will upskill workers and safeguard jobs in at-risk industries. Can I just take a moment to acknowledge the former Minister for Skills and TAFE Gayle Tierney, who has done such incredible work with free TAFE, including the fact that free TAFE has coverage of some courses that will be fully subsidised, including the certificate III in information technology and the certificate IV in cybersecurity. These are important opportunities to make sure that Victoria can fully embrace the new tech that is coming very, very quickly and in fact in many cases is right here.

There is a comprehensive plan to strike the right balance. We are embracing the opportunities of digital innovation. We have recalibrated the cabinet to include a specific call-out for AI, artificial intelligence. We are also ensuring that we responsibly protect our environment, our energy grid and the communities we serve. That is why I am looking forward to this debate continuing in this place, in the knowledge that this is something that has been brought before us before, and I look forward to speaking on it again when it comes here. But as per convention, I will reaffirm to the chamber that the government will not oppose this documents motion that is before us. Again, I take the opportunity to thank Dr Mansfield for bringing it to our chamber.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (10:53): I am pleased to rise and strongly support Dr Mansfield’s motion today to bring forward documents relating to data centres and artificial

intelligence. I will not go through the top part of the motion – I will come to that in a minute – which lays out the situation as it were. But the second part of the motion, under standing order 10.01, requires tabling in the Council within four weeks of:

... all modelling, including under different scenarios, and briefings that the government has received from departments and commissioned advice regarding data centres and the current and anticipated impact on wholesale and retail energy prices.

The government in Victoria has dropped the ball on data centres. On one hand it does appear that there is no thoughtful, broad, overarching plan. On the alternate hand there is the fact that the government has approved data centres – controversial data centres – in record time without what I would regard as proper assessment. Proper assessment does mean proper planning assessment of impacts on local areas. It means environmental assessment. It means an understanding of the energy requirements and what the data centre may bring to that challenge and of issues around some other key inputs as well.

The one in Fishermans Bend, for example, was done in about 70 days. It was very short. I have read the report through – it is not a long read. What it looks like to me is a very shallow and inadequate assessment, and this seems to be the pattern that we are seeing with the government across the state. If they have commissioned modelling, the community should see it. If they have got briefings and inputs, the community should see them. We should know what they are working on. I do not think this government is working on a lot in this area. I think they are going by the seat of their pants. They have decided they like data centres and they want to sign up. We have no intrinsic opposition to data centres; we see them as an important part of the future economy. However, as with other things, they have got to be properly planned and thought through. That means processes which require checks and balances to make sure that communities are not overridden, and they require those input questions – energy principally – to be thoughtfully dealt with.

The Prime Minister has come forward with some big contributions. I might say that it troubles me, the idea that the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet would be undertaking planning processes and so forth. This does appear to me to be a grab for power from Canberra – from the centre – to insert the Department of Premier and Cabinet into all aspects of data centres, and that chills me, I might say. I understand that some harmonisation of arrangements might be a good idea and might have some relevance, but that is a different thing from an imposition and an overreach by the Prime Minister, which I think is what has occurred here.

I am going to just quote briefly from a brief that has been provided to me by Clayton Utz. It is actually a very useful one. It states:

What are the challenges?

- Fragmented state-by-state policy landscape
- New South Wales parliamentary inquiry creating near-term investment uncertainty

And we will certainly be watching that New South Wales inquiry quite closely. And the brief goes on:

- PM's "net generators not net users speech" – legal obligation for large-scale DCs to underwrite new renewable generation ...

It is important to understand the reliability requirements for data centres – 99.999 per cent. The briefing from Clayton Utz says that is no more than 5.26 minutes of unplanned downtime per year. These are very, very high requirements.

I was talking to Mr Galea before, saying that many of the data centre operators come into my office. I talk to them and try to understand what they are seeking to do. I do ask them the question of whether they have one of those dirty diesels planned.

A member interjected.

David DAVIS: A backup. They have all got the backup dirty diesel, so that is an interesting point. But at the same time, the water issue I think has been overplayed. I think that is something that can be very well managed. The energy issue is a real issue and a challenge.

We see the thoughtful proposals that we have got on urban solar parks as an opportunity to co-locate these sorts of arrangements in commercial and industrial areas near to a source of generation and near to the grid – (*Time expired*)

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (10:58): I rise to support this motion from Dr Mansfield, and I endorse her comments and will not repeat them. I have never really believed in vampires, but I have to say, having now been introduced to the data centre industry, I have changed my mind, because we are seeing across the west and north-western suburbs monsters being unleashed, ones that will consume vast amounts of electricity, ones that will consume vast amounts of water. We are seeing a veritable feeding frenzy of developers trying to get their snouts into the data centre trough. They are made up of both the global giants of artificial intelligence and increasingly a sort of rabble of vampire carpetbaggers who sense a potential river of gold. Most distressingly, this is being facilitated by the appropriately named development facilitation unit within the Department of Transport and Planning. This is a black box.

We know now, roughly, that there are around 50 data centres in place, but they are all very small compared to what is coming. I guess what is really disturbing is we know that there are somewhere around 20 to 30 other data centres – hyperscale centres – which will use exponentially more water, more power and more land than the 50 that are already on the ground. The thing that I think is really disturbing communities across the west and the north-west is the absolute lack of transparency. We are left to read the latest article or the latest press release. I know in terms of my backyard – wow – yesterday or earlier this week, we found out that HiQ are not only dipping their foot into waste-to-energy incinerators but have now abandoned their approach of powering Sunbury and are going to whack a data centre in there, even though the amount of electricity would only make up a fraction of what they need.

This is a disturbing time. We are seeing councils like Hobsons Bay saying they were provided with improper or inaccurate information from the government and then given 14 days to process a billion-dollar project. Last night we saw Hume council take a stand and call for a moratorium on these approvals to allow for consideration of what the feds are doing with regard to guidelines, to call for a Victorian parliamentary select committee and to set up a joint state and local government taskforce to consider an appropriate regulatory framework.

In the interim, let us just have some info, shall we? Just let us know what is going on. There is already an outstanding documents motion for the much-vaunted-but-never-seen sustainable data centre action plan. Ms Terpstra, who I am pleased to see has re-entered, has suggested that rather than worrying about that, we should focus on recycled bong water. I would also say that what is being sought by the Greens is a very basic thing: show us the calculations and show us the benefits, because they are entirely unapparent. We want this in the light. We do not want people treated like mushrooms – kept in the dark and fed you-know-what.

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Veterinary care

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (11:02): I move:

That this house notes that:

- (1) veterinarians play an essential role in public health, animal welfare, biosecurity, agriculture, and community wellbeing;

- (2) the veterinary industry is currently facing significant workforce pressures, mental health risks and financial vulnerabilities;
- (3) the veterinary industry is hamstrung by a slow and burdensome paper-prescribing requirement, resulting in significant time being dedicated to paperwork at the expense of patient care;
- (4) this is a contributing factor to vet stress and burnout and results in significant barriers to accessibility, cost and animal welfare;
- (5) electronic scripting would significantly reduce administrative workload for veterinary clinics, ease workforce pressures, and position Victoria as a national leader in animal health technology;
- (6) allowing pet owners and farmers to have prescriptions dispensed by a pharmacy of their choice would reduce medication costs and align the veterinary sector with doctors, dentists, optometrists, midwives and nurse practitioners;
- (7) this simple but meaningful change would provide cost-of-living relief, relieve vet pressures, improve animal welfare and improve access for regional Victorians, who often have to travel long distances to a clinic;
- (8) work is underway by agriculture departments and ministers across Australia to enhance biosecurity and animal health through the introduction of e-prescribing;

and calls on the government to investigate all options to enable these reforms, including via gazettal or other methods.

This is a really simple motion that calls on the government to make a simple yet meaningful change that will make life easier for so many Victorian pet owners – whether they be in the city or in the country, but it is particularly for regional Victorians – and the animals that they love. This will also transform the entire veterinary sector for the better.

To begin this motion, I want to talk about the state of the veterinary sector, because it is a really, really important part of this conversation. The vet sector is in need of urgent reform, because right now it is in crisis. It is a crisis that the Animal Justice Party has been warning of this term and last term, and it has only continued to worsen in a cost-of-living crisis and animal welfare crisis. The result of that has been really poor outcomes for the people who care for our animals as well.

I want to reference a South Australian joint committee on the mental health and wellbeing of veterinarians that did an absolutely brilliant inquiry and handed down a final report with a number of really strong recommendations that would improve and reform our veterinary sector. This inquiry was sparked by the death of Sophie Putland, who died by suicide in 2021 while working as a vet in Melbourne. She was just 33 years old. She loved all animals, and for the most part she loved being a vet, but the pressure of the veterinary profession became too overwhelming for her.

This is a really tragic story. It is one that has received a lot of attention and has resulted in the push for reform in many states across the country, but it is actually not a rare story. In fact on average one vet dies by suicide approximately every 12 weeks in our country. Over the last 30 years the rate of suicide in this profession has increased, with research confirming that vets are four times more likely to die by suicide than the rest of the general population and two times more likely than any other healthcare professional. Those numbers are obviously shattering and demand urgent national attention, and they certainly demand attention here in Victoria, where we are seeing our veterinary sector struggle even more day by day. Sophie's parents Garry and Kate started an organisation called Sophie's Legacy in her honour, and they were a driving force in getting the South Australian government to establish this parliamentary inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of veterinarians, which commenced in November 2024.

While this inquiry was about the South Australian sector, it was actually really reflective of the situation across the nation. This inquiry had many findings, including that veterinarian mental health is a systemic workforce problem, which includes high workload, financial pressure, workforce shortages and really difficult workplace conditions. Excessive working hours and after-hours work are major pressures on the vet sector, leading to fatigue, burnout and no work-life balance. Workforce shortages particularly affect rural and regional areas. When I am out in my community speaking to vet

staff and pet owners and farmers, that is certainly the experience that they share as well. Vets experience difficult interactions and often abuse from clients. Vets provide benefits well beyond private consultations for individual pet owners. Their work does contribute to broader animal welfare, biosecurity and wildlife protection and is integral in times of emergency, but they simply are just not treated the same as other healthcare professionals, whether that be in respect of reform or changes to make the work easier. The inquiry also considered whether the broader vet team could be better utilised, such as appropriately trained vet nurses taking on greater responsibility to reduce unnecessary pressure. That is certainly something that the Animal Justice Party has proposed under a vet nurse practitioner model a number of times, and it is something that I will speak further about in this debate.

This crisis is not new, and it is time that we started fixing it. In this motion I have one simple proposed change among many changes that need to happen in the vet care sector. It might be seemingly small, but it is certainly not symbolic. It will go a long way towards alleviating some of the pressures that vets face every single day. This motion calls for a change that would allow electronic prescribing in the veterinary industry. Unlike human health, the veterinary industry still does not have regulations that allow vets to offer electronic prescriptions. This might not seem like a big deal, but certainly in many areas around our state it creates a huge accessibility issue, and it is exacerbated by a cost-of-living crisis. It results in significant barriers to accessibility and animal welfare as well.

Living in regional Victoria myself, I can speak to this firsthand. I have 15 pet sheep who often require antibiotics, particularly in winter if they get an abscess from the wet ground. Every single time that I need to get those antibiotics, even though I administer them myself, it requires a vet visit on farm. There is the consultation cost for that vet visit and the cost of the medication. They need to handwrite the script because they do not have electronic prescribing, and then that medication is handed to me. The cost of that is much higher than if there was the healthcare professional to client relationship that exists in human health care and the ability to electronically prescribe me that medication. Certainly for me, I am very privileged that I can afford that care when I need it. But we know that here in our state times are more difficult than ever before and people are having to make really difficult decisions about what they can and cannot afford. As long as vet care costs continue to rise, this is something that many Victorians have had to forgo as a result.

We know that allowing electronic scripting would reduce the administrative workload for veterinary clinics. It is estimated that there would be around 173 hours per month saved in clinics by making this change. It would allow not just pet owners but livestock producers to have veterinary prescriptions dispensed by a pharmacy of their choice, which would increase competition and reduce medication costs. It would also give people the ability to buy these scripts online and have them delivered too. It is an important measure that would provide cost-of-living relief, improve animal welfare and improve access for regional Victorians, who often, on top of all of this, have to travel really long distances to a vet clinic – and I can see Ms Bath nodding her head. Certainly where I live is not anywhere near the most regional part of my electorate, but we have had one vet clinic close, which has resulted in all the clients from that clinic going to the one existing clinic. It is hard to get an appointment. In many parts of regional Victoria we are seeing clinics closing completely or reducing their hours because they do not have the ability to operate. They are losing vets. In fact it takes around two years for a regional Victorian town to fill a full-time vet role, and as long as that is not done the whole community suffers and of course animal welfare suffers as well.

Being able to access medications at a local pharmacy could mean the difference between an animal suffering until an available appointment appears and receiving prompt relief for that animal. It is necessary for both those with companion animals and people with farmed animals – people with pets, like me, or people who are running an agricultural business where access to necessary treatment is an essential part of animal welfare, and those animals are sometimes quite difficult to take into a veterinary clinic to be sighted by a vet in person. That is not to say it will bypass any necessary consultations, which will be determined by the veterinarian overseeing the animal, but rather it will remove an unnecessary administrative barrier, allowing vets to be available to see more cases where

their expertise is truly needed and get into that work that they became vets for, which is caring for animals, relieving their suffering and ensuring great health for them. So much of the stress and burnout is because of the extra administrative burden, which we could all very simply relieve.

Victoria has the opportunity to be a leader in this space and can implement vet e-prescribing administratively without waiting for a national framework, which has been the hold-up in progressing. This has still, despite that, received support from agriculture ministers and parliamentary inquiries across the country. We are hopeful that a change like this can be supported by the government for many reasons, not just animal welfare, but – knowing that this government is trying to do what it can to address the cost-of-living crisis, to help regional Victorians who deal with the brunt of that crisis, often the worst – also to acknowledge the really important bond that we share with our animals. They are part of our family, and particularly when times are hard like they are right now, the comfort and the companionship of that animal is more important than we know.

This proposal is, of course, part of a broader policy and piece of work by the Animal Justice Party, which I have spoken about many times before. We call it Veticare, which is the idea that we can have some sort of an accessible and even subsidised vet care system for our animals, just like we have in human health, which of course was transformational for many when it came into effect in our country, and we cannot imagine life without it. But the reality is that vet care is run through private business and it is a commercial operation, and that has resulted in an information gap where pet owners, who are often in distress, do not understand why costs are rising when vets are simply trying to meet overheads, pay their staff and support their own ability to get by in this current climate. We think it is really important that the government do what they can to support this sector, because it is for reasons like that that we are seeing increased client abuse towards vets and vet staff and misunderstanding about why vet costs are continuing to rise. Vets do not want to do that.

I spend a lot of time at my vet. I have 25 animals, and certainly I have found when it rains, it pours. I have been in there a lot recently actually talking to them about this proposal. They say that something like this would really relieve those pressures, because they would no longer be asking people to come in for a consult, pay for the consult, get the handwritten script, take it elsewhere and get the medication dispensed themselves. In some cases that handwritten script has to be mailed to a pharmacist before it can be filled. So there is a real accessibility issue here that is resulting in pet owner frustration, because they love their animals and do not want to see them suffer, but then also a regulation barrier that does not allow vets to act immediately like they could in human health care.

We would love to see something like this supported by the government, alongside a range of other reforms that I will briefly speak about. The need for subsidised vet appointments is something that we see as critical in the vet care sector, particularly for those who might be concession card holders or seniors or students. There is certainly very much this idea that if you cannot afford to have an animal, you should not have one, and we think that it is far too simplistic. Many of the people who need the love and companionship and comfort of an animal are people who are in circumstances where they may not be able to afford it. This of course is also not acknowledging that situations can change. In my role I have dealt with many women who have escaped violent relationships and violent homes, and their one source of safety and security has been that animal that they have been able to leave with, but they have lost financial security and can no longer care for that animal. The importance of them being able to get the vet work so that they can continue to have that animal just cannot be understated. We have a proposal that is actually being costed up right now to see how this model could work that we are hoping to take to the election.

What we do know is that vet care is becoming increasingly costly for owners and there can be the inability to pay those costs. There are several factors driving that, including a substantial rise in pet ownership post COVID, but this financial burden for clients is also an emotional burden for vets. We will have more to say about this accessibility piece. We would really love to see that considered by the government as well, noting that it will cost money, but it would save money in other ways because our pets bring so much to our lives and relieve many other social issues, such as rising mental health

issues, loneliness and poor physical health – of course our pets get us outdoors – and it is incredibly important that we keep pets and families together.

Something that also is a significant pressure in the vet care sector is the expectation that they treat wildlife for free under a good Samaritan expectation. In regional areas this is obviously exacerbated, where there are more cases of wildlife road strike or displaced wildlife. At my own vet clinic they actually fundraise to pay the cost of caring for wildlife, but this certainly should not be the model for an industry where they have this expectation placed on them but no support in order to do that. Under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986 and Wildlife Regulations 2024 there are exemptions that allow vets to do this, but they actually do not get any wildlife training while they are at university. This has been seen as a real knowledge gap and something that needs to be addressed. In a country that is known for its wildlife, the people who are tasked with caring for these animals actually receive no training in order to do that. We see that as something that should be addressed, particularly as we are seeing bird flu enter our state. For the vet care sector to have that support to treat and care for these animals is incredibly important. There is a wildlife shelter in my electorate, Red Box, that actually has a vet who has done extensive wildlife training, which he offers to vets who would like to learn more. But that is optional and not something that is part of the training at university.

In coming to this motion I was contacted by a number of vets who run hotlines. We are used to the ability to call 13SICK, go on the virtual ED, go to an urgent care clinic or just walk into the emergency department of a public hospital. But again, in the vet care sector, not only do we not have this, we are increasingly seeing after-hours clinics closing because of inability to fill the shifts or to meet the expectations of that, and something that has come about is vets filling that gap by opening hotlines. One of those is VetCheck 24/7, which is an established teletriage service that provides access to qualified vet nurses around the clock. Anyone across the country can call up this number at any time, and they will give an assessment of the animal's symptoms, provide first-aid advice where appropriate and help determine whether an animal needs emergency care or a routine appointment or can be safely monitored at home. This service does not replace a vet or a physical examination. However, it simply helps pet owners make informed decisions about what care their animal needs at a time when they may otherwise be left trying to make that decision alone because of a lack of resources or infrastructure, and for regional Victorians, again, that advice could make an enormous difference.

With more than 1.4 million households owning companion animals, there is a clear opportunity here for the government to support and expand this model to ensure that while we address this vet crisis and fill vet roles, anyone anywhere in the state will still have the ability to access care, even if that is over the phone, to give them that comfort, that advice and that security, because when the animals we love are sick, it is an incredibly distressing situation. Separately, some things have arisen in the lead-up to this. Relatively recently we have seen the Commonwealth paid prac program. This is a real example that relates to the electronic prescribing problem, where advances happen in human health because there is that respect and consideration of their sector. We have seen the paid prac program only come in for human health – vets and vet nurses have been left out of that. That is the difference between students receiving nothing and receiving \$340 per week. When we need to fill vet roles – we have a vet shortage on top of all of this – it is incredibly important that we see a consideration by the federal government.

We would love to see a nurse practitioner model implemented in the vet care sector, again to reduce burnout to ensure that vet nurses – so many of whom have come through the government's free TAFE program and are now leaving because of burnout – have that job satisfaction but also to relieve the pressure on vets, who are taking up so much time doing tasks that only they are allowed to do. Vet nurses could take on some of the role that is more up-front and up-close care, allowing them to do the things that they love as well. This is a significant amount of reform, but electronic prescribing would be a meaningful way to start that – an acknowledgement of this really big issue that we need to address in the stresses, the burdens, the burnout and that feeling of disrespect within the vet care sector.

I particularly want to thank Dr Megan Auld, who is a co-founder of the Australian Veterinary Innovation Council, for her tireless advocacy across the health and agriculture portfolios. She brought this issue to me some time ago now, and we have used this general business motion because we really want to see it advance and to see the government put their consideration on the record. I also thank Dr Jack Ayerbe, who is a longstanding pillar of the vet industry; Dr Mos Siddle, veterinary surgeon and founder of VetCheck 24/7, who gave us lots of advice in relation to this; my personal vet, from whom I get a lot of feelings about what needs to happen in this space and who has helped guide me in ideas for reform; and every vet for their work and every vet nurse and everyone in this sector who is in it because they love animals.

They are not getting a fair go, and hopefully today is a step forward towards that, with the government agreeing that this is an area that should be pursued. It is a very simple measure that does not require legislation, and I am hopeful we can get on with it. I commend the motion to the house.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:22): I am pleased to rise to make a contribution on this motion in Ms Purcell's name. The motion addresses a range of points, but principally it is in regard to electronic prescriptions, making workloads for veterinarians easier and facilitating ease of access for pet owners or farmers to have prescriptions dispensed by a pharmacy of their choice. I note Ms Purcell did also address things like mental health and workforce support in her motion. I will come to those points in a minute.

I can say that the government's position is that we support the motion. I want to take the opportunity to talk about my experience as a pet owner. We can talk about emotion and what that might mean to the industry, but it is also good to talk about what that means to individual pet owners. My dog Skye is an older girl now. She is about 13, and she cannot hear very well anymore. She has got cloudy eyes and she cannot see. She has a sort of deformed paw, which she has had from when she was a pup. As she has gotten older it has become more problematic for her, and she suffers from an arthritic condition. It causes her lots of pain. One of the things we need to do to help keep her pain free and comfortable is to take her to the vet. She is prescribed gabapentin, which is something that humans are prescribed as well, for pain relief. It is an anti-inflammatory type of thing.

When we started getting that for her the vet gave us a script, but we then went and got it filled at the chemist. That was a new one on me; I did not know that was a thing. Certainly, to Ms Purcell's point about electronic scripting, as you know, doctors send us humans scripts all the time by text message. You just go into your chemist and scan it. It is very easy, so it makes good sense to have this same sort of thing available. I still would have to take my dog to the vet. They would still have to make an assessment of her and her pain levels to see whether the level of medication was appropriate, but then it gives them time to be able to just send that to my phone or whatever and I can go and fill it at the pharmacy, or if I need a refill without having to go back to the vet, it just makes it a lot easier. That is a real-world example from everyday people, and I am sure other people in this chamber – everyone – who might have different types of pets, whether it is pets or farm animals or whatever, can see that these sorts of initiatives would make it easier for people from a cost-of-living perspective as well, not having to go back twice and pay for appointments and the like. It is just easier. But also for veterinarians, who are very busy, just being able to add that additional factor is going to make it easier for them.

I just want to talk about workforce wellbeing. It has been a significant issue in the sector. We have heard multiple times of things being reported in the media about vets and the emotional toll that is experienced by them dealing with pets and obviously pet owners. When their animal is in distress, people can be in distress and sometimes difficult to deal with, depending on what is going on. We also know that sometimes when animals are unwell the cost of getting treatment for your animal can be really, really expensive. For example, in my case, Skye was too old when I got her. I could not get pet insurance, so there is nothing I can do about covering the costs for that. I have had lots of animals over my life, and some of them have needed very expensive dental care and all sorts of things, and none of that has been covered by pet insurance or anything like that. So of course people are concerned when

they take their dog to the vet about what is going to happen in terms of costs, so that can make people difficult.

As I said, we know that Victorian vets are facing more pressure than ever before, especially vets in regional communities, and as Ms Purcell spoke to, there is difficulty recruiting and retaining workers and it makes it hard for our vets. There is an emotional toll to the work that they do, and vets are experiencing burnout, so in 2025 the Victorian government introduced psychosocial health regulations to strengthen the occupational health and safety framework. The psychosocial regulations were drafted in consultation with unions and employer groups, and an important move was to recognise that the way we work has in fact changed, and the hazards that workers face today are not the same as the ones they might have faced 20 years ago – for example, psychosocial hazards such as bullying, sexual harassment, aggression or violence. We hear about this not only in this sector but also from retail workers and the like, flight attendants, healthcare workers – it does not matter if you are in a client- or customer-facing role, it just seems that there is this exponential explosion in occupational violence and aggression and also exposure to traumatic events or content. These things continue to cause harm in Victorian workplaces, and in many cases psychosocial injuries can lead to longer periods away from work, with just 42 per cent of workers with mental injury returning to work within six months in the last financial year, compared with 75 per cent of workers with physical injury. So you can see that while you may not see the obvious effects of a mental injury, they can linger longer than, say, a physical injury can, and it is nonetheless still so critically important to get treatment for a mental injury just like you would a physical injury.

There has been funding for four mental health and wellbeing hubs in Cowes, Warrnambool, Horsham and Ballarat, and that will mean that regional Victorians can continue to access free mental health care close to home. The loss of any person to suicide is tragic and has long-lasting and far-reaching impacts, and that is why we are making sure that all Victorians can get the support they need. There is a further \$6.5 million investment to deliver suicide prevention programs, including the hospital outreach post-suicidal engagement program as well, and a further \$5.5 million investment will strengthen responses to those who are experiencing mental health crises through trialling expanded models of care and continuing the TelePROMPT program to provide better access to mental health care via 000.

With about 3 minutes left on this one, I know my colleagues will also want to make some comments on this as well, there is lots I could say about cost-of-living relief, and I might just address some of these things. In the budget we are investing \$18 million to enable pharmacists to treat more Victorians with more conditions without a trip to the doctor for a prescription. This was previously trialled as the community pharmacy pilot, and the investment locks it in for good and makes it even bigger.

As you can see, these initiatives that we have already worked on almost paved the way, if you like, for something like the initiative that Ms Purcell is talking about in her motion. But we have also helped Victorians with cost-of-living relief with things like the power saving bonus. We have also invested in supporting 27,000 homes to install electric heat pumps. A \$12 million investment will fund the rollout of insulation upgrades and Victorian energy upgrades. There are 65,000 Get Active Kids vouchers – again, an investment to ensure that kids can get a voucher for up to \$200 towards the cost of kids sport, which, as we know, is very important for anybody who might be struggling with mental health conditions or concerns. Sport is actually a really good thing for that. There is \$9 million to support frontline organisations through community food relief. So there are lots and lots of things that we are doing.

This initiative that Ms Purcell speaks to is another way of supporting Victorians to cut back on any of those unforeseen costs. As we know, when an animal is sick, sometimes you may not have the necessary cash on hand to treat your animal or take it to the vet, and this can cause added pressures as well. I will leave my contribution there. We are always happy to look at reforms to support people, and this initiative will also help us have conversations with the veterinary workforce, farmers and pet owners.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (11:31): Up there with our GPs, our teachers and our nurses, our vets and their practices are gold in communities, in particular in regional communities. I grew up on a farm, and I note the important and close working relationship my father had with our local vet. In fact I think Christmas gifts were exchanged in gratitude for the work that they did, and it still continues on in a great dairying community. Speaking as the lead speaker for the Liberals and the Nationals, this motion before us has merit. It is multisectional, and there really is not a great deal of time to go through each and every part, but I will get to the nub, which of course is e-scripts.

First of all, I want to bring some understanding and reflection into the house in relation to veterinarians. The opening part looks at their essential role in public health, animal welfare, biosecurity, agriculture and community wellbeing, and I certainly endorse those sentiments. But one of the things that we really see with vet clinics and veterinarians is that they provide an essential service while operating as a small private business. That is the business model overwhelmingly, unless they are employed by Agriculture Victoria, which is a different conversation. Some of that essential service, if we look to floods, if we look to bushfires or if we look to storms and the like, is for not only our livestock and our farm stock – cattle, sheep, goats et cetera – but our pets and our companion animals, which are very, very dear to all of us, and also our native fauna.

When we have droughts, bushfires and the like, we see our veterinarians come out and assist. Often there can be injured native species on the roads, and our vets are often contacted. Indeed, I had a vet live down my street for many years. There was a wildlife carer at one end and a vet at the other, and they were out volunteering their time – and we really respected that – on many, many occasions. If animals are brought in, they bear that cost for the community service in a private business model. I am just putting that on record.

Let us go to the nub of the issue, which is around e-prescriptions. Certainly the Liberals and Nationals will support sensible reforms that reduce unnecessary paperwork, improve access to veterinary medicines and make life easier not only for vets but for companion animal owners and farmers. As we are evolving, we need to evolve with the technologies, and we saw that certainly through COVID and the lockdowns with the digital technology that arose then and is used well now. But we should be clear about the problem we are solving. In terms of this particular issue, vets already do prescribe drugs, and indeed you can send them electronically to the pharmacy or you can take it into the pharmacy. It is going to be through a paper system, but that can work. Indeed I was speaking to a vet in my town only this morning to do a little bit of research, and she provided some context. The context is that of course large vet clinics often hold drugs and the like for stock, so it is not really going to be appropriate that you would use those digital forms and run off to the pharmacy for large stock items. Small animal clinics also are a dispensary in themselves. It is really important that as a small business, those vets have the opportunity to serve their client by providing the drug of choice and of need there and then. That is an important element. We do not want to remove that relationship between the vet, the animal and the carer, the owner of that animal. When I was speaking with the vet this morning she said, ‘Look, there might be some minimal savings in terms of time.’ She certainly was not opposed to it. It is not the panacea to all issues, but it can be one element.

Of course vets do prescribe human drugs, we will say, in terms of antibiotics or cortisone and the like. If they do run out in the clinic you can go into your pharmacist. Again, these are the good relationships that our local communities have between the veterinary clinic and our local dispensaries.

Digitising can work. Pharmacists do that work, and regional pet owners can potentially access more competitive prices. But in the regions you often have to travel, so the bargain you might be getting in one area might mean that you have to use your car on a bumpy road to get there. There can be genuine consumer choice increases and benefits.

In terms of livestock, e-prescriptions also have potential for farmers, but we should not pretend that this solves every problem in relation to livestock medicines. Livestock operations require quantities

and logistics. They require freight and availability, and sometimes – as I have spoken about – the large volumes of material can actually be a practical barrier.

The Veterinary Practitioners Registration Board of Victoria requires a veterinary practice to ensure the owner and the animal relationship is established and maintained. It is, as I said, a really, really important one.

In short, on e-prescriptions, where there is a sound principle to this, where the vets have the ability to issue compliant prescriptions, where regional Victorians get a greater choice – of course I have been focusing on regional Victoria, but clearly we have amazing vets right across the state – where there is that more practical choice and where there is unnecessary paper handling, they will not revolutionise, but they will be another string to the bow. Also where clinical safeguards still remain, then this investigation, as is called for, into options to enable these reforms, including via gazetted and/or other methods, I think is sound practice.

There are a couple of other points I would just like to raise. A dear friend of mine is actually a practice manager of a vet group, and one of the things that she raised with me is that part of this whole service in our vet clinics is also about the tremendous vet nurses. Some of her concerns that she has raised are in relation to the quality of training in our vet nurse system. Of course you can be trained through a registered training organisation or through a TAFE. There seems to be a propensity – the sense that I get from her – that the TAFE sector needs to pull up its socks in terms of the quality of the graduates. Now, they are happy to take people who are qualified, who work and have the expertise, but they tend to actually have to go off to the RTOs and accept people who have gone through that training because our TAFE sector is not bringing the standard that should be there when a qualified vet nurse enters into a practice. I think that is really important.

The other issue that I would like to raise is that the Liberals and Nationals have just put the Planning and Environment Amendment (Agricultural Land and Food Security) Bill 2026 in this house, and we raised the very real factor that state gross product for our agricultural sector, food and fibre, is \$22 billion annually. A very important part of that of course is livestock. Let us not be under any illusion that the role of the Animal Justice Party, if it went to its nth degree, would be to shut down our livestock farms. Whether it be dairy, beef or sheep, it would shut them down. In consideration of mental health, what would that then do to a whole sector of vets if that was brought to fruition? Let us not be under any illusions. We, the Liberals and Nationals, support vets, support our communities and support livestock industries as well.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (11:41): I rise to speak on Ms Purcell's motion. The Greens are very supportive of this motion and thank Ms Purcell for bringing this issue to the chamber today. The Greens agree that access to electronic scripts should be extended to vet services across Victoria, as we have seen for human health services. For people with disabilities, people that live in rural and regional areas and those without access to decent transport or with cost restrictions, there are many barriers to services that digital health care can go some way to alleviating.

Veterinarians do extraordinarily important work. They care for animals who share our homes. They support farmers and regional communities and protect animal welfare. They respond to disease outbreaks, and they play an essential role in biosecurity and public health. But we also know that the vet profession is under extreme pressure. Australia's Chief Veterinary Officer has described a significant national veterinary workforce shortage, and the recent South Australian parliamentary inquiry that Ms Purcell circulated to colleagues found reports of burnout, emotional distress and suicidality were growing across the profession. It heard about excessive workloads, unpaid and out-of-work hours, financial pressures, rising client abuse – largely, as Ms Purcell covered, due to the pressures that people are finding in this sector – and the moral distress vets face, which comes from caring for injured wildlife, stray animals and animals whose guardians simply cannot afford treatment. That inquiry was very clear that there is no single solution to this crisis that is facing the profession. The sector needs better working conditions, better remuneration and mental health support. We need

stronger regional vet services, and we need a serious workforce strategy for the vet workforce. But the inquiry did also specifically identify digital reform, including electronic prescriptions, as a really low-hanging fruit area where governments can easily reduce unnecessary pressures on vets and folks with animals who are using their services. That is why this motion is completely sensible today.

In human health electronic prescriptions are now really routine, yet vets in Victoria remain reliant on cumbersome handwritten and computer-generated prescription processes, which means more time writing, handling and managing scripts, more unnecessary admin, and in some cases additional trips to the clinic for people who are simply trying to obtain medication for their animal which might be routine. All of this adds up to time and energy that vets could be putting towards treating more animals. There is also a really clear benefit for people who love their animals. Vet care is expensive and medication costs can add substantially to the bill that they face. Allowing prescriptions to be sent electronically and, where appropriate, dispensed by a pharmacy chosen by the animal's guardian would make it much easier to compare prices and access medicines. That really will make a big difference during this cost-of-living crisis.

This will be very important, as has been noted by several speakers, in regional Victoria. When the nearest vet clinic may be a decent drive away, requiring people to return simply to deal with a paper prescription is not just a minor inconvenience but a pretty big undertaking. It adds delays and additional costs and can ultimately mean delayed treatment for an animal, or I imagine in some cases it would make accessing treatment impossible.

Importantly, Victoria does not need to wait indefinitely on this topic for every jurisdiction to move together. The Victorian Department of Health already recognises that some provisions of the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Regulations 2017 do allow the departmental secretary to approve additional matters, and the department already publishes secretary-approved criteria for electronic prescriptions.

This motion today describes a really large problem but a very tangible and easy solution that we could implement. I am very glad to hear the government is considering this motion positively. I certainly hope that we will see progress on this in the near term, because it will make a real difference to those working in the profession and to those who are seeking care for their beloved animals through vet access. Electronic prescribing will not fix the crisis that is facing the vet workforce, but it is a practical and achievable reform that can reduce administrative burden, improve access to medicines and make vet care a little easier, both for the professionals who are providing it and the people who are trying to seek proper care for their animals. The Greens will be supporting the motion today.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (11:47): Thank you very much for the opportunity to rise and speak on the motion moved by Ms Purcell. Like the previous speaker from the government benches, I reiterate that we will be supporting this motion. Our government is focused on real issues facing Victorians, including keeping people safe and delivering great health care and education. As part of this commitment, we are always looking for new ways to make life easier for our pet owners right across our state and the vets that so often care for their pets. Vets do incredible work in our community looking after what is essentially a part of our family. Pets are a fundamental part of our family. They offer us unconditional love, and they are there for our family milestones, so it is deeply important that we look after them too.

This motion rightly highlights the potential benefits of electronic prescribing, or e-scripts, within the veterinary industry. We acknowledge that allowing pet owners and farmers to have prescriptions dispensed by a pharmacist of their choice could reduce medication costs and align the veterinary sector with doctors, dentists, optometrists, midwives and nurse practitioners. We are always interested in reforms that make people's lives easier and reduce cost-of-living pressures and are open to conversations about how we can further support this important workforce and of course the farmers and pets. However, these changes require the government to consult deeply with community and with industry. We must develop fit-for-purpose regulatory reforms that will accurately meet the

expectations of both vets and pet owners alike. Industry-wide reforms take time to get right. It takes a lot of in-depth consultation with workers and with industry bodies, and furthermore there is a question around alignment with other jurisdictions.

This motion touches explicitly on the significant workforce pressures, the mental health risks and the heavy toll of vet stress and burnout that the industry is currently facing. It goes right to the heart of how we support people in their workplaces. Our government will always back working people. We know that Victorian vets are facing more pressure than ever before, especially those in our regional communities. There is of course difficulty in recruiting and retaining workers, and it is making it even harder for our vets on the ground. Many young vets are drawn to the industry because of their profound love of animals, but the emotional strain of the work is incredibly high. Having to be the bearer of bad news over and over again takes a massive toll on their wellbeing.

