Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Wednesday 13 May 2026

By authority of the Victorian Government Printer

Members of the Legislative Council

60th Parliament

President

Shaun Leane

Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Lizzie Blandthorn

Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Bev McArthur (from 18 November 2025)
David Davis (from 27 December 2024)
Georgie Crozier (to 27 December 2024)

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Evan Mulholland (from 31 August 2023)
Matthew Bach (to 31 August 2023)

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

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

Party abbreviations

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

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Wednesday 13 May 2026

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

Papers

Papers

Tabled by Clerk:

Auditor-General –

Free TAFE, May 2026 (*Ordered to be published*).

Responses to Performance Engagement Recommendations: Annual Status Update 2026, May 2026 (*Ordered to be published*).

Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 – Report, 2025, under section 96 by the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police.

Interpretation of Legislation Act 1984 – Notice under section 32(3)(a)(iii) in relation to Statutory Rule No. 26 (*Gazette G19, 7 May 2026*).

Planning and Environment Act 1987 – Notice of approval of the Victorian Planning Provisions – Amendment VC309.

Committees

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into Ambulance Victoria

The Clerk: I have received the following paper for presentation to the house pursuant to standing orders: the government response to the Legal and Social Issues Committee's inquiry into Ambulance Victoria.

Production of documents

Animal research

Housing

The Clerk: I table two letters from the Attorney-General, both dated 11 May 2026, in response to a resolution of the Council on 18 March 2026 relating to Monash University primates research on the motion of Ms Purcell and a resolution of the Council on 1 April 2026 relating to rental controls on the motion of Mr Puglielli. The letters state that the date for the production of documents does not allow sufficient time to respond and that the government will endeavour to provide a final response to the order as soon as possible.

Contraceptive pill access

The Clerk: I table a further letter from the Attorney-General dated 11 May 2026 in response to a resolution of the Council on 18 March 2026 on the motion of Ms Crozier. The government have identified one document within the scope of the order and make a claim of executive privilege over the document in full. I further table a schedule of the one document.

Business of the house

Notices

Notices of motion given.

Members statements

Nepalese New Year

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Environment, Minister for Outdoor Recreation) (09:52): Last night I was delighted to join the Premier and many of my colleagues to celebrate the Nepalese New Year in Parliament House. I want to acknowledge our co-host consul general Nirajan Gauli, Australian Nepalese Multicultural Centre president Tilak Pokhrel and the hardworking member for Broadmeadows Kathleen Matthews-Ward, and I want to thank them for bringing the community together for such a proud occasion. Nepalese New Year is a moment for fresh intention. It is a moment to honour what you have carried and to set your eyes firmly on what you will build next.

There is something about the Nepalese community, I must say, that made last night feel bigger than it was. More than just a celebration, it felt like a community that was confident and determined to make our state better for all. What stood out was the leadership in the room and the consular corps that were there; it was not just the attendees but the organisers, the institution builders, student leaders, business owners and advocates – people who keep the community running when nobody is watching. The Nepalese community sets a high standard in education, in professional life, in small business and in service, especially through the care economy and community organisations to help people settle and thrive. Our Labor government has always stood with the Nepalese community not just in words but through practical support. That includes support for the Australian Nepalese Multicultural Centre in Diggers Rest. I want to thank everyone who attended last night's event, and I wish them a very happy Nepalese New Year. May the year ahead bring health, opportunity and success to you and your families. Happy New Year.

Franco Vaccari

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (09:53): It was an emotional day but a great honour to attend last week the funeral of Franco Vaccari at Yarima in Cressy, the extraordinary and historic home that Franco and Rosalie built together and such a fitting place to farewell a man whose life was defined by what he created. Franco Vaccari was a visionary builder and a shrewd businessman, but above all else he was one of the kindest, most generous, most interesting men you could ever hope to meet, honest and capable to a tee, yet no-one would ever have known how generous he was, how successful he was or how deeply he cared, because he never sought the credit. He gave enormous time and energy to the Vaccari family foundation; the aged care facility at South Morang, the first of its kind in Australia; the restoration of a derelict substation in North Fitzroy, now Ronald McDonald House, serving the Royal Children's Hospital; and as the inaugural chair of Italian at La Trobe University. And then there was Yarima, where he planted 120,000 eucalypts, built bridges, crushed rock and transformed 4000 acres into something magnificent. He leaves behind his courageous wife Rosalie and their beloved children Luisa, Angela, Mick and Sofia. I hope Franco will forgive my pronunciation: riposi in pace.