To address that, the government has undertaken a range of regulatory changes, including strengthening of the occupational health and safety framework through the introduction of psychosocial health regulations in 2025. They were of course conducted in consultation with unions and employer groups, marking an important move to recognise that work has fundamentally changed and that the hazards that workers face today are not the same ones as 20 years ago. Just 42 per cent of workers with a mental injury returned to work within six months last financial year, compared with 75 per cent of workers with a physical injury. To ensure that all workers have the backing that they need we are investing in mental health so people can get the support they need close to home. There are four mental health and wellbeing hubs at Cowes, Warrnambool, Horsham and Ballarat, which will support the regional Victorian community, helping them to access free mental health care close to home. And of course, as was mentioned by Ms Purcell in her remarks, this workforce has had the loss of a young vet, and my sympathies and condolences go out to her colleagues and her friends, because this is a tragedy here in our community.

There is more I could say, but I will just take a moment to thank Ms Purcell for bringing this to us and say that I look forward to following this particular development in our community, because I know for many this will make a real, tangible difference. Thank you very much. I will leave my remarks there.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:51): I also would like to say a few words on this motion put forward by Ms Purcell. I will start by saying the Libertarian Party wholeheartedly supports this motion. It is essentially about making the process of prescribing and delivering medicine for animals by vets more efficient, and I am always very supportive of anything that will remove unnecessary red tape and increase efficiency through the use of technology. I think that this is a wonderful idea, having electronic prescriptions and delivery for vets, as my family of course also has some pets. We have got a couple of rabbits, and the family loves the rabbits, especially my wife. Anyone that tells you that rabbits are cheap is lying, and a big cost of that is the vet itself. I am not pointing the finger at vets – they do a wonderful job – but it is very expensive, and anything that we can do to make that more efficient and lower the vets' workload and make it cheaper for pet owners is a wonderful thing. Therefore we will be supporting this, and I hope that the government actually does something on this, because otherwise it just seems like a waste. As has been pointed out by Ms Purcell, we have got electronic scripts for humans. There is no reason we cannot have this sort of technology for vets as well. It seems like a basic efficiency measure that the government should be implementing and enabling.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) incorporated the following:

President, I rise today to speak on the motion to allow the veterinary profession to make use of electronic scripts.

I would like to first thank the Member from the Animal Justice Party, Ms Purcell, for bringing this motion before the House.

These days, thanks to modern technology, when we visit the doctor, we have the option to receive a prescription for medication electronically rather than physically.

Instead of having the doctor write us a physical script, they can use a program which sends a text or email to our phones, which we can then take to a pharmacy.

Some people find this much easier than using a physical script given they do not have to carry around the piece of paper, and they will be much less likely to lose the prescription.

This can be especially useful for those who are constantly travelling or for those who prefer to have everything organised through one of their personal devices.

Ultimately, this helps to give people more choice over how they go about managing their health.

All you need to access an e-script is a mobile device and an internet connection.

Additionally, receiving an e-script, for those using telehealth services, is instant, saving people valuable time.

These electronic scripts can be sent via the internet to the pharmacy so that the medicine can be ready to pick up as soon as you arrive.

For those who have multiple prescriptions, using an Active Script List can help them to manage them without having to keep track of and digitally store multiple individual script tokens.

Given how e-scripts have been able to benefit many people in managing their own health, the question of whether they could be used in veterinary care is, perhaps, a natural thing for us to consider.

E-scripts are not the only technological innovation which has made it easier and more convenient for people to access healthcare in recent years.

President, another example would be telehealth, which I mentioned only a few moments ago: a service that allows individuals to consult with healthcare providers through telephone or video calls.

It allows people to conveniently get the advice or support they need from their clinicians, all without needing to visit a clinic in person.

Telehealth has a wide range of benefits.

Not only does it improve access to care, particularly for people living in regional and rural communities, but it also reduces travel time and costs.

It provides greater convenience and flexibility for patients, allowing them to receive care from their home, workplace, or another suitable location.

Telehealth can also make it faster to access advice and treatment, supports continuity of care through follow-up consultations, and helps patients connect with clinicians that may not be available locally.

Like the use of e-scripts, telehealth is an example of advances in technology being used to make healthcare more accessible and more convenient for members of the public.

For many Australians, it has become a practical and effective way for getting the care they need, where and when they need it.

People use telehealth for a range of reasons, including to get general health advice, to discuss test results, to renew prescription, to receive mental health support, to review treatment plans, or in other circumstances where a physical check-up would not be necessary.

Electronic scripts and Telehealth were especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

They allowed millions of Australians to remain connected with their doctors, specialists, allied health professionals, mental health practitioners, and pharmacists, ensuring essential care during a period of public health crisis.

In fact, more than 219 million electronic prescriptions have been issued since May 2020.

On top of this, Australians accessed more than 100 million telehealth services during the pandemic, demonstrating the value and demand for these models of care.

In its first five years, Victoria's Virtual Emergency Department supported more than 680,000 people to receive healthcare and health advice remotely, continuing to provide vital support for Victorians even after the pandemic.

Since the pandemic, electronic scripts and telehealth have evolved from an emergency response to a mainstream and widely accepted part of Australia's health system.

For something which seems such an important part of our medical infrastructure today, it seems strange to think that less than a decade ago, the only legal way to receive certain medicines was through a paper script.

Today, though we are no longer facing the same conditions which we were during the pandemic, innovations which came about during that period such as e-scripts and telehealth are still relevant.

We recognise that people's lives can be hectic, that many people are juggling multiple responsibilities all at once, and many people would find it easier and more convenient to receive an electronic script or to have a health consultation over the phone rather than in person.

For Victorians, these are trusted methods of accessing the healthcare they need.

We recognise the important role that electronic scripts and telehealth play in delivering accessible and timely healthcare.

Saving people time, giving people more choice, and making use of technology to make our healthcare system smoother, more efficient, and better value for money.

With so many people benefiting from e-scripts for their own health, I wouldn't be surprised if many people out there are wondering whether it would be possible to do the same for their pet's health.

We know that, for many Victorians, pets are not simply animals.

They are beloved companions and important members of the family.

They bring comfort, companionship and joy to the lives of countless Victorians.

And for many people they play a significant role in supporting wellbeing and reducing social isolation.

We also know that lack of expert knowledge about animal health does not indicate a lack of concern for the wellbeing of one's pets.

Victorians care deeply about the health of their animals and want to ensure they receive the care they need.

It may be the case that the use of e-scripts could help people to manage the health of their pets with confidence in the same way that e-scripts have already been helping people to manage their own health for the last few years.

Yet, when considering reforms of this nature, it is also important to recognise the broader work this government has done to improve animal welfare across Victoria.

President, we have strengthened regulations designed to improve animal welfare outcomes, and continued to support shelters, rescue organisations and animal welfare agencies that play an essential role within our communities.

For example, the Labor Government supported all 17 recommendations made by the Taskforce on Rehoming Pets.

As part of this, we passed a bill last year to introduce the new voluntary Pet Rehoming Organisation Authorisation Scheme, which helps participating animal rehoming organisations by providing benefits such as foster animal registration exemptions and opportunities to hold adoption days in registered pet shops.

This provides more certainty, more support and stronger legislative structures to support the sector in the important work that they do on behalf of the community.

With these changes, we hope to see better long-term outcomes in the pet-rehoming sector.

Furthermore, through the Victorian Budget 2026–27, we are investing in the RSPCA to ensure it can continue delivering the vital animal welfare services that Victorians rely on every day.

Our commitment to improving animal welfare has not stopped there.

More recently, we have taken action against unethical breeding practices and puppy farms by commencing a review of the Domestic Animals Act 1994.

This ensured that Victoria's dog breeding laws remain fit for purpose and continue to provide strong protections for animal welfare.

I believe that Victorians would not want to adopt puppies from breeders if they knew that they were using unethical and cruel practices, that is why it is sometimes necessary to take action to ensure that the public can have faith in the system.

Victorians do not want to see animals being neglected or being treated with cruelty, that goes against the values which we hold, and it does not fit in with the way that our society views pet ownership.

How we treat animals does say something about who we are as a society, and it is important that we as a government are continuing to ensure that we are upholding the standards that the public expects from us.

Taken together, these reforms and investments show the Carroll Labor government's strong commitment to animal welfare and to ensuring animals across Victoria receive the protection, care and support they deserve.

I have spoken today about the importance of adapting to and incorporating technological innovation within our healthcare system, as well as the importance of the work that this government has done to protect animal welfare.

The question of whether or not we should change the law to enable veterinarians to distribute electronic prescriptions the same way that doctors can is well worth we in this place taking the time to consider and debate, so I again thank Ms Purcell for moving this motion.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) incorporated the following:

I thank Ms Purcell for her motion, which the Government does not oppose.

The availability of vet services is a matter of enormous concern to rural and regional communities.

As is the welfare of the skilled staff who provide those services.

This government has a strong record when it comes to tackling animal cruelty and supporting animal welfare organisations.

The 2025–26 state budget provided \$16.7 million over two years towards safeguarding the future of Victoria’s agricultural sector and supporting animal welfare.

The 2026–7 budget provided \$16.9 million for Biosecurity and Animal Welfare, including funding to enable RSPCA Victoria to deliver critical regulatory services.

It is clear, however, that the veterinary sector across Australia is facing challenges.

A recent study published in the Australian Veterinary Journal on 24 December 2025 found that more than 250,000 Australians live in what the researchers call a “veterinary care desert”

That is, they are beyond a reasonable drive of veterinary services altogether

The article was titled *Tyranny of Distance: Mapping the accessibility of veterinary services in Australia using geospatial modelling*

It found that rural and regional areas were more likely to be veterinary care deserts

This is very concerning, for a range of reasons.

The authors of that study wrote in an article in The Conversation on 5 January this year:

“Veterinary care deserts increase inequity among human populations, risk animal welfare and threaten biosecurity.

This is because veterinarians don’t just treat pets and livestock. They act as early alert systems, detecting the first signs of exotic or emergency animal diseases.

They also help treat wildlife, often for free, and play an active role in preventing food-borne diseases.”

So, the strength of our veterinary sector is a vital issue for my electorate of Western Victoria, for a range of reasons.

We rely on our vets to care for our beloved pets

In an article in The Australian published 10 May 2026, veterinarian Claire Jenkins was quoted as saying that regional and rural pet owners were being hit the hardest by the fuel crisis, which had increased the cost of taking long trips to access basic veterinary care.

She said:

“People are left with making a decision: Do I get in the car and drive two hours into the city and potentially wait four to six hours for care?”

This shows why the work we are doing to support Victorians with the cost of living is so important.

Labor’s 2026–27 Budget delivers a record **\$2.3 billion** in cost of living relief.

As one small example of this relief in practice, my office has helped almost 450 people to get 20% off their rego.

And many thousands more across my electorate have applied themselves using the Service Victoria app.

But the strength of our veterinary services sector is not just about cost of living for my constituents.

Veterinary services are also critical for our economy.

Meat and Livestock Australia estimates the number of sheep in the Glenelg Hopkins region alone at 5.77 million, based on 2021 data

And we are also home to almost 850,000 head of dairy and meat cattle, the largest of any region in Victoria.

Veterinary services are absolutely vital for the health of those animals and the viability of those farms.

They are obviously also critical for maintaining our product quality and biosecurity.

MOTIONS

3098

Legislative Council

Wednesday 12 August 2026

But the Australian Veterinary Association's most recent workforce survey, from 2023–24, found that regional vacancies in veterinary practices were far more likely to sit unfilled than in the city.

Close to half, or 44%, took over 12 months to fill, or were never filled

This is in comparison to 28% in metro areas

What's more, in solo practices, which are often what smaller communities rely on, 70% of vacancies in solo practices took 12+ months to fill or remained unfilled.

Fewer than one in fifteen vets in Australia now works predominantly in production animal practice according to the AVA survey.

The reasons for this are not hard to find.

Production animal vets in Australia carry heavy on-call burdens

They are regularly on call for more than 20 hours a week, compared to effectively none for vets in metropolitan small-animal clinics

Sadly, South West Coast will be severely impacted by H5 bird flu.

Forty four percent of Victoria's wetlands are in the Glenelg Hopkins region.

While the brunt of the work here is falling on DEECA, the veterinary sector will still play an important role in monitoring and reporting cases, both in wildlife and in livestock.

I want to take a moment to thank the hardworking and expert staff at DEECA, Agriculture Victoria and other agencies assisting with managing the response to the arrival of bird flu.

They have been diligent in keeping me, and my colleagues here and on the other side, up to date and informed as things develop.

Their dedication and the strength of their collaboration across all levels of government gives me hope.

The complexity of the response to bird flu reflects the need for a thoughtful and consultative response.

We have a range of signals that there are opportunities to help the veterinary sector.

And that these are issues that must be tackled in a coordinated way across all levels of government.

We agree that allowing vets to use e-scripts is a potentially useful change.

It's clear that it is a change that should be considered as part of the larger picture.

We need to consult with community and industry to develop fit for purpose regulations

And any changes should be coordinated and align with other jurisdictions.

We are always interested in reforms like these that make peoples lives easier and reduce cost of living pressures.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (11:53): I have been really pleased to hear the contributions to this motion today. It is always really nice when something comes into this chamber and somehow, despite the various different characters in this place, we can agree on an area in need of addressing and something that we should move forward on. Certainly I know with this proposal to allow electronic prescribing in the veterinary sector, whether it is about passion for animals and animal welfare, access for regional Victorians or mental health and wellbeing among our hardworking vets, there are so many reasons to move forward with this change. We know that when this was put forward during the pandemic, for human health, there were a lot of conversations about how it could possibly work. Unfortunately, this part of our everyday life that we did not previously have required a pandemic to force it upon us. We have seen just how much it has helped so many people, just like working from home and other things that came about from that somewhat difficult period in our lives. But the veterinary sector was not part of that change, and it is something that is resulting in Victorians spending more money, animals going without care and increased burden on vets, and there is just so much evidence to show the need to act when it comes to this.

I was really pleased to hear that the government has supported this motion and hopefully will be progressing forward in consideration about how we can actually do this. As I have said, it does not require legislation. It is a change that can happen while they are still in government, and I would really encourage them to do so given that we are not sure what the make-up of this place will be after November. When there is agreement on an issue that needs action, certainly I think it is a responsibility

of those who have the ability to take that action to act on it when they know that they have the ability to do so.

We have heard the stories of the people who have been impacted by this, particularly the family of Sophie, who have driven a legacy after her suicide and who are determined to do anything they possibly can to decrease the burnout and the poor mental health rates in this sector. With many people coming into the chamber right now, they might wonder how electronic prescribing could possibly do that, but we know one of the biggest drivers of the workforce pressures in this industry is the fact that vets just have too much on their plate. We should do anything we can do to streamline those services and to ensure that they are not spending unnecessary hours and unpaid hours doing things that we have the infrastructure and the systems to allow them to do electronically, especially when it exists in human health care. Everyone in human health care has access to this, whether it be doctors, nurse practitioners, optometrists or dentists, but we are faced with an ongoing situation where the vet care industry is just not considered the same.

In closing, I want to talk about the importance of this reform for people, because of course when we think of vets we think of animals, but they bring so much to our lives. By addressing the inaccessibility in the vet care sector, we know we are helping people too, because when people cannot afford vet care they are faced with the decision to give their animal up or to deal with the stress and anxiety of not being able to pay for that care. When we are separated from our animals it results in loneliness, which we know is actually a public health emergency. Some research has found that it is comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. There are clear links to show the impact that animals have on addressing loneliness and on being a protective factor in mental health frameworks. In fact data from Pet Medical Crisis has found that 99 per cent of people that they surveyed relied on their pets to reduce loneliness, but they were facing significant barriers in getting the care that they need. We know that there are things that we can do. While there is a larger piece of work in terms of reform to address the crisis in the vet care sector, there are some very simple things that can be acted on now. Hopefully with the passage of this motion today we can get going on that work, whether that be through gazetting this change or through another way to allow vets to e-prescribe. There are so many benefits to it in so many different ways. I thank everyone for their really meaningful contributions to this debate.

Motion agreed to.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Education system

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:00): (1405) My question today is to the new Premier. Over the weekend it was reported that you have agreed to finally fulfil the state's obligations to fund Victoria's public schools to the Gonski minimum standard. It has been a long time coming, with our schools currently the lowest funded in the country. But, Premier, talk is cheap. Schools are in desperate need of this funding. When will the dollars actually flow and when will the schools see this money?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:00): I thank Mr Puglielli for his question, and the Premier will be delighted to respond. Obviously education is a key priority of the Premier – a passion after being the education minister for some time. When it comes to education, we have demonstrated we are the Education State in relation to NAPLAN results and investment in education, particularly in relation to funding and support for schools for infrastructure. There is no state other than Victoria that has invested anywhere near as much as we have in the infrastructure for our public schools, as well as upgrading or remodelling every special school in the state.

Members interjecting.

Jaclyn SYMES: In relation to the overall budget for education, it is significant, it is something that we are proud of, but there is always more work to do. As you have indicated, Mr Puglielli – as opposed to the opposition, who are interjecting – your interest in the Premier’s discussions and the education minister’s discussions with the federal government in relation to the Gonski negotiations will be best placed if I pass that question on to them to respond to you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:02): Thank you, Minister, for passing that on and for those remarks, but like I said, talk is cheap. These schools desperately want to see this funding. This announcement of public school funding has been part of the advocacy of the Australian Education Union while they negotiate a new deal for improved wages and working conditions for teachers and school staff. Premier, will you ensure that this school funding announcement will not come at the expense of meeting the demands being bargained for by teachers and school staff?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:02): Mr Puglielli, there is currently an offer with the AEU and I believe the opinion of members is being sought as we speak. It is an offer of more than \$5 billion for teachers, support staff and those that work in the public education system. I will not comment on where that is headed – it is in the hands of the members at this point in time – but what it will deliver is the highest paid teachers, educators and support staff in the country, and it has responded to a number of the concerns that the union has raised in relation to workload, meetings et cetera. If you would like to see more of the offer, I am sure you can obtain that detail from the AEU. It is a separate matter to the fair funding agreement that the Premier and the education minister will be negotiating with the federal government.

Mental health services

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:03): (1406) My question is to the Minister for Mental Health. Yesterday in the Parliament you said:

... I have a deep respect for Professor McGorry ...

And:

... I regularly engage with Professor McGorry.

You said:

He is an eminent expert in youth mental health in our state ... He has a deep understanding of mental health priorities.

In today’s *Age* Professor McGorry accuses your government of ‘gaslighting’ Victorians on mental health reform, ‘undermining of watchdog and accountability mechanisms’, ‘shrinkage and weakening of the mental health commission’ and a ‘dramatic reduction in funding for the peak body, Mental Health Victoria’. The mental health levy raises more than \$1 billion a year from the business sector. Why is access to mental health services getting harder and outcomes getting worse under Labor when there is \$1 billion being spent from the mental health levy?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:04): I thank Ms Crozier for her question. As I indicated yesterday, I have enormous respect for Professor McGorry, and he is entitled to express his view. On these matters, however, I respectfully take a different view. The view that I hold is on the importance of our job to continue to roll out the important mental health reforms that have been clearly outlined in a 10-year reform pathway set out for us by the royal commission’s final report.

If I can just take up Ms Crozier’s attempt to explain the mental health levy, this is a significant commitment that the government made. It was about recognising that we needed to lift the level of investment in mental health across the state, recognising and acknowledging the evidence that was put

before the royal commission about the state of the mental health system. Can I say that the mental health levy, under our legislation, is required to be expended on mental health services and reform. It is a requirement of the legislation that that occur. It is estimated that for the 2026–27 financial year the levy will collect more than \$1.2 billion. That will give our state the ability to invest more than all other states combined in mental health supports. In fact the performance statement in the budget papers indicates that our investments in mental health are over \$3.25 billion, so we are more than doubling what we are collecting in the form of the levy for the critical services that we know Victorians rely on.

If I can, I will just take the next minute of time that I have left to give you a snapshot of the services and the improvements to the system that we have delivered. Our government are absolutely proud to be able to support our workforce, and we have increased the workforce by over 30 per cent in the mental health sector. We have increased the number of acute beds available across the system. We have delivered modern, fit-for-purpose services across the state, including at the Thomas Embling Hospital and including at youth prevention and recovery care centres in every region in the state. We are continuing to roll out locals in local communities – the missing middle in our system. We have rolled out 22 locals in 24 locations, and this is helping thousands and thousands of Victorians, including in regional Victoria, which you profess to care so much about. We are delivering the services that the royal commission called on us to do, and I know that the hardworking people in our sector are doing the very best job they can.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:07): I note the minister's response, and she was very keen to talk up the tax that she is applying to hardworking Victorians, but the facts are that the outcomes are getting worse under Labor. You do not seem to take any notice of what is being written about your government, your administration and your leadership. Professor Patrick McGorry has also written that your government is only 'entrusting departmental officials' who have been 'stubbornly immune to advice from experts'. So I ask: why has the government ignored expert advice?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:08): I think that the way that Ms Crozier has asked that question really exposes the lack of understanding of those opposite.

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, it is not an opportunity for the minister to attack the opposition. I am asking a very important question around what Professor McGorry has said in today's paper, and I would ask you to bring the minister back to answering the question.

Harriet Shing interjected.

Georgie Crozier: It is an excellent question, Ms Shing. You got the boot and so should she.

The PRESIDENT: That sort of amplifies what I was going to say, Ms Crozier, insofar as questions are not supposed to be asked to provoke a response. I will uphold the point of order insofar as it is not an opportunity for the government to attack the opposition. But in saying that, I would also ask you to keep in mind when asking questions that questions are not are supposed to be designed to provoke a response.

Ingrid STITT: I appreciate the opportunity to answer this in the way that I see fit because, frankly, we are not going to be lectured by those opposite, who did not even support the mental health levy when we introduced that legislation to the Parliament. We have taken the expert advice. You cannot get more expert advice than a far-reaching royal commission into the mental health and wellbeing system. We have also embedded lived experience in all of the reforms that we are driving, and I take very seriously the importance of continuing to listen carefully to the sector. It is why I have two ministerial advisory committees – I might add Professor McGorry is a member of one of them – to advise the government on the most effective way to roll out these reforms, and we will continue to listen to the experts.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:10): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Ministers statements: kindergarten funding

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:11): I rise to update the house on another major milestone for the Carroll Labor government's free kinder initiative. And what a milestone it is, with well over half a million Victorian children having now benefited from free kinder. For families, free kinder means more money back in their pockets, with the program now providing over \$5000 in savings per child across the kinder journey. It also means that parents and –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: As much as I could hear the minister, I do not think she was being provocative. The minister has a right to do her ministers statement in silence. I will ask for the clock to be reset if it has not been already.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I rise to update the house on another major milestone for the Carroll Labor government's free kinder initiative. And what a milestone it is, with well over half a million Victorian children having now benefited from free kinder. For families, free kinder means more money back in their pockets, with the program now providing over \$5000 in savings per child across the kinder journey. It also means that parents and carers can get back to work or study if they choose. And, importantly, it means that every child can get the best start in life.

Because good news is meant to be shared, I have got a few numbers for those opposite. I am spoilt for choice, but let us start with the growing communities in the south-east. Mrs Hermans might be interested to learn that more than 78,000 children have accessed free kinder in the south-east, including more than 7500 in the electorate of Dandenong and 9000 in Pakenham. On the other side of our state, Mrs McArthur and Mr McCracken will be thrilled to hear that free kinder has benefited more than 70,000 children across the Western Victoria Region, including more than 6500 in each of the electorates of Geelong and Wendouree. And if, in Mr McCracken's words, free kinder is a marketing ploy, then perhaps Mr Mulholland may well like to consider becoming an ambassador because free kinder is available in Kalkallo in Northern Metro in particular, with more than 15,000 children in the Kalkallo electorate benefiting.

Despite the record numbers of children benefiting from free kinder, those opposite do not want to be ambassadors for our littlest learners. They want to cut free kinder. The Leader of the Opposition has written to me advocating for kinders to charge fees, because it is lost on the Leader of –

David Davis: On a point of order, President, this is just a silly attack. It is nonsense. What is required in a ministers statement is that a minister be factual. This is not factual, this is a fantasy. This is rubbish. It is not factual –

Michael Galea: On a further point of order, President, I realise that Mr Davis is a very thin-skinned about the fact that the Liberal–One Nation coalition will cut free kinder for Victorian students, but that does not mean that you can make up stuff about what the minister is saying.

The PRESIDENT: I am happy to rule on it. Both of those were not points of order. The standing orders say that a minister can make a statement, and that is what the minister is doing. The minister may have provoked the response at the end there, so I gave people leeway as far as making noise goes.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: It is absolutely factual that the Leader of the Opposition has written to me advocating for kinders to be able to charge fees, and I am happy to table the letter. Perhaps it is lost on the Leader of the Opposition that in her very own electorate of Kew more than 3600 children have

accessed free kinder. When the Liberals talk about cuts, Victorians should not just take their word for it, they should look at their record. When those opposite were last in government they shut TAFEs, privatised hospitals and slashed funding for schools, and now they are coming after free kinder.

Health system

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:15): (1407) My question is to the Minister for Health, and it relates to the electronic patient health information sharing platform that was established through the Health Legislation Amendment (Information Sharing) Bill 2023. During the debate on that bill I asked about an individual's ability to access their own health data free of charge in a generally available, machine-readable form. I was assured, and it is recorded in *Hansard*, that the government would work with public health services so that patients would be able to obtain their own health information in an accessible manner without the need for an FOI application. It is now more than two years since the passing of the information sharing bill. Can the minister update the house on the implementation of the health information sharing project?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:16): Thank you very much, Mr Ettershank, for your question. As I am getting across the details in the vast health portfolio, of course I know that the CareSync Exchange program is very important in terms of providing a Victorian patient information sharing system. Currently, I am advised, it operates across 19 Victorian public health services, and it enables that secure clinical information sharing between a number of health services, including Austin Health, Bayside Health, Eastern Health, Gippsland local health service network, Monash Health, the Northern Health network, Peter Mac, the Royal Children's, the Royal Melbourne and the Royal Women's hospitals. That program will continue to expand through a phased rollout to all of the remaining Victorian public health services, planned for completion around 2028. The rollout is being progressed in a fairly measured and sustainable manner, aligned to whether those health services' readiness is there. Together, EMR and CareSync Exchange support safer transitions to care by improving access to relevant clinical information when patients with complex or chronic conditions receiving care from multiple providers need to benefit from that arrangement. Patient privacy and data security are obviously important and fundamental to Victoria's digital health approach, and the CareSync Exchange operates within that robust privacy management framework, which sets clear rules for access, use and oversight of shared health information.

In terms of your question in relation to patients being able to request information, I am advised that patients may request a user activity report from their treating health service, outlining when and where their information has been accessed, through CareSync Exchange, supporting transparency and accountability. And of course another important factor, Mr Ettershank, that you will probably recall from the bill that came through the Parliament is the independent oversight arrangements that are in place to support that transparency, compliance and public confidence on how the information is shared and used. I would be very happy, as I get across the details of this complex but important program of work, to keep you updated about the progress.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:19): Thank you, Minister. Unfortunately, I could not actually hear a lot of what you were saying due to what might be best described as friendly fire. As noted in my substantive question, cost-free access to a patient's own health records was promised as part of the rollout of the electronic patient health information sharing platform. In our consultations at the time of the bill, we were inundated with patients who found accessing their own medical records frustrating. What they got was sometimes illegible, and it was always time consuming and really, really expensive, especially for patients already dealing with chronic diseases and others with litigation. Minister, could you please expand on when patients can expect to be able to access the totality of their own health records in the manner I have described previously and what information will be captured by public health services in relation to drug use and how it will be shared?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:20): I thank Mr Ettershank for that supplementary question. As I already indicated in the answer to your substantive question, I am happy to keep you updated, including on the issues that you have raised about access and cost. In relation to how drug use is captured in the system, the advice I have got is that information relating to alcohol and substance use is not captured as a specific clinical domain within CareSync Exchange. However, it may be included within clinical information shared by health services, such as through discharge summaries and pathology results. But all information in the CareSync Exchange is obviously subject to privacy, security, audit and access controls, which is absolutely appropriate when you are talking about sensitive patient information.

Ballarat Base Hospital

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:21): (1408) My question is to the Minister for Health. The emergency department at Ballarat Base Hospital is under enormous pressure. A local man Stephen Downey waited 19 hours in the emergency department to be seen. Stephen's wife Cheryl, who spoke publicly, said:

It was chaotic, unclean and frantic, and lacking basic services ...

This is one of our most trusted institutions and is not a dignified or safe environment for staff or patients.

Minister, that is a scathing assessment. Will you be launching an investigation into the conditions at the Ballarat Base Hospital emergency department?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:22): I thank Mrs McArthur for her question. This is obviously an issue in her region, and I thank her for raising it in the chamber. I do know that like all other jurisdictions in Australia we are seeing record emergency department presentations around the country, including here in Victoria. We also know that extended emergency department stays can be influenced by a range of factors, including complex systemic factors including the high levels of acuity of the presentations that we are seeing. And I certainly know that that is the case in the mental health portfolio I am also responsible for when it comes to ED presentations. But also there are other factors, including population growth, and there is also a lot of work going on between jurisdictions and the Commonwealth about the impact that access to aged care and disability support is having on our busy emergency departments and hospitals, and how that can impact adversely on bed flow.

In terms of the issues that you have raised on behalf of your constituent Stephen, as you would appreciate, I am not able to talk about individual patients in the chamber, and it will not be my practice to do that, but I would give an open invitation to you, Mrs McArthur, to provide to my office any detailed information you wish to, and I will follow that up and come back to you promptly. In terms of the Ballarat Base Hospital, I can indicate that the government is investing \$655 million to redevelop the Ballarat Base Hospital, and I can indicate that the redevelopment will deliver a new multilevel tower; a main entrance off Sturt Street; a new emergency department with an integrated mental health and alcohol and other drug hub, which is an important feature of many of our hospitals now; a new helipad; a new women's and children's hub; and an extra 100 inpatient –

Joe McCracken: On a point of order, President, it was a very simple question: will you investigate it, yes or no?

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

Ingrid STITT: I was continuing to explain the record investment that our government is making in the Ballarat Base Hospital, including a new women's and children's hub and an extra 100 inpatient and short-stay beds. These investments are all about unlocking that capacity within the Ballarat Base Hospital. I will always listen to our health services, our clinicians and our workforce when it comes to –

Renee Heath: On a point of order, President, I believe the minister was doing a ministers statement, and I just ask her to return to the question, which was a yes or no.

The PRESIDENT: That is not a point of order. Minister, do you want your 13 seconds back?

Ingrid STITT: Yes, thank you, President. I was just in the process of completing my answer in relation to the acknowledgement that our government make for the need to continue to invest, because we are seeing record presentations right across our emergency departments. I was in the process of indicating that I will always listen to our health services, our clinicians and our workforce on what more we can do to support them.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:26): Minister, it is not about the millions you have invested – if you have, it has clearly not worked – it is the outcomes that matter. Stephen’s wife Cheryl reported that after 19 hours waiting in the chair her husband was then shunted into another area for a further 11 hours, resulting in a total of more than 30 hours of wait time. Cheryl said:

People I was speaking to were horrified, it felt like conditions in a developing country.

Cheryl reported that most of the patients stranded in that emergency department had not had food or water for many hours. Cheryl had to get her own food and water for her husband. Thirty hours of waiting and no food or water is a total and utter disgrace. What are you going to do to fix it?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:27): Thank you, Mrs McArthur, for your supplementary question. I do extend that offer again that if there are issues that your constituents would like me to follow up, then I invite you to provide that information to me. I can indicate that the investments that the government is making in the Ballarat Base Hospital, once completed, will provide access and capacity to treat at least 18,000 more emergency patients and 14,500 inpatients per year. That is a significant boost to the capacity of the Ballarat Base Hospital, and we will continue to back the communities right across Victoria who deserve access to world-class care.

The PRESIDENT: I acknowledge a previous member of this chamber Jan Kronberg, who is in the gallery.

Ministers statements: vehicle registration rebate

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Finance, Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Government Services) (12:29): I rise today to update the house on the Victorian government’s 20 per cent vehicle registration rebate, also colloquially known as the 20 per cent rego rebate. I am pleased to report that the Carroll Labor government has extended the application deadline to ensure more Victorians can access this practical cost-of-living measure. Our focus remains on making sure life is easier, safer and more affordable for all Victorians. Eligible vehicle owners will continue to be able to claim the full 20 per cent rebate on their registration until 31 August this year. This applies whether registration is paid annually or by instalments. For a typical household that can be up to \$186 back for every registered vehicle and as much as \$372 back for two cars. More than 3.6 million Victorians have already benefited from the rebate, putting money back into household budgets when it is needed most. By extending the deadline, we are making sure more Victorians can access the support they are entitled to rather than missing out. Whether it helps cover the cost of groceries, school expenses, fuel, utility bills or everyday essentials, the rebate provides practical financial relief and helps families better manage rising household costs. Our government understands the pressure that many Victorians continue to face, and we remain focused on delivering practical measures that make a real difference to everyday lives. The application process is simple and accessible. Most eligible Victorians are able to complete an online application through Service Victoria in just a few minutes. I encourage all Victorians who have not yet claimed this rebate – 3.6 million already have – to make sure they do so before 31 August this year.

The PRESIDENT: I also acknowledge in the gallery a former member of the Victorian Parliament Mary Delahunty.

Electricity infrastructure

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:31): (1409) My question is for the minister for energy. The residents of Goorambat, Glenrowan, Dookie and all the little towns in between are feeling unheard, steamrolled and flat-out ignored when it comes to the decision surrounding the proposed Central North renewable energy zone. There are properties under threat of being surrounded by solar energy facilities on all four sides, historic regions being destroyed and, most of all, valuable agricultural land being lost to the industrial mess that is this government's insatiable thirst for so-called renewable energy. Minister, will you meet with the communities under threat from this proposed Central North renewable energy zone and simply listen to their concerns?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:31): I thank Ms Tyrrell for her question in relation to renewable energy zones. As the chamber would be aware, five onshore renewable energy zones were declared via ministerial order in May of this year. The proposed Central North zone that, similar to what you have mentioned, will cover parts of the Campaspe, Greater Shepparton, Benalla and City of Greater Bendigo local government areas has not been formally declared. There will be more opportunities for consultation with community, industry and traditional owners on this Central North REZ.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Ms Lovell! Ms Tyrrell is not interjecting. Ms Tyrrell wants to hear her answer. The minister, without anyone yelling.

Jaclyn SYMES: Together the REZs only cover 8 per cent of the state's land area, and effectively they are just marking where potential investment can go. It is not an indication that that 8 per cent would be projects. In fact it would be a fraction – about 1 per cent of the total area of Victoria is required for wind, solar, batteries and access roads. The REZs were developed following statewide strategic land use mapping exercises, and there have been multiple rounds of consultation. In relation to the areas that you have indicated, particularly Dookie, those conversations certainly will be ongoing.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:33): My question was: will you as the minister listen to the communities by visiting these communities?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:33): Ms Tyrrell, I am very familiar with the areas that you indicate, having grown up in these areas. I frequent these areas regularly.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:33): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Child protection

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:34): (1410) My question is to the Minister for Children. Minister, Richard Irving was issued with a working with children check and cleared to work with the registered charity Habitat for Humanity despite being arrested that same month for the online grooming of a 14-year-old girl. Minister, how did your department allow this to happen?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:34): I thank Mr Mulholland for his question. Obviously this chamber has referred the responsibility for these matters to an independent authority. I cannot comment on individual matters,

and I will not be doing that in this case. But what I will talk to is the important steps that have been taken by this chamber, indeed by all of us collectively, and particularly through the Social Services Regulator and our department to improve child safety. The regulator has the responsibility for investigating matters, and the regulator has made it very clear that he will be taking investigatory actions further. Through the Social Services Regulator we acquitted the recommendations of the child safety review, which gave the Social Services Regulator the power to undertake those investigations. It means that the administration of the working with children check, the reportable conduct scheme and the Child Safe Standards have all transferred to the responsibility of the Social Services Regulator, a responsibility I know he takes seriously.

In relation to the working with children check through the Social Services Regulation Amendment (Child Safety, Complaints and Worker Regulation) Bill 2025, we obviously have acquitted the recommendations. That was causing some consternation for all of us in relation to the Ombudsman's report. But we went further by requiring that working with children check applicants undergo child safety training and testing as part of their application process, requiring organisations to verify when they have engaged a working with children clearance holder to ensure the status of a person's working with children check can be monitored when people move between roles and employment. There is an obligation on employers and on organisations to ensure that there is a valid working with children check. If those employers or organisations are not doing that, the chamber last December gave the powers to the Social Services Regulator for that to be enabled and to be followed. So there has been extensive work, with a bipartisan commitment from this chamber, to ensure that the Social Services Regulator has those powers, that the Social Services Regulator has increased powers in relation to the working with children check, and that they have the independent responsibility in order to ensure that we are keeping children safe.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:36): Minister, according to your government's regulatory schemes, including Child Safe Standards, the reportable conduct scheme and the working with children requirements, Irving should have been suspended from any work with children after he was arrested. How did this breach occur?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:37): Again I thank Mr Mulholland for his question, and I refer him to my substantive answer, which made it very clear that the Social Services Regulator, as an independent authority, has the responsibility for making investigations. That is publicly available information, and the Social Services Regulator takes those responsibilities seriously.