National disability insurance scheme

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (09:55): $36 billion – that is what the federal Labor government has committed to cutting from the NDIS, stripping lifeline support from the most vulnerable Australians and Victorians while dressing it up as responsible budgeting. The message is loud and clear: people with disabilities are a budget problem that needs controlling, that needs resetting, that needs to be dealt with. Isn't that what the federal health minister was selling to the media in the last couple of weeks? 'We care about people with disabilities, but this scheme is too unregulated, filled with fraudulent providers.' But whose job is it to regulate the sector? The government's. These gutless cuts will force disabled people into segregation, isolation, institutional settings and dependency, reducing the independence and choice they have fought so hard and so long for. Meanwhile, Labor refuses to confront powerful vested interests. They refuse to tax gas companies, they refuse to tax corporations, they refuse to tax billionaires. They refuse to hang multinational corporations out to dry in the same way they do with vulnerable members of our society. This federal

Labor government, just like the state Labor government, has shown it will not stand up for ordinary people when powerful corporate interests are on the line. Instead of making big corporations and gas giants pay their fair share of tax, they are asking vulnerable Australians to bear that cost. We, the Greens, will continue to protect the NDIS.

Sherry Johnstone

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (09:57): Today I want to talk about a piece of art that I am actually wearing. This is a unique Australian garment, and in fact it is a unique western Victorian garment. This cardigan was designed by Sherry Johnstone, a Keerray Woorroong and Yorta Yorta woman. Sherry is a contemporary Indigenous artist from south-west Victoria. She has deep ancestral connections to the region, including Moyjil, the site depicted in this artwork, formerly known as Point Ritchie. Moyjil is one of the oldest known sites of human habitation in Australia. This jacket is made from Australian extra-fine merino wool knitted at Kilmaille Knits, near Harrow, on a fourth-generation wool farm. Sherry Johnstone's fashion label Flash1A, launched this year, was featured at the Melbourne Fashion Festival's First Nations runway. Sherry has shown what is possible when an Indigenous creator combines artistic skill and business ambition and finds the right partners to bring that vision to life. Sherry's work is one great example of what Victorian treaty is about: inclusion of Aboriginal people in business and artistic life in our state. I congratulate Sherry and wish her all the best for her business future.

Ballarat citizenship ceremony

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (09:58): I first want to acknowledge the new citizens that I was very pleased to talk to and greet the other day at the Ballarat citizenship ceremony. There are over 100 new citizens that happily now call Australia home. To be able to speak to them and talk to them, engage with them and look them in the eyes and say 'Welcome to our community' was a great honour and a great privilege, and I wish them all the very best for the future.

St Dominic's Primary School, Melton

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (09:59): Last week I was also incredibly proud to go to St Dominic's Primary School in Melton, and we had a wonderful chat with all the grade 6 students. We were talking about civics and engagement and how you get involved, and we had some really interesting discussions about the social media ban. There were a lot of really smart, bright minds there that were full of ideas, and I was so proud to be there. I congratulate all the teachers and the staff that do such hard work to bring these students along with them to ensure they have got the best start possible in life.

Anzac Day

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (09:59): Over the break I was also honoured to go to a number of Anzac Day ceremonies. There are a lot of people across the Ballarat region that went to Anzac Day ceremonies, both at schools and actually on the day itself. I want to pay tribute to those that have served our armed forces in Australia and thank them for their service and the sacrifice that they have endured, both for them and their family, many over a significant period of time. Lest we forget. We pay absolute honour and privilege to our fallen veterans who have gone before us so that we can live the way that we can today.

Greyhound racing

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (10:00): These are words I never thought I would say: congratulations to the Liberals and shame on Labor. Recently Tasmanian Liberal Premier Jeremy Rockliff did something remarkable. He acknowledged that greyhound racing is an industry built on cruelty, injury, death and wastage and that no amount of self-regulation can make a blood sport humane. Meanwhile the Labor opposition and shadow racing minister Dean Winter have decided to throw themselves in front of reform in a spectacular display of political opportunism. Rather than

standing up for animals or taxpayers, they are fighting tooth and nail to protect an industry that kills dogs for gambling profits. This is not just cruel, it is irresponsible, because Tasmania's greyhound racing industry receives more than double the per capita funding of other Australian jurisdictions. While Labor is arguing that propping up gambling and animal cruelty is more important than spending this money to help people who are struggling with housing, health care and cost-of-living pressures, they expect us to believe they have made this decision to stand with the working class. I think it is deeply insulting to suggest that the working class does not have compassion for animals. You know things have gone badly wrong when the Liberals are leading Labor on animal protection. Australians from across the political spectrum want greyhound racing to go, and if the Allan Labor government want to avoid the embarrassing and out-of-touch mistakes of their Tasmanian counterparts, they should call time on this shameful practice in our state too.