Ministers statements: Smile Squad

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:37): I rise to update the house on how the Carroll Labor government is saving families time and money with free dental care for kids. Last week I was thrilled to be able to join the member for Kororoit in the other place at Resurrection primary school in Kings Park, a beautiful little school, to announce that the expansion of Victoria's Smile Squad free dental program to students at low-fee non-government schools is now underway. Delivered by a dedicated mobile team of oral care clinicians, Smile Squad provides free check-ups and follow-up care, including X-rays, teeth cleaning, fluoride treatments, dental sealants, fillings and root canals, and at-school services mean busy families do not need to worry about missing school or work for a dental appointment. Regular dental check-ups can cost parents up to \$400 a year per child, but with Labor's Smile Squad it is free, putting money back into the pockets of families and easing cost-of-living pressures.

Backed in by \$16 million in investment, 54 schools across metro and regional Victoria have been invited to participate in the program as part of our phased rollout to all low-fee non-government schools. Since 2019 Smile Squad has already visited more than a thousand public schools, seen more than 175,000 students and delivered more than 1 million oral health kits. Only Labor will make it

easier and cheaper for Victorian kids and their families to access free dental care. With a \$40 billion cuts plan, we know that the Jess Wilson and One Nation coalition will slash these critical services. They will cut the free services Victorians rely on and make life harder and more expensive for families.

I would like to thank everybody at Resurrection primary school, including the principal Adrian Glasby and all the students, for having us there on Friday and for celebrating this wonderful free dental program.

Gender services

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:40): (1411) My question is for the Minister for Health. For years this government has authorised and indeed mandated unproven, unethical, harmful and irreversible medical and psychosocial interventions on gender-distressed children, often despite objections from doctors, parents and everyone else who has been concerned. For years the previous health ministers have dismissed my questions and hidden behind the fact that AusPATH standards align with WPATH standards. But WPATH has just admitted in a United States federal court that its own standards, which AusPATH relies on, are actually expressions of opinion in a field of medical uncertainty and that they will not be held liable for them as medical advice. So my question is: will you halt these irreversible treatments on children?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:41): I thank Mrs Deeming for her question. I know that this is a question that has been asked of previous health ministers on a number of occasions, and I think you will find that my views on these matters are consistent with the previous health ministers' replies, and that is that in Victoria equality is not negotiable. We are absolutely committed to making sure that we are providing care that is appropriate and based on clinical advice. I take very seriously the consequences of not providing that kind of gender-affirming care. Of course when it comes to children, it is more important than ever to ensure that those clinicians who work in this area are the ones that are driving the models of care, and that is why we will continue to support their work. I certainly know that our Victorian health services have led the way in developing best practice gender-affirming care that is age appropriate. I am certainly looking forward to reaching out to those programs and ensuring that they understand that the Victorian government will continue to support their evidence-based work.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:42): Well, that is very interesting, because your predecessor was very happy to hear that these interventions are already under a national review in Australia, but still she would not halt them either. Major medical insurers have withdrawn coverage for any and all transgender interventions on minors. I would like to know if the minister will table what the level and cost of insuring these practices are in our youth gender clinics in Victoria – so Monash and Royal Children's Hospital.

Ingrid Stitt: Sorry, I could not hear the end of that.

The PRESIDENT: Could you ask the question again, please, Mrs Deeming.

Moira DEEMING: Many private insurers when it comes to trans-affirming care for minors have withdrawn any type of insurance coverage. I have asked before about how our doctors are covered in the gender clinics in Victoria. Apparently the work that they do inside the gender clinics is covered by the Victorian government. What I am asking is: I would like to know what the annual cost is and what the level of insurance is that we have that covers those gender affirmation interventions on minors.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:44): I thank Mrs Deeming for that supplementary question. Our output funding across the health portfolio is detailed every year through the budget process, and of course members have an opportunity through the PAEC budget process to ask detailed questions of ministers about these matters. I will say that in the 2025–26 financial year

the Victorian state budget provided \$15.3 million to continue life-saving supports for trans and gender-diverse young people in Victoria, and we will continue to support those efforts.

Moir Deeming: On a point of order, President, I was specifically asking about insurance, the level of cover and the cost of the cover for insurance.

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

Electricity infrastructure

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:45): (1412) My question is to the minister for energy. I refer, Minister, to the Western Renewables Link. Will the government guarantee that it will not pre-emptively provide approvals or licences or support the signing of agreements given how close we are to the caretaker period and the convention that governments should not make large-scale decisions that bind a future government?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:45): I thank Mr Davis for his question on the Western Renewables Link. The project's proponent AusNet have prepared an EES for the project, which includes extensive studies, investigations and community consultations. No decisions can be made about the approvals required for the project to proceed until the Minister for Planning releases her assessment and it has been considered by the key decision-makers. We have long-established processes and timelines for WRL, and we are not going to change those because of the question that you have asked.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:46): That is sort of a non-answer.

Members interjecting.

David DAVIS: I actually do understand. Minister, in June 2025 the Western Renewables Link economic impact assessment listed the cost of the project at \$1.531 billion. Given the proponents will seek approval from the AER to pass through the full cost of the project, do you stand by this figure or has the cost escalated further since June 2025? If you do not stand by this figure, what is the alternate current cost?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:47): Mr Davis, I am not in a position to provide you any figures today. On your question in relation to the progress of the project, I can confirm that AusNet are already contracted. There are no decisions that can be made for approvals required for the project to proceed until the Minister for Planning conducts her components. I think you understand this, so I think you are muddling a bit of the processes together in relation to your question. As I said, we are committed to the timelines that we have already outlined. I am not in a position to discuss the cost of an AusNet project.

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) (12:48): This morning before Parliament started, I was a bit late, and the reason I was a bit late was that I was at St Kilda Pier to announce that doses of the H5 bird flu vaccine have arrived in Victoria and are ready to be administered early next week. More than 5000 of our treasured little penguins in St Kilda and on Phillip Island are expected to be vaccinated as part of this program. Make no mistake, catching and safely handling our cute little critters is not easy, but we know, as penguins usually return to the same colonies and burrows, that it provides a unique opportunity for our trained welfare personnel to vaccinate and monitor the wild population over time. Just for the avoidance of doubt, there has not yet been any detection of H5 bird flu in little penguins in Victoria or Australia to date. Even though

vaccinations will not stop H5 bird flu from circulating, we know it can help reduce its impact alongside existing biosecurity surveillance and wildlife response measures.

Today's announcement does build on the government's support for wildlife volunteer organisations. On Sunday we announced half a million dollars in a funding package for our wonderful wildlife rescuers and carers, boosting access to PPE and boosting Wildlife Victoria's emergency response services. We have known that bird flu would hit our shores. That is why we have invested more than \$130 million since 2023 in biosecurity and disease response capability, and we continue to strengthen surveillance and response activities as the situation evolves. We all have our part to play in limiting the spread of bird flu. Again, there is a hotline to report any sick or dead wildlife that you come across. As I said, H5 is unfortunately a reality in Victoria, but we are fighting it from a strong foundation. I look forward to providing updates on the penguin vaccination process as that gets underway next week.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:50): Minister Symes will get a response for Mr Puglielli from the Premier to his substantive question. I believe the minister acquitted the supplementary from Mr Puglielli with her answer, but she may get further information on that one as well from the Premier.

Questions on notice

Answers

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:51): I have overdue questions I would like to seek an explanation on. They are 2539, 2568, 2567, 2662, 2326, 1374, 2147, 2539, 2520, 2034, 2585, 2424, 2774, 2662, 2773, 2780, 2779, 2446, 2429, 2397 and 2249. Many of them are for the former Minister for Environment.

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Finance, Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Government Services) (12:51): I thank Ms Copsey for those. I am happy to take a list. I noticed that I did get a large volume during the Outdoor Recreation Victoria Bill 2026 debate in this chamber, and I am sure that we will try to get a response for you through the new minister's office.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:51): I also have a number of questions that remain unanswered by the Minister for Health, the Minister for Ambulance Services and the Minister for Mental Health: 2537, 2683, 2680, 2665, 2666, 2574, 2778, 2682, 2681, 2663, 2775, 2776 and 2595. I request, in accordance with standing order 8.11, that the ministers respond to those questions.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:52): I have your correspondence as well, Ms Crozier, and we will follow them up for you.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:52): On a similar note, I have a number of outstanding questions: 2726, 2725, 2724, 2696, 2667, 2663, 2653, 2608, 2601, 2596, 2580, 2458, 2355, 2195 and 2165. In accordance with standing order 8.11, I also request that we get a response.

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Finance, Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Government Services) (12:53): I thank Dr Mansfield. If I could get the full list, I will follow up a response from the appropriate minister.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (12:53): Similar to Dr Mansfield, I also have some outstanding questions: 2722, 2719, 2660, 2654, 2642, 2474, 2464, 2453, 2437, 2374, 2316, 2220 and 2087. In line with the standing orders, if I could please have those questions answered.

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Finance, Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Government Services) (12:54): I thank Ms Gray-Barberio for

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bringing that to our attention. If I could get the full list, I will be happy to chase that up with the appropriate minister's office.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:54): I also have a number of overdue questions for which I would seek explanations: 2765, 2671, 2648, 2472, 2451, 2433, 2418, 2360, 2335 and 2215. In accordance with the standing orders, I seek that these be responded to.

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Finance, Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Government Services) (12:54): I thank Mr Puglielli for that list. If you could forward that on, I will be happy to follow up with the appropriate ministers for a response in line with the standing orders.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:54): While we are on a roll, could I please ask the Minister for Environment for responses to questions 2508, 2509, 2512, 2515, 2126, 2334, 2451 and 2555.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:55): Ms Bath, it is a priority for me.

Sitting suspended 12:55 pm until 2:02 pm.

Constituency questions

Southern Metropolitan Region

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:02): (2485) My constituency question is directed towards the Minister for Veterans in the other place. More than 500 Victorian students have been awarded the Premier's Spirit of Anzac Prize since the program began in 2005, including many students from Southern Metro. Winners are sent on a study tour to explore the world and learn about Australia's war and peacekeeping history through the stories of our veterans. This program is important for many reasons: it ensures future generations connect with our history; funds travel for exceptional young Victorians to represent our state overseas; and in their own words, provides an opportunity to connect with their peers, their history and themselves. My question to the minister is this: how has this government increased its support for this program, and in what other ways has this government supported Victorians, young and old, to learn about the history of our veterans?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (14:03): (2486) My constituency question is to the latest Minister for Education, and it concerns the lack of adequate outdoor shade area at Lalor Primary School in my electorate. Prior to the redevelopment of Lalor Primary School, which I understand finished in 2024, the school had several outdoor shade sails and mature trees, providing shade and protecting students from UV exposure during recess and lunch. Those trees and shade structures were demolished as part of the rebuild project and were not actually replaced. This has left kids at Lalor Primary School without anywhere to sit and play with protection from the sun. The government has not funded this and, frankly, has given the school and community a run-around in terms of applying for new funding for the coverage they previously had. Will the minister commit to finishing the job properly at Lalor Primary School and reinstalling the sun coverage this school community needs and deserves?

Western Metropolitan Region

Moir DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (14:04): (2487) My question is for the Minister for Police. Five mayors across Melbourne's west have united, and I know that others agree. Brimbank, Maribyrnong, Hobsons Bay, Wyndham and Melton have come together to call for more police to address the crime crisis in the west. It is up 12.7 per cent this year alone. In Brimbank it is up 8.8 per cent, yet Brimbank suffered the biggest fall in police numbers in the state. In Footscray, Keilor Downs and Caroline Springs counters are now open three days a week instead of the seven days a week that

crime does actually occur. Residents who were assaulted in Sunshine and Footscray, one of whom tragically died as a result, were met with a government response which was just nothing more than a press conference. My constituent asks: when will the government actually do something practical about crime in Melbourne's west?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:05): (2488) My question is for the Minister for Children, and it concerns the very exciting news that around 70,000 free kinder spaces have been taken up in the south-east of Melbourne alone. So I ask on behalf of my constituents, tens of thousands of whom have benefited from these policies already, what difference this makes for working families in the south-east, and what consequences would there be if a Liberal–One Nation coalition were to cut free kinder services?

Western Victoria Region

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (14:06): (2489) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. There is no simple way around it: state-managed roads are a total disgrace in Victoria. Motorists are paying through the nose when a tyre is blown or a rim is busted, and nobody from Labor seems to care. I was with the Liberal candidate for Eureka Emma Muir last week, when we inspected the Western Highway and the Midland Highway. Roads were littered with 'Slow down' signs, but there was no sign of actual works to fix dangerous road conditions. Emma said it is the worst she has ever seen it, and I agree with her. So my question to the minister is: will you do anything to fix state-managed roads, particularly in Eureka, or will you continue to ignore them, because we have had years and years of Labor neglect?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:07): (2490) My constituency question is for the Minister for Artificial Intelligence and the Digital Economy. My constituent is a university student based in Clyde North who is concerned that the 53-hectare data centre proposed for Clyde North will impact his studies, health and quality of life. While the benefits of data centres to local communities are unclear, the risks are not. A report from Greenpeace suggests that data centres could reach 13 per cent of total national energy use by 2040. The stress that they put on the electricity grid could cause bills to soar by 23 per cent by 2035, and the Climate Council estimates that they will increase climate pollution by 14 per cent by 2035. The constant noise, light and pollution produced by these facilities is a health hazard to residents who live near them, and they pose a fire hazard. As the data centres have been fast-tracked under the Victorian government's urban growth zone planning provisions, my constituent asks: why has there been no community consultation in the planning of these data centres, given the enormous risks they pose to community wellbeing, environmental sustainability, safety and quality of life?

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (14:08): (2491) My question is for the Minister for Education. Will the minister provide funding for safety and usability upgrades to an outdoor area at Woodend Primary School? When he was Minister for Education, now Premier Ben Carroll failed to properly maintain school buildings in the Macedon Ranges shire. Sixty per cent of the schools in the shire are in poor or worn condition, but only one school received a small amount of funding in this year's state budget. Liberal candidate for Macedon Kate Kendall and I have both visited Woodend Primary School to inspect the site. On my visit I had the pleasure of watching the amazing staff teach eager learners, but I also saw leaking ceilings, rotting doorframes and outdoor areas with trip hazards. Woodend Primary has submitted a grant application to make safe and redevelop an outdoor area that has cracked and uneven footpaths and exposed concrete piping. I strongly support the school's funding application and ask the minister to fund this project and other maintenance at Woodend Primary.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (14:09): (2492) My question is to the Minister for Housing, Building and Precincts. I have been contacted by a constituent of mine in Balaclava who has described serious defects in her new property. She signed a contract in 2021 for the construction of a townhouse, and since then she has discovered water damage that she believes was caused by leakage from the townhouse next door. She recently had an appraisal completed by an insurance expert, who identified 140 defects, including safety hazards. She has reported these to her owners corporation and to the insurer, but they have failed to cover the damages. As a result of this, my constituent and her young family have been saddled with significant financial pressure from both her mortgage and the rectification of this damage. Minister, can you please assist my constituent to understand what kind of safeguards exist for owners where their owner corporation and insurer refuse to cover incidents of developer and builder noncompliance?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (14:10): (2493) My question is to the Minister for Health. I have been contacted by residents living in Bendigo who have experienced frightening situations when ambulances were simply not available. One resident's father-in-law developed severe abdominal pain at 2 am, and between 2 and 5 am Triple Zero advised that no ambulance or taxi was available and told the family to drive him to the hospital themselves. Another resident found her husband collapsed on the bathroom floor. She was told there was no ambulance available and spent more than an hour getting him down the stairs and into their car to transport him to hospital. At the same time, the latest health data shows regional emergency departments, including Albury and Bendigo, are among the worst performing in Victoria, with patients waiting 24 hours or more. The data shows there has been a significant increase in the number of patients exceeding waiting 24 hours in the last 10 years. Minister, what immediate steps is the government taking to reduce the emergency department wait times and ensure that families can access an ambulance when they urgently need it?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:11): (2494) My question today is to the Minister for Environment. In Whittlesea in my electorate there have been plans for the grassy eucalypt woodland reserve for many, many years. The grassy eucalypt woodlands are home to majestic red river gums, as well as threatened species like the golden sun moth, striped legless lizard and threatened flora. In 2009 the Labor government committed to this 1200-hectare reserve, and yet here we are almost 20 years later with little to no progress. Securing this land for nature not only protects this precious biodiversity into the future but also acts as an important offset to the continued development and clearing of land around this urban growth boundary. Minister, will you commit to funding to see this reserve secured within the next five years?

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (14:12): (2495) My question is for the Minister for Police. Pakington Street is Geelong's best shopping precinct, yet desperate and disillusioned traders there now face repeated break-ins, theft, property damage and antisocial behaviour. In recent months businesses have suffered burglaries and substantial losses, with some targeted more than once. Traders have become so frustrated they are coordinating their own crime warnings and sharing CCTV footage. The City of Greater Geelong and mayor Stretch Kontelj have responded with a practical proposal. They have identified nine locations for CCTV cameras between Autumn Street and Church Street and estimate the entire project would cost approximately \$50,000. CCTV would provide a visible deterrent, assist Victoria Police investigations and help restore confidence among traders, staff and shoppers. Will the minister commit the modest funding required to install these nine cameras and help make Pakington Street safer?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (14:13): (2496) My constituency question is for the Minister for Mental Health. Minister, Kids Helpline does a great job supporting young people experiencing mental health challenges, responding to 33,543 contacts from Victorian children and young people in 2025. The Victorian Labor government rejected Kids Helpline's requests for \$4.5 million in the last budget, despite one in seven children and adolescents aged four to 17 years old experiencing mental illness. Helal, a Northern Metro constituent and member of my multicultural youth advisory committee, told me:

... what the Labor Government doesn't understand is that some kids don't feel comfortable getting pulled out of class or being publicly exposed as the "kid who sees a therapist" at school.

The Kids Helpline allows confidentiality and 24-hour care for kids who may be sitting, unable to sleep at the darkest of hours. Minister, will you commit to fully funding Kids Helpline?

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:14): (2497) My constituency question is to the Minister for Health. There is something quite exquisitely painful about a parent having to watch their child live in pain. Gippsland mother Melissa has a daughter Matilda. Matilda suffers from dental demineralisation, causing brittle teeth, pain and distress. Until recently she was receiving treatment under a treatment plan through the Latrobe Valley special dental hub. Well, no more, because the government has cut that service, leaving Matilda and her treatment in limbo. What happens next is that they have to make an appointment at the Royal Dental Hospital. They have travel costs. They have long waitlists. All the while poor Melissa is seeing her daughter suffer. This is not good enough. This government has cut that specific, important funding for this venture, and I ask the minister what she is going to do to save Matilda's teeth.

Southern Metropolitan Region

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (14:15): (2498) Today I want to raise a matter for the Minister for Planning. Just a week ago I held a large forum in Ashburton and Glen Iris. There were almost 150 people in attendance, people concerned about the state government's planning approach, concerned about the decisions that the minister has made, with planning amendments that will see six and eight storeys as the discretionary height limit in Ashburton. These discretionary height limits are not worth the paper they are written on. They are discretionary, and we have seen already in the City of Boroondara, in Kew, that the minister has signed off height limits beyond the discretionary limits. The fear is high-density high-rise development that will not have council or community support is being foisted on the area. There is wild anger at the government's arrogant and undemocratic approach, and I am asking the planning minister to review the decisions, to reverse the decisions to override and to bulldoze local communities and to provide a way forward that involves the community and the City of Boroondara.

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:16): (2499) Rochelle Halstead and Jess Wilson have committed to investing \$350 million into completing the Wonthaggi Hospital redevelopment, which was promised by the Labor government but which they have not delivered. My question for the Minister for Health is: will you do the same? A resident from just outside Wonthaggi recently contacted me. They have been forced to travel to Melbourne to receive treatment that they should be getting closer to home. They have asked: when is it that this government will take taxpayers in the Bass electorate seriously so they do not have to keep paying for things within the tram tracks – the Suburban Rail Loop and all the other things that you have forced them to pay for – and when will they get their fair share?

*Motions***Construction industry**

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (14:18): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes:
 - (a) in February 2026, this house called for a royal commission into corruption on Big Build sites, supported by every non-government party, and Labor ignored it;
 - (b) the Premier twice dismissed a royal commission before reversing his position on becoming Premier;
 - (c) the Premier served as roads and public transport minister, concedes he may be called as a witness, and is writing the terms for an inquiry into a government he helped lead;
- (2) affirms that a royal commission must:
 - (a) investigate corruption, criminality and misconduct across all government-funded construction projects since December 2014, not merely Big Build sites or the CFMEU;
 - (b) examine unions, contractors, subcontractors, labour hire firms, ministerial offices, departments and agencies, including how projects were selected, procured, administered and funded;
 - (c) determine what current and former premiers, ministers, advisers and senior officials knew, when they knew it and what they did, including early public examination of the Honourable Daniel Andrews, the Honourable Jacinta Allan MP, and the Honourable Ben Carroll MP;
 - (d) follow public money to organised crime, outlaw motorcycle gangs, contractors, political organisations, and unions, including redundancy, training and entitlement funds;
 - (e) be led by an independent interstate commissioner in consultation with the opposition;
 - (f) commence public hearings before the election, obtain cabinet records, and test claims of privilege and public interest immunity; and
- (3) calls on the government to adopt these requirements, because a narrow Labor-drafted inquiry into Labor's conduct would be no reckoning, merely the same old cover-up under new management.

I have put forward the motion in my name today because it is important to talk about what a royal commission actually means. Announcing an inquiry is easy, but the real work lies in the detail behind it. Unfortunately, a royal commission is not a silver bullet. There is no button to press which suddenly delivers truth and accountability on demand. Like so many things, what you get out of a royal commission depends on what you put into it. It is people who produce truth, and they will only do that if they are given the scope, the powers, the time and the permission to go looking for it.

We are not arguing anymore about whether Victoria needs an inquiry. That argument is over, and we won it. In February every non-government party in this house supported a royal commission into corruption on Victorian government construction sites. Labor ignored us. Then Ben Carroll became Premier, and suddenly the royal commission he had twice dismissed as too slow and too expensive became his signature integrity policy. His conversion did not exactly happen on the road to Damascus – it came on the road to the latest disastrous state election polling. Still, as they say, better late than never.

But now comes the part that actually matters. The terms of reference have to be right. The commissioner has to be right, so do the deputy commissioners and counsel assisting. The witnesses have to be the right witnesses. They have to be called at the right time and, wherever possible, be examined in public. If these things are wrong through carelessness or by design, then this state could spend years and millions of dollars on an exercise which tells Victorians nothing they did not already know. The terms of reference are not administrative fine print, the terms of reference are the inquiry. They decide where the commissioner can look, what questions can be asked, what evidence can be pursued and, just as importantly with this Labor government, what is left safely outside the fence. We all know what a failed inquiry looks like because Victoria has lived through one. The Coate inquiry into hotel quarantine sat, took evidence and produced a report, yet the central decision it was

established to examine somehow escaped explanation. Nobody could remember. Nobody was responsible. A decision of enormous consequence apparently just happened. We cannot have that again. We cannot spend years listening to 'I don't recall', 'I wasn't told', 'That wasn't my responsibility' and 'That was a decision for somebody else'. This inquiry has to find answers.

That brings me to the new Premier's own position. Nobody on this side is complacent about November. Elections are decided by voters. But the reality is that this royal commission may well become the defining legacy of Ben Carroll's premiership. It may be the only legacy. Royal commissions outlive premiers, and these hearings will continue long after the political circumstances which created this inquiry have changed. The question for the Premier is this: does he want to be remembered as the leader who finally opened the books and established a serious inquiry which followed the evidence wherever it led or as the Premier who established a cynical, expensive political exercise, which Victorians were left paying for and listening to, probably shaking their heads in disbelief long after he left the hot seat and possibly politics entirely. I do not believe anybody enters public life hoping to be remembered for the second outcome, but that is the choice in front of the Premier, and he is making it now in the drafting of these terms.

Mr Carroll has talked endlessly about a fresh start. He stood up on his first day and told Victorians that integrity was not optional. Very well. A fresh start is only a fresh start if you do actually do things differently. If 'integrity is not optional' means anything, it has to be in the DNA of this royal commission: in the terms the Premier settles, the commissioner he appoints, the powers the commission receives and the witnesses who get called. That is what this motion asks for. It should be self-evident that we cannot examine the CFMEU as though the union operated in a vacuum. We need to investigate the whole system around those projects: contractors, subcontractors, labour hire firms, consultants, unions, ministerial offices, departments and agencies, and how projects were conceived, selected, procured, administered and funded. I saw a question from the Australian Constructors Association recently which summarises it well. They asked how a small group of union officials acquired the power to dictate which subcontractors a tier 1 builder was obliged to hire. That is not a question about industrial relations, it is a question about government. The state was no innocent bystander here. The state was the client and the paymaster. It owned the projects. Ministers stood in front of the cameras in high-vis jackets and hard hats taking the credit. So they cannot now retreat behind the farcical idea that what happened on those same worksites was somebody else's business.

This royal commission must ask the questions Victorians themselves would ask – simple questions: who knew what, when did they know it, who told them and what did they do about it? Either ministers knew what was happening on projects they ran and did nothing or they did not know, which is a serious indictment of another kind. This necessarily includes the people at the top. Daniel Andrews should not be beyond examination, nor should Jacinta Allan and nor should Ben Carroll. It also means the commission must obtain cabinet records and test robustly every claim of privilege made against it, because we already hear reporting that briefings warning about infiltration in 2023 were left unsigned in a minister's office. If deniability was conveniently, deliberately manufactured at the time, then only an inquiry with those powers will ever dig up the truth.

Mr Carroll says he would be happy to appear if called, and we take him at his word, but that creates an obvious difficulty. A man who becomes a witness should not be the one who alone decides which questions may be asked of him. That is why the commissioner has to be genuinely independent and why the opposition should be consulted on the terms, the appointment, the powers and the resourcing, not to give us a veto but in the interests of legitimacy and continuity. Whatever happens on 28 November, Victorians have to know that this commission belongs to Victoria and not the Labor Party. The Premier tells us he is working on the terms with the Chief Commissioner of Police. That is good. He should be working on them with us all as well. And while he is at it, if he wants to be believed, he should publish the budget, because the amount of money a government allocates is probably the most honest statement it ever makes about how much truth it actually wants.

History is instructive here. The Costigan royal commission began with narrow terms aimed at a single union and became one of the most consequential inquiries this country has held, only because those terms were widened again and again over four years. The lesson is not that narrow terms can be repaired later but that we should not need years of amendments to get it right.

As the motion notes, we have to follow the money. Geoffrey Watson has conservatively estimated that the CFMEU overcharged Victorian taxpayers by around \$15 billion across a \$100 billion program and concluded that much of that money went directly into the hands of criminals and organised crime gangs. Whether the final figure proves to be \$15 billion more or less is exactly the point. A royal commission exists to establish the truth, not to confirm anybody's talking points, including mine. Where did the money go? Who benefited? Were contracts inflated? Were labour hire arrangements manipulated? Did money flow into outlaw motorcycle gangs, into union redundancy training and entitlement funds or into political organisations? Were decent Victorian businesses frozen out because they lacked the right Labor connections? And Victorians are entitled to ask why they should trust this government to answer them when, as we discussed here last sitting week, it quietly commissioned John Merritt to review criminality on Big Build worksites and then sat on the result for more than six months – no media release or press conference or reference on a single government website. That is the ingrained instinct we are dealing with, and it is precisely the instinct these terms of reference must be written to defeat.

Finally, I want to touch on how I think the government still misunderstands the depth of public anger. Victorians do not expect government to be perfect. They know hospitals get busy, that police cannot be everywhere, that roads need repairing, that money is finite. They will forgive a great deal of ordinary failure. But what they will not forgive is the suspicion that their services are worse because somebody else is looking after themselves. There are 405 fewer sworn police than three years ago and 41 stations closed or on reduced hours. More than 68,000 Victorians are waiting for elective surgery. Fewer than two in three code 1 ambulance call-outs arrive within 15 minutes. Teachers have walked off the job, country roads are breaking cars and emergency services fund bills keep landing in letterboxes and keep going up. When a farmer hits another pothole, when a family waits too long for an ambulance, when somebody finds their local station on reduced hours, what genuinely incenses them is the thought that money which should have been working for them went somewhere else – through grey corruption, through soft corruption, and in some cases through straightforward criminal corruption, somebody took what was meant for them and looked after their mates instead.

Failure is forgivable; selfishness and corruption are not. That is why this royal commission is about far more than construction – it is about trust. Does Ben Carroll want to be remembered for restoring trust or putting the final nail in its coffin? Will he be the Premier who opened the books, let the evidence lead where it led and began restoring Victorians' trust in their own government, or the Premier who established a cynical and expensive political exercise announced to neutralise an election problem, carefully fenced to protect the people who built the system and paid for by the very taxpayers who were fleeced in the first place? I would obviously urge the former. Ditch the Temu royal commission, adopt the requirements of this motion and give the commission the scope, the independence and the courage to lance the boil properly. Do not try to protect the guilty or spin the scandal. Another Labor-drafted inquiry into Labor's own conduct will be no reckoning at all – it will simply be the same old cover-up under new management. I commend the motion to the house.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (14:33): I am pleased to rise to speak on Mrs McArthur's motion today about the royal commission that Premier Ben Carroll has announced will be established into the construction sector here in Victoria. The new Premier has said quite clearly the first item of business will be to commission the work to start a royal commission into the construction sector. What we have seen since the day that Ben Carroll was elected and sworn in as Premier of this state is the Liberal Party running scared and running away from their commitment to and their support of a royal commission. There is no further evidence we need that the Liberal Party

is running away from its support of a royal commission in this state than the terms of this motion and the speech just given by the Leader of the Opposition in this place.

What that demonstrates is that the Liberal Party is not serious about a real royal commission that gets to these issues – what they are interested in is putting their thumb on the scales of justice before it begins. It demonstrates that their ostensible support for a royal commission hitherto was not a stand of principle but a play of politics. Because when they have got, in the form of this Premier, someone coming out and doing the work properly via cabinet processes to establish the terms of reference in letters patent with the commissioner under the processes established in the Inquiries Act 2014, we have seen the Liberal Party scurrying to throw muck and to try and predetermine the outcomes of an independent process, not only in violation of the spirit in which this royal commission is being established but also undermining the law in Victoria and undermining the provisions that exist in the Inquiries Act that set out how royal commissions themselves should be established. They do not want a proper inquiry. They want to put their thumbs on the scale of justice and have a predetermined outcome. That is not a royal commission, that is a kangaroo court, and it is not what we want here in the state of Victoria.

If you are serious about dealing with the issues that exist in the construction sector, if you are interested in understanding and exposing some of the side deals and side deeds that may have been entered into by governments about construction projects in the state of Victoria, the terms of this motion demonstrate quite clearly just how blatantly political and antithetical to a genuine inquiry you can get, because this motion on its very terms seeks to limit what the royal commission can investigate. It seeks to stop the royal commission looking at the procurement and funding of large-scale construction projects here in the state of Victoria in the last 15 years. We know therefore – because they have written it in plain English in black and white on the notice paper – that the Liberal Party must have something to hide.

They must be scared of what happened in the term of the last Liberal government, because they want to exclude this royal commission from any examination of any actions of anyone who was involved in any of the construction deals in the last Liberal government, and that, I think, is the best example that we have got as to why this motion and their support for a royal commission is not genuine at all but is just another cheap political stunt. So when Mrs McArthur gets up and exhorts that we need to look at what a royal commission actually means and that what you get out depends on what you put in and then proposes a motion that seeks to limit the royal commission's scope and terms of reference and what it is able to look into, you can see that they are not genuine at all and they do not care about getting to the truth about what has happened in construction projects in Victoria over the last 15 years. All they are interested in is a political hit job. They are discredited, and they should be disregarded about what they have got to say.

What we are doing and what this Premier is doing is setting up a royal commission to examine these issues and going and drafting through proper cabinet processes – not by press releases on a weekend – the exact scope of those letters patent and terms of reference. That is taking regard of the provisions of the Inquiries Act, particularly section 12 of the Inquiries Act, which governs how a royal commission works here in the state of Victoria, which says quite clearly on its face in very plain English that we need to enable the royal commission to conduct its inquiry in a manner that it thinks is appropriate, not predetermine the outcome and not tell them who they have got to go and investigate, which is what Mrs McArthur and the Liberal Party want to do. They want to tell the royal commissioner what to look at and when to look at it, and that is an absolute disgrace and an absolute undermining of the principles of the rule of law that we have here in the state of Victoria and discredits anything that the Liberal Party have got to say about a proper inquiry using the significant powers and resources of a royal commission, because they do not actually want to get to the truth. They actually do not want to understand what is going on. They just want a political witch-hunt. They just want a kangaroo court.

I do not think the people of Victoria want a partisan inquiry at the behest of the Liberal Party. They want an independent royal commission led by an eminent jurist that is going to examine these issues in thorough detail and get to the truth of the matter. What we see before us today is a motion that seeks to limit that royal commission, that seeks to direct the royal commissioner in what they should be looking at and that seeks to predetermine outcomes. They cannot seriously stand up as the Liberal Party, as the alternative government of this state, and claim any credibility on integrity matters when they are seeking to predetermine the outcomes of this inquiry.

They used to support a royal commission. They got a Premier who is setting one up and all of a sudden they are running miles away from a proper investigation. Ms Crozier can wave her comic book around all day. What this government is doing is setting up that royal commission properly, giving due consideration to its terms of reference, not fettering what it can look at, not determining that it is not something. They might have something to hide over there. They might know something about what happened prior to December 2014. They might know what happened in the dying days of the Napthine government and may be unwilling to see it brought out into the public domain. We do not know, because what their motion today tells us is that what they want to do is put their thumbs on the scales of justice and predetermine the outcome of a royal commission that this Premier has said that we are having and that this state has said that it wants.

The Liberal Party cannot be trusted to do this properly. The Liberal Party have form when it comes to setting up sham royal commissions for political purposes. Their friends in Canberra have done it time and time again. If you want to have a proper examination of all of the issues that have occurred in the construction sector in the state of Victoria over the last 15 years, the only way you are going to get there is through the work initiated by the Premier Ben Carroll. He is doing the work now. The cabinet is doing the work now. This motion is a political stunt.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (14:43): I rise to speak on Mrs McArthur's motion, and the Greens will not be supporting this motion today. As Mrs McArthur noted, the Greens supported the motion in February calling for a royal commission, not because we thought it was the best possible course of action to deal with corruption allegations but because it was the only adequate one that seemed likely to get some legs any time soon. The Greens have always maintained that the best way to get to the bottom of these corruption allegations is reforming IBAC so that they have the powers to investigate these matters properly. This means not just follow-the-money powers and public hearings, but also expanding the jurisdiction of IBAC so it can investigate corruption that does not meet the current ridiculously high threshold of conduct involving alleged serious indictable crimes or common-law offending like bribery or misconduct in office. IBAC, if appropriately armed, would effectively function like a standing royal commission, but it would be far cheaper and able to investigate all instances of corruption, not just the issue of the Big Build. This Labor government has generated plenty of potential work for them, and no doubt future governments will continue to do so.

Let us remember that Labor voted against multiple bills to strengthen IBAC over this term, and the Liberals, despite their big talk on integrity, voted against expanding the definition of 'corruption' and have weasel-worded their way out of committing to doing so by saying that if elected they will get a little bit more advice about this. Because when it comes to integrity, the Liberals are not any better than Labor. All we are seeing from them right now with this motion is political opportunism. Just like Labor, they will say anything to get into power. The motion today is just another example of that. The whole point of a royal commission is that it is independent. It is not for politicians to give it a wish list of witnesses or try to dictate terms that suit that party's own agenda. As has been pointed out, the terms of reference are so clearly designed to suit the Liberals' agenda and create parameters that prevent investigation of anything former Liberal governments might have done or any decisions that they might have made from the terms of reference. If the Liberals want a political process, there are plenty of other options, but it is not a royal commission. Right now public trust in our institutions, including Parliament, is at rock bottom. Ensuring that a royal commission has genuine independence and is not just a field for political pointscoring is key to ensuring public confidence in the process. Where we

agree with Mrs McArthur is that it is critically important that we get this inquiry right – but that we get it right by keeping the politics out of it.

The scale of the alleged corruption is staggering, and I think most people in this place, if they have been doing their job and getting out there and talking to people in the community, will know that the public are absolutely appalled by it. Victorians are rightly feeling very angry. They are barely getting by day to day, trying to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. They are trying to get their kids the things they need for school. They are trying to figure out how to pay for a doctor's or a dental appointment. Then they hear that \$15 billion – and that is a conservative estimate – of their taxpayer funds has been siphoned off into organised crime. But it is not just about the loss of money. It is not just the \$15 billion going into the hands of organised criminals. It is the complete lack of acknowledgement or acceptance of responsibility from the Labor government overseeing these projects and overseeing this funding, despite receiving multiple warnings over the years that this was occurring. It is seeing a Labor government that instead says anything to scramble to stay in power, rather than just getting on with it and doing the right thing. I warned in April, when we were having another debate about this issue – when the government arrogantly refused to even consider in the Assembly a bill to strengthen IBAC that was passed by this chamber – that the Labor government's lack of accountability would eventually catch up with them. And it looks like it might be starting to.