Northern Metropolitan Region public transport

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (10:02): They are sleek, they are comfortable, they are fast and they have arrived in the north. The X'trapolis 2.0 is here, and it does not just look cool; it can fit more passengers and there are better accessibility features. The new X'trapolis 2.0 going up and down the Craigieburn and Upfield lines embodies Labor's investment into public transport in the north. Only our government has a plan to deliver real public transport infrastructure for Melbourne's northern suburbs, from better trains to more accessible trams to more frequent bus services. Labor is making sure our tram services are more accessible for everyone who travels along the coolest street in the world – High Street, Northcote – with level-access tram stops to be delivered along that corridor with the 86 tram route. We are also beginning the design and consultation process for accessible tram stops along iconic Sydney Road, something I have been working with disability advocates for and we are finally kicking off. But it is not just rail. We are also boosting bus services across the inner north with more evening trips for services like the 526 and the 508 bus. It is something that I know the community very much welcomes. Those opposite, the Liberals, talk about cutting train services, and they have already opposed the free public transport for this month and half-price fares till the end of the year. You see, only Labor can deliver the upgrades and increased services the north needs.

Economic policy

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (10:03): Labor are gambling with our state's finances. Debt is spiralling, and with it, so does the interest bill. We are paying more than $1 million every hour to service a debt that is fast approaching $200 billion. We are now paying over $24 million every day in interest, and that interest bill keeps going up. The state budget has higher debt, higher taxes and higher interest, with no plan to fix it, and when you waste money on interest repayments, there is less money for essential services to pay for more police, better roads, schools, health services and transport. Right now families are feeling the pressure and businesses are struggling, and it is going to take time to fix the state budget. The Nationals and Liberals team have released a 10-year plan to secure Victoria's economic future – a plan that will fix the budget and lower taxes, including payroll tax and land tax, and a plan that will make life easier and grow our economy again. We will reduce the debt and interest burden, build business confidence, drive investment and jobs, unlock housing supply and reform planning, restore energy security and reduce costs, shift infrastructure to local priorities and put a hiring freeze on back office roles to guarantee essential services. Victorians deserve a government that respects their money. We will be open and honest and manage your money responsibly. There is a state election in November, and it is time for a fresh start. The Liberals and Nationals team are committed to fixing the budget, lowering taxes and upholding accountability and transparency in government.

First Nations justice outcomes

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (10:05): It is 35 years since the release of the final report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. The royal commission investigated 99 deaths and made 339 recommendations for reform. While a 2018 report claimed that

around three-quarters of these recommendations had been implemented, the implementation appears to have been more paper based than actual in many cases. Since 1991 more than 630 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have died in custody. Deaths have in fact continued to rise, while deaths of non-Indigenous people in custody have declined. Only one police officer has ever been held criminally responsible for their role in the death of an Aboriginal person in their care. In Victoria we continue to see funding to community programs cut while we implement increasingly regressive laws that drive mass incarceration. Despite the harm they cause, our government boasts about their draconian, tough-on-crime laws. Hopefully the federal inquiry into racism, hate and violence directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will look into the failure of governments to bring about meaningful reform. A good place to start for our government would be to implement the *Yoorrook for Justice* recommendations.

Budget 2026–27

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (10:06): There was lots of great news out of the budget last week, and there was big news for Mirboo North out of the Victorian state budget. We got $7 million for the new CFA brigade and a new kinder on site at the school. Thanks to everyone around town who has put in their advocacy to achieve this. In our next steps we focus on securing funding for the stadium at the school.

In other news out of the state budget, Stratford is getting an upgrade to the stadium, with over $300,000 to lift the bathrooms. The community have fundraised, and the school community have advocated. This is going to really breathe life into the stadium. There is more to do, but congratulations to everyone for their advocacy on it. It is going to unlock the stadium for lots of community groups around town.