We now have a new Premier, who has very early on in their premiership declared that integrity is no longer optional for this government. Top work – I am very pleased to hear that. At least in saying that he has acknowledged what every Victorian already knew: that integrity was entirely optional and, as it turns out, probably not the preferred option under previous premiers. I am not quite sure what Premier Carroll was doing when he was a senior minister or Deputy Premier during the optional integrity period, but he is saying things will change. He is saying a lot of things. The Premier has said there will be a royal commission, which I think has been broadly welcomed. He has also said that at some stage we might see IBAC strengthened. Terrific. We stand ready to pass legislation tomorrow. Bring it on. Everyone in this chamber I think has demonstrated a willingness to pass legislation to strengthen IBAC. But do you know what? I am not going to hold my breath. The thing is he is saying a lot of the right things, but it is still just a lot of talk, not action – the kind of talk that has a remarkable resonance with Victorian Labor's optional integrity era.

Mr Batchelor said the Liberals are not to be trusted to do this investigation properly, and I agree with that. But I also do not believe that Labor are any better. Victorians deserve a government that is genuine about tackling corruption and strengthening integrity. From what we have seen this term, including what we have seen today here with this motion, they clearly cannot rely on Labor or the coalition to deliver that.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:49): I rise to speak to Mrs McArthur's motion. It got rather heated back there with the extraordinary assertions made by Mr Batchelor. But I want to congratulate Mrs McArthur for bringing this to the house, because this is an important issue. In fact it is the number one issue that Victorians are really concerned about – the corruption and level of waste and what has been going on under the guise of Ben Carroll or Jacinta Allan or Daniel Andrews before her in this term of Parliament – because as we have seen, the corruption is rife. A fish rots from its head. The Premier was the Deputy Premier under Jacinta Allan, and she continually turned a blind eye to the CFMEU corruption. It was the Liberals who first said that a royal commission needed to be undertaken into the corruption. That was first announced in July of 2024, and at that time we were very concerned about the illegal and thuggish behaviour that had been allowed to occur. Since that time multiple news articles have got to the extent of understanding what has gone on with the CFMEU.

I want to go to some of the comments, but before I do that, I just want to pick up on the Greens being holier than thou. They have been funded by the CFMEU in their election endeavours. That is on the record – \$60,000 back in 2010. I do not know that they can be preaching to anyone in this place about integrity when they have taken donations from the CFMEU.

On the CFMEU, and I want to speak about the area we know, in the Big Build, but it has also been exposed in the building of hospitals. Stephen King said he was improperly pushed by the government to cave into the construction union's demands to sack a plastering firm. As he said in an article back on 14 July 2026:

The pressure came down to me from the government, and I was told it wanted the subcontractor gone. When I asked about it, I was told the CFMEU was putting pressure on the government and the CFMEU was meeting the government regularly.

That is the extent of the dirty deals that were done under this administration. It does not matter who is leading it, whether it is Daniel Andrews or Jacinta Allan or Ben Carroll, because he was deputy and he stood beside her. Just like Mr Batchelor, who stood in this house and did not back a royal commission, all of you were saying a royal commission was not needed, because that was the then Premier Jacinta Allan's line: 'We don't need a royal commission.' Mr Batchelor said:

The appropriate body to deal with allegations of criminal activity in the state of Victoria is Victoria Police. No other body, whether it be the standing royal commission, in the form of IBAC, that we have in this state or another royal commission-like process, is going to – because of the way that those processes work – or is empowered with the same prosecutorial vehicles to bring criminal charges and to arrest people.

We have got to get through to the absolute issues around what happened and whether prosecutions need to be made given what is found through the royal commission process. The government does not want that, because the findings will be damning and they will be extensive and deep. That is because the rot has been going on for far too long, for 12 years. And the ridiculous deflections by Mr Batchelor and others on integrity – spare me. How you can even think to lecture this side when you have been overseeing the biggest corruption scandal in the country's history let alone the state's history.

And look where we are with the dirty deals, whether it is the CFMEU or the United Firefighters Union. While I am on that, Tony Bates, who has run a mile, who was exposed recently by Operation Richmond, was the government head of integrity and did the backroom deals with the UFU. That is how Labor rolls. It does not matter if it is the UFU or the CFMEU, they do backroom dirty deals, just as Stephen King said about what happened with hospital builds and the Victorian Health Building Authority. This is a disgrace; it is absolutely a disgrace. Stephen King is quoted in this article, and he has decades of experience in managing major government projects. People like that should be called before a royal commission, but so should those decision-makers – like former leaders, like Daniel Andrews, like Jacinta Allan, like the Deputy Premier. I think that we have every right to point out to the Victorian public who we think should come before the royal commission so that Victorians can see what has gone on. It should not be hidden behind closed doors like we saw through the IBAC process with Operation Richmond; it should be a royal commission to expose it. We do not want a cover-up sham process like the Coate inquiry – absolutely not. I know that Jennifer Coate did her best, because I spoke to her, but the terms of reference given by the government and the former Premier and everybody else that was involved and called before that inquiry saying 'I can't recall' and 'I can't remember' were a farce. It was a disgrace. It was a betrayal of the Victorian people.

That is why we have no faith in the government and the deputy – he is not the Deputy Premier now. He has been elevated because the Premier got the boot. She has gone, never to be seen. She will not come back here. She will never come back to the Parliament. Rumour is she is going to resign. I mean, seriously, she cannot even face the music after everything and the destruction from the decisions under her watch, under Ben Carroll's watch and under Daniel Andrews's watch. It does not matter who they are. It is the same corrupt, desperate government. They have just got a different name for their leader. Victorians can see through it. Believe you me, they can see through it. I am out there knocking on doors, and they are saying, 'It doesn't matter. He's nobody. He's as weak as water.'

I want to go back to why this royal commission is important – the level of corruption and the depth of corruption. Geoffrey Watson's findings speak about what he heard from the hearings on the issues and his understanding of what has gone on. His report really goes to the infiltration of the sites. We were hearing this. I was hearing this through COVID. People were reaching out to me saying, 'You've got

no idea what is going on on some of these sites.’ I spoke to journalists, but they were powerless. People were intimidated and terrified about going to the police. Well, thank God some people have stood up and shown what has gone on: the absolute infiltration and the standover tactics by these criminals, these thugs and these bikies; the appalling abuse; the sexual exploitation; the drug taking; and the drug dealing. That all happened in this state: \$15 billion and more. ‘No,’ Jacinta Allan said, ‘there’s nothing to see here.’ Every one of you said, ‘Run off to the police.’ They said, ‘We don’t have the powers.’ IBAC said, ‘We don’t have the powers.’

There is much to do in this state to clean up the mess that Labor has put this state in. It will take decades to unravel. It will take decades to pay off the appalling debt that has ramped up because of the ongoing corruption and abuse of taxpayer money. This motion goes to the point about what this house said needed to be done. The government voted against it. Let us not forget what happened. They did not support what was required. All of a sudden the polls are going south. The Premier gets knifed. A new boy comes in and takes over: ‘Oh, it’s all hunky dory, Victorians. It’s under control. I hear you, I listen to you and I’m going to fix it.’ No, you are not. It is just the same desperate, corrupt government with a new leader, a new Premier who stood by Jacinta Allan as her deputy and admitted himself that she would make a phone call on the Sunday night and he would just roll over and do whatever she wanted him to do in the cabinet the next day. My God, he thinks that he can get up there and lecture Victorians about integrity – well, no.

We need to fix this, and we need a proper royal commission. I think Victorians understand. They will have no faith in this government writing the terms of reference and having another cover-up. We have reached out and said, ‘Bring us in so you understand what you need to do.’ That has all been rejected – just like the Coate inquiry and just like COVID. That is what the government did. It shut the opposition down. It shut us out, saying, ‘They are irrelevant.’ That is their *modus operandi*. Well, not anymore; Victorians have woken up to this corrupt, desperate government that has put so much pain and destruction on so many Victorians, and I say – (*Time expired*)

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (15:00): I want to make something clear right from the outset. The question before us is not whether there should be a royal commission into the construction sector; there will be one. The first action of Premier Ben Carroll was to announce that his government would establish a royal commission into the construction sector. The Premier has been clear: integrity will be at the centre of the government he leads. Where workers or taxpayers have been let down, we need to know how, and where reform is necessary, we need the courage to deliver it. That is precisely why a royal commission is being established.

A royal commission is the most serious form of public inquiry available to a government. It is not a press conference and it is not a social media post, and it certainly should not be treated as a political plaything. A royal commission requires careful legal work, rigorous terms of reference and above all a commissioner whose independence, experience and standing are beyond question. That distinction is at the heart of why this motion should be opposed. The government wants a royal commission capable of following the evidence wherever it leads. Those opposite appear to want a royal commission that follows their political script.

Before a commissioner has even been appointed, before evidence has been gathered and before a single witness has been heard, the opposition apparently already knows who should appear, when they should appear and where the inquiry should look. That is not how an independent inquiry operates. You cannot demand an independent royal commission and simultaneously try to dictate its work. You cannot say that you respect the judicial process while publishing lists of people you want hauled before it. Utter politicisation is not appropriate. You cannot claim to be searching for the truth when you appear to have already decided what that truth should be. A genuinely independent commissioner must be able to determine which witnesses are relevant, what evidence needs to be gathered first and what should be heard publicly. They also determine how the commission should interact with ongoing criminal and regulatory investigations. Those are serious decisions with serious consequences.

There is also a very important issue of procedural fairness here. People are entitled to procedural fairness regardless of whether we agree with them politically, whether we like them or not, no matter their politics. That principle cannot be discarded simply because there might be a short-term political advantage in doing so. That is not independence.

The royal commission established by this government will follow the evidence; it will definitely not follow the opposition's media plan. Premier Carroll made the decision to establish this inquiry because it is in the public interest to get to the truth. The Premier has also made it absolutely clear that he will co-operate with the royal commission, including appearing before it if called. There will be no special treatment. Those opposite argue that because the Premier could potentially be called he should somehow have no role in the government establishing the inquiry. That argument simply does not withstand scrutiny. By that logic no government could establish a royal commission examining events that occurred during its period in office. The solution is not to hand control of a royal commission to the Liberal Party, as this motion suggests. The solution is strong terms of reference, a proper and transparent establishment process, and a fiercely independent commissioner.

We also need to remember that this inquiry will not operate in isolation. There are a number of other initiatives that have also been announced by the Premier, including the strengthening of IBAC. The construction division of the CFMEU is already under Commonwealth administration. There are Commonwealth regulators and enforcement processes operating in this space, and in Victoria agencies already have responsibilities relating to workplace safety, labour hire, procurement, integrity and criminal conduct. The Commonwealth-appointed administrator has asked Victoria to consult so that our respective efforts strengthen each other rather than overlap. That is sensible. We should ensure information can be shared appropriately, and we should avoid unnecessary duplication. Critically, we must ensure that one process does not inadvertently compromise another live investigation.

Those opposite seem to confuse noise with action, and I am much more interested in results. Because if we are serious about reforming the construction sector, we need to look beyond tomorrow's headline. How do we better protect our worker who speaks up about intimidation? How do we prevent exploitation through sham contracting and complicated layers of subcontracting? How do we ensure labour hire arrangements are properly regulated? How do we ensure that workers are protected from wage theft? How do we change workplace cultures in which unacceptable conduct has been allowed to take hold? How do we ensure public money is protected?

I also find it worth noting that when this government established the Labour Hire Authority to regulate the labour hire industry and protect vulnerable workers, those opposite voted against it. So I find some of the sudden enthusiasm from the opposition for workplace integrity a little difficult to reconcile with their voting record. Integrity is not something you discover when there is a political opportunity. It requires strong institutions, strong laws and the willingness to examine systems as well as individuals. This is about protecting workers and protecting taxpayers. It is about protecting the integrity of an industry that employs thousands of hardworking Victorians and builds the infrastructure our state depends on. Those workers should not have their entire industry defined by allegations against individuals or organisations. They deserve an inquiry that is serious enough to distinguish allegation from evidence and evidence from fact, and Victorians deserve recommendations capable of delivering lasting reform.

The Carroll Labor government will establish a strong and independent royal commission. It will work alongside law enforcement, regulators and integrity agencies. It will have the ability to investigate corruption and criminality and, importantly, the circumstances and systems that allowed misconduct to occur. It will help us protect workers, protect public money and restore confidence in Victoria's construction sector. What it will not be is a publicly funded political witch-hunt directed by the Liberal Party. This issue is far too serious for that. I reject this politically motivated motion, and I support a proper independent establishment of a royal commission.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:10): Victorians are sick to death of organised crime and corruption in this state. They are absolutely sick to death of it. They see evidence of it every day with new firebombing attacks and with what is being reported about construction sites – which is just the tip of the iceberg I think – and they see a government that has overseen this and they see an opposition which has failed to hold the government to account on this. Victorians are mad at both the major parties for what has happened here. While Victorians are being bled dry through taxes, they see their money wasted through corruption, and yet basic services – basic functions of the state – like fixing the roads and making sure that we have enough police to stop criminals on the street fall by the wayside.

To the government's credit, the new Premier has finally been dragged, kicking and screaming, to establish a royal commission. This is a good thing. As Mr Batchelor pointed out, it needs to be done in accordance with the Inquiries Act 2014. No-one has seen the terms of reference yet, so I will reserve my judgement for when they are published. I would very much like to see them. I have said, through an adjournment question in this place, some things about the terms of reference that I would like to see. I am very disappointed today to see this motion by the Liberal Party trying to narrow the scope of the royal commission. They are trying to narrow it. They are claiming that they want to see integrity and they want to see corruption and organised crime unmasked, yet they want to limit the royal commission to the days after they lost government in Victoria.

Anyone that has been looking at what is happening with organised crime in Victoria in the corruption sector would know that the origin story for everything that is happening now is the desal plant in Wonthaggi. It was reported at the time there were bikies there. There were cranes that were not being used or were underused. There was drug dealing. In fact in December last year there was a report in the local papers that spoke about the ongoing problems with meth addiction caused by the desal plant. Some locals were wanting to oppose extensions of and further investment in the desal plant because they were worried about more drugs coming into town. They have still got that memory after all these years, and that happened in 2012 under a Liberal government. I do not know what they knew about it. I do not know what they did to stop it. Maybe they did some great things; I do not know. But limiting this royal commission to only look at things that have happened in this time whilst ignoring what is essentially the origin story of the situation that we are in is totally wrong. This will be one of the key things that I will be looking at when these terms of reference are released. It has to go back and look at the desal plant, because it was the same people, the same organised crime groups and the same types of corruption. We talk now about drugs and strippers and no-show jobs and stuff as if it is something new. It has been happening for a very long time. It is nothing new at all – same people, same gangs, same modus operandi – and yet the Liberal Party want to exclude that from scrutiny. That is irresponsible, that is wrong, and we should not be doing that.

I also take issue with what the Liberal Party have been doing in trying to name witnesses that they think should appear. Let us hope that we get a commissioner of high integrity that is intelligent enough to see what has happened in Victoria and what is necessary to do to uncover this and get to the bottom of everything. I would hope that they are more than capable of identifying witnesses and who should be called to find out what is going on. Maybe there are some people that were in the Liberal government at the time that need to answer some questions about what was going on in Wonthaggi, because there were obviously some bad things going on there. The locals are still suffering from what happened. They are still suffering the scourge of ice addiction in that town all these years later and they are still scarred from it. The opposition may say that project was all kicked off by the Labor Party, but much of that construction happened under the Liberal Party, under the Liberal government.

One of the things that happened under the Liberal government, and it was related to the desal plant, was the pipelines in Clyde North. I have lots of questions about that. I have had constituents approach me with lots of questions about the types of construction that were done with these pipelines – things like why they are so shallow in many areas that you cannot drive cars over them. It seems like a crazy

design issue. I do not know why they were done like that. Was there something untoward going on? I do not know.

Ms Crozier raised the Greens and was talking about how the Greens took some donation from the CFMEU in the past. Apparently that happened in 2010 in the ACT or something. That would have been outside the terms of reference. So something untoward did happen, but under the Liberal Party's terms of reference that would be totally fine and not need to be looked at, according to the Liberal Party. This is wrong, what they are doing here.

The royal commission absolutely needs to look at things that happened before December 2014. That will be a key metric on which I will be judging the government's terms of reference when they finally publish them. I hope that the Premier makes the right decision and does go back further than December 2014. Without that we cannot discover the history of the state that we are in, because it was happening back then and it is happening now. We need to get to the bottom of how this started in the first place.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (15:16): I rise to speak on Mrs McArthur's excellent motion, and I thank her for leading the debate on this important issue that has shocked the state more than any other Labor corruption scandal in history. If there is one thing that we have learned about this Premier, it is that he cannot be trusted. He has said countless times that a royal commission into union corruption is not necessary. Remember? He said it would cost too much and take too long and that they were putting in the action required – until the political pressure became all too great and he rolled the former Premier and said he would call one. He lied to his own daughter about his support for the former Premier.

This Premier cannot be trusted on a royal commission, which we still have not seen terms of reference for. It was his first thing. He said his first thing would be to call a royal commission. Well, he has not. Calling a royal commission means signing and calling a royal commission with terms of reference, with letters patent to establish it. He is supposedly getting his secretary to write terms of reference and brief him on terms of reference. We still have not seen them. What I believe is that this Premier does not want public hearings to be occurring before the November election, so he is dragging it out as long as possible in order to avoid any hearings disparaging what this Andrews–Allan–Carroll government has been up to.

I do enjoy these Wednesday debates. There have been many of them. I could not help but hear Mr Batchelor wax lyrical about how Labor is standing firm and Labor is the only one with integrity and it is going to have integrity in moving a royal commission. It was a previous Wednesday – and there have been lots of debates about this topic – but I want to quote Mr Batchelor from 18 March this year. He said:

The appropriate body to deal with allegations of criminal activity in the state of Victoria is Victoria Police. No other body, whether it be the standing royal commission, in the form of IBAC, that we have in this state or another royal commission-like process, is going to – because of the way that those processes work – or is empowered with the same prosecutorial vehicles to bring criminal charges and to arrest people. I think that if you are serious about stopping criminal behaviour on construction sites, you call the cops, because what the police can do is arrest people and what the police can do is charge people.

We have a member waxing lyrical about the need for a royal commission now, who in March was viciously arguing against a royal commission. Spare me on the integrity of those opposite in dismissing a royal commission. In particular, Mr Batchelor at the same time as he was dismissing a royal commission was saying, 'Well, we need to go to Victoria Police. It should be referred to Victoria Police.' But we know that the police at the same time, as far back as the start of the year and last year, were asking former Premier Jacinta Allan for more powers, because they stated publicly they did not have the powers to deal with the broadscale corruption going on on construction sites. So spare me the lectures from the other side about integrity over a royal commission, when they fought to the bitter end to prop up Jacinta Allan to save themselves from having a royal commission.

Now they have managed to look her in the eye and then roll her and propose a royal commission. But we still have not seen the terms of reference, which means they are trying to avoid a royal commission and its hearings being up and running before the election because they are worried what people might say. They are worried that the Victorian people will finally figure out the corruption that has gone on under this government. I mean, \$15 billion was siphoned off construction sites through the CFMEU to criminals, strippers and bikies. It is an absolute disgrace. At the same time, why did they need to increase taxes and need to massively increase land taxes? Countless people I have spoken to in the northern suburbs are not only paying their own mortgage but paying the mortgage on their small business, and they have been whacked with sometimes four or five times the amount of land tax, crushing their businesses into the ground, only for them to see that people like those opposite have been defending against having a royal commission into \$15 billion of taxpayer money being siphoned off to strippers, to bikies and to the criminal underworld. There is a massive amount of blowouts under this government on infrastructure projects – \$50 billion worth – and a huge waste of \$15 billion being siphoned off. It is an outrage.

At the same time, they are cutting community hospitals like Eltham. At the same time, they are not being able to staff community hospitals like Craigieburn. At the same time, they are shutting down police station counters all across the state. Forty police stations have reduced operating hours or have been shut completely. Yet this government has the gall to say, 'Oh, no, we're doing a royal commission now.' They are only doing a royal commission to save their own political skin because of what was leaked out there. They are all out there doorknocking, and people know a crook when they see one. For hours and hours those opposite have spent time in here defending the corrupt practices on construction sites, making excuses for it and saying, 'Refer it to the police,' when the police do not have the powers.

How about the former Premier? She said, 'Oh, I wrote to IBAC after these allegations aired in July 2024,' only to never release the fact that IBAC wrote to her six weeks later saying they did not have the powers to do anything about it. What did the former Premier do with that information? She kept it quiet from all of her colleagues, from the media and from the Victorian people. You would think getting a letter like that as Premier would prompt you to say, 'Okay, what can we do about this? We can make those changes. We can bring them into the Parliament.' She could have even done the year-and-a-half review, which she announced much later on and wanted to push back to after the election, and had it in place before the election. Well, of course she would not want that. Neither would the rest of them that were involved.

As I said, this Premier cannot be trusted. We all recall – I believe it was somewhere in Carlton – the current Premier Ben Carroll with the then Treasurer Tim Pallas attending a CFMEU-hosted fundraiser. And who was there? John Setka. The union reported in the media that those members, Mr Carroll and Mr Pallas, guaranteed decades of a pipeline of work on infrastructure for their members. What we all know is that it was really decades of crookedness and dodgy deals under this government to expand the remit of the CFMEU, which meant that they could get bikies straight out of prison onto construction sites as health and safety reps. That is what actually happened because of the philosophy that 'Everyone's got to eat'. Do you know whose money that is? It is taxpayers money that has been ripped out of all sorts of government services, ripped out of roads funding in our state and ripped out of community hospitals in our state and gone to strippers and to bikies, to give people – criminal bikies – straight out of prison jobs of over \$250,000 a year on taxpayer-funded construction sites. It is an absolute disgrace, and I commend Mrs McArthur's motion to the house.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (15:26): The Liberals are being true to form again, and as Victorians know, they are unable to do anything constructive or positive with their time in this place. Even now, when Premier Carroll has stood up and announced a royal commission, they are unable to be supportive or to be productive. We heard Mr Limbrick. Mr Limbrick stood over there and called out the Liberals. We know the Liberals have no values. They have nothing that brings them together

to make the lives of Victorians better. We know the Liberals' ideologies are driven by driving down workers' pay and conditions – lower wages.

In this motion they have brought here today the politics shows out. They do not want the best possible independent inquiry. They want it to suit their internal politics. They are not worried about getting the most relevant witnesses. They are not worried about getting those relevant witnesses to appear in the best possible order to ensure that evidence can be gathered appropriately and to ensure that criminal investigations that are occurring in parallel can run their process. For the Liberals it is all political, and in the time in the debate we have heard so far there has been nothing constructive put forward. It has been mudslinging, it has been attacking language, not dealing with the substance of the issue, and it just fits with the Liberal Party that voters know.

With institutions – whether they be our major corporations, whether they be our sports clubs, whether they be our banks or indeed whether they be our unions – where there are people, we have to be ever vigilant. We have to be ever vigilant to weed out any corruption. It is critically important for our society that we have faith that the operation and processes of our institutions are free from corruption. Indeed, unions are too important to have corruption in them because hundreds of thousands – millions – of members rely on their unions to represent them and to ensure the pay that they take home to their families and spend in their communities. That keeps our economy strong, something that this side believes in – in workforces being paid well and in workforces, homes and families having enough money to have the highest possible quality of life they can but also in being able to make a contribution to the local economies that they live in, the local high streets, the local small businesses and the strip shops. It is important that workers take home decent pay, so we need strong unions. Like I said before, no matter which of the institutions that are critically important to our society, they all need to be strong.

A royal commission is the most serious form of public inquiry available to the government. Despite the fact that it is being called, those opposite continue to stay here and play politics. Despite the fact a royal commission is being set in place to uncover the truth and the causes of alleged misconduct and alleged criminal activity and to deliver lasting reforms, those opposite continue with their stunts. They have already decided in their minds who should be called without a judicial officer, the order in which they should appear and the conclusions they want Victorians to reach before a commissioner has even been appointed. It is not in the interests of an independent process. If those opposite had their way, the outcomes would be as hopeless as the Cole commission. That is not integrity, that is a simply a sham. They have no intent of the independence of the royal commission and no intent for the commissioner to determine, as I said before, witnesses that are relevant, the order in which they should be called, which matters should be heard publicly and how parallel criminal investigations should be protected. We need to enable the royal commission to follow evidence and follow its due process. As I said before, the Liberals are well known to be all about themselves and not about the best outcomes for Victorians.

The government will establish a serious, independent and effective royal commission. We will appoint a commissioner with the experience, authority and independence required to conduct this inquiry without fear or favour. We will develop terms of reference that go to the heart of the problems within the construction sector. We will not compromise investigations or duplicate work simply to meet an artificial political timetable imposed by the opposition. We will not prescribe findings before evidence is heard, and the government will give Victorians confidence that this royal commission is independent, methodical and capable of producing real reform.

Premier Carroll's first act as Premier was to call a royal commission into the construction sector. The Premier has also made it clear that he will cooperate with the royal commission, including appearing if called – no special treatment. The Liberals are saying that the Premier cannot call the royal commission. By that logic, no government could ever establish a royal commission examining matters that occurred during its time in office. Yet again, without thinking – and we see it regularly, like the press release they did the other day where Ms Crozier spoke – they have tripped over their own feet, because they have not put the time and the effort and the consideration into their announcements to get things right.

The answer is not to hand control of the inquiry to the Liberal Party. The answer is strong terms of reference, transparent establishment processes and a fiercely independent commissioner. That is exactly what the Carroll Labor government will deliver. We will consult with Commonwealth and other integrity agencies, and we will ensure relevant information can be shared and that separate bodies are not unintentionally compromising each other's work. This is about getting results. Nothing the opposition has presented goes to the root of the problem. Where is their serious plan to address the structures that allow misconduct to take hold? Where is their interest to prevent sham contracting and exploitation through layers of subcontractors? Where is their interest in strengthening labour hire regulation? They voted against the establishment of the Labour Hire Authority, so we can only assume they do not care about regulating this industry properly and fairly. Where is their interest in stopping wage theft? Where is their interest in changing the culture of the industry? Where is their interest in preventing corruption? There is no interest.

The government's terms of reference will be designed around conduct systems, powers and accountability. For decades voters have seen time and time again through successive Liberal leaders and through the Liberal Party's actions that they do not have working people's interests at their heart. Their student politics, the worship of Reagan and Thatcherism when they were all at university, play out in the way they approach their politics. I am very, very proud to come from a party that through collective values works things up to improve the quality of people's lives, whether it is education, whether it is health care, our housing or our public transport. I oppose this motion. I have run out of time, so I will leave my contribution there.

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:36): I also rise today to speak to the motion of my colleague and leader in the upper house Mrs McArthur. I congratulate her on a very thorough and forward-thinking motion. I think it is important, in light of what has just been said in this chamber, after listening to some of the drivel that has been going on, that I go through some of the words in the motion. Bev McArthur has moved:

That this house:

(1) notes

- (a) in February 2026, this house called for a royal commission into corruption on Big Build sites, supported by every non-government party, and Labor ignored it ...

That is a very serious thing for Labor to ignore, and I think that it speaks volumes when we consider that every single other MP, representing a variety of parties, was prepared to stand up and go, 'This needs to happen.' Everybody knows that there is a problem here, that our Big Build costs have been super-inflated. You do not have to go very far on the ground to hear the stories out there in the community of how cost blowouts take place and what takes place on the Big Build sites to inflate those costs. It is quite common knowledge among people, and they talk about it quite freely behind closed doors.

I have a number of stories that I have heard, a number of stories that I am sure many colleagues in this place have heard, of calls to give quotes and then being told by unions that they will be taking this percentage of the bill that they will never see from that quote. Why the CFMEU thinks that it is so special that somehow it and the cartels that it seems to be connected to can go in and use the hard-earned money of taxpayers just beggars belief. We have so many families in my region who are struggling to pay their bills. I think this is what makes Victorians so angry: they are prepared to do the hard yards to get the state back on track, but when they discover that while they are struggling to pay their bills and they are struggling to put the petrol in their car and they are struggling to pay whatever fees they have for their children, that money that they are paying in taxes is going into the pockets of cartel criminals through unions like the CFMEU through the Big Build. That is what absolutely ticks off Victorians, because they work hard for their money and they are struggling on every level. It is simply not acceptable. Let us take (1)(b):

the Premier twice dismissed a royal commission before reversing his position on becoming Premier ...

So isn't that interesting? We have this new Premier Mr Carroll, and he had the opportunity to say yes to a royal commission, but he did not. He stood there next to the Premier and he did nothing. Suddenly, 'Oh, we might lose the election,' so now we are going to go through some sort of process that they can control so they can tick the box and say, 'Don't worry, we had a royal commission.' I am sure they will find a head to roll somewhere, and then they will say 'Problem solved'. But the reality is it will not be solved, because it is Labor investigating Labor. I do not think so. The motion states:

- (c) the Premier served as roads and public transport minister, concedes he may be called as a witness, and is writing the terms for an inquiry into a government he helped lead ...

I do not know, but I think that if we were to put this to the pub test everybody would be able to see that that is a conflict of interest. It goes on:

- (2) affirms that a royal commission must:
 - (a) investigate corruption, criminality and misconduct across all government-funded construction projects since December 2014, not merely Big Build sites or the CFMEU ...

I think that one is fairly self-explanatory, because we know that corruption and criminality and misconduct were taking place on all sorts of construction sites and projects well before this just kind of blew up with what we have been calling the Big Build. Now let us think about:

- (b) examine unions, contractors, subcontractors, labour hire firms, ministerial offices, departments and agencies, including how projects were selected, procured, administered and funded ...

I guess the point here is why should only a couple of heads roll when there is a whole bunch of people who are involved in this? Why should a couple of people have to take the load and go to prison when there are a ton of people who should be investigated? Further:

- (c) determine what current and former premiers, ministers, advisers and senior officials knew, when they knew it and what they did, including early public examination of the Honourable Daniel Andrews, the Honourable Jacinta Allan MP, and the Honourable Ben Carroll MP ...

our current leader. The point is this: why should ministers and former ministers and premiers and former premiers be able to get off scot-free and not be under the same scrutiny as every other Victorian that is going to have to go through this? They should be. And let me tell you, it is not going to pass the pub test if they get up there and go, 'I don't recall.' I actually think we will see a mutiny in Victoria. The motion states:

- (e) be led by an independent interstate commissioner in consultation with the opposition ...

Yes, because the opposition has every right to be in consultation here, because we are here to make sure that this government is held to account. We want it to be independent, because we know that Labor cannot examine itself, because a criminal cannot examine another criminal – and they are all mates – can they? It is not going to be done properly. It further states:

- (f) commence public hearings before the election –

(Time expired)

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (15:43): I thank my colleagues Ms Crozier, Mr Mulholland and Mrs Hermans for their contributions and also Dr Mansfield from the Greens and Mr Limbrick from the Libertarians, and I absolutely thank those in the Labor Party who tried to defend the indefensible – Mr Batchelor, Mr McIntosh and Ms Ermacora.

Let us be clear here: we would not have known about this corruption, this \$15 billion worth of CFMEU corruption and this money that went to strippers, bikies and criminals all over the place, except for the Liberal National Party in Queensland, who conducted the inquiry. That is how we know about this. That is the reason we need to get to the bottom of it here in Victoria. And you people who have had an epiphany all of a sudden that you want to have a royal commission, well, you did not want one when Jacinta Allan was the Premier. But now that you have knifed her, you actually want a royal commission. Well, hello, you have come to the party way too late. Get with the program. You should

have supported it from the beginning. In fact you should have stemmed the corruption. You would have known it was going on. You were a party to it; you were absolutely a party to it.

Dr Mansfield said we do not need this, we could just have extra powers for IBAC. Well, we produced a private members bill on that very point – and thank you, Dr Mansfield; you supported it – but the Labor Party did not want to give extra powers to IBAC. They defeated it in that other chamber over there. We absolutely need not only to give IBAC extra powers to follow this \$15 billion and counting but to have a royal commission to hold you people accountable – every one of you. You need to be held accountable. Your leaders, your department secretaries, your bosses, your union mates – they all need to be held accountable, absolutely. My goodness me.

Talk about Backflip Ben. I mean, can you believe a few weeks ago it was ‘There is no need for a royal commission – too expensive, not needed’, but all of a sudden the polls said something different, and gosh, not only did they need to replace the Premier, even though he had looked her in the eye and said ‘I will never replace you’, but all of a sudden he found he needed a royal commission as well. He lied to his daughter. How can you possibly sit over there and talk about truth? Truth is not negotiable. Integrity is not negotiable. It was negotiable under Jacinta Allan, it was negotiable when Ben Carroll stood joined at the hip with her, but it is not negotiable now. Honesty is not negotiable. That is what we stand for. Transparency is not negotiable. Accountability is not negotiable. You cannot lie straight in bed on the issue of truth, integrity, accountability and responsibility. You just do not know how to be honest in the way you deliver government in this state. Shame on you. The taxpayers of this state have been ripped off for way too long. There are people that cannot get a bed in hospital. There are criminals marauding in the streets. This is the crime capital of Australia. It is the high tax capital of Australia. It is the debt capital of Australia. Everything is wrong about this state, and you are absolutely fundamentally responsible.

You stand there and say we are providing terms of reference that you do not like. Well, let me tell you, the people of Victoria will vote on 28 November, and they will deliver you a message – a message that says, ‘We want truth. We want accountability. We want transparency. We want honesty in government, and we want to stem the waste that is going on in this state, the waste that is ruining everything about this state.’ We need to support this motion. I urge the crossbench to support the motion. We need to hold this government to account. We need to do everything possible to make sure the people of Victoria understand that the government need to be honest, accountable, transparent and do the right thing by the taxpayers of Victoria.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (13): Melina Bath, Gaele Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

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

Motion negatived.

Cannabis law reform

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:55): I move:

That this house notes that:

- (1) cannabis is the most widely consumed illicit substance in Australia and 80 per cent of Victorians support cannabis law reform;
- (2) a plebiscite on cannabis legalisation would ensure that every Victorian has a direct voice in shaping one of the most significant and long-overdue drug policy reforms of our time;

- (3) we have endured nearly 100 years of prohibition, and this policy has failed to reduce use and failed to eliminate the illicit market;
- (4) thousands of Victorians continue to come into contact with the criminal justice system simply for the personal use of small amounts of cannabis;
- (5) First Nations people are disproportionately affected by the policing of cannabis and are 11 times more likely to be arrested for cannabis-related offences than non-Indigenous Victorians;
- (6) as Victoria progresses treaty, Parliament must address the ongoing inequities created by our current cannabis laws;

and calls on the government to ask Victorians if they support the legalisation of cannabis in Victoria as proposed in the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023.

I rise to speak on motion 1552 in my name. Nearly a century of cannabis prohibition has failed. It has failed as drug policy, it has failed to deliver better public health outcomes and it has failed as a matter of social justice. Increasingly the evidence is clear, and so is the growing public recognition that we need a different and better approach. That is why this motion calling on the government to support the Cannabis Legislation Plebiscite Bill 2026 is important. We are not asking anyone to pretend that cannabis is harmless. We are simply asking this Parliament to accept the evidence. What we are asking is that you trust Victorians enough to have their say by asking Victorians a simple question: do you believe cannabis should be legalised?

For decades governments have made decisions about cannabis policy without giving Victorians a say. We all know that cannabis is already part of Australian society: people use it, people access medicinal cannabis, people grow it. People talk openly about cannabis. What prohibition has not done is eliminate cannabis. Instead prohibition has created an enormous criminal justice footprint around conduct that for many people poses a far lower risk to the community than any legal substance. It has consumed police resources at a time when Victoria needs our police to be focused on organised and serious crime. It has brought everyday Victorians into contact with the criminal justice system, creating criminal records and consequences that follow people for years, affecting employment, housing, travel and education for the almost 4000 Victorians who get arrested for the possession of cannabis every year.

The evidence is clear that the burden of those consequences has not fallen equally. We know that First Nations Victorians are disproportionately affected by cannabis enforcement and are around 11 times more likely to be arrested for cannabis possession. First Nations peoples continue to be incarcerated for small cannabis possessions. We heard from the Premier himself recently that he is open to discussing the removal of criminal penalties as these penalties have been shown to disproportionately impact First Nations people. If we are serious about treaty, we must also be serious about addressing the laws and systems that continue to produce these unequal outcomes.

I have been here in this Parliament for almost four years now, and throughout that time I have continued to raise the voices of people who have been impacted by discrimination, systemic barriers and the failures of cannabis prohibition. I have sat with people whose lives have been turned upside down by a cannabis charge, people who have lost employment opportunities, had their drivers licence taken away, faced stigma, been denied access to housing or been forced to navigate a criminal justice system simply because they use a substance that millions of Australians use. We have come a long way in the four years. The conversation has changed. The evidence has changed. Community attitudes have changed. Even the government's public position has shifted to one that acknowledges that we should be focused on a health rather than a criminal justice response.

In 2020 there was an inquiry into the use of cannabis in Victoria. Its final report was tabled in August 2021. The inquiry made a significant recommendation that the Victorian government should investigate legalising cannabis for adult personal use. The government did not support the recommendations of the inquiry but indicated it was open to further discussion about cannabis reform.

In 2023 I introduced the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023. The bill was about establishing a sensible and regulated framework for adult personal use of cannabis to allow for adults to possess small quantities of cannabis for personal use, to grow up to six cannabis plants per residence and to consume cannabis in private settings. It was an effort to adopt a similar approach to the ACT. This led to an inquiry to consider and report on the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023, including consideration of the impacts and outcomes of the Australian Capital Territory's approach to decriminalising the personal use of cannabis. After two parliamentary inquiries into the legalisation of personal cannabis use, the Victorian government still refuses to seriously consider the evidence, expertise and experience placed before it.

Stakeholders across the legal, health, drug and alcohol, justice and harm reduction sectors have repeatedly told this Parliament that prohibition is failing. We have heard from experts about the harms caused by criminalisation, from people directly impacted by the current laws and from organisations with decades of experience working on the front line. We have also seen what is happening beyond Victoria. The ACT has taken a different approach to personal cannabis use, while jurisdictions overseas have moved towards regulated legalisation, providing valuable evidence about what reform can look like in practice. And then there is the Victorian community itself. Public opinion on cannabis has shifted considerably. Australians increasingly recognise that possessing a small amount of cannabis for personal use should not result in a criminal record or bring someone into contact with the criminal justice system. Yet despite two inquiries, expert evidence, international and interstate experience and growing public support, the government continues to drag its feet. Progress for reform has been painfully slow, and while governments deliberate, people continue to experience the consequences of prohibition.

The purpose of this motion is more fundamental than legalising cannabis. It is about allowing people who live under these laws to have a direct say about whether these laws should continue. This is not about telling Victorians what the answer should be, it is about trusting them to make the decision. If we genuinely believe in democracy, we should trust Victorians with this question. The *Herald Sun* asked the question on behalf of the Carroll government, and – no surprise – 84 per cent of Victorians said yes, recreational cannabis should be legalised. Once again, public opinion has delivered a resounding message in support of this.

If we genuinely believe in evidence-based policy, we should be prepared to put the evidence before the public, and if we genuinely believe that cannabis prohibition has reached a point where reform is worthy of serious consideration, then surely we should let Victorians have their say. For almost a century cannabis prohibition has been imposed from above. This motion offers something different. It is about giving Victorians a voice. It says, after decades of prohibition, after years of evidence, after countless lives affected, 'Let people decide what comes next.' That, to me, is democracy at its best.

There is something particularly important about doing that through a plebiscite. Cannabis policy has been debated in this Parliament for decades. Governments have commissioned reports, experts have presented evidence and courts have dealt with the consequences of prohibition. Health professionals, legal experts, researchers and community organisations have repeatedly called for reform, and public attitudes have changed dramatically. A plebiscite would not diminish the role of this Parliament – quite the opposite. It would give Parliament a clear democratic mandate to consider the next steps. If Victorians vote against legalisation, then that is the outcome that we must respect. But if Victorians vote in favour, this Parliament would have a clear responsibility to develop a framework that is evidence based, tightly regulated and focused on reducing harm. That is democracy, and surely on an issue as consequential and as longstanding as cannabis prohibition, Victorians deserve the opportunity to have their say.

Next year marks the 100th anniversary of prohibition of cannabis in Victoria. Every year that we continue prohibition, we continue to waste public resources policing personal cannabis possession, we continue to expose people to criminal penalties, we continue to prop up an illegal market, we continue

to see disproportionate impacts on already marginalised communities and we continue to operate a system that after nearly a century has not achieved its stated objective of eliminating cannabis use. The question is no longer whether cannabis exists. It does. The question is whether our laws are making the situation better or worse. I believe the evidence increasingly tells us that prohibition is not working, and I believe Victorians are ready for a mature conversation about what will come next. This is not about being soft on drugs. It is about recognising that criminalisation is not the only tool available to government. It is about treating drug use as a public health and social policy issue where appropriate, rather than defaulting to criminal justice. It is about recognising that good policy should be judged by the outcomes it produces and not simply by how long we have had it.

After almost a century, we should have the courage to ask whether prohibition has delivered what it promised. The evidence is very clear that it has not. The community is increasingly telling us it is time for change, experts are telling us that it is time for change and people who have experienced the consequences of prohibition are telling us that it is time for change. So let us give Victorians the opportunity to decide. Let us put the question directly to the people: do we continue a century of prohibition, or do we move towards a legal, regulated and evidence-based cannabis framework?

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:08): I rise to make a contribution on this motion, and I thank Ms Payne for bringing this important motion to the house. It is, as we are all aware, on cannabis reform, but the central part of this motion is about a plebiscite as well. It will obviously come as a disappointment that the government's position on this is that the government opposes this motion, but nevertheless we do have something to say about this motion.

I recently met with a group in regard to legal and illicit drug taking in Victoria, and I am always interested to hear the sorts of things that Victorians might consume. It is always disappointing to hear, sadly, that alcohol is still one of those things that is more highly consumed than illicit drugs. Illicit drug taking, again, is a problem of course, but alcohol still presents the highest level of harm for Victorians. We have a very proud record in terms of supporting the sector and a health-led approach to reducing alcohol and drug-related harm. We have made a significant investment to expand drug treatment supports and harm minimisation services for those who need them.

I am also very fortunate to have Turning Point in my electorate. Turning Point is an inpatient facility that is based at Box Hill. They do amazing work helping Victorians who want to get clean with the support that they need, both first of all in an inpatient hospital facility and then at a house where they can stay and learn about behaviours and triggers and those sorts of things and how to manage their addictions and their behaviours. Again, that just speaks to the investment that our government is making in terms of helping people who want to try and turn their lives around by not using illicit drugs and alcohol. Since 2014 our government has invested more than \$3 billion in drug and alcohol treatment, support and harm minimisation initiatives, sitting alongside substantial legislative reform achievements. There is \$415.5 million allocated in the 2026–27 state budget, which will allow us to continue and expand life-saving and life-changing services and initiatives.

As I just said, we know that alcohol and other drug harms are increasing. Each year more than 40,000 people access alcohol and drug treatment and harm reduction supports. One of the questions I asked the group that I met with the other day, the Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association, was about how we are also hearing that, whilst there is a lot of focus on alcohol and illicit drugs, there is an increasing amount of people who are taking aesthetic-type drugs – peptide injectables – and we are seeing growing demand for needle exchange programs. With people who are wanting to shred, look great in the gym and all those sorts of things, we are seeing the use of peptides and those sorts of drugs increasing as well. As I said, that is putting demand on our needle exchange programs. Also, we do know that there are groups within our community that are at increased risk of alcohol and drug-related harm, and our services need to be flexible and tailored to meet people where they are at.

In terms of the plebiscite, I know I and Ms Watt are both on the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee, and this private members bill was the subject of a SARC meeting this week. I will bring

to the chamber's attention that the SARC report that I tabled in this chamber on Tuesday includes analysis of the Legalise Cannabis Victoria bill that is the basis for the motion before the house today. The report highlights one concerning element of the bill. According to clause 7 of the bill, it appears – whether it is inadvertent or not; perhaps it is on purpose, I am not sure – it would be an offence for a person not to vote or participate in this plebiscite. Victorians could be slugged with a \$210 fine for not voting in what is a non-binding plebiscite. Normally these sorts of things are really reserved for electoral processes. If we go and vote in a state election, of course the provisions of the Electoral Act 2002 apply to that. But it would be, yes, quite interesting if you were asking people to participate in a non-binding plebiscite –

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: That is exactly what it is. So the question is really: is it on purpose or by accident? I am not sure, but it is really an irrelevant question. Either way, if you were not to participate in this plebiscite, you would be fined \$210. I am not sure that that is a particularly well-thought-out strategy. If you are basically saying to someone, 'I'm forcing you to give me your opinion about this,' you are probably going to get a negative answer if the threat of a fine is hanging over their head. In a cost-of-living crisis, every dollar counts. The SARC report shows that perhaps, as I said, this has not been properly thought through. It is quite disappointing that, rather than trying to build social licence around participation in a plebiscite by encouraging people through education and the like and bringing people on a journey with them about this, the threat of a fine is the blunt instrument that has been chosen by Legalise Cannabis to force people to vote in a plebiscite if this bill is successful.

I might say that in 2016 Victoria was the first jurisdiction in the country to legalise the use of medicinal cannabis, through the Access to Medicinal Cannabis Act 2016, which paved the way for other states to do it. We have taken measured, thoughtful steps on this reform. We sought expert advice from the Victorian Law Reform Commission on how to appropriately amend the law and on key issues including cultivation, manufacture and supply of high-quality medicinal cannabis products within Victoria; patient eligibility; appropriate clinical oversight involving specialists, general practitioners, nurses and pharmacists; and the need for ongoing research and clinical trials. Also the commission provided over 40 recommendations to the government, including the need to establish an independent medical advisory committee on medical cannabis to provide advice about expanding eligibility for future patient groups as well.

Any doctor or nurse practitioner in Victoria can prescribe medicinal cannabis for any patient with any condition if they believe it is clinically appropriate to do so. Of course, today, medicinal cannabis is most often prescribed for the treatment of chronic pain, but it is also used to treat anxiety; cancer-related symptoms such as pain, nausea, and reduced appetite; epilepsy; insomnia and multiple sclerosis. Again, this is another example of this government listening to people and meeting them where they are at in terms of ensuring that people have options when it comes to the treatment or management of pain. Medicinal cannabis does work for some people – there is no doubt about that. It is not effective for some people, for whatever reason. People have different needs when it comes to pain, and it is one treatment that is available. Again, it is something that doctors or nurse practitioners are responsible for dispensing.

I will just quickly step back to the SARC report. I know I have got just under 2 minutes left to talk on this motion. In terms of the SARC report, I think the bottom line was with that open question about the provisions of clause 7 then falling foul of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities, because it offends the charter's right to freedom of expression, which also may include the right to not hold or not to express an opinion on the legalisation of cannabis. It is also a negative duty, so it is like I have a right to not participate in this plebiscite. That is where this offends this aspect of the human rights charter. The committee then did resolve to write to the member seeking further information about the compatibility of clause 7 with the charter's right to freedom of expression. I bring that to the chamber's attention today, notwithstanding the fact that is something that does need noting.

Nevertheless the issue around medicinal cannabis, as I have spoken to, is an important one. Our government has certainly listened, responded and acted in regard to people who were seeking that as a way of managing pain.

I was just sitting here talking to my colleague Ms Watt before about what illicit drugs people are consuming. Pill testing is another important example of reform that our government has taken and listened to people about. In this year's budget we have invested \$9.6 million over two years to support a successful pill-testing trial. So again, we are quite prepared to listen, but unfortunately this motion and the plebiscite that is proposed is a little bit underdone for the reasons that I outlined. As I said, the government's position on this motion is that we will be opposing this motion.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (16:18): I rise to speak on Ms Payne's motion – and I thank her for bringing it to the chamber – about a plebiscite to legalise cannabis. When I saw this, I was like, 'It's always interesting. What new way can we debate the legalisation of cannabis?' It is creative. It is like the last shot in the locker for the Legalise Cannabis Party.

From the outset I would like to state that, unfortunately, I will not be supporting this motion. I apologise for that. I find it interesting that we are sort of 5 seconds to midnight and Legalise Cannabis Victoria have finally remembered why they are here and brought up the issue of legalising cannabis again, which is what you would think the party would be on about every week. I mean, you had one job over four years. I cannot help but wonder if it is somehow connected to the decision of this chamber last night to abolish group voting tickets or whether you needed to remind the Victorian people in the lead-up to the election what your party actually stands for. Because I did a little bit of analysis, and I know Mr Ettershank and Ms Payne have spoken a lot in the chamber, but Mr Ettershank has only mentioned the word 'cannabis' in about 22 per cent of contributions. Ms Payne did a bit better. She mentioned the word 'cannabis' in 25 per cent of contributions. I think these numbers speak for themselves. What is evident is the fact that this issue has not been a focus of their time in Parliament over the last four years. We have had Ms Payne and Mr Ettershank bring up voluntary assisted dying (VAD), buses, data centres, waste-to-energy incinerators, conflict in the Middle East, Palestine and Trump.

The point I am trying to make is that the Victorian people did not vote for two more members of the Reason Party. We already got rid of Fiona Patten. They voted for Legalise Cannabis. I have right-wing friends who voted for Legalise Cannabis because they truly want to legalise cannabis and they thought it was a good laugh and decided to put a number 1 on the Legalise Cannabis box. To think that people wanted you in the last four years to do anything other than spend your time solely on legalising cannabis I think gives your voters a bit too much credit. They wanted you to completely focus on exactly what your party name sets out to do. There might be policies on a website, but that is not what they are looking at on the ballot paper; it is not. They wanted you to focus on this.

I can guarantee you that, due to the make-up of this house, if you had said to the government even two years ago that you were no longer going to vote for any piece of legislation until cannabis was legalised, it would have been passed by now, because there were enough pieces of critical legislation, whether it be anti-vilification laws or whether it be treaty, where they needed both of your votes, and you just voted with them anyway. I did not see any tangible concessions that you got out that related to cannabis, which is what you were sent here for. Cannabis probably would be legalised, but unfortunately you did not spend your time here focusing on what people sent you here to do.

They sent you here with one job. As I said, I think you are giving Victorians who voted for you a bit too much credit in thinking that you should have been focused on VAD, bus routes, data centres, waste to energy a thousand times, conflicts in the Middle East, Palestine and Trump. It goes a long way back. You came in here with some sort of mandate. One of the first questions Mr Ettershank asked in March 2023 was a question on whether the Acknowledge of Country should go before the Lord's Prayer. That is not what people were thinking about when they voted 1 for the Legalise Cannabis Party. So I say to you, if you had just focused on what people sent you here for, you might have gotten somewhere.

What I would say on plebiscites is that they are a valid means of testing support for a policy amongst the broader population on issues of social policy and of conscience – for example, the marriage equality postal survey initiated by the Turnbull Liberal government. That helped demonstrate a strong social licence for change. However, it is not a means by which serious matters of government policy should be decided. The motion asks the house to hand over serious questions of health and criminal law to a popularity contest. That is the wrong way to make policy. Cannabis law reform, like other areas of drug policy, criminal justice and public health, needs to be assessed on evidence, health outcomes, policing data, treatment capacity and the experience of other jurisdictions which have changed their laws. A plebiscite would not resolve the practical outcome questions that the reform raises. It would simply outsource a decision that does belong to this Parliament, elected to weigh evidence and take responsibility for the laws that it passes. If the Legalise Cannabis Party really believe cannabis law reform is justified, they should bring their bill back to the house.

We were elected – some of us – to lead and to provide a serious answer to the questions that matter and to fix the mess that Labor have left us, not to defer to opinion polls when the going gets tough. As I mentioned, I honestly think if I was a voter for Legalise Cannabis Victoria I would be a bit disappointed about the issues that their elected members have represented here in this place. They have focused on it for only about a quarter of the time that they have been here and have focused on all these other trendy issues. They might have been Reason Party issues. Legalise Cannabis Victoria, when people see that on a ballot paper, the voters of Victoria expect you to focus on that one thing and just that one thing. Unfortunately, that has not happened with this political party. If they had actually had a dogged determination to just focus on that thing, I reckon cannabis would be legalised here in Victoria. It would have. If you look at the make-up of the Parliament, you can almost guarantee it would have happened. But no, they decided to be part of the progressive crossbench so that they can get secret special preference and treatment by the government to do advanced deals before bills get to the chamber. Of course in return for their support of any of those bills they never got the one thing they were sent here to do, which is legalising cannabis. They never once got that passed into legislation, which I think would be disappointing to their voters. They will go out again at this state election coming up and say, ‘Vote for Legalise Cannabis Victoria because this is what we’re going to do,’ not ‘Vote for Legalise Cannabis Victoria because we’ll spend a quarter of the time on it and focus on all these other trendy issues.’ That is ultimately what they have done over the last four years and what they will probably do over the next four years should they be re-elected.

I will go back to the motion. As I said, I will not be supporting this motion. I do not think a plebiscite is worth our time, and I am also quite concerned about what Ms Terpstra said – that you would be seeking to find people that do not participate in this plebiscite as well.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:28): The Libertarian Party’s views on cannabis legalisation are well known. In fact I spoke about it in my inaugural speech. I have been a long-time supporter of legalising cannabis for recreational, industrial and medical use in Victoria. That said, I will be supporting this motion, but I do have some concerns. I do not like plebiscites. I see plebiscites as a way of, in this case, voting on people’s rights. I did not like the marriage equality plebiscite. I do not think that people’s rights should be voted on. However, if it is a way that would be non-binding, as I understand this would be for the Parliament, and if it is a way of demonstrating to whoever is the government of the day the popularity of this issue, then I think that is a good thing.

Some of the framing of this motion I quite strongly object to – when we talk about people’s rights and that the legalisation of cannabis is somehow related to race issues around First Nations people and related to treaty. I do not think it has got anything to do with that. In fact I think Victorians are sick of talking about identity politics and race-based politics. I think the government has actually woken up to that and is taking notice of that, as I hope the opposition is also. People are sick of this identity politics. They are sick to death of it. Frankly, why not make commentary about all the different races? Well, we would not do that because it is racist, and I do not see the point of doing that. We should be just talking about the rights of all Victorians, because under the principle of equality under law, the

rights of all Victorians should be equal. That is, in fact, why I oppose the treaty – the main reason. There are a bunch of other reasons, but the main reason is because I believe in the principle of equality under law, and judging whether or not we should legalise something based on whether one particular racial group is more or less affected by it breaches that principle entirely. I think that that is a bad thing.

If we are actually going to get cannabis legalisation happening in Victoria, the people that we need to appeal to are not the people that care about treaty and not the people that care about disproportionate effects on minority groups, they are the people like Mr Mulholland's friend, who was a right-wing person who voted for Legalise Cannabis because they wanted cannabis legalised. Actually it is the conservative side of politics that you need to convince, because once you convince a large number of those people, then everyone else will just flip. We have already convinced most of the left side of politics. The reason the Labor Party do not support legalisation of cannabis is because they are scared of the reaction of the conservative side of politics. But I actually think that there are a lot of people on the conservative side of politics who would like cannabis legalisation. In fact many of them may be cannabis consumers themselves, and they would not really object to it if it was done in a way that respected people's rights and was done in a way that would undermine organised crime.

I have said many times that I am not a fan of the decriminalisation model that has been spoken about many times here. The main reason I am not a fan of that is because it does absolutely nothing to address the biggest problem in Victoria at the moment, which is organised crime. Decriminalisation will not address that, but a legal, regulated market will do that. The fact of the matter is: there is and there always will be a cannabis market in Victoria. The question that this Parliament and Victorians need to grapple with is: are we going to have that market run by organised crime, or is it going to be a legal, regulated market? Most sensible people on the conservative side of politics would hopefully come to the realisation that they would rather have a legal, regulated market than have organised crime running it. It is an over \$1 billion industry in Victoria alone for organised crime. We have seen how much damage they have done to this state, these criminal groups. If we can use the power of economics to undermine them – and if conservatives do not like cannabis or whatever, maybe they can hold their noses because of the benefits that we will see through undermining these criminal networks. I think even many in the Liberal Party would probably agree with me on that, and we need to get popular support for that. It has not got there yet. This Parliament has not done it.

I actually agree with Mr Mulholland. There are probably a few points during this Parliament where Legalise Cannabis or others in the progressive crossbench could have actually said, 'Well, you know, we're not going to do this unless you legalise cannabis.' It did not happen – unfortunately, because I would have been passionately supportive of that, because it is something that I have cared about for a long time. But it has not happened. If a plebiscite is a method of giving Parliament confidence that it does have popular social licence, then I will support it. I do share Ms Terpstra's and Mr Mulholland's concerns about plebiscites being compulsory, but unfortunately all voting is compulsory in Australia. I do not support compulsory voting either. I think that people should be able to decide if they want to vote or not. As it is, people, if they do not want to vote, just go along and draw a dirty picture on the ballot or whatever they do. But I do not think it should be compulsory.

If people want to express an opinion through a plebiscite, I do not see a problem with that. But it needs to be framed in a way that respects the principles of equality under law and will appeal to a wide range of Victorians, not just those who care about identity politics.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (16:34): Thank you very much for the call and the opportunity to make a contribution, and thank you, Ms Payne, for moving aside such that I can speak on this motion today. I just want to start and say that this is a complex and sensitive area of alcohol and drug policy and our government proudly and consistently takes a harm minimisation approach. We know that these issues require a nuanced, mature and health-led conversation. For far too long, public discussions around drug reform across the country have been bogged down in stigma, which does nothing to support vulnerable Victorians. We are a government that looks towards evidence-based policies that tangibly improve health and social outcomes.

Our record over the last decade speaks for itself. We listen to health experts and to vulnerable community members and get on with delivering meaningful life-saving reform. These are complex policy matters that come with potential benefits but also potential risks – risks which our government clearly does not take lightly. We will continue working to reduce the harms associated with drug use through coordinated, evidence-based health action across the state. As outlined in responses previously, our government will continue to explore meaningful ways to reduce harm, support individuals and keep Victorians safe. This includes our government supporting diversion programs as an effective way for minor drug offenders to avoid a lifelong criminal record. These crucial programs encourage individuals to participate in alternative actions that actively promote rehabilitation, delivering vastly improved, lasting outcomes for both the person and their community.

I might just take a moment now to go to the main call in this motion, which is a call for a plebiscite on cannabis legalisation. Our government's position is grounded in a sense of responsibility regarding how we focus government attention and public resources. We genuinely respect the intent behind wanting to gauge community sentiment on this issue, as hearing from Victorians is vital. However, we believe that our primary focus should be on funding frontline health treatment and support services. Every single dollar our government spends should be directed where it delivers the absolute greatest and most immediate impact and benefit for the Victorian community. Victorians will have the opportunity to vote on a vast range of policies, government priorities and comprehensive platforms at the ballot box this coming November.

It is important to highlight that when it comes to the policy area of medicinal cannabis our government has proudly led the nation. Victoria was the very first jurisdiction in the country to legalise the use of medicinal cannabis back in 2016 through the Access to Medicinal Cannabis Act 2016. This was a landmark reform that brought much-needed relief to so many families and paved the way for other states and territories to introduce their own legislation. You see, we took measured, thoughtful and regulated steps, ensuring from day one that these changes were designed solely for the benefit of Victorians suffering from severe and chronic conditions. Ahead of the 2014 election we outlined that a Labor government would modernise Victorian laws so those in need could safely access the therapeutic benefits of cannabis. We knew that families were facing impossible situations trying to support sick loved ones, often forced to choose between breaking the law or watching a family member suffer. We acted to change the law responsibly.

To ensure the reforms were robust and grounded in rigorous clinical evidence, we sought expert advice from the Victorian Law Reform Commission. We carefully examined key issues, including the local cultivation, manufacture and supply of high-quality medicinal cannabis products, to build a safe, reliable and local industry. We examined patient eligibility and clinical oversight, involving general practitioners, specialists, nurses and pharmacists, and we embedded ongoing research and clinical trials directly into the framework. The commission provided over 40 comprehensive recommendations, including establishing an independent medical advisory committee to guide eligibility expansion over time. Today, because of those necessary pioneering reforms, any doctor or nurse practitioner in Victoria can prescribe medicinal cannabis for any patient with any condition, provided that they deem it clinically appropriate. It is now widely prescribed for chronic pain, while transforming lives by managing severe anxiety, cancer-related symptoms, epilepsy, insomnia and multiple sclerosis. We transformed the medical landscape in this state by putting health outcomes and patient care first.

Our commitment to health-led harm reduction extends across the entire alcohol and drug sector. Our government is proud to support a health-led approach to reduce drug-related harm right across Victoria. We have made investments to expand treatment networks and harm minimisation services because we know that providing care, rather than stigma, is what truly protects lives. Since 2014 our government has invested more than \$3 billion in drug and alcohol treatment, support and harm reduction initiatives, backed by a further \$415.5 million allocated in the 2026–27 budget. This funding

enables us to expand life-changing services statewide, acknowledging that more than 40,000 people access treatment and support each year.

We know that different groups across our state face varying risks, which is why our services must remain flexible, accessible and tailored to meet people where they are at in their lives. The establishment of the state's first medically supervised injecting service in my electorate, in North Richmond, is a clear example of our commitment to evidence-based drug policy that works. It is fundamentally about saving lives, reducing community harm and connecting people with genuine pathways out of addiction. That centre in North Richmond has safely managed more than 13,000 overdoses while relieving pressure on local emergency departments and ambulance services. Crucially, the service provides clients with holistic, non-judgmental health and social supports, connecting vulnerable people to housing, and there are mental health support rehabilitation services also available to help stabilise lives.

Similarly, I was reflecting yesterday that our Victorian pill-testing service represents another nation-leading, health-focused reform that prioritises safety. That is supported by a \$9.2 million investment over two years, including in this budget, and builds on successful trials. Between August 2025 and June 2026 the fixed site tested over 4600 samples and conducted more than 2300 harm reduction conversations. For over 39 per cent of service users, this was their very first time having a conversation with a healthcare professional about their substance use. The mobile service tested a further 2400 samples at festivals and conducted over 1500 health consultations, with around 12 per cent of samples containing unexpected or harmful substances, including dangerous synthetic opioids. This service provides essential, real-time health data and warnings that prevent harm and save young lives.

Addressing drug harm requires a comprehensive, statewide approach, and that is why our \$95 million statewide action plan expands access to public pharmacotherapy, with \$8.4 million alongside \$4.4 million to deploy the 24/7 naloxone dispensing machines in high-risk areas. We are expanding outreach teams in St Kilda and Footscray and supporting critical community facilities in the Melbourne CBD. This includes the Salvation Army's health clinic on Bourke Street, led by Major Brendan Nottle. There is funding for an additional community health service in the CBD; \$36.4 million has gone towards that. This hub in the city will provide wraparound health, mental health and social support and deliver the Victoria-first trial of hydromorphone therapy. This is for individuals with really complex opioid dependence where traditional treatments have proven ineffective, ensuring that even the most vulnerable individuals receive specialised clinical support.

Our government's focus remains guided by evidence, compassion and continued investment in frontline health services that indeed save lives. We will continue to deliver practical, health-led solutions that protect Victorians and support families across our state. I thank the chamber for the opportunity to make a contribution, and I thank the mover of this motion for bringing it to the house for debate this afternoon.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:44): I rise to speak to Ms Payne's motion. I am slightly deviating from Mr Mulholland. I think you have raised your issues on a number of occasions in the Parliament over the last 3½ years because I have heard you speak on a number of things, especially around medicinal cannabis, and that is probably where we differ. I do support medicinal cannabis because you can regulate it and it has gone through testing and approval, and there are safeguards and rigorous testing around that. I was going back to have a look at your motion and the request for a plebiscite on the legalisation of cannabis, and I went back to look at the inquiry I was a part of when Ms Patten was here. She drove this issue before you came into the Parliament. She should have been in the Cannabis Party, really, because she was on this case for years. We did have this inquiry, and we wrote a minority report. We did not fully support the chair or a number of recommendations that were in the report, because we did have concerns about certain aspects that came before us. It was a very good inquiry, it was a very thorough inquiry, and we heard from a lot of excellent submitters in the submissions that we received and from witnesses in the hearings that we held. There were concerns that I still have around the impacts of cannabis, and I will come to that.

I just want to go back to this point about the plebiscite on cannabis legalisation. You speak about, as Mr Limbrick did actually, calling out certain subgroups of the community, and you talk about treaty. If you are looking at a plebiscite and treaty, Australia held a referendum, a basic plebiscite on the Voice, and voted no, so we have had that plebiscite and that referendum. I do not know why it is singled out in this. Certainly there was evidence in our inquiry, and we understood, that there were various individuals and others that were vulnerable and at risk of ending up in the criminal justice system.

One of the areas we spoke of in our minority report concerned the evidence that was provided by assistant commissioner Glenn Weir, who is very, very well regarded within Victoria Police, and the concerns that Victoria Police had around safety and driving impacts. Looking at the issues around education, we made some very strong recommendations around education in schools and the harms of drugs, and this government has dropped the ball. They have legalised pill testing, and they have not done any of the drug education that really should be done.

One of the concerns I have is around the harms of cannabis. It came out very clearly through various submitters. I still have those concerns, and I am very concerned about the potency of cannabis now. It is a very different drug from the 1970s, when you were a young man, Mr Ettershank. In all seriousness, I am concerned about the genetically modified cannabis and the potency of cannabis. I am worried about the issue you have raised in your private members bill of having a few plants growing in the backyard and who regulates that. Who polices that? How is that monitored? It cannot be. It will not drive out a black market; it will, I believe, further a black market. We are having problems with illegal tobacco now. Alcohol and cannabis are very different in terms of the components of illegal cannabis versus those of illegal alcohol. They are two very different things. It is a very different argument. It is much harder to have illegal alcohol than to have illegal cannabis.

I have got these concerns, and I will go back to the issue around the harms caused by cannabis. There needs to be more work done on this, because too many people within the medical profession will tell you that constant use for many, many people has significant harms – psychoses – and it is awful. They are very concerned around the mental health impacts and the psychosis that develops due to cannabis use. A bit like smoking, not everyone gets lung cancer if they smoke and not everyone is going to get severe psychosis with cannabis, but there are a range of medicos who say, ‘We just are concerned around the increasing potency, the increasing numbers of psychoses from drug use and these cocktails of drugs out there.’ Putting it all together, it is causing a very, very dangerous situation and very real concerns. We see that on our roads with the number of car accidents. We cannot test for cocaine in this state. Drug testing has dropped off under this government. We have real concerns around those issues.

I want to talk again about what the AMA have said, and I will take that from a report where they highlighted the short- and long-term health impacts:

People can experience immediate impacts to mental health such as reduced brain function, anxiety or panic attacks, paranoia, or memory loss. Cannabis users are more likely to develop psychoses or schizophrenia. Physical impacts can include impaired reaction time, balance, and information processing. Cannabis can be addictive and cause withdrawal symptoms. Long-term use can impair brain function, damage the person’s throat and lungs and cause bronchitis or cancer, cause cardiovascular system damage, and mental health conditions such as depression. Using cannabis while pregnant is associated with a lower birthweight of babies. Using cannabis is associated with alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use ...

I would say that cocktail of drugs is a very real concern. One of the other witnesses said:

... there are known issues with cardiovascular problems of the heart and pulmonary effects of the lungs, and also issues regarding acute use, chronic use and neuropsychiatric or mental disorders as well. There have been increasing reports of overdose and toxicity by minors with increasing use ...

I do think we have to caution this. Some will say, ‘Let’s just have a plebiscite. Let’s get over this.’ As the motion says, we have had nearly 100 years of prohibition. Well, I say, ‘Good. Keep it going, because there are too many unknowns with’ –

David Ettershank interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: Mr Ettershank, you will pick me up in your contribution, I am sure, but I am concerned about legalising this drug without the proper safeguards around it. I do not support it. I think we have got enough problems with enough illegal drugs out there, and I do not think legalising cannabis is going to improve the situation at all. I just do not think it will. For most of the people where there are problems within our courts, there is multiple drug use or there are other issues related to many of these things. We need to be doing more. We need to be doing more to support people to get off drugs. We need more education around the harmful impacts of drug use, of mixing drugs, whether that is alcohol or whether that is other drugs, with cannabis. I think we are all in agreement on that point. I know this is an area that Ms Payne and Mr Ettershank have been pushing. I respect that. That is why we are having the debate. But respectfully, I do not agree with this motion today.

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (16:53): I rise to speak on my colleague Ms Payne's motion calling on the government to allow Victorians a say on whether they support the legalisation of cannabis in Victoria. I can only echo Ms Payne's comments that cannabis prohibition is a failed policy. Since the passing of the Poisons Act 1928 we have spent hundreds of millions of dollars policing cannabis use to absolutely no avail. In fact cannabis use has continued to grow over the decades. It is far and away the most widely consumed illicit substance in Australia. Prohibition and criminalisation have done little more than waste our valuable justice resources and create criminal empires.

Attitudes have changed. At least 21 per cent of Victorians regularly use cannabis, and 80 per cent of Victorians agree that it should no longer be a criminal offence. Eighty per cent of Victorians agree that it is well and truly time to end the prohibition and the criminalisation of cannabis. I believe our Premier also agrees because he knows the impact that criminalisation has, particularly on our young people, on working-class people, on our First Nations people, on Pasifika people, on African Australian people and on lower income Victorians. He knows that our police force can be more effectively deployed tackling real crime, the sort of serious crime that is affecting our communities. If they are not wasting their time and resources busting people for possessing or cultivating small amounts of cannabis for personal use, there is no shortage of things for our police to focus on, and he would not be the first Premier to come to this conclusion. Former Premier Jeff Kennett at last year's Penington oration stated that his failure to reform our cannabis laws in 1996 was one of the major regrets of his time as Premier. Unfortunately he is not here with us today, but Mr Davis made a wonderful contribution. Thirty years ago he was still light years ahead of where Mr Mulholland can only hope to reach.

Victorians are ready for change. The real question is why other members in this place are not and why they persist in these same tired, discredited arguments. The reason we hear so many anecdotes of problematic cannabis use from opponents of decriminalisation when the vast, vast majority of people who consume cannabis are law-abiding, taxpaying decent people is because they are not going to admit it. Why should they when it is a criminal offence and so shrouded in harmful stigma?

We have never said that cannabis is a harmless drug. People have shared stories of friends or acquaintances who have issues with cannabis, whose problematic cannabis use has contributed to physical or mental health issues, and in those cases people should have access to support. That is the heart of a health-led recovery and one which this government has turned its back on. The last thing they need is to be arrested and charged and to end up with a criminal record. We know beyond any shadow of a doubt that any contact with the criminal justice system leads to further harms. It can lead to loss of employment and housing and to further contact with the justice system. So many lives ruined, and for what? We are talking about a victimless crime.

I want to pick up a couple of comments that people have made. Firstly, I thank Ms Terpstra for her usual thoughtful contribution. On the question of the compulsory plebiscite, I must say we took advice from the Office of the Chief Parliamentary Counsel on that. I am sure if it was such a big issue we would have been more than happy to look to an amendment, but never mind. Ms Terpstra suggested

that the plebiscite somehow needs to bring people on a journey. Bring people on a journey? Somewhere between 80 and 87 per cent of people support this policy. In terms of journeys, maybe Ms Terpstra could catch up with the journey that has been taken by the ALP state conference, who for the last three years have argued for this, and yet you just pretend it is not there. I mean, it is extraordinary.

Mr Mulholland, my friend, seriously, getting career counselling from you is about as welcome as an ice-water enema. We have used every option, you say, but then we have not talked about it enough. Well, make up your mind, son. I think it is that schizophrenic quality in so many of your policies that might be eroding your voter base. I also compliment you that I think apart from your last sentence, across your 10-minute contribution you did not actually mention anything to do with what this motion is about. I think that is a first. I have never seen quite that level of irrelevance in a debate.

Mr Limbrick says that conservatives need to be persuaded. Well, I think they have been persuaded. Let us face it, this is the elephant in the room here. Yes? If somewhere between 80 and 87 per cent of the people support decriminalisation, they want it decriminalised, that leaves somewhere between 13 and 20 per cent who do not know or do not support it. I guess that is about the same, really, as your primary vote at the moment, isn't it, for the Liberal Party? What wouldn't you – or the Labor Party, for that matter – give to come to the Victorian people and put up something that has 80 per cent public support? The elephant in the room here that nobody is talking about is the fact that there is an overwhelming consensus within the community for this change. The arrogance is so utterly staggering. You shared your contempt for democracy last night in scuttling proportional representation, and you have just reinforced the isolation, the contempt, that is held for so many politicians today. It does not matter what the overwhelming majority of people want; it is what you think is good. I will tell you what, Mr Mulholland, do not hold your breath if that is your secret to success in politics.

I would like to thank Ms Crozier, who I think made possibly the only contribution to date, apart from Ms Payne's, that addressed the motion. I respect her views. We do not agree, but at least she is happy to put them forward and to speak honestly and openly in a public debate, as opposed to half-arsed career counselling.

The bottom line here is that as jurisdictions around the world face up to the failure of cannabis prohibition to deter use and its extraordinary cost and legalised cannabis uses, they change. I think it was Menzies who said, 'Why do I change my mind? When circumstances change.' Maybe you should think about that, Mr Mulholland. I mean, you can get your name carved on the desk there, but seriously.