Community safety

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (10:07): Many of us have listened closely to the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion in recent days and noted the attacks on so many arts and creative sector people, the doxing that has occurred and the documentation now of what has occurred with so many arts and creative industry sector people. I was particularly struck by the evidence of Deborah Conway. I absolutely reject the attacks on her, noting her record of service to Australian music over so many decades. The royal commission has received that very significant evidence. One of the things that I think shocked me most was the coordinated attack on Ms Conway led by Alicia Gardiner, a pro-Palestinian activist who appears to be unable to differentiate between her views on Palestine and her antisemitic and anti-Zionist prejudices. Ms Gardiner was prominent in an incident in the Legislative Assembly public gallery here recently, where she appeared to have provocatively and calculatedly launched a personal attack on another visitor. But it is her coordinated attack on Deborah Conway that I think is most disgraceful. It gives the lie to those who say it is just about free speech. These are people who, with malice and hatred, are attacking many of our Jewish creatives, and I say it has to stop.

TAFE Clean Energy Fund

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria) (10:09): Today I rise to highlight the important investment in Victoria's clean energy training and education sector and the benefits that it will deliver right across our state. I recently travelled to Morwell – to TAFE Gippsland, the Morwell campus – to hear the Minister for Skills and TAFE Colin Brooks and the federal Minister for Skills and Training Andrew Giles, as well our very own Harriet Shing, a member in the upper house for Gippsland. The announcement was for a $50 million renewable energy TAFE centre of excellence, which is being co-funded by the state and the federal governments. The TAFE Gippsland Morwell campus will be the anchor point for renewable energy training and education in Victoria, but it will work with the rest of the TAFE network, including Holmesglen, but in particular – being a member for Western Victoria – South West TAFE and Federation University have very, very strong partnerships with the new centre. The TAFE Clean Energy Fund is expanding training opportunities for western Victorian students and

workers through its partnerships. It is an $8 million investment in Ballarat's Asia Pacific Renewable Energy Training Centre – *(Time expired)*

Production of documents

Data centres

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (10:11): I move:

That this house:

(1) notes the failure of the Victorian government to release its sustainable data centre action plan; and

(2) requires the Leader of the Government, in accordance with standing order 10.01, to table in the Council, within 30 days of the house agreeing to this resolution, a copy of the sustainable data centre action plan.

The Premier has made no secret of her intention to make Victoria the data centre capital of the Asia Pacific region. She has vowed to ruthlessly compete against other states to make that a reality. The regulatory approach the government has adopted in its bid to attract data centre investment is basically to just let it run. According to the former minister for economic growth Danny Pearson, if there are unforeseen, adverse consequences, then they will intervene and try to deal with this – 'try', presumably, is the operative word.

With data centres in Europe and the US wreaking havoc on local water and energy supplies, I believe we have seen sufficient evidence of numerous foreseeable adverse consequences attached to data centre facilities. Communities are not reassured by the government's laissez-faire approach. As more of these facilities are approved, I am not the only member in this place to raise their community's entirely reasonable concerns that these centres are receiving lightning-fast approvals without consultation, without sufficient environmental standards and without the necessary social licence.

However, the Victorian government apparently does have a plan, a $5.5 million sustainable data centre action plan, which has been mentioned in numerous press releases and by the former Minister for Water in her responses to questions without notice. The sustainable data centre action plan will:

> … use transport, energy and water usage data, including recycled water, to determine where data centres can be built sustainably.

This would be achieved:

> … through a coordinated, whole-of-government approach to investment, planning and workforce development.

The recently published AI driven, business-ready mission statement assures us that the action plan is a key initiative under the Victorian government's AI mission statement, which is a vision for the state to develop and adopt AI safely, responsibly and for the benefit of all Victorians.

The plan, which will act as a set of guidelines for sector development, appears to cover many of the concerns that Victorians have around the introduction of these technologies. The whole-of-government approach to investment, planning and workforce development will purportedly deliver coordinated infrastructure, land and connectivity; energy innovation and grid readiness; sustainable water security and management; a skilled and future-ready workforce; and strengthened leadership and coordination.