It is time for us to trust Victorians with the question: do you support the legalisation of cannabis? It is very simple. It is very obvious. And those who oppose it I would suggest have an ulterior motive. I am not sure if this is parliamentary, but if you are not willing to demonstrate the courage for change, if you are not willing to demonstrate a commitment to democracy – if you are not going to wee, get off the pot. Let Victorians decide how they wish to see this issue treated, because we are all going to be old and dead by the time you folks come to some sort of a consensus. Let us let Victorians decide.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (17:02): I am pleased to rise to speak on Ms Payne's motion relating to cannabis use and calling on the government to ask Victorians if they support legalisation of cannabis in Victoria as proposed by the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023. Ms Payne and Mr Ettershank have been tireless advocates for their clear position that the personal use of cannabis here in Victoria should be decriminalised. That was certainly the core of the bill that they proposed a couple of years ago, which essentially sought to adopt a model similar to that which exists now in the ACT and propose that that be adopted here in Victoria.

I will not go through the details of what that proposal was, because there has been debate on those matters in the past. As a consequence of a referral this chamber made, the matter and that bill were

examined by the Legal and Social Issues Committee. I was part of that inquiry, and we tabled a report into the provisions of that bill a couple of years ago following some quite interesting debates and evidence we received both here in Melbourne and on a trip to the ACT to hear from those including the capital policing unit in the AFP and also drug and alcohol support in the ACT and members of the ACT Legislative Assembly. I think it is fair to say that the government in its response to that parliamentary committee report made it clear that it did not support the recommendations in that report to consider the issues raised in the bill. There are some concerns about that.

I think one of the further issues personally that I have with the motion here today is this notion that the way we resolve this question is to put it to the people through a non-binding plebiscite. There have been other speakers in the course of this debate that have sought to posit arguments for and against the use of a plebiscite as a means of indicating public support for a matter. I for one am not a big believer in the use of indicative plebiscites to determine or suggest determinative positions of the Victorian people on matters of public policy. Fundamentally I believe that this Parliament exists in a framework of representative democracy for Victoria, and it is incumbent upon us as members of this Parliament to be the ones who, duly elected by the Victorian people at free and fair elections every four years, get to make laws for the state. I do not think that putting standalone questions to the people on indicative policy issues is the way that our democracy has operated and should operate. I am a believer in parliamentary democracy. I am a believer in the way and the will of the Parliament to achieve those changes.

I think there are many ways in which policy change gets enacted, and sometimes it is a tireless grind. We have certainly seen – and I am not using this in the pejorative – relentless advocacy from our colleagues on the crossbench, from Legalise Cannabis and others, supporting their position on the decriminalisation of adult use of cannabis here in the state of Victoria. I think to achieve the outcome that they are seeking, the elected representatives in this place have got to continue that relentless grind and see that it is not a solvable issue by way of an indicative plebiscite, survey, poll or whatever, which, effectively, a plebiscite delivers. I think that in our constitutional context, taking questions to the people should be restricted to matters associated with the constitutional framework that exists. Certainly we were having a debate in the Parliament yesterday about a matter for which one of the further steps that some advocated for could only be determined via a referendum. I think those are the appropriate circumstances in which matters should be taken to the people directly. I think that matters of policy are ones that the Parliament needs to do its job on, and at this time there is not support in the Parliament for the provisions of the bill that Ms Payne's motion seeks to advocate.

What we have from the government I think are a couple of really important indications of an approach that is focused on harm minimisation, health and therapeutic benefit. You see across the board from this Labor government after more than a decade in office that harm minimisation has been an incredibly important part of our approach to drug law reform in this state, with things like the medically supervised injecting facility; like the permanent drug-checking service, the pill-testing service, with the fixed site and the mobile sites; and like the additional focus on the rollout of pharmacotherapy and the way that, in a nation-leading first, we have got the rollout of things like the naloxone vending machines. It is a consistent approach to support harm minimisation and support those who do use drugs, because they do exist in our community. People do take illicit substances in our community, and this government has very clearly adopted a harm minimisation approach to make sure that those who are using illicit substances are doing so in a way that is both fully informed about the consequences and supported within a medical framework when they need it. I do not think that you can in any way, shape or form suggest that this government is not serious about the harm minimisation approach that it takes to illicit substances and drugs in our community.

The second is the very clear framework around which this government has enacted significant changes in Victoria for those who need cannabis for therapeutic purposes. It was a commitment that Labor made on coming to government to establish a framework for the legalisation of therapeutic use of medicinal cannabis in this state, the first jurisdiction in the country, in 2016, to move towards access

to medicinal cannabis. That is a step that other jurisdictions have now followed. We passed those laws, we sought clear advice from the Law Reform Commission and we set up a regulatory framework that thousands of Victorians are now using to access at a medicinal level the cannabis that they require to support medical conditions, based on the advice and direction of healthcare professionals. I think what that demonstrates is that, again, the government, in considering issues associated with cannabis use but also other drug use in the community, takes an approach that is founded in harm minimisation and that focuses on therapeutic benefits but does so, driven by the Parliament, in a thoughtful and considered way. I do not think that a plebiscite is the way to achieve further steps on drug law reform in this state.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:12): I am very pleased to rise on behalf of my Greens colleagues to speak on this motion before us today, noting of course that the Greens will be supporting it. As the motion itself says, a plebiscite on cannabis legalisation would ensure that every Victorian has a direct voice in shaping one of the most long-overdue drug policy reforms of our time. We can for sure, as has been canvassed, have a discussion about the exact way in which we do that and that process at a more technical level, but at a principle level, this is a good idea. It is a good idea to me; I am a huge fan of democracy, not on a selective basis but continually. Democracy is a wonderful thing. This proposal to hold a plebiscite about the decriminalisation of personal cannabis use sounds like a great idea, and I think there are a lot of people out there, as we have heard today in this debate, who think this would be excellent.

Over 40 per cent of people in this country have tried cannabis at some point in their life. Even more, somewhere around 80 per cent of people do not support the criminalisation of cannabis. We have heard it in this debate today. And yet people get elected saying they are representative of the broader community. They get into this place, and they do not have the guts to even look at this stuff. That is the issue that we are confronted with here. So I think it is reasonable to find pathways to give people that direct input, to hold up a yardstick to see just how we are going in representing community attitudes on this stuff. That is what this puts before us here today.

The decriminalisation model that the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023 engages with is very similar to the one that has been in use, up and running, in the ACT for several years now. It is one of those things: when you get more Greens elected and they get into shared government, these things become possible. When I and members of the Legal and Social Issues Committee, colleagues from this place, undertook the inquiry process into this bill, we went up to Canberra. We saw just how things were operating up there, and what we saw, pleasingly, was that there had been no increase in road trauma and there had been no increase in hospitalisation. In fact we heard there had been less young people using cannabis, which might seem counterintuitive. And given that this is a decriminalisation model, arrests were, unsurprisingly, significantly reduced. It means less people were being needlessly dragged through the courts for minor possession and use.

Victoria should be seriously considering engaging in this scheme. So it was disappointing that despite all of that evidence – despite all of the processes, all of the reviews, all of the work that has gone into presenting to this government what people think about this issue, the evidence that exists around this issue and has for many years – the Labor government have refused to support the majority of the inquiry recommendations into this and they continue to keep their heads in the sand and act as if our current cannabis laws are fair and reasonable. Yet thousands of Victorians, it says in the motion, continue to come into contact with the criminal justice system simply for the personal use of small amounts of cannabis.

We should be changing our cannabis laws. With an election looming it is time that parties in this state offered bold, positive and progressive reforms like these for Victoria. The Greens would like to see cannabis fully legalised and regulated, and that is what we will vote for in this place. In saying that, every Greens MP elected into this place or the other place puts us another step closer to this important reform. With safe, legal and regulated access to cannabis, people will be able to responsibly enjoy a

brownie or some home-grown bud in the same way they currently do a beer. The revenue earned can be invested into health promotion, it can be invested into education, it can be invested into support services, all of which right now need more government funding. We should not be running people through the criminal justice system for possession or consumption of cannabis while organised crime continues to profit from a flourishing black market. It is time that our laws were updated, so bring on democracy. I commend this motion to the house.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:17): I just want to thank everyone for their contributions today and make a few statements in regard to some of the contributions that have been made. I particularly would like to acknowledge Ms Terpstra, Mr Mulholland, Mr Limbrick, Ms Watt, Ms Crozier, my colleague Mr Ettershank, Mr Batchelor and Mr Puglielli for making a contribution today. I think at the outset I will look at Ms Terpstra's contribution, as someone else who is part of the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee. We obviously took advice from the amazing staff at the parliamentary counsel, and their expertise is always very much appreciated. I think listening to the experts in how to draft legislation is what we rely on in this place. But I would take note of the fact that if that was the most alarming thing in this SARC report, when we have literally had this government turn around and say that they are going to not allow prisoners 1 hour of access to fresh air, a breach of the charter of human rights that was acknowledged in that report, then I think that you have got your priorities around the wrong way.

Mr Mulholland – not that he is here – I do not want to give him a civics lesson, but I will acknowledge that he thinks that vicarious liability is a trendy issue. What is fascinating about being part of Legalise Cannabis is that it is a bit of a broad church of people who are our membership base, and many of our membership are victim-survivors. So some of the issues that we do present before Parliament may not be cannabis related but are always in line with what our party principles are. Ms Watt highlighted the fact that medicinal cannabis was introduced a decade ago now and very much celebrated that. I think it is important to acknowledge that cannabis as a therapeutic product is exactly why we are calling for it to be regulated, because that is why people access cannabis. Those that grow their own at home do so because they are using it therapeutically.

I acknowledge Ms Crozier's contribution, and I also acknowledge that many of the other contributors today highlighted their time on committees, whether it be Ms Crozier and Fiona Patten working on that committee around the use of cannabis inquiry, I think that was in 2020, whereas we had the inquiry into the personal use of cannabis and looking at the ACT model in 2023–24, from memory. What was evident throughout that process was that the expertise there was saying that we know more now. I do not think we have ever identified cannabis as saying that it is harmless. We all acknowledge that there are harms and risks associated with cannabis. But what we do know is that the greatest harm is caused by the interactions with the criminal justice system, as my colleague Mr Ettershank pointed out. In saying that, I think that we have had a rigorous debate today, and I think it is important to also acknowledge that the democratic process here is something that we should hold strong. People having their say on things that are fairly outdated laws I think should be something that we should be normalising. The fact that we are at 100 years of prohibition next year of cannabis is something where we should be allowing there to be rigorous debate on that, whether that be in the public forum and influencing us in Parliament, or whether we continue to look at laws that may not be fit for purpose and how we might action that. In summary, I thank you all for your time today.

Council divided on motion:

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

Noes (27): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Shaun Leane, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan,

Tom McIntosh, Evan Mulholland, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Motion negatived.

Business of the house

Notices of motion and orders of the day

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:27): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Statements on tabled papers and petitions

Victorian Auditor-General's Office

Reducing the Harm Caused by Distracted Drivers

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:28): I rise today to speak on the independent assurance report called *Reducing the Harm Caused by Distracted Drivers*, which was submitted to the Parliament of Victoria by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office. This report was submitted in June of this year, and the report inquires into the effectiveness of the distracted driver and seatbelt detection camera program, amongst other things. The Victorian Auditor-General acknowledges that the use of mobile devices when driving significantly increases the risk of road accidents, and as a result the distracted driver and seatbelt detection camera program was launched with the intention of improving road safety through raising awareness of the risks and laws around using mobile devices and not wearing seatbelts; increasing enforcement of these laws; and also reducing behaviours that raise the risk of road accidents, serious injuries and death.

In 2021 the then Department of Transport developed the *Victorian Road Safety Strategy 2021–2030*. This strategy was developed to address deaths and serious injuries on Victorian roads, with the main objective of the strategy being to halve deaths and serious injuries on Victorian roads by the year 2030. As part of this, the distracted driver and seatbelt detection camera program was established on 31 March 2023, first with a three-month trial period prior to its full enforcement on 1 July 2023. Originally the program was intended to run for a two-year period until July 2025. The government, however, reviewed this and in December 2024 decided to extend the program until June 2030. The audit discusses the different bodies involved in the implementation of the program and the company responsible for providing the cameras, physically placing them and collecting data, Jenoptik. Upon capturing images, Jenoptik initially uses an AI software program to determine if a driver captured on the camera may be committing an offence. It is only after review by Jenoptik's team that the photo is then issued to Victoria Police, who determine if an offence is being committed and whether or not to therefore then issue an infringement notice to the driver. The report determined that Jenoptik is working well with Victoria Police, particularly in finalising site selection for cameras. Once Victoria Police have identified and recommended a site for camera deployment, Jenoptik has been seen to work well in determining the logistics and suitability of the site, assisting Victoria Police if alterations are then necessary.

The audit further mentions that the Victorian public can also recommend sites via the Cameras Save Lives website, not only for this program in particular but for Victoria's whole camera safety program. The website was further updated in order to more clearly describe the process of how public suggestions for camera sites are managed. Furthermore, the report found the multistage verification process employed by Jenoptik and Victoria Police is working well, and data collected is used to further improve the authentication process, particularly when low-confidence images are being analysed. This is done through joint meetings between Jenoptik and Victoria Police, during which trends in images

are also reviewed. Jenoptik then uses Victoria Police's decisions regarding low-confidence images to improve its verification process.

The audit also found that there is further data that needs to be collected in order to better determine the effect the program is having on reducing road deaths and serious injury. It is safe to say that the program is still comparatively new and more work is to be done in data collection. With more data collected over a longer period of time, the effectiveness of the overall program can be better determined. Therefore more work is required, but the department has been working with the recommendations in the audit, and it actively adopted changes whilst the audit was taking place. What is for certain is that we cannot put a price on safety. Regardless of how effective this program may turn out to be, we must acknowledge that even if one life has been saved or one serious accident has been averted, then all of the time, effort and funding that goes into this program is worth it. We can only determine the most effective deterrent measures if we try them and then evaluate them. I commend this report to the house.

Electricity infrastructure

Petition

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:32): I rise to speak on the petition I tabled yesterday bearing 1300 signatures, which added to the 10,460 online signatures I tabled on 28 July for the same petition. That is a total of 11,760 Victorians who have signed the petition calling on VicGrid and the Minister for Energy and Resources to remove the eastern section of the Central North renewable energy zone from the Victorian transmission plan. This huge number of signatures is a testament to the energy and dedication of Dookie residents who have driven this campaign and who are watching tonight online.

Let me briefly recount the history around this renewable energy zone. The draft Victorian transmission plan was released for public consultation in May 2025. It contained a single Central North renewable energy zone that spanned a massive footprint of 160,000 hectares between Bendigo and Shepparton. The large size and location of the zone seriously worried farmers, residents and local governments because it overlaps significantly with highly productive agricultural land. The final 2025 Victorian transmission plan, released in August that year, significantly reduced the zone to a smaller area close to the existing transmission line. However, I was completely shocked to discover that the final plan contained a nasty surprise, with a whole new section of the zone created to the east of Shepparton, running from Pine Lodge to Glenrowan. Let me emphasise this point: this section was not in the draft plan at all, and not a single farmer or landowner within the new section was aware that their land had been placed inside the renewable energy zone. This was a brand new section that was created in the final version of the transmission plan with zero consultation – zero. VicGrid have admitted this, and in the updated transmission plan they say:

We acknowledge that the eastern section of the REZ is new and was not consulted on during the draft 2025 VTP process.

When the Dookie community found out about the new section there was much shock and confusion, with many questions about why their land had been chosen, but very few answers. The only reason given was the hint that the eastern section had been created to satisfy developer interest. Imagine the stress and anxiety suffered by farmers who woke up one morning and read in the newspaper that their property had been targeted to host solar panels and wind turbines, and that is what the REZ boundary is. It is a target painted on their backs telling developers to concentrate their efforts here.

Rural landowners around Victoria will tell you that this often ends up in harassment, with energy developers chasing farmers and pressuring them until they sell up. This can divide communities when the zone pushes energy developers to focus intense pressure onto specific regions. Creating a new zone without any warning was a massive failure of basic principles of community consultation by a Labor government ideologically obsessed with renewables. Labor arrogantly thinks it can run

roughshod over rural communities and force industrial renewable energy projects onto productive farming areas.

A Greater Shepparton City Council community survey found that about 75 per cent of people believed the boundary selection process was flawed and they opposed the current REZ proposal. Why do they oppose it? Because they recognise that the land around Dookie is highly productive agricultural land that is essential to food security in Victoria, and the government's own solar energy facility guidelines say that prime agricultural land must be protected. The area has unique fertile soil that retains moisture and produces some of the highest yields in the state. Data for grain production shows that the productivity of dryland cropping in the area is 67 per cent above the state average. Dookie produces up to 8 tonnes of wheat per hectare and 3 tonnes of canola, making it one of the best performing regions in Victoria. The untouched natural beauty also attracts tourists to the area.

In May this year I attended two community meetings, and everyone at those meetings was against this plan. But it only takes one weak link and someone seduced by a tempting offer to open the door to unwanted development. 11,760 Victorians have signed the petition to say no. The minister for energy must listen to local residents and the over 11,000 petitioners and remove Dookie from the eastern section of the Central North renewable energy zone.

Victorian Auditor-General's Office

Improving Bus Services

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (17:38): I rise tonight to speak on the Victorian Auditor-General Office's (VAGO) recent audit *Improving Bus Services*. Victoria's bus plan was an ambitious document. It was a little light on detail, as is often the case, but it presented a bold vision for Melbourne's bus network to become a proper mass transit option by 2031. About two-thirds of Melbourne is not within reach of train or tram service, which means that buses are a critical component of a comprehensive public transport network. If we want to enable people to get from anywhere to anywhere in Melbourne by public transport, buses will have to be part of the solution, so making them a proper mass transit option is crucial. But the bus plan's ambition has not so far translated into action. Despite some promising consultations on significant reforms in Melbourne's north and north-east that took place in late 2022, the only real action we have seen is tinkering around the edges – a new route in a growth suburb here, a few extra services on the weekends there. It is all very welcome, but it is not serious reform.

VAGO's verdict is clear: routine planning and management will not deliver the mass transit ambitions that are set out in Victoria's bus plan. The government cannot just keep tinkering around the edges and pretend that it is enough. We need proper bus reform to realise this vision. There is not some huge mystery here about what needs to happen; we know in broad terms what we need to do. As the bus plan said, albeit without much detail, we need to unscramble the bus network and provide a network that is simple, direct, fast and frequent and that gets people where they need to go. Recommendations 1, 2 and 3 in Infrastructure Victoria's 2025 paper *Fast, Frequent, Fair* were to (1) increase frequencies, (2) optimise the network through fast and direct routes and (3) extend operating hours. Community campaigns are already doing the work, mapping out what this can look like in some areas. Friends of the Earth's Better Buses campaign has come up with a detailed map of what a reformed network in the western suburbs could look like: a grid structure of fast and direct routes focused on the arterial road network.

One of the first priorities identified in the bus plan, action 1 of the 2021–23 period, was to develop the bus reform implementation plan which would then set the path for those serious reforms. We in the Greens saw this and we really looked forward to seeing that bus reform implementation plan published. When we had not seen any sign of it by February 2025, we asked the department about it in the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. They took that question on notice, but when their answer finally came back it did not actually provide any information about the bus reform implementation plan. Instead the secretary waffled on, sadly, about the incremental changes to the bus

network that have been made recently and then closed with a generic statement about providing robust advice to the government and claiming executive privilege on that advice – so nothing about the bus reform implementation plan specifically. The Greens have been left with the impression that this document was simply never created, just like the integrated transport plan that is required by our Transport Integration Act 2010 that has never been created, and that it was yet another casualty of this government's poor record on transparency and on planning. But what VAGO's audit has revealed is that the implementation plan does exist, it has just never been published, and this lack of transparency is something that VAGO has rightly criticised. The Greens and the Victorian public still have not seen this document, but what we can glean from VAGO's audit is that the department's thinking is along the same lines as Infrastructure Victoria and along the same lines as the community Better Buses campaign: a modern grid of frequent routes within 800 metres of most households.

We all know what needs to be done to make buses a real mass transit option for the people of Melbourne, but so far Labor has just lacked the political will and prioritisation to do it. Our newly minted Premier Ben Carroll was the minister responsible for producing Victoria's bus plan. I actually raised it with Mr Carroll in one of the first meetings that I had when I took on the public transport portfolio for the Greens in person, and he seemed well across the issues. At the time I think he was stymied by a Premier and a Treasurer who would not let him implement this vision for bus reform in Melbourne, but now he is in the top job and the buck stops with him. So it will be a test of his leadership, whether we see a bus network delivered that meets Melbourne's needs or if we continue with one that neglects two-thirds of Melburnians that are stuck with a subpar system.

Electricity infrastructure

Petition

Gaëlle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (17:43): I am pleased to be able to speak on the petition to remove the eastern section of Central North renewable energy zone (REZ) from the Victorian transmission plan. I note that there have been over 11,000 signatures, and I thank Wendy Lovell for tabling both of those petitions. I know that this is something that Kim O'Keeffe, the member for Shepparton, has been advocating for, and also Sam Birrell, the federal member for Nicholls, calling on the Victorian government to remove the Dookie district from the proposed Central North renewable energy zone, because industrialising some of Victoria's most fertile agricultural land would ruin one of Australia's most important food-producing landscapes.

I grew up on a farm between the Yarra Valley and the Dandenong Ranges, started by my great-grandfather and then my grandfather and my dad continued it – fruit, flowers, vegetables – and I understand the value of soils. Soils are so different. Certainly in Silvan there is rich red volcanic soil that can grow anything. But different areas have different soils and different rainfalls, different terrain, and you grow what is suited to the region if you want to do well. Dookie, in the Goulburn Valley, is special: the yields are much higher. The Shepparton council commissioned a review, and it found that the wheat and canola yield is much higher than the Victorian averages.

What happened with this inclusion in the Central North REZ has really caught the community by surprise. The draft plan, released in May 2025, showed only a Western Bendigo to Tatura area. The final plan, released in August 2025, added an Eastern Shepparton to Glenrowan section that covered Dookie. Community meetings have gathered hundreds of people from Dookie and surrounding areas who were really outraged and surprised by the inclusion in the Central North REZ in the final Victorian transmission plan, and the response from those attending was very clear. The Dookie soil is unique, and they want the zone to avoid capturing prime agricultural land. VicGrid's case for the eastern section is the strong solar interest and proximity to existing transmission. The counter case is that these advantages do not outweigh Dookie's exceptional food production, the flood constraints, public agricultural investment and the cumulative fragmentation risk that can occur, because once you lose prime agricultural land, it can be lost for good. I know that Dookie, certainly as I was growing up, was

the place to go to learn about agriculture. Now with the University of Melbourne campus it is certainly a hub for agricultural research, and there is a reason why it was located in that area.

But the government has a choice. Central North has not been declared, and its boundary remains open to consultation. I heard the Minister for Energy and Resources during question time today say that consultation was ongoing with the local community. The Protect Dookie and the Goulburn Valley group has been working hard to highlight the issues. They have made their request to decision-makers clear: to remove Dookie and surrounding high-value agricultural land from the proposed Central North renewable energy zone, to ensure the independent findings of the report that has been done by the council are fully considered before any planning decisions are made, to publicly release the locality-specific evidence assessments and data sets relied upon in selecting Dookie and acknowledge and address the consultation deficiencies surrounding Dookie's inclusion, and to strengthen planning protections for strategically significant agricultural land before future renewable energy zone boundaries are finalised.

I know my colleague Kim O'Keeffe has been speaking in the other place about an inquiry that was done into securing Victoria's food supply, and one of the key recommendations of that inquiry was the protection of high-value cultural land. In the Shepparton electorate we are seeing increased pressure from development and competing land uses. What we need to remember is the need to protect not just our land, but the ability to feed future generations.

It is timely that this petition has been tabled today, because Emma Kealy, the Shadow Minister for Agriculture, has introduced to the Victorian Parliament, to protect the state's most strategic agricultural land from being permanently lost to poorly considered development, the Planning and Environment Amendment (Agricultural Land and Food Security) Bill 2026 to ensure agriculture is finally recognised as the strategic asset it is rather than just being treated as another land use in Victoria's planning system. Because Victoria produces around 28 per cent of Australia's gross value of agricultural production, and we need to look after it.

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into Public School Funding

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:48): I rise today to speak on the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's recent report on public school funding in Victoria. It was a very worthwhile and interesting committee inquiry to partake in, and indeed very valuable for the point-in-time perspective that it provided, coming at the start of this year. There was much that was discussed and indeed much useful evidence that we heard from principals, from teachers, from parents and from other stakeholders in the public education system in Victoria.

We are very proud of the investments that we have made so far and indeed of the incredible results that public school teachers in particular and our schoolteachers across the state have delivered with our history-setting, best NAPLAN results in Victoria's history along with the best results observed in the nation again, for the second year in a row, with the recent results.

The inquiry looked into detail of issues around pay for teachers and around the student resource standard model, the SRS, which is more commonly known as the full Gonski funding. This government remains committed to securing and achieving that full partnership of 75 per cent funding by the states and 25 per cent funding of that SRS in agreement with the Commonwealth government. It is particularly exciting that in recent days we have seen a firm commitment by new Premier Ben Carroll for Victoria to achieve its full SRS new bilateral agreement deal with the Commonwealth government this year. There is an interim agreement in place, but we are still working towards that final agreement.

One of the key parts of that agreement is based on funding for teachers pay as well as other educational resources. That is why it is also very good to see a pay offer before our teachers right now, which

would make them not the worst paid in the country, as the previous EBA has led them to be, but the best paid in the country. I will not go into too much commentary on that, because it is up for teachers at the moment to be having their say, and we look forward to seeing the outcomes of that vote next week. Certainly this is a government that is committed, in particular with Premier Ben Carroll and the Deputy Premier and new Minister for Education Gab Williams absolutely determined to provide the best pay and conditions possible for our already very hardworking teachers and to reward them for the effort that they do in providing a very strong academic grounding and social grounding for students. The existing NAPLAN results obviously speak for themselves. It is their success to be proud of. We want to give them a pay offer that recognises that.

It is about more than just that as well. That is where the full SRS funding comes in, and it is a very, very good thing to see that. I know many teachers have been calling for it. Many in my community have spoken to me, both directly from within the education system as well as more broadly from the community. They have been very interested in this topic. I know for Mr Batchelor, Mr Tarlamis and me – it is always good to see fellow committee members in the room when you are talking about a report – it is something that we have been engaged with extensively, both within and beyond our party and through and beyond this report.

The SRS is a fairly complicated model, and this report does go into some of the nuances on which Victoria and other jurisdictions have sought some tweaks and improvements from the Commonwealth. One such thing is the variance throughout a school year that the SRS target is set at, with the example given of two consecutive years, 2022 and 2023, where the target shot up in mid-December. If you were to allocate a whole bunch of extra funds in mid-September to accommodate a shifting target, it is probably not going to do much for educational outcomes over the entire year by cramming all that extra funding into what is basically the wind-down week. There are perhaps some tweaks that are needed for the model to ensure that it is adaptive and responsive but also achievable. In those rare cases where Victoria did not in fact meet the target that was agreed to, it was because of those last-minute jumps and variations in the target. That is something that is important to be considered, and I understand that through the national education ministers' meetings and other forums that is being discussed extensively.

Another thing that this inquiry looked at in some minor detail was the ongoing capital spend. We know that Victoria has built as many new schools in our state as every other state and territory combined. We have seen the phenomenal growth and demand for public education in this state. Where we have seen that at a lower rate or in some cases even declining, we have seen the value of that very world-class education that we have provided demonstrated in the demand, and we are building the new schools and upgrading the existing schools to meet that demand.

Environment and Planning Committee

Inquiry into the 2026 Summer Fires across Victoria

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:53): I am going to take the opportunity to discuss our minority report from the bushfire inquiry into the 2026 bushfires. It certainly is a very expansive report that was conducted in a short space of time, and our minority report covers a number of topics. The one that is of interest to me tonight, and I will indulge my interest, is around fuel reduction and risk mitigation in terms of bushfires. We start with:

Fuel is the bushfire risk factor most directly influenced by government action.

My two colleagues Ms Lovell and Mrs Broad and I quoted Forestry Australia. Forestry Australia are a very passionate, very learned, very capable and very scientific group of people. They submitted that:

The scale of bushfire impacts on the community, economy and environment result from a reduced commitment to properly resource the management of public forest lands and in particular a decline in the use of planned (prescribed) fire at the landscape scale.

This is the other part. They further stated that:

Mild extensive burning is not only a tool for fuel management but also contributes to maintenance of forest health and biodiversity and to minimising the impact of fire on distributed assets and infrastructure.

Of course that also relates to our forests.

A couple of weeks ago there was a very interesting article, which flows on from this. Something that I have spoken about regularly in this place, and a passion of mine, is around the active management of our forest systems. I have long argued that there is no point saying, 'We're changing land tenure. We're changing it from a state forest to a national park. We're locking out certain activities. Lo and behold, the forest systems are now safe' – far be it.

I want to relate an experiment that occurred some 30 years ago now. This occurred in an area that I have actually visited up at Tanjil Bren. What happened was that in about the 1970s there was clear-felling up behind Noojee. There was clear-felling, and they decided to conduct an experiment on it in the mid-1980s. I have actually spoken to one of the gentlemen who was then a very young man, a young forester out of university, who worked on this. They decided to turn this clear-felled area of many, many hectares behind Tanjil Bren into a large-scale test tube. What they did was they did some different systems. They compared forest regeneration of full-scale silviculture approaches. They included traditional felling, small patch clear-felling and heavy thinning. Indeed they had from 50 per cent thinning. If you picture a full hectare of land, they 50 per cent thinned some of the then sapling trees away, and they also then thinned out part of it to only 30 per cent. Now moving forward, they did their tests back in the 2000s and then basically shut the gate and away they went.

But here are some of the systems that they found. They retested it 30 years later. The trees left behind after thinning were enormous; the ones that had been thinned were enormous. They were only 80 years old, but the largest average size was well over 1.5 metres. Thinning had given these trees, naturally, more space to breathe, more space to grow, more light and more resources. The very exciting part about this is that they also captured and measured the carbon content of the square hectare, and the larger trees that had the area around them thinned could naturally grow and captured carbon to a greater degree than the whole hectare of those that had not been thinned. They also found that Leadbeater's possums were in the acacias that grew under those. That was really important. They found some really important things. Long-term silviculture experiments are irreplaceable, and I was really thankful to go and visit. Forest thinning is not a trade-off; it can sincerely enhance our forest systems.

Third, and most importantly, there is no silviculture silver bullet for managing forests. The long-forgotten Tanjil Bren experiment has taught us that there are options available for managing our forests, and it was so good to go up there with Professor Patrick Baker a year ago and see this firsthand.

Petitions

Animal care and protection legislation

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (17:58): I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration.

I rise to speak on this petition which calls on the government to finally honour its now 10-year-old commitment to introduce the animal care and protection bill to finally modernise our broken animal protection laws in this state. This was a promise that was made by the Labor government quite some time ago, and it is a promise that they have continued to fail on. They have continued to prioritise other pieces of work and have continued to prioritise other pieces of legislation, despite this bill being ready for introduction to the Parliament at any time.

I want to thank the petition starter Tracey Asquith for her relentless dedication. I am sure she would love to be here today. I believe she is watching on the live stream. She has shown so much effort not just in collecting these signatures but in tireless work advocating to the government to make this

change and to finally do what they said they would. This all came about after Tracey was horrified when she learned just how weak our state's so-called animal protection laws are and how they are failing each and every day. It is clear that everyone else is disgusted too, because more than 10,000 Victorians signed this petition in rapid time after the former Premier said that these laws would not enter the Parliament this term. This was after we were promised they would enter this term and promised they would enter in the last term. There have been multiple rounds of consultation and millions of dollars budgeted for it, only for the legislation to languish and gather dust on a desk.

This is not just a broken promise. This is causing animals to suffer in real time every day, because our current framework is 40 years old – it is older than I am – and those laws were designed to punish cruelty, not to prevent cruelty. That might sound like a minor detail, but it means they are incredibly difficult to apply and to prove that there should be intervention by authorities. Part of the reason for that is because cruelty is hard to prove, whereas we know something that can be cruel to an animal is neglecting that animal – it is failing to provide care, it is failing to provide food, water or shelter. Not only would these laws have finally recognised that are animals sentient – they can feel pain, joy, suffering and happiness – but they would have mandated a duty of care, and that is incredibly important.

There are many cases that have happened in our state that would have seen different outcomes if we had had these laws in place at the time. Some of those will be familiar to people in this place because we received huge amounts of correspondence in relation to them, such as the Mount Eliza horses, where there were months of inaction while 35 horses were starving on a property with no ability for action because our laws did not allow it. There was Trump the corgi – I did not name him – who was languishing on a balcony and was only rehomed because of a negotiation with the owner, not because the laws allowed it. We have seen many of these cases.

And when the high threshold of cruelty is proven and charges are laid, the penalties are incredibly weak. We saw that in the case of Millie, a Maltese shih tzu who was brutally beaten with a metal pole at least 16 times in December 2024 by a neighbour. Her body was never found. Her attacker was placed on an 18-month community corrections order. I do believe some of Millie's family are here today. They know the outcomes when these laws fail, and they are why we need to ensure this promise is finally delivered.

These are just some examples, but we are inundated every single day in my office by Victorians who are horrified at the animal suffering they are seeing around them, only to find out that our laws actually allow this, and then when a case does reach an outcome, the penalties do not match the crime. For example: aggravated animal cruelty has a maximum jail term of two years, which has not been used I think ever; property damage has a maximum jail term of 10 years. This really demonstrates just how devalued and dismissed animals are in this state, and that was the reasoning for this commitment in the very first place. We knew that our laws were not recognising the way that we view animals here in 2026, or in 2016 when this was first committed to. We were promised these laws by 2019. It is seven years later. There are a few weeks left of Parliament. This bill is ready, it is about priorities and it is time for the new Premier to tell us where he stands on this one.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:03): I rise to speak on what is a very important subject, and I acknowledge the continued and tenacious advocacy of Ms Purcell in raising this in the chamber. I am appreciative of the opportunity for this place to be talking about this matter today, although I will note my attire is far less appropriate to the matter at hand.

I understand that well over 10,000 Victorians have signed this petition, and I want to acknowledge each and every one of them. In affirming that the government will be supporting the acceptance of this petition tonight, I am sure that this will contribute to the ongoing public debate that we are having in this state and the ongoing work that, as Ms Purcell referenced, is already well and truly underway. I note that Minister Blandthorn is in the chamber and the work that she has done in this space over a sustained period as well. There are reforms which have already taken place. Indeed as part of this

year's state budget there is the \$16.9 million commitment to deliver important animal welfare protection initiatives as well as biosecurity measures, which are just as important.

There is absolutely no place for animal cruelty like that in some of the stories Ms Purcell has shared today, some of which I have discussed with her, and similar stories. Indeed with one particular story affecting a family in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, no words can describe how I feel about that. No family should have to go through that. No family should ever have to deal with that. It is appropriate, I think, that we work for laws in this place that bring about justice for people, justice for families and justice for animals. That is something that sits at the front of my mind whenever we discuss these issues. The unthinkable thing is if I were in that situation with my pets. But that is something that we must always strive for in this place: to remember that no matter what the policy is that we are debating, the debates, the discussions and the arguments that we have in this chamber affect the lives of ordinary Victorians – of each and every Victorian. It is in that spirit that I am very much looking forward to seeing the continued policy work and the consultations taking place for this very important piece of legislation to be further continued.

There is much more I could talk about in relation to government investment in animal welfare as it stands broadly, ranging from giving renters the right to keep a pet; reforms around the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee, ensuring that the government receives expert advice; becoming the first state to introduce mandatory reporting of animal fate data for dogs and cats in shelters and pounds; the targeted desexing program for cats; and the production of Victoria's first *Animal Welfare Action Plan*, which recognised that animals are sentient. The latest round of funding for the Animal Welfare Fund, supporting 36 organisations, brings grants to more than \$16 million over the past decade. Indeed as part of the previous year's state budget there was significant funding as well of over \$13 million, including funding to continue the delivery of domestic animal regulatory functions under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986 and the continued operation of the pet exchange register and commercial dog breeder scheme. This government also banned puppy farms, with the strictest breeding rules in the country, made it an offence to sell a pet without a valid microchip and source number from the pet exchange register, and removed the need for greyhounds – beautiful greys – to be muzzled in public.

I am going to conclude my remarks by going back to where I began, and that is that we do have an important role and responsibility in this place to legislate for all Victorians, especially for those moments when we are at our most vulnerable. No animal – I was going to say, especially no treasured pet, but no animal – should have to go through any amount of abuse or violence, especially where it is completely unwarranted, unnecessary and against all human and all animal decency. I very much look forward to continuing this discussion and having more to say in future debates on this issue.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:08): The wonderful thing about Parliament is petitions, and I respect the fact that Victorians are enabled to conduct petitions and submit them to Parliament, and then when they reach a threshold we debate them. Clearly there is always going to be a wide array of views in this place and potentially an even wider array of views in the public domain. Whilst I note this petition and will speak to it, it is not the Liberals' or Nationals' position that we endorse the contents of it. However, we endorse the democracy behind it.

Let me put our position quite clearly: we strongly support animal welfare, and we strongly support tough penalties for those who deliberately inflict abuse, neglect and cruelty on animals. We strongly say that there should be no tolerance of cruelty in the animal world and also in the small child world, in the domestic violence world, and the list could go on.

I am a daughter of a dairy farmer, and I know how hard my father worked for all his working life since he was 14 to make sure his animals were fit, healthy and the least stressed they could be. And it was a feather in his cap, we will say, or a piece of pride, to know that his cell count was one of the best in the state. That means that his cows produced healthy milk and they were healthy, overwhelmingly – not always, of course, and that is where that practical application of animal care comes into it.

Caring for animals is not a political slogan, and this debate should not be framed in the position of supporting animals as opposed to supporting farmers. We need to do and should be doing both, and there should be a hand-in-hand approach. We should have, and we do have now, strong animal welfare protection, and we need to do that while supporting the people that care for animals every day in food and fibre production and in care for our domestic animals. There is nothing more atrocious than having a domestic violence situation where a partner is being held ransom because of a loved companion animal.

But our concern is not with the improving of animal welfare. Our concern is with the rushing of a complex piece of legislation before important questions have been answered. The Victorian Farmers Federation have consistently raised concerns about the broad regulatory powers, uncertainty around the future licensing arrangement and the potential impact on legitimate farming practices. These concerns should not be dismissed. The VFF represents hardworking Victorian farmers, and there are more that sit under the VFF umbrella. They are asking for certainty, clarity, proper consultation and significant reforms, rather than just a draft bill before this house.

We want to see practical reform, we want to see evidence-based reform, we want things to be informed by science and veterinary expertise and we want real-world farming expertise to be included in it. Good policy is developed with industry, and in this case farmers and primary producers, not imposed upon them, and given the impact of excessive regulation on Victoria's agricultural industries, any reforms, as I have said, must be practical, must be proportionate and must be evidence based. We should target cruelty, but we should not create uncertainty. If laws need strengthening, then strengthen them. If penalties are inadequate, then increase them. Truly what this government has done over its time is reduce Agriculture Victoria to a back room or an outhouse. It has whittled down both the enforcement powers within them and their resources to actually go out and do that proper work in relation to care and animal husbandry, we could say.

We will always support sensible measures that improve animal welfare. But this is a draft bill, and in my view we need to get it right. There needs to be more consultation. Rushing it through and calling it protection is a fallacy, and therefore whilst we appreciate the democracy within the petition, we do not appreciate a rushed draft bill.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (18:14): The Greens will be supporting this petition, and we share the call for the government to immediately introduce the animal care and protection bill. Our existing Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986 (POCTA act) is now 40 years old, and it does reflect an outdated approach to animal welfare, one that is largely focused on responding to cruelty once suffering has occurred rather than establishing a modern preventative duty to properly care for animals. The draft bill that has been spoken about would also have explicitly recognised that animals are sentient beings, that they experience pain, fear and pleasure and that cruelty can cause suffering. These are not radical proposals in 2026, they are basic principles that should underpin contemporary animal welfare law. The RSPCA has been so clear that these reforms will make a practical difference to its inspectors, who investigate more than 10,000 reports of animal cruelty every year. Specifically, the RSPCA welcomed legislated minimum care requirements because they assist inspectors that are investigating neglect and poor living conditions every day in this state.

The new legislation would also have strengthened serious cruelty offences and penalties, including indictable offences for the most serious intentional cruelty, torture and torment. We know why that is needed; we have seen so many horrible examples in this state. Another that I am aware of is RSPCA's seizure of 13 horses and 24 cats from a property that was linked to a repeat animal cruelty offender, where more than 400 animals had been reportedly removed from this same person's care over the preceding decade, and this was their fourth breach of court orders. So clearly we do need updated laws.

It is not a coincidence, but that 10-year period in which that person continued to inflict cruelty on animals roughly mirrors how long we have been talking about this new animal care and protection bill. It is a nonsense to say that this bill was being rushed. In fact this bill had been consulted on and

advocated for for years, and then, when the Premier changed the action, it ground to a halt, and the bill has sat there gathering dust, and it is a damn shame. This government should prioritise this work. It is ready to go. It has been consulted on. In fact the stakeholders that Ms Bath was referring to have had extensive opportunities to contribute. I think what happened is that the then Premier got more worried about losing her own seat, and feeling that there was sensitivity around this law, she choked and took it off the agenda. Now our animals are suffering still, because this work has been done but the government has not prioritised bringing the bill on. Hopefully there is a fresh opportunity. We have certainly got a lot on the agenda in these last few weeks, but I think that this is crucial and the government should bring it on.

In fact way before the consultation on the current draft bill the Greens had been saying this for years. My predecessor in this place Sue Pennicuik, who was the one of the first Greens elected to this place, in 2006 was arguing for stronger animal protection laws and throughout her time in Parliament, including criticising these existing gaps in our POCTA act. Ellen Sandell and Samantha Ratnam, again, repeatedly called for the POCTA act to be strengthened, as had previous Greens animal welfare spokespersons. We continue that work today and we will continue until the government finally gets on and delivers fit-for-purpose, well-consulted laws.

Labor itself recognised the problem back in 2017, when it committed to replacing the POCTA act, so this is a broken promise as well as a waste of all the effort. There have been years of reviews, consultation papers, stakeholder meetings, an exposure draft and years and years of work by animal welfare organisations, legal experts, industry and the community. The government glowingly described its own draft bill as enabling 'earlier intervention before harm occurs'. So much for earlier intervention, because inexplicably it was shelved.

The draft bill would not solve every animal welfare problem in Victoria, and the Greens certainly look forward to the opportunity to scrutinise and strengthen it as it comes through this chamber eventually, but Victoria absolutely needs to move on from a 40-year-old framework centred on responding to cruelty towards modern laws designed to prevent suffering in the first place. The government should absolutely introduce the animal care and protection bill and let Parliament get on with its job. The Greens support the petition today and thank Ms Purcell for bringing this to the chamber and everyone who signed the petition.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (18:19): It has been great to receive support from most parts of the chamber. I certainly do take issue with commentary stating that this has been rushed when it has been a decade and in that decade we have seen countless animals suffer in our state. To hear that we have strong animal protection laws when we have people in this building observing this debate who have lived the reality of that simply not being the case and the heartache and the trauma that comes with that I think is incredibly out of touch. Nobody is saying that these laws cannot exist alongside farming communities. In fact the entire intention behind these laws is that they have gone through multiple rounds of consultation and they are ready for introduction to the Parliament because that consultation was a successful process. We cannot have the opposition saying that we have strong laws while also complaining and blaming the government for one of the cases I spoke about, which was the Mount Eliza horses, where multiple MPs in the lower house were criticising the government for inaction. It does not go both ways.

We need to give authorities the power to act, and they clearly do not have that right now. There is the ability to get the balance right. I know better than anyone the balancing act that comes with protecting animals from cruelty and acknowledging that there are people who will have expectations of these laws. These laws certainly do not go far enough for me. Everybody knows my views on the various atrocities that happen to animals across our state that are completely legal. But we have got to start somewhere, and right now animals are languishing, suffering from neglect and dying because of the inaction of this government. It is time that they did the right thing and acted on this.

To hear that this is somehow rushed when we have seen multiple bills for racing, for outdoor recreation, for duck shooting, for a range of different things fly through this Parliament that were not even policy at the start of this term is galling. Once again, I call on Premier Ben Carroll to prove he is different to Jacinta Allan and introduce these laws to the Parliament.

Motion agreed to.

Business of the house

Notices of motion and orders of the day

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:21): I move:

That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 1559, and order of the day, government business, 1, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Corrections 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) (18:22): I rise to speak on the Corrections Amendment Bill 2026. We will not be opposing this bill, but I am going to point out what is missing from this bill and what is, quite frankly, not in line with community expectations. The background to this bill is that an underworld boss, George Marrogi, recently won a legal battle regarding prison conditions. This man is serving a 38-year sentence for murder and drug trafficking, and he took the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety to the Supreme Court and won. He argued that his rights had been breached essentially because the courtyard behind his prison cell – he was in a high-security prison cell – was too small, restricting his open air access. He claimed, and it was proven in the court, that this happened in the Melbourne remand centre and in Barwon Prison. The judge said this:

The yard felt enclosed, with limited room to move around and the only view to the outdoors being to the sky above the yard through the mesh on the cell's roof.

As a result we are dealing with this Corrections Amendment Bill today. In doing so we are amending the piece of legislation that addresses prisoners' rights within corrections settings. This is the very piece of legislation that thousands of Victorians have petitioned to see changed, yet the government has gone nowhere near the changes that the community have asked for.

In less than two years I have personally raised the need to change this piece of legislation over 15 times in this place. Why? Because in mid-2024 Bianca and Boyd Unwin contacted me. They told me about Boyd's daughter and Bianca's sister Katie Haley and how she had been brutally beaten to death by her partner. Because he was locked up in prison during COVID, he received 427 days off his sentence due to inconvenience. This took him below his non-parole period, not because he had shown remorse, not because he had been well-behaved, but because he was inconvenienced.

I am going to take a step back – because it is important in debating this piece of legislation – and tell you exactly what happened. I want to know why the government has exempted itself from financial compensation in this piece of legislation while completely ignoring the voices of victims and victims' families. It was in 2018 when Katie was at home with her partner that he got, according to court documents, angry and lost it. He beat her to death because he did not want her to leave him. We know that the stage where people have been in a situation of domestic violence and they make the decision to leave is the most dangerous time in that person's life. Her partner did not like what he was hearing, so he bashed her to death with a dumbbell bar while their beautiful daughter, just 11 months old, slept

in the room next door. I know this little girl well because I have spent a lot of time with this family. I have wanted to understand the impact of this piece of legislation. She is the most beautiful little girl. She has been raised in the most loving family by Katie Haley's parents and her extended family. But the fact is this little girl had the toughest start to life. She lay innocently in the next room as her mother was murdered. Katie received at least three blows to the face and at least two blows to the throat, and Katie's cause of death was blunt force to the head. Justice Champion described the crime scene as 'gruesome and horrific'. He went on and said to Shane Robertson, who murdered Katie:

It is clear to me that you attacked your partner in uncontrollable rage and it was your intention to kill her.

He showed no remorse. There is not a good chance of rehabilitation. Yet he received 427 days off his prison sentence because of these discounts. He was sentenced to 24 years, 19 non-parole. I am going to talk about parole as part of this legislation, because it is an important part of this legislation. I believe that in the community people would imagine that non-parole means non-parole, but no, parole is actually elastic. There is room for it to move, and I am going to go through that in a minute. However, the day Robertson was sentenced, Ms Haley's dad Boyd said the jail term was in many ways 'irrelevant' to the family as they suffered the ongoing loss. He said:

We've all got a life sentence. My wife and I, we don't get to see Katie again.

My daughter, my son, don't get to see their sister again.

And more importantly, two young children never get to spend any more time with their mum.

I first raised this in this place on 28 August 2024, and I have not been a lone voice on this issue. In fact 3750 Victorians petitioned the government online to change this. If you look this up, it will say on the website:

Petition sponsor: **Renee Heath**

Response status –

this is since 16 October 2024 –

Awaiting Response

...

Response due: **15 November 2024**

So I think it is safe to say it is a little bit late. I am going to read what we petitioned in regard to this legislation:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that all Victorian prisoners are eligible for emergency management days while incarcerated, which can see up to four days of their sentence removed for each day they are inconvenienced due to industrial action, emergencies, disruptions and deprivations, including due to COVID-19 lockdowns.

This is exactly the settings we are talking about here today. It goes on to say:

Over the two years that Melbourne and Victoria suffered through the world's longest ... lockdowns, thousands of prisoners received more than 360,000 days off their collective sentences. This is equivalent to over 1,000 years ...

Well, we were wrong in saying that. More recent FOIs show that in fact well over 800,000 days were taken off – more than 2000 years worth of sentence reductions. It therefore calls on the government to, as a matter of urgency, remove the eligibility of violent and high-risk prisoners – like the murderer and drug trafficker that took this department to court – for emergency management days and ensure that any reductions do not take them beyond their minimum non-parole period. We are still awaiting a response.

Tabled on the same day, on 16 October 2024, 2855 Victorians petitioned the government. That response was due 15 November. However, six months later, in June, I got this response from the then Minister for Corrections, and I am going to read some of it to you. It states:

Emergency Management Days may be granted under the *Corrections Act 1986* to people in custody who demonstrate good behaviour during periods of disruption and deprivation such as an industrial dispute, emergency or other ... unforeseen circumstances. They are not granted where a person has demonstrated poor behaviour.

We later found out this is false, but that is not what I am going to focus on today. It further states:

Emergency Management Days are an operational tool for maintaining good order during emergencies, as they provide a strong incentive for compliance during times when there is a significant risk of dangerous disruptions inside prison facilities.

But this is the last part:

Pandemic related rules for the application of EMD's ended in early 2023. EMDs are now being used very rarely, in line with their targeted role relating to disruptions or deprivations.

It explicitly says that that ended in 2023. However, that is not the case. I later received an FOI response when there was a change from Minister Erdogan to Minister Hamer – and it has now changed again – that demonstrates that this was completely false. The FOI response said that between 1 July 2023 until the end of the year, there were 9882 days granted because of COVID. Then from 1 January 2024 to 30 June, there were 7697. I should actually add that up quickly. That is 9882 plus 7697, which means 17,579 days for a reason they said did not exist. That was either a mistake – a mistake that happened over 17,000 times – or was actually misleading. Then I got another FOI response that shows – and this is completely outside the dates that he said they had finished – between July and December 2024 there were almost 3000; between January and June, 1451; and then from July to December last year, 512. This really makes me wonder. Why on earth are we seeing the same piece of legislation that, while still ignoring the voices of victims, manages to exempt the government from its responsibility?

There are some other things that I would really like to point out in the current legislation, which is what we are amending today. It says:

The Secretary may, in accordance with the regulations, reduce the length of a sentence of imprisonment being served by a person or the length of the non-parole period ...

This is unbelievable to me when somebody gets locked up and when somebody gets sentenced. This man that this legislation is a response to had murdered somebody and had trafficked drugs, but because his area outside was too small, he has managed to take the department of justice of Victoria to the Supreme Court, and because of the way our laws are written he has been able to extract out of them huge amounts of financial compensation, because the laws in this state are weighted far more in support of the perpetrators than they are of the victims. I think that is an incredible thing that we have got to look at when we are looking at legislation. What this bill actually does is remove the state's financial liability for past breaches of prisoners' open-air rights, affecting ongoing legal claims seeking compensation. So if this government are able to amend this legislation but they are not doing it to uphold the rights of victims and their families, what are they doing it for and why?

Let us look at this bill in detail. The purpose of this bill before us today is to allow prisoners' open-air access to be restricted due to operational issues. It sounds familiar, doesn't it? That is exactly what happens in these cases, which thousands and thousands of Victorians are fighting for change on. It introduces a list of operational considerations that can be taken into account when limiting this open-air access. It applies to unexpected events as well as ongoing operational changes. This could be something like an outbreak of an infectious disease once again, or it could be something to do with maintenance. It exempts these provisions from the requirements of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities. Now, if you really want a good read, you should read the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities and the statement of compatibility, because it explicitly says that this bill is

actually not in line with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities. It explains why, though. It says, for instance, here:

In determining whether some hardship or constraint falls into that category, it is necessary to consider not merely what is ‘theoretically possible’, but also what is ‘practicable’, ‘reasonable in the context of a prison environment’, and ‘consistent with the very purpose of imprisonment itself’.

In other words, what it is saying is that, yes, you do have a human right to liberty and you do have a human right to freedom of movement, but when you are locked up in prison because you have breached the laws of the state you actually have some of those liberties taken away. I understand that. But it is also amazing that with essentially the stroke of a pen – and the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee has done an amazing report on this as well – you can actually just bypass every one of those charter of human rights considerations, and the charter can so easily be overridden.

Something else that is amazing, which I think speaks to a lot of what I believe this government is about, is this article from a few hours ago from the *Guardian*. It says:

Victoria’s new First Nations voice to parliament has made its first intervention on government policy under nation-leading treaty powers to call for a controversial bill that would deny prisoners at least one hour of open air daily to be scrapped.

It goes on:

... the government will forge ahead with debate in the upper house on Thursday.

It has prompted an intervention from Gellung Warl, Victoria’s First Peoples’ representative body established as part of the treaty process.

For the first time, it has exercised its powers under the Statewide Treaty Act to call on the government to withdraw the bill.

In a letter to the minister for corrections, Ros Spence; the attorney general, Sonya Kilkenny; and the deputy premier and minister for First Peoples, Gabrielle Williams; Gellung Warl co-chairs ... said the bill was “inconsistent with the spirit and intent of Statewide Treaty”.

It is just amazing that this government has ignored the voice of victims. It is upholding the rights of the perpetrators above the voices of victims. It has bypassed some of the charter of human rights, and it is not compatible with the treaty that they have spruiked so much about, yet they go ahead with it. The article continues:

The Victorian Greens leader, Ellen Sandell, said ...

...

“The Labor government can’t go out there and champion treaty on one day, and the next day completely ignore the principles of it.”

The Victorian senator Lidia Thorpe accused the government of treating treaty like a “photo opportunity”.

“Labor celebrated Treaty, took their selfies and filled their socials with how historic it was. But Treaty means nothing if the Government ignores First Peoples when they exercise the powers that Treaty gives them ...”

It is quite an interesting point of view. There is a lot to talk about in this bill.

What this bill also does is it preserves compensation claims relating to past restrictions on open-air access. If there are prisoners that have been in Barwon Prison or that have had this access withheld from them within the Melbourne remand centre, they can go ahead. But the bill applies new compensation restrictions and ongoing court proceedings, so from here on in if they make a complaint, they are not going to get anything.

This is the bit that I find just not up to scratch with what the community would expect from a government. The bill removes the Crown’s liability for compensation claims relating to past restrictions to open-air access, which is found in clause 5 of the bill. That is the part that I want to look at now. Clause 5 of the bill inserts a new section that removes the Crown’s financial liability in respect to past limitations of rights conferred by section 47(1)(a) of the Corrections Act. This provision

prevents people from receiving monetary compensation from the Crown. It only applies to claims relating to events before the law. This part I find staggering: it does not affect non-monetary remedies or compensation for future breaches. For example, there will be no change to emergency management days that take violent and high-risk offenders beyond their non-parole period. That is unbelievable to me. Thousands and thousands of Victorians have petitioned this government and said how harmful it is when they are told that the person that murdered the person that was most precious to them and who they were told would not get out of jail a day before 19 years could walk out within 17 or 18 years. That does not reach the threshold of community expectations. That is unbelievable.

What does matter to this government? It is really hard for me to read this in any other way than that the way to get the government to change this piece of legislation that we are changing today is not to be a survivor, because let us remember that in a lot of these cases the victims are dead. They have been murdered. For instance, Celeste Manno. Her murderer, by the time he was sentenced, got over 50 days knocked off his sentence straightaway because he was on remand during COVID. Katie Haley's murderer got 427 days off his sentence, not because of good behaviour but because he was locked up during COVID.

I am going to find some other, I think, quite staggering numbers. The largest number of emergency management days approved for a single individual broken down into six-month time periods – within six months one offender got 245 days off his prison sentence. Imagine that. And you know what, these families generally find out through a generic letter, basically a mass email that says 'The person that murdered your daughter, the person that murdered your sister, will get out this much earlier.'

This is another one that I found interesting through FOI: the largest number of emergency management days approved for one prisoner related to COVID-19 was 452 days off one sentence. I thought the 427 days that Katie Haley's murderer received must have been the biggest amount, but it was not. It just keeps getting worse and worse. I do not know where the dishonesty stops, because we were told here in this place – if you go online, you can download *Hansard* and you can download the letter from the Minister for Corrections at the time. It explicitly says that after mid-2023 none of these days applied to anyone, yet here we are. We have seen over 17,000 days applied since that date. It is unbelievable. There are not really many more ways to read this, but the government will change the legislation when it hits their bottom dollar, when it hits their back pocket, when it is going to be a monetary cost to them, not when it is going to be something that will make the lives of victims and their families better.

In amending this legislation they are giving themselves an out when it comes to financial obligations in relation to loss of time outside of the cell, for example, but they have completely ignored the voices of victims when it comes to giving the perpetrators a get-out-of-jail-early card. Imagine being faced with a choice to protect victims who have lost some of the closest people in their lives, who will live with that loss forever, or to let the perpetrators leave early from jail if they have been inconvenienced, and yet the government does not see this as an issue. Why is that? Because it is not affecting them.

This is a government whose list of priorities seem to go in this order when it comes to crime. First, it is protecting themselves – looking after number one. They are exempting themselves from liability. Second, they then look after the criminal who they allow to get time off their sentences, often letting them out earlier than their non-parole period, which in my opinion smashes to pieces the social contract. For instance, in the case of the man who murdered Katie, the public were told that he would have 19 years non-parole, the family were told that he would have 19 years non-parole, but due to these discounts he is getting out earlier than that. He does not even have to report for parole, because once he gets out of jail, he has been taken below that because of these discounts. Not because of remorse, not because of good behaviour, but because of inconvenience – the very same breach that the government are exempting themselves of liability from. Then the last priority for this government seems to be the victims. They are the last consideration when they really should be the first.

For too long in the state of Victoria there has been a culture where the rights of perpetrators have been put above the rights of victims. The government, in its laws and in its treatment, has given more weight

to the feelings of perpetrators than they have to the reality and the lived experience of victims and those that survive them. Under a Liberal and National government, that is going to change. That is why it is not just talking points for me, because once you have sat with one of these families and you have looked them in the eye and they have told you about the experience and what it has been like after they have lost their loved ones, it changes your life forever. There are just little things, like when I was speaking recently to Katie Haley's brother he was telling me what it was like when he got that phone call, and he and his dad hopped in the car to go to the house because they thought that Katie had been murdered. When they got there the whole place was cordoned off and there were lights, there was stress and what had happened began to sink in. He said to me – he was a bit embarrassed about it, and he reminded me so much of my own little brother – ‘All I kept saying to Dad was, “Dad, who’s going to cut my hair?”’ He said of course there was so much more, but in that moment something so horrible had happened that the only way he could process it was by going through these tiny little things that he found so special that would forever change his life.

That is why we have to get law and order under control in the state of Victoria. That is why if you break bail you should face jail. You cannot keep flouting the laws. Laws in Victoria should be more than just recommendations and suggestions; they should be enforced. We should not be giving kids this opportunity to just titrate up their crimes until all of a sudden there is a reaction and they end up locked up forever. We have to get this state back on track, and there needs to be an accountability and a responsibility for what our laws are actually doing. The first people we should think about, I believe, are the victims and the people they leave behind.

We are not opposing this bill, but the reason that I brought these things up is that this exact piece of legislation needs much more change. It should not be just to give violent and high-risk offenders that are put in cells that are contained more rights because their patio is not big enough. There should at least be consideration that if parole is not given that is upheld by the law. I hope that there will be more to come on this piece of legislation, and I hope when it does it gives a lot more weight to victims than it does to perpetrators.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:50): When a bill is tabled in Parliament, as all members here would know, a bill needs to be submitted with a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities and now also a statement of compatibility with treaty. This is the first bill I have ever seen in this place where the statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities is thicker than the bill itself. I do not know, maybe Parliament staff can check that for me, but this is absolutely the first time that I have noticed that. That tells you a lot about what we are talking about here.

The Corrections Amendment Bill 2026 is a human rights disaster. This bill is probably one of the worst bills that I have seen come through this place. The genesis of this bill was a prisoner in the matter of *Marrogi v Secretary, Department of Justice and Community Safety*, who took the government to court. Ultimately, the court found a number of things, but one of those things was that they did not have sufficient access to open air and fresh air and exercise and that sort of thing. With a normal government that respected human rights and with an opposition that defended human rights and held the government to account, what we would have in a situation like this is the government would either appeal the decision of the court or they would comply with the law. But instead we have a situation where rather than comply with their own law, the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities, what they are doing now is simply changing the law. What they are doing with this bill is effectively overriding the charter on many issues. You only need to look at the statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

Human Rights Issues

The following Charter rights are relevant to, and in some cases may be limited by, the Bill:

- protection from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (section 10(b));
- the right to humane treatment when deprived of liberty (section 22(1));

- the right not to be deprived of property other than in accordance with law (section 20);
- right to freedom of movement and right to liberty (sections 12 and 21);
- right to fair hearing (section 24(1));
- right not to be tried or punished more than once (section 26); and
- right to protection from retrospective criminal laws (section 27).

What the government have done here, with the support of the opposition, is rewrite the law to allow, in perpetuity, breaches of human rights for prisoners because they do not want to manage the prison system to allow these rights.

I do not think anyone would say that Libertarians are soft on crime. My staff did some research earlier today, and I have spoken about organised crime apparently more than anyone in this place. The number two person that has spoken about organised crime is former Premier Steve Bracks, apparently. It is possible to both be tough on crime and also respect human rights. It is very easy to be tough on crime and disrespect human rights. There was reporting today on this bill in the media by someone who had been imprisoned by the Islamic regime in Iran. They said that even in Iran they were allowed to get fresh air and exercise. They said they were appalled by the idea that Australia might have in some way worse conditions than under the Iranian regime. I share this view as well. I am very concerned by this idea that we are not at least treating people as human.

Taking away someone's liberty is a very serious thing, and of course that is taking away their rights. The correct time to take away someone's liberty is when they cause harm to another person. The people that are imprisoned here caused harm to other people. We are talking about very serious criminals. We are talking about drug dealers, murderers, very serious criminals. But just because we deprive them of their liberty does not mean that they are not human. In fact it degrades all of us when we do not treat these prisoners as human, when we take away human things such as access to fresh air. We have spoken about fresh air more than a few times in this place. In the last term of Parliament I tried to move an amendment to guarantee people access to fresh air and exercise when they were deprived of liberty under the old Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008. I am glad that since that time it is apparent that the Greens have had some epiphany on that and now support fresh air and exercise for Victorians that are deprived of liberty.

It is totally possible to be tough on crime and respect human rights. In fact it is important for the provision of justice that we do respect human rights, because if we do not respect human rights what happens is people lose respect for the system, people lose respect for our institutions and people come to mistrust our institutions. And that is one of the biggest problems that we have in Australia at the moment, especially in Victoria – people have lost faith in our institutions, they are losing faith in the government, they are losing faith in our entire parliamentary system in many cases and they have certainly lost faith in our justice system. They see decisions by courts that they do not understand, that they do not like, that are not in line with community expectations, and I totally agree with them. There have been many cases which were not in line with community expectations. But where a court does come to the decision to deprive someone of liberty and remove them from society – appropriately because they are a danger to other people, because they have committed crimes against other people, murdered other people or hurt them in some way – that does not mean that we should treat them like an animal. That does not mean that we should treat these people like animals. They are human, like us. The way that we treat prisoners says a lot about the society that we are. The Libertarians will not support this bill.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:57): I just want to make a couple of comments on this bill – and I know my colleague Dr Heath has interrogated it to a fairly extensive extent – to put on record some comments from me in terms of the Corrections Amendment Bill 2026. This bill is addressing prisoner rights in the corrections portfolio. It is looking at a number of elements which allow prisoners' open-air access to be restricted during operational times. It introduces a list of operational considerations that are to be taken into account when open-air access is limited. This applies to

unexpected events as well as ongoing operational concerns and challenges, and it exempts provisions in the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.

We have heard both in the lower house and in this house that this is in relation to a particular prisoner who took the Department of Justice and Community Safety to court in relation to access to open air and indeed won. This particular individual happens to be a murderer and a drug trafficker and is incarcerated for a number of decades. Often we can get indignant, and everyone certainly has the right to a free opinion while I am still standing, but we do have to recognise the fact that in order to be incarcerated for some 38 years he had certainly committed the most heinous crimes of murder and drug trafficking. In this case there are people who are no longer here because of those actions and there are families who are forever altered, forever grieving and forever having lost a limb of their family tree. I put that on record because we are seeing this so much.

In relation to that, this now is, I guess, closing what could be considered a loophole. We have seen in my time some changes to legislation to close certain legal loopholes. With the shocking occurrence of the Bourke Street murders, a car driven by Mr Gargasoulas, I think it was, terminated the lives of many, many people. I remember at the time our Shadow Attorney-General Ed O'Donohue gave a very eloquent and impassioned speech about the need to close certain loopholes to contain people's rights and privileges in order to ensure that those sorts of dangers and risks and therefore impacts and victims were minimised into the future. I take the point that we should be treating people with dignity and respect. That is also overlaid with the fact that these people have made a choice in their life to compromise forever the lives of others. Nevertheless, this is where we are at at this point.

We have stated that we will not be opposing the bill, but I do want to put on record my recognition of the fact that in this place, in November last year, there was an extensive debate and there was much handclapping and indeed flags were unfurled in relation to the passing of the Statewide Treaty Act 2025. I am not going to be duplicitous about this. It was very clear – and I have been very open, frank and I hope respectful in my dealings with the First Peoples' Assembly through my portfolio as the Shadow Minister for Aboriginal Affairs – that we would not support treaty. Through consultation, understanding and development, we have a different pathway to support First Nations people in Victoria, and that is First Nations Victoria, a standalone department with a focus very firmly on enabling, on supporting, on working with community-led solutions and on trying to punch holes in silos that I have, through consultation, learned about, to be able to create success, to create self-determination and to improve jobs. There is nothing like the facilitation of empowerment through jobs, health and housing. These are our focuses, and we will walk hand in hand with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians.

Back in November we were all made to feel ashamed, apparently, because we did not agree with the government's position. We were all told to cower our heads. As the bill passed through, there was a particular section in that bill about treaty compatibility. We asked questions at the time in relation to what that would look like. Gellung Warl and the co-chairs have the right to decide how they view various pieces of legislation, reports, actions, plans and the like within almost any department and any authority down to – I was reminded – the CFA and what it would mean to the First Peoples' Assembly in terms of the impact on them through treaty compatibility. The government endorsed that, and they patted themselves on the back. As I said, we moved forward, and therefore section 66 of the Statewide Treaty Act invites treaty compatibility, invites First Peoples to have their say, legislates the value of that and requires their scrutiny. Now we saw only yesterday that Gellung Warl wrote to Ros Spence, Minister for Corrections; Sonya Kilkenny, Attorney-General; and Gabrielle Williams, Minister for First Peoples, most significantly, that:

This Bill will have a disproportionate impact on First Peoples who continue to be significantly overrepresented in Victoria's correctional system.

I will hold there and come back to that. They wrote:

There are a significant proportion of First Peoples who are currently held in remand without a formal sentence, and First Peoples are vulnerable to systemic neglect and solitary confinement.

Now that must be its own kind of incarceration and a horrible thing for anybody. But there it is; that is part of our justice system. It goes on:

It undermines the renewed relationship between First Peoples and the State agreed to under Statewide Treaty.

We had Labor members – we had many members – whacking themselves on the back saying that they were going to create self-determination. Then at a very significant issue, which they have the right to decide under treaty compatibility, which is significant, lo and behold, there it is: Gellung Warl does not agree with it. And then they just move on.

As I said, we have opposed treaty. We will repeal treaty. We will put legislation in in the first 100 days. We have a plan. We want to walk forward with our First Nations people together. We want to enable, facilitate, support, learn and commit to – and the very part that I want to also get to – under 10 years. When I asked the minister in this house in relation to certain aspects – I think it was to do with VACCHO and young children – the minister said at the time and the Treasurer said at the time, ‘It hasn’t been working, so we’re trying something different.’ After 11 years we have got an incarceration rate in Victoria of around 18 per cent higher than for non-Indigenous Victorians. I am putting that on record. I am not being magnanimous about this, but at the first hurdle, it is like, ‘Well, there you go. Here it is. Yes, First Peoples’ Assembly, Gellung Warl, treaty compatibility and away we go.’

In finality for me, as I said, I have put on record our commitment. I have stated our situation, which is unerring. This bill is overwhelmingly going to pass through the house, but I just call on the government: when you are backslapping at one end, it is on your head that you have then gone and ignored at the other.

Moir DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (19:08): I also rise to speak against the Corrections Amendment Bill 2026, which in my opinion is probably one of the most blatantly obvious, gross violations of rights that this Parliament has seen, and that is saying something, considering what they did to Victorians during the COVID era. When we talk about jail, we know that that is really the last line of defence that we have in dealing with people who are completely antisocial, do not learn and commit grievous crimes. Before that, you have fines, you have apologies and you have mediation. We can talk about the criminals and how bad their crimes are and what they deserve, and we can talk about the victims and what they need. But as victims all know, there is no getting back what is taken from you when you are the victim of serious crime like that. I think what is equally important is to remember the difference between justice and revenge. You do not want to become the thing that you say is evil when you are saying that you are after justice and actually end up doing the same kind of evil to another human being that you say should never be done to anybody else and that it was not injustice. These topics are always very emotional because you can never get a perfect situation when crimes like this have been done, but two wrongs do not make a right, as they say.

We know why this bill is here. The government seem to have made a mistake in their architecture designs of the prisons, which have then been found not to meet the standards of the human right to open fresh air. But instead of just dealing with that fact, paying their fines and then updating the prison architecture, they have actually permanently given themselves an exemption from a human right. That is something that governments must never do. History has taught us that governments can never be trusted to do that. It never leads to anywhere good. It never leads to justice. Operational reasons are not defined. They are not enough. You should not be able to create an exemption for yourself from a basic human right.

It should not need explaining, but the human right that this bill extinguishes is referred to by the United Nations and in prisons as the Mandela rules. It should not take knowledge and understanding of Nelson Mandela and his fight against apartheid to work out that humans in prison, regardless of their crimes,

should be treated with humanity and given basic open-air access. I would also like to point out that this is the second Mandela rule that this government has trashed, the other one being the right to single-sex prisons, for obvious reasons. So do not be giving me this garbage about how it is just a special one-time deal, it will not happen again. Please!

The other reason is how can anyone expect prisoners to be rehabilitated or even remorseful if their time in prison is incredibly inhumane, if they look at us and they do see that we are just as bad as them, we are just as inhumane as they are, if they spend their time locked up in the dark losing their minds, all because the government has decided that it is convenient to rewrite the rules for themselves and say that if it is operationally difficult then we do not have to respect human rights. Does that sound like a government that you want to rule over you? It does not sound like a government that I want to rule over me.

Let us not forget that this is the same government who flew youth offenders to another state to go to theme parks and gave pizza to prisoners who got on the roof of a prison. We should not have to choose between cancelling human rights and making prison a holiday, just completely trashing justice and victims' rights. That is not actually the choice before us. It should not be. We do not have to choose between these two things. That is the job of a responsible government: to balance rights and duties.

Usually these kinds of bills are brought in with a sunset clause – I know that my Libertarian colleague here loves a sunset clause – but there is nothing like that in here either, which I was very shocked to find, and I made sure that I double-checked. This is not even a temporary measure, it is permanent. That is outrageous. It is really actually quite phenomenal that you would consider yourselves above the United Nations and above every single global intergovernmental organisation that respects human rights, that we draw all of our other laws from and that are referred to in our own charter. I mean, that is amazing. I have got to hand it to you.

Either human rights are non-derogable, which means there is no situation and no scenario in which they can be justifiably denied, or there have to be extreme circumstances. Operational considerations are not extreme circumstances. This government was supposed to be analysing the data, building prisons, hiring staff and adjusting the law so that these kinds of operational considerations never became such an issue that you had to deny a basic human right to open air. You are literally subjecting human rights beneath your administrative burden. That is not good government. That is terrifying, actually.

I absolutely reject this bill. I reject it. It goes against every single lesson we have learned throughout history – the Nuremberg trials, the Clapham sect, if you know what that is. William Wilberforce, who I named my son after, was not just anti slavery, he also participated in a group with lots of good people, but with prison reform he talked a lot about architecture. These things are not new. These principles are not new. Human rights are not new. Morality is not new. Dealing with administrative burdens is not new. If anyone loves a bureaucracy, I mean, it is that side of this place, so you should be experts at it, really, but clearly you are not. Instead, you are just trashing human rights for your bureaucracy, and it is unacceptable. I am voting against this bill.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) incorporated the following:

President, I rise to make a contribution on the Corrections Amendment Bill 2026.

I firstly want to thank the Minister for Corrections over in the over place for bringing forward this legislation.

It is important to all Victorians that the Corrections system is run effectively, safely, and in an orderly manner, and I would also like to thank the minister for their work on that front as well.

This Bill makes targeted amendments to the Corrections Act 1986 to clarify how the right to spend time in the open air is applied within Victoria's prison system.

Currently, the Act provides that prisoners who are not ordinarily engaged in outdoor work are entitled to spend at least one hour each day in the open air, weather permitting, under section 47(1)(a).

This Bill recognises that there are circumstances where, despite the importance of that entitlement, it is simply not reasonably practicable to provide it because of operational requirements within a prison.

I want to start by recognising that this bill isn't diminishing the importance of being entitled to open air but rather ensuring that management, safety and security are top of the agenda.

The amendments in this bill make clear that decisions about access to open air can also take into account operational considerations, including maintaining the good order and security of a prison, protecting the safety and welfare of prisoners, and ensuring the safety of correctional staff.

President, I think that these are sensible and necessary changes to the Victorian Correctional system.

Our correctional system must always balance individual rights with the practical realities of operating secure facilities that house people with varying security classifications and complex behavioural needs.

And these amendments are reflective of that fact, and doing so help to strengthen the system as a whole.

The Bill responds to the recent Supreme Court decision in the Marrogi case, which highlighted uncertainty in how the existing provisions should operate in practice.

Our legislation needs to be clear so it can be interpreted in the way that it was intended.

The supreme court case has exposed significant operational and financial risks for the correctional system that require an effective and immediate legislative response.

Importantly, these amendments do not remove the expectation that prisoners should have access to open air wherever it is safe and reasonably practicable.

These amendments still make it clear that the entitlement to open air remains an important part of correctional facilities.

Rather, they acknowledge that there will be circumstances where operational realities make that impossible.

This is particularly relevant for prisoners housed in high-security or management units, where movement throughout a prison often requires significant staffing resources and carefully managed security arrangements.

In those circumstances, providing access to external exercise areas may create unacceptable risks for staff, other prisoners and the safe operation of the prison itself.

We need to ensure the safety and security of these facilities first and foremost.

These people deserve to live with at least some sense of certainty that every possible step is being taken to ensure that at the end of the day they can go home to their families both healthy and safe.

The Bill therefore provides Corrections Victoria with the flexibility to make operational decisions that prioritise safety while continuing to provide access to open air wherever practicable.

The legislation also addresses the State's exposure to compensation claims arising from limitations on access to open air that occurred before these amendments commence.

It ensures that claims already finally determined by the courts remain unaffected, while preventing further compensation from being awarded in relation to historical limitations that arose under the previous legislative framework.

What these provisions do is help strike an appropriate balance.

They provide certainty for the correctional system while ensuring public resources remain focused on delivering frontline services and maintaining a safe and effective justice system.

The Government also acknowledges that aspects of this Bill engage rights protected under the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.

The decision to include an override declaration is not one that has been taken lightly.

However, the Government considers that, in the unique and highly complex environment of correctional facilities, these amendments are necessary to ensure prisons can continue to operate safely and effectively while balancing the rights and safety of everyone within the system.

President, ultimately, this Bill is about providing clarity for those working in and operating Victoria's correctional system.

And it is about ensuring that best possible practices are followed to keep everyone's safety and security at the top of the priority list.

It recognises that access to open air remains an important element of humane prison conditions, but it also recognises that the safe operation of our correctional facilities must remain paramount.

These amendments support Corrections Victoria in continuing to manage prisons safely, securely and effectively, while ensuring that operational realities are appropriately recognised in law.

They also provide certainty following the Marrogi decision and protect taxpayers from unnecessary financial liability, allowing public resources to remain focused on the services that benefit the broader Victorian community.

Corrections Victoria is responsible for handling some of the most complex and challenging environments with our justice system.

Environments that can host some of the most dangerous elements of our society.

Everyday correctional staff are required to balance rehabilitation and wellbeing of people in custody.

Their overriding responsibility is to maintain the safety and security of these facilities, and frankly of themselves.

Quite frankly, these facilities are not ordinary workplaces.

They are housing individuals with a wide range of security classifications, behavioural risks and medical needs.

Decisions that might appear straightforward from the outside are often far more complex in practice.

Providing access to open air at a minimum requires, movement of prisoners, deployment of correctional officers and coordination of multiple operational requirements.

Those arrangements can be affected by emergency incidents, intelligence regarding security risks, medical emergencies, lockdowns or infrastructure constraints.

Therefore, we need legislation to be adaptable to unpredictable environments like those of our prison facilities.

This is of critical importance if these sites are to remain as secure and safe as possible, for all who occupy or work in these facilities.

These amendments recognise the operational realities on the ground.

It is important when talking about these changes to recognise the correctional staff that undertake this work.

The workers at our correctional facilities work in what is an incredibly difficult role.

They work in high pressured, unpredictable and at times dangerous environments.

So, it is important that we recognise them and do our best to ensure their safety.

Every decision made must reflect the safety standards for prisoners and visitors alike because complications can be dangerous.

Perhaps the most dangerous and complex situation that these workers can deal with is when moving prisoners around.

When these movements happen within prisons staff are required to handle many different moving parts.

This includes, managing escorts, supervising interactions between prisoners, and being prepared to respond immediately to changing circumstances.

They do not need the added pressure created by the supreme court case decision.

The law should not place correctional staff in a position where they are forced to prioritise compliance with an inflexible statutory requirement over immediate operational safety.

Again, I would like to stress, that every worker within our state's correctional system deserves to go home safe.

This bill provides flexibility for experienced prison managers to make appropriate operational decisions while remaining accountable to the legislative framework following these sensible amendments.

They reflect confidence in the professional judgement of those responsible for operating our correctional facilities every day.

President, one of Parliament's most important responsibilities is ensuring that legislation is clear, workable and capable of operating in the manner that was intended.

The legislation that we pass in this building needs to provide clarity over the areas that it is regulating.

It should establish clear expectations for those responsible for administering the law, and it should minimise unnecessary ambiguity wherever possible.

When uncertainty arises through judicial interpretation, Parliament has an important role to consider whether legislative clarification is required.

It is clear that in this case such clarification was required, which is exactly what this Bill seeks to achieve.

The Supreme Court's decision in the Marrogi case highlighted uncertainty in the operation of the existing legislative framework.

Whether one agrees with every aspect of the Court's interpretation or not, the decision demonstrated that the existing provisions were capable of producing outcomes that Parliament did not intend when the legislation was originally enacted.

It is entirely appropriate that Parliament now considers amendments to address that uncertainty.

This should not be viewed as criticism of the courts as the judiciary performs an essential constitutional function by interpreting legislation as it is written.

Equally, Parliament retains responsibility for determining whether legislation continues to reflect public policy and operational realities.

Where clarification is required, Parliament should not hesitate to provide it.

That process is a normal and important feature of our democratic system.

Indeed, many pieces of legislation evolve over time as governments respond to judicial decisions, practical experience and changing community expectations, the Corrections Act is no exception.

These amendments are designed to ensure that the legislation reflects how correctional facilities must operate in practice.

Having clear legislation and regulation is a benefit for everyone involved in this sector.

This is because it assists prison managers, it provides certainty for correctional staff, it reduces unnecessary litigation, and it assists the courts in applying Parliament's intention.

Most importantly, it provides a legislative framework that can operate consistently across Victoria's correctional system.

Consistency creates certainty, and certainty creates safety.

President, what we see in this bill is ultimately an example of this Parliament performing one of its most important functions

Reviewing and updating legislation, responding to developments in the law and ensuring that statutory provisions continue to operate effectively in the public interest.

President, I also want to acknowledge that this Bill engages rights recognised under the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.

The Government has been transparent about that throughout the legislative process.

Access to fresh air and exercise forms part of the humane treatment of people in custody and has long been recognised as an important aspect of prison conditions.

Nothing in this Bill seeks to diminish that principle.

However, the Charter itself recognises that rights may, in appropriate circumstances, be subject to reasonable limits.

The Charter requires those limits to be demonstrably justified having regard to the broader public interest.

That reflects an important reality, that very few rights exist in complete isolation.

They frequently intersect with the rights and safety of others, as well as with broader responsibilities held by government institutions.

The correctional environment illustrates that point particularly clearly.

Correctional facilities are unique institutions.

They exist to detain individuals lawfully deprived of their liberty while maintaining order, protecting staff, safeguarding other prisoners and ensuring community safety.

Those objectives can occasionally come into tension.

The law must therefore provide a framework that allows those competing considerations to be balanced in a practical and proportionate manner.

That is what these amendments seek to achieve.

Importantly, the Bill does not remove the entitlement to open air.

Nor does it suggest that access should be withheld for administrative convenience or routine operational preference.

Instead, it recognises that there will sometimes be circumstances where providing access is simply not reasonably practicable because of genuine operational requirements.

Those circumstances may include emergency incidents, significant security risks, staffing shortages arising from unforeseen events or other operational issues that make prisoner movement unsafe at that particular time.

In those situations, the safety of correctional officers, prisoners and visitors must remain paramount.

The Bill therefore seeks to provide an appropriate legal framework for those decisions.

It also acknowledges that an override declaration has been included.

The use of an override declaration is not something that should ever become routine, it is an incredibly important safeguard implemented within Victorian Law.

However, the Charter deliberately reserves this mechanism for exceptional circumstances, and this is an exceptional circumstance.

It reflects Parliament's recognition that, on rare occasions, there may be compelling public policy reasons that justify temporary legislative action despite identified human rights implications.

The Government has made clear that this decision has not been taken lightly.

Rather, it reflects the unique operational challenges arising from the correctional system and the need to provide immediate legislative certainty following the Marrogi decision.

Whether dealing with prison safety, operational security or the responsible allocation of public resources, Parliament has an obligation to ensure that the legislative framework remains workable.

These amendments seek to achieve that outcome while continuing to acknowledge the importance of humane treatment within Victoria's correctional system.

That is why this Bill represents a careful balancing of competing interests rather than a departure from the principles that underpin our correctional framework.

In closing President, I support this bill for a few crucial reasons.

For one, it provides certainty and stability to those working within Victoria's correctional facilities.

Given the nature of the places we are talking about today, stability and certainty is without doubt are very important thing to achieve.

However most importantly, it helps to promote the safety of the workers in these facilities, increasing the likelihood that they will be able to return home to their families everyday after work.

This is a simple but crucial premise, that no matter what field that you work in, every precaution must be taken to ensure that you remain safe at work.

I understand fully that there are some well-founded concerns regarding the way that this bill has been achieved.

It would remain a rare undertaking to pass legislation that does not comply fully with the Charter of Human Rights.

However, at the end of the day I do believe that the benefits of passing this legislation will be seen in this state's ability to maintain a well-functioning corrections system.

And as such I commend this bill to the chamber.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) incorporated the following:

This Bill makes several targeted amendments to the Corrections Act 1986.

The changes relate to access to open air particularly for high risk prisoners in Victoria.

It will make it clear that the right to be in the open air is subject to it being reasonably practicable.

Not all prisoners are safe to mix with other prisoners.

It will also provide that no amount is payable to any person for any loss or damage caused by past limitations of a person's right to open air.

And it will fix a technical delegation issue affecting Community Corrections Advanced Practitioners.

Community safety is a top priority for the Carroll Labor Government.

To keep Victorians safe, we have:

- introduced the nation's toughest bail laws;

- introduced the Adult Crime Adult Time laws, so that those who commit serious violence face the full consequences.

And our new laws are working.

- In the year to March 2026, Victoria's criminal incident rate fell by nearly three per cent, and the youth offending rate fell by six per cent.
- The drop in alleged youth offending is the biggest since before the COVID pandemic.
- The victimisation rate, overall recorded offences and criminal incidents are all decreasing

More adults are also being held to account for breaching their bail conditions.

For the first time since records started, bail revocations and refusals in the Magistrates Court now make up a greater share of bail decisions – meaning more people are being jailed and not bailed

This Bill continues that efforts to keep Victorians safe.

Every person in prison has, if not ordinarily engaged in outdoor work, the right to be in open air for at least one hour each day, if the weather permits.

These reforms will provide that the right to open air does not apply in circumstances where it is not reasonably practicable.

This right has been met by Corrections for twenty years by providing rear cell courtyards, or 'run out yards', attached to high security and management units.

A recent Supreme Court judgment found that these cells did not constitute 'open air' for the purposes of the Act.

The reforms in this Bill are a necessary response to the legal, operational and financial risks that arise from that judgement.

The Government must ensure that prisons can operate safely for staff, visitors and people in custody.

The Bill recognises the importance of access to open air

But acknowledges the operational realities this right must be managed within.

That includes the need to manage the risks from, to and between high-risk prisoners.

Corrections facilities are designed to mitigate a range of risks, including the risk of incidents, risk of contraband, and even attempted escapes.

Prisons manage those risks on a day to day basis, in dynamic circumstances.

And I thank our Corrections Officers for the work that they do to keep Victorians safe.

This reform is aimed at ensuring access to open air can be managed in a safe way.

The changes seek to reinforce and align with longstanding practice in the Corrections system.

The use of individual run out yards is longstanding practice in the Victorian system, and common practice in corrections systems around the world.

The Government has a responsibility to ensure that prisons and community corrections operate lawfully, safely and effectively.

This kind of practical balancing is part of a longstanding practice across the prison system.

This change improves prison community safety and recognises the operational practical reality of the corrections system.

The Bill also limits the State's financial exposure to compensation sought in claims for past limitations of the right to open air.

It provides that no amount is payable to any person for any loss or damage caused by past limitations of a person's right to open air that occurred before the Bill commences.

It does not affect rights or liabilities that have already been determined by a court.

The Bill also retrospectively validates actions of Community Corrections Advanced Practitioners during a period where there was no effective delegation of powers to those staff members to perform those actions.

This ensures an administrative oversight does not create risks to community safety or undermine the community corrections system.

The Government calls on all Members of Parliament to support the speedy passage of this Bill, because keeping Victorians safe should be above politics

Corrections law must work not only in theory, but in practice.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (19:15): I move:

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

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

Adjournment

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Finance, Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Government Services) (19:15): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Melbourne Airport rail link

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (19:15): (2677) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Public Transport Vicki Ward. Many regional Victorians are keen to see rail access to Melbourne Airport. With the works underway on the Sunshine superhub, the action I seek is an update on how this project will unlock capacity, improve services for western Victoria and support the delivery of airport rail.

Cultural heritage management plans

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (19:16): (2678) My matter is for the Minister for First Peoples on behalf of a resident who has raised concerns about escalating costs and lack of transparency around cultural heritage management plans. A constituent undertaking a proposed four-lot residential subdivision had part of their property covered by the cultural heritage sensitivity layer. They were initially given an estimated CHMP cost of around \$24,000. However, as the process progressed and additional assessment stages were required, the final expenditure was close to \$36,000. This added close to \$9000 per lot before any subdivision, infrastructure or housing costs were incurred. The costs are in addition to roads, drainage services, engineering, council charges, titles, financing and construction. For smaller residential subdivisions costs of this nature may affect feasibility and ultimately flow through to the final cost of creating residential land and housing.

During the process the owner found it difficult to understand what would trigger the progression from standard to complex assessment, what additional field work would be required and what the ultimate cost was likely to be. They want to make it clear that they are not in opposition to Aboriginal cultural heritage protection. They support respectful engagement with traditional owners and the protection of cultural heritage. Rather, their concern relates to transparency of costs, escalation of assessment stages and whether ordinary residential landowners are able to make informed decisions about likely total costs before becoming committed to the process.

The current CHMP process is too often costly, unpredictable and lacking in transparency, leaving landowners exposed to significant expenses with little certainty about where the process will ultimately end. For smaller subdivisions these costs and delays add to the cost of creating new housing and affect the feasibility of development. The Nationals believe cultural heritage protections are important, but the process must also be practical and transparent, and it needs reform. The action I seek is for the government to substantially review and reform the cultural heritage management plan process to introduce clear timelines, sensible cost caps and greater transparency around costs and assessment requirements.

COVID-19 vaccination

Moir DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (19:18): (2679) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, and the action that I seek is for the Minister for Health to table all advice and documentation provided to the Victorian government on COVID-19 vaccine safety in pregnancy and

female reproductive health, along with any analysis by the government or its agencies for the years 2021 to 2023. This week US senators Rand Paul and Ron Johnson released private communications from Dr Anthony Fauci. They showed that in January 2021 Dr Fauci flagged that a second dose of COVID-19 vaccine could be associated with miscarriage in the first trimester. These are the same vaccines that this government rolled out and mandated and forced onto pregnant women who were told to take it or lose their jobs and income in the lead-up to having their babies. The stress that that would have put on the mothers is unimaginable. We know that these mothers trusted the government. They trusted that someone in the government, someone in charge, would have read the data and weighed the risk to protect them and their child. On hearing this information come to light in the United States, I am very angry for every woman who was stripped of her livelihood over a decision that she was never allowed to make freely. I am angry at those who issued the orders and asked no hard questions. I am angry that concern was treated as dissent or hysteria or paranoia or selfishness and that caution was treated as defiance. And I am angry over the babies that were possibly lost due to this.

Barwon Health

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria) (19:20): (2680) My adjournment matter is also for the Minister for Health, and the action I request of the minister is for her to provide a progress update on construction at the Barwon women's and children's. The Geelong region is one of the fastest growing regional areas in the country and one of the most popular destinations for people who want to live in a more regional setting. Families are moving to places like Armstrong Creek because they offer a great lifestyle as well as services and facilities close by. A growing region needs additional health facilities that provide specialist care to growing families, like the new children's emergency department at the University Hospital Geelong, which was opened in 2024 with 28 dedicated treatment spaces and a separate paediatric triage system and waiting area. In good news for local families, the 2026–27 budget funded an expansion of services at the children's ED. In even better news, work is underway on the more than \$500 million Barwon women's and children's. It will provide maternity inpatient beds, paediatric multiday and same-day inpatient beds, special care, nursery cots, birthing suites, operating theatres and expanded paediatric and maternity specialist clinic facilities. The Barwon women's and children's is the kind of health facility a growing region like Geelong needs, and it is this Labor government that is delivering it. I take this opportunity to acknowledge and express thanks for the very strong advocacy for this development from the member for Geelong Christine Couzens and the efforts of all the other Geelong MPs.

NAPLAN results

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (19:21): (2681) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Education, and the action I seek is for the Minister for Education, who of course was the former Premier but now is Ms Williams, to clearly outline the steps this government will take to address the declining literacy and numeracy skills in students and the worrying finding in the latest NAPLAN results that one in three children – or one in four in Victoria – cannot read. One-third of students are struggling to meet basic standards in English and maths, and the damage is even worse across regional, remote and disadvantaged backgrounds. In Victoria under Labor one in four kids are failing to meet NAPLAN proficiency benchmarks in reading, writing and maths.

The Carroll Labor government, we know, has not been able to resolve teacher situations. In fact under Mr Carroll we still have teachers giving up a day's pay in protest and striking because schools have not been properly upgraded and given resources. This Carroll Labor government is busy racking up debt while students continue to fall behind. The latest NAPLAN results show that literacy skills are now lower than they were two years ago, and up to 40 per cent of Victorian students failed to meet basic proficiency targets in grammar and punctuation.

However, thanks to the coalition consistently campaigning to return to teaching phonics, Victorian students outperformed their peers in all other states in writing and numeracy. In fact they ranked first or second nationally in 16 out of 20 assessment measures. This positive result is thanks to the Liberals

and Nationals' efforts to reintroduce 25 minutes of phonics for prep to year 2 students, which creates early reading stability and a critical foundation for learning. Meanwhile, the Carroll Labor government is sitting on its hands, as universities are not teaching phonics to trainee teachers despite proven positive outcomes.

A Wilson Liberal government will focus on lifting academic standards, with a \$200 million commitment to rewrite and declutter the Victorian school curriculum with a much stronger emphasis on core maths, science and literacy. Through our excellence in education plan we will provide rigorous academic training for students and expand professional learning for teachers to become experts in their field. The Liberals and Nationals will not accept failure. We will look at schools that are excelling and replicate their success. To create real and lasting improvements, parents must also be encouraged to spend more time with their children. They need to monitor what their kids are looking at, because unfiltered material can be distressing for their intellectual, emotional and spiritual development. The coalition government has a plan to back every Victorian to achieve their full potential at school, while providing more support for teachers and evidence-based learning in every classroom. Our Liberal and National literacy and numeracy guarantee includes an interim target of a 15 per cent increase in the number of kids deemed proficient in literacy and numeracy under NAPLAN, a goal that goes above and beyond existing targets.

COVID-19 vaccination

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (19:24): (2682) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Premier. There has been a flurry of policy announcements and changes from the Premier as he tries to set what he calls a new direction. Many of these things I have supported, such as calling a royal commission and dropping the terrible work from home scam. While the COVID era is happily in the rear-view mirror for many people, and they would rather just remember it as a terrible thing that we all went through, that is not the case for everybody. People lost businesses, lost jobs, experienced adverse reactions from the vaccine, and many people had relationships break down. Whilst the government cannot rectify all of these things, there are some concrete actions that the Premier could take to start making amends and create some small sense of justice. People who were coerced into taking the vaccine deserve an apology. The level of coercion was completely outrageous, as was the dishonesty about the ability of the vaccines to prevent transmission.

In late 2024 the New South Wales government withdrew all remaining COVID fines. While this was apparently because of legal advice that they may be invalid due to insufficient information, it should have been done anyway simply because it was the right thing to do. Many fines were for ridiculous breaches of silly rules, and there are still fines in Victoria that are working their way through the courts. This is a needless drain of court resources, and the fines should be withdrawn. The New South Wales police force has recently announced that police officers who were sacked over vaccine mandates would be offered the opportunity to return to work. There were many teachers, health workers, police and others in Victoria who were sacked for refusing to take the vaccine. Not only were they sacked but they were sacked over misconduct. How can it be misconduct to make an informed decision about your own health care? It was a disgrace then and it remains a disgrace now.

Whilst it might be impossible to rectify all of the injustices of the COVID era, that does not mean that we should not try. My request to the Premier is this: to issue an apology to Victorians over the vaccine mandates that resulted in workers being sacked, work with the Attorney-General to withdraw all remaining COVID fines, work with relevant ministers to rectify the employment records of public service workers who received a misconduct finding for refusing to take the vaccine and to explore options to allow them to return to work.

Public transport accessibility

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (19:27): (2683) My adjournment matter tonight is to the Minister for Public Transport. We know it is only Labor that can deliver level access tram stops for

Sydney Road and only Labor, in partnership with our community, that can deliver the accessible public transport our community needs. I and so many in the community were heartened to see that this year's budget commits funding to the design and consultation around level access tram stops on Sydney Road. This has been something that our community has been calling out for, and our government is listening and acting. My office has met with key community groups who have been fighting for these upgrades, as I have met with them. Can I take a moment to thank the Victorian Transport Action Group, the Sydney Road Accessible Tram Stops campaign and the Merri-bek Bicycle User Group for their robust feedback and valuable ideas as the consultation process kicked off. We have seen through previous projects how important a detailed consultation process can be, and it is pleasing to see that this budget has committed funding to ensure that we do the same.

But we are not just focused on accessibility on our tram network. We are also recognising that our rail system should be safe and accessible for everyone. That is why our government has started rolling out the new X'Trapolis 2.0 on the Upfield and Craigieburn lines. These modern, accessible features mean that more passengers from Brunswick to Craigieburn and from North Melbourne to Upfield will have ample mobility space, semi-automated boarding ramps and continuous walkways, meaning that it will be easier for those with mobility issues to access a ride on our world-class train system. You see, it is only Labor, in partnership with passionate community advocates, that can deliver these key accessible upgrades for our inclusive inner north community. With all these upgrades already delivered or in the works, the action I seek from the minister is to update me on accessibility for public transport in the Northern Metropolitan Region.

Local government integrity

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (19:29): (2684) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Local Government. The action I seek is that the minister adopt the coalition's proposed amendments to the government's so-called Local Government Legislation Amendment (Stronger Communities) Bill 2026, as set out in my letter to him. Several weeks ago councillors from Hepburn Shire Council were automatically stood down because of vexatious private prosecutions. Overnight a council was silenced. Meetings could not be held, decisions could not be made and a community was left without the representation it deserved. We have spoken with many of those affected and each of them described the immense personal and reputational toll of this debacle. The previous CEO left after more than seven years in the job. Five councillors were stood down, including one councillor who was out of the job for several months.

Today I received correspondence from the deputy mayor Cr Shirley Cornish, who contacted me in a personal capacity. She wrote of being denied access to any council premises, unable even to visit her local library or the transfer station as a ratepayer. In her own words, she described feeling like a 'guilty prisoner' in her own home. While the courts threw out the charges against the five Hepburn councillors, this outcome came only after months of turmoil. It should never have come to this, and it only happened because Labor rushed through changes to the Local Government Act 2020 in 2024, creating a loophole that allowed untested private prosecutions to automatically remove councillors from office. The flawed bill currently before Parliament does nothing to reverse a similar situation while the bill is being debated. There are now rumours that further actions could take place in other parts of the state if this is not urgently resolved. I have personally heard of at least three affected councils. The coalition has proposed sensible, workable amendments and introduced an alternative bill, the Local Government Amendment (Stability of Councils) Bill 2026. One of our provisions retrospectively removes private prosecutions as a trigger, so no councillor can be stood down because of a vexatious private charge from the start of this council term onwards. Minister, adopt our recommendations. The sector supports our bill and our amendments. I urge you to do the same.

Student accommodation

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (19:31): (2685) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Renters, and the action I seek is confirmation that university and

student housing is fully covered by standard tenancy protections, like protection from unfair eviction, access to VCAT tenancy dispute processes, enforcement of minimum rental standards, transparency around fees and contracts, protection from coercive ties to enrolment status, fair notice periods and clearer termination rights.

Wani, a young university student in my multicultural youth advisory committee, lives in student accommodation. This important issue was raised by her, but sadly it is not a unique issue. Instead it is a common problem experienced by many university students where they are forced to sign rental accommodation agreements extending months beyond their course completion dates because providers know students have limited alternatives. Wani's rent has increased by about \$80 a week from last year, with very little notice given by the landlord. Despite these price hikes, the facilities in which students must live do not match. Wani explained to me a recent incident where toilets in the entire building did not work for three whole days, with students expected to go down the street to find public toilets to use. University-affiliated student housing does not always have the same protections as other rentals in Victoria. Exemptions such as section 21 of the Residential Tenancies Act 1997 allow universities and large corporate providers such as UniLodge to operate under occupancy agreements rather than standard leases. This means many forms of university-affiliated student housing operate outside the Residential Tenancies Act entirely. This means students are living in freezing dorms or waiting months to have their water fixed because there are no minimum standards for energy efficiency and no timeframes for addressing maintenance issues. There are no rules about how much landlords can jack up the rent, and if students get unfairly evicted, the onus is on them to prove why they should not have been.

I would like to conclude this adjournment with the following direct quote from Wani:

This loophole creates a two-tiered rental system in Victoria: one for ordinary renters and another for students. Students are often the most vulnerable renters of all. Many are living away from home for the first time. Many are international students. Many are on low incomes. Many are balancing work, study, caring responsibilities, and rising living costs. Housing is not just a commodity; it is foundational to dignity, security and participation in society.

Small business support

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (19:34): (2686) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Small and Family Business in the other place. Running a business is not easy. Many newer small business owners do not always have built-up networks, nor can they rely on support or advice for their businesses. That is why we are delivering the business skills mentoring program, offering free mentoring for up to 1000 businesses in priority industries. This initiative is part of the *Economic Growth Statement* to back businesses, create jobs and unlock more local growth. It will help businesses to thrive by providing them with hands-on specialist advice that is tailored to their circumstances, their businesses and their growth potential. The action I seek is for the minister to provide me with an update on how local Victorian businesses are benefiting from this program.

Land tax

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (19:35): (2687) My adjournment matter is for the latest Treasurer, and it concerns Labor's land tax and the crippling impact it is having on my constituents. Not a day goes by that I do not get an email or hear firsthand – because unlike a lot of Labor MPs in the north, I actually go out and speak to my constituents and listen to them – and they tell me about Labor's land tax regime here in Victoria and the crippling impact it is having on them.

I have got to say, it particularly impacts migrant families in the northern suburbs, who are being penalised and punished by this Labor government for owning more than one property and running a small business from one of them. I can tell you, it is communities like the Italian community, the Greek community, the Lebanese community and the Maltese community who built this state; they worked bloody hard and mostly with their hands. They might have started a business and they might own one property, which is their business, and one house, mortgaged to the hilt on both of them. Because of

that decision to take a risk, they are being punished by this Labor government. Some of them are paying up to four times what they were previously before this Andrews–Allan–Carroll government’s COVID debt recovery taxes. That is what we have seen: we have seen this government massively jack up land taxes. It is punishing the very people who built this state.

Labor’s approach is in stark contrast to the Liberals and Nationals. We will reverse Labor’s land tax hikes by lifting the land tax threshold from the current level of \$50,000 back to the old level of \$300,000 over a five-year period, saving 280,000 Victorians up to \$975 a year. This will help make Victoria a better and more attractive place to invest in a business, to have a go and get ahead, like so many migrant families and communities in the northern suburbs have done in the past. But under this government, because of their \$200 billion of debt that they have racked up and because they have seen \$15 billion siphoned off to corruption, everyone is paying for this debt.

The action I seek from the Treasurer is to commit to copying the Liberals and Nationals policy on land tax and stop financially punishing my constituents for working hard and having a go.

Housing

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (19:38): (2688) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Housing, Building and Precincts. Shortage of housing supply is at the core of our housing crisis. Victoria is not meeting its target under the National Housing Accord of 60,000 homes per year; only 43,000 homes of the 56,000 approved in 2024–25 have actually been completed. Contributing factors include rising construction costs and workforce shortages courtesy, at least in part, of the ill-advised data centre boom. If we are serious about tackling our housing crisis, we need a paradigm shift. Modular and prefabricated housing offers a way to build high-quality homes faster, reducing labour requirements and construction waste. The Productivity Commission estimates that modern methods of construction can reduce costs by up to 20 per cent and can build housing up to 50 per cent faster than traditional homes.

With the effects of climate change accelerating rapidly, we also need to find ways to reduce the construction industry’s significant emissions. Modular hemp construction has been identified as a promising alternative for affordable low-emission housing. Hemp grows rapidly, absorbs carbon while growing and, uniquely, continues to store significant amounts of carbon when used as a building material. A typical family home made of hemp sequesters around 50 tonnes of CO₂, whereas a conventional brick veneer home of the same size generates around 200 tonnes. The Victorian inquiry into the industrial hemp industry stressed the need for government support for industry development, processing infrastructure and reducing red tape. Queensland is going modular to address housing shortages ahead of the 2032 Olympic Games, while the Australian Building Codes Board is developing a national certification pathway for prefabs. Victoria is currently lagging but could be a leader in low-emission prefab construction. The action I seek is for the minister to provide an update on what Victoria is doing to boost modular housing and to use low-carbon materials such as hemp.

Tony Clarke Reserve, Macedon

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (19:40): (2689) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Community Sport. The action that I seek is for the minister to support greater female participation in sport by upgrading the facilities at Tony Clarke Reserve in Macedon. The fantastic Liberal candidate for Macedon Kate Kendall has been visiting sporting clubs across the district of Macedon. Kate is always inspired by the selfless commitment of the club members and volunteers she meets, who freely give their time and energy to support junior sport and women’s sports. However, Kate is appalled by how dilapidated and run-down some of the facilities are after years of neglect by the Victorian Labor government.

At Tony Clarke Reserve, home of the Macedon Cats Football & Netball Club, the change rooms are decrepit and, frankly, unhygienic. The urinals are wide open and there are no cubicles or doors on the showers. That might have been okay for earlier generations of male players, but it does not meet the

needs of younger women and girls today, who rightly expect privacy and cleanliness when showering and changing after playing sport. Coaches are often forced to take junior players to a public toilet block hundreds of metres away, and many of the girls resort to getting changed in the car or showering at home. This just is not good enough, and it is turning some young girls away from participating at an age when they feel the need to feel safe and welcomed into sport.

Under the leadership of Kate Kendall when she was mayor of Macedon Ranges Shire Council the shire council committed \$40,000 towards a master plan for future development of the reserve. Council has also allocated \$380,000 in its 2026–27 budget towards change room upgrades and sought a further \$250,000 from the Victorian government’s country football and netball program to complete the project. This would bring the change rooms up to AFL community standards, ensuring that they are fit for purpose for all user groups, especially girls and women.

Unfortunately, council’s application for funding was knocked back, and club organisers and players have been left feeling deeply disappointed. The state government’s commitment to women’s inclusion in sport has to be more than two words. It must be backed up by meaningful action. Council intends to submit a new application for funding through the local sports infrastructure program, and I fully support their request. The Cats have waited patiently for tangible state government assistance that will provide modern, safe and inclusive facilities at Tony Clarke Reserve, but so far it has failed to materialise. I urge the minister to support female participation in sport by giving close consideration to the merits of the funding application to upgrade facilities at Tony Clarke Reserve in Macedon. Our female athletes deserve better and cannot endure another season with these substandard facilities.

Wyndham–MacIntosh streets, Shepparton

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (19:43): (2690) My adjournment is – you guessed it – for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. The action I seek is for the minister to switch the lights on at Wyndham and MacIntosh streets in Shepparton. It has been six years since the traffic lights at the intersection of Wyndham and MacIntosh streets in Shepparton were installed. On 14 May 2025 I asked the then minister almost the exact same question. Fourteen months later they are still not switched on, in spite of all the rail and signalling upgrades being completed. How many more accidents need to occur before the lights are turned on? Surely it is not that complicated. On 5 August 2026 there was a serious crash at this intersection. This is the fifth collision at this intersection since the lights were installed. Council and members of the community have consistently raised this intersection as one of high risk. They are dumbfounded that after six years the lights are still not active. The work is done. From next week Shepparton will have the expanded train services they were promised last parliamentary term. Now all that is left is for the potentially life-saving traffic lights at the intersection of Wyndham and MacIntosh streets to be turned on.

Albury–Wodonga hospital

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (19:45): (2691) My adjournment matter is for the attention of the Minister for Health, and the action I seek is that the minister advise when the Carroll Labor government will update the Albury–Wodonga community on the progress in tender evaluations for the Albury Wodonga Health clinical services building. Tenders closed in April but the project remains veiled in secrecy, and frankly that is just not good enough. In the lead-up to the 2022 election, Labor promised a transformational redevelopment of Albury Wodonga Health. Almost four years later the community is still waiting for construction to begin. The project, which is slated to begin at the start of 2027, which is only a few months away, has become synonymous with delays, secrecy and broken promises.

As planning has progressed and true costs become apparent, the government’s original promise has been gutted. Essential components have disappeared under the convenient label of ‘value managed’, including infrastructure the community rightly expected would form part of a modern regional hospital. The height of the building has been reduced by three floors. Some floors will be shell spaces – a lack of money means they will not be fitted out. The helipad is gone and the multistorey car park has

been ditched, just to name a few. The full business case remains hidden from the public despite repeated calls for its release, leaving the community in the dark about what is being delivered. The project has also been plagued by instability, and that is not just the cracks in the ward walls caused by unstable ground. A crisis manager was appointed and has since departed, while confidence has been undermined by continuing uncertainty over the scope, funding and delivery of the redevelopment.

Public reports indicate tenders closed three months ago. I have been up there recently. I met with the outgoing acting chair Andrew Way. He showed me a plan – that was all just a fudge. I thought it was just a disgrace how I was treated on that visit given I had no follow-up after it was guaranteed there would be. I really am concerned about where this is going. If the government's plan to start construction in early 2027 is to be achieved, a successful contractor will need to be appointed in the very near future. This is a Victorian election promise for a Victorian-funded public hospital. The 180,000 Victorians in the north-east who rely on this service deserve answers from the Victorian government. The minister cannot bury her head in the sand and hide behind the fact that New South Wales Health Infrastructure is managing the procurement process. Whatever arrangements exist between the two states, the Carroll government remains accountable to the people of Victoria for delivering the hospital it promised.

Border communities have waited long enough. Every month of delay means patients and clinicians suffer and conspiracy theories swirl about and gather momentum while uncertainty and frustration continue to fester. The action I seek is for the minister to provide, as a matter of urgency, some transparency, confirm that construction remains on track to commence in early 2027 and state whether the government will publicly release the project's business case and final scope of works before construction commences. The community deserves nothing less.

Zoos Victoria

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (19:48): (2692) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Environment, and the action that I seek is that the minister step in and provide more funding to Zoos Victoria so that they do not have to proceed with job cuts and a reduction in vital education programs. Zoos Victoria are proposing to cut 70 full-time equivalent positions across a range of departments, including the education teams. The education programs offered to school groups are one of the most important and financially beneficial aspects of the zoos. Zoos Victoria engages with over 150,000 students every year, from early learning to tertiary studies.

Students love coming to the zoo and learning about conservation, learning about food chains, culture, animal care, STEM skills and much more. Yet Zoos Victoria have proposed to cut at least 30 per cent of education staff across Melbourne Zoo, Werribee Open Range Zoo, Healesville Sanctuary and Kyabram Fauna Park. The most notable cut is reducing Melbourne Zoo education teams from 6.2 FTE to 3.8. These programs cannot be replicated in a classroom, and staff believe they will not be able to service the volume of student groups that currently come through the zoo nor maintain the standard of education they currently deliver. Many impacted staff have decades of experience. Victorian students are losing vital and irreplaceable knowledge. This will impact students and future zoo revenue. Zoos Victoria claims young people remain essential to our vision for the future, yet they will be directly impacted by these cuts. These cuts are ill conceived, and they must be stopped.

Housing

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (19:50): (2693) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Housing, Building and Precincts, and the action that I seek is an update on how the government is increasing our housing supply. We know that the One Nation party and Liberals have no plan to increase housing supply and it is only Labor that is making housing more affordable and ensuring more people have access to homes.

ADJOURNMENT

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Legislative Council

Wednesday 12 August 2026

Responses

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Finance, Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Government Services) (19:50): There were 17 matters raised for a number of ministers. In line with the standing orders, I will seek written responses.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 7:50 pm.