Back in December, when we inquired, the action plan was only weeks away. Since then we have seen repeated statements from government and on the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions website that this plan has been completed and is being applied. The web page concerned, which was updated only four weeks ago, says:

> As Victoria's data centre footprint grows, we want to make sure this growth is well planned, efficient and responsible. The Sustainable Data Centre Action Plan sets out how we will achieve this through a coordinated, whole-of-government approach to investment, planning and workforce development.

Based on that sort of statement, the plan must surely exist. The only problem is that the plan does not seem to be available. As I said, it is referenced repeatedly on the government's website and in various media releases, yet it is not downloadable, and multiple calls to ministerial staff and departmental contacts have resulted in either no greater clarity or a suggestion that it either has not been produced yet or is for internal government use only. Really?

Given the growing community concern and the urgent need for some parameters around the sector, let us recognise that is a fact. I mean, last month the government announced the approval of a gigantic data centre at Fishermans Bend that had been approved with little or no consultation only 75 days after it had been lodged with the Department of Transport and Planning. If this is a plan to truly benefit Victorians, if it is to respond strategically to the many very valid concerns that the community has, the government should be happy to release it publicly so that all Victorians can see how this government will both ensure the maximising of returns to the community while concurrently addressing the very real environmental threats posed by these so-called factories of the future. We recognise this is important technology. We are not being Luddites here, but we are saying unequivocally this should be done with a social licence and a consciousness of the social consequences of doing it. Accordingly, we call on the government to release its much-vaunted sustainable data centre action plan.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:16): I rise to make a contribution on this motion moved by Legalise Cannabis Victoria calling on the government to release its sustainable data centre action plan and requiring the Leader of the Government, in accordance with standing order 10.01, to table in the Council within 30 days of the house agreeing to the resolution a copy of the sustainable data centre action plan.

This is a documents motion, and it is the government's practice not to oppose documents motions, so we will not be opposing this motion. I had the benefit of listening to Mr Ettershank's contribution on this motion, and I must say I am a little bit confused. In looking at some of the research around this matter, there are a couple of points that I would like to address. Mr Ettershank did go to one of those points himself, which is that there is available on the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions website a URL link that is titled 'Sustainable data centre action plan', and he acknowledges that. Within that URL there are five points to the action plan, and it goes into a bit of detail. There are other links of course. If you want to participate in being part of growing these data centres, there are various opportunities to do that with investment and the like. I do not know, it kind of looks like a plan to me, but nevertheless what I think Mr Ettershank is asking is if there is a physical copy of it. You could probably print off the URL, but nevertheless it is kind of a bit bizarre.

I note that our government is already home to 40 data centres. Thanks to our outstanding land, energy and talent, we are emerging as a prominent data centre hub in the Asia Pacific. I note Mr Ettershank's comments where he said, 'Oh, we're not Luddites.' Well, I am sorry, I think you are. You are Luddites, because anytime somebody tries to do anything positive for Victorians that involves growing jobs, growing opportunities for our economy, we get constant negative criticism from those on the crossbench sometimes about how we should do things better. The lecturing goes on and on and on. Mr Ettershank went to some of this in his contribution as well. We talk about the water that is involved in these sorts of things – I am reading the notes; I am reading the action plan that talks about how, for anybody who might be going to set up a data centre or whatever, recycled water is something that would be more beneficial to use. But I also then looked at how much water growing a crop of cannabis requires. For example, cannabis plants can require up to 23 litres of water per plant per day. Maybe the Nimbin Hemp Embassy could come up with a plan – it might be an optimistic plan – that involves using perhaps recycled bong water or recycled water for cannabis crops for data centres.

David Ettershank interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: We get the guffawing, hypocritical laughter from Legalise Cannabis down there, which is Mr Ettershank's wont, but again they are low on solutions, high on criticism and have no solutions for a plan. As I said, Victoria is already home to 40 data centres. We have invested

$5.5 million in the sustainable data centre action plan, and we are going to unlock projects worth up to $25 billion in potential capital expenditure. But if you listen to Mr Ettershank and Legalise Cannabis, again there are no solutions, just 'We want to see a document.' I think my advice to Mr Ettershank would be to download the URL and print it off. Honestly, if you cannot even search properly on the internet but you want a paper – and I might note that whenever we print off any paper, water is actually a very –

David Ettershank: On a point of order, President, I am not sure where Ms Terpstra is going here, but I actually specifically quoted from the webpage she is referring to as though it is the plan.

The PRESIDENT: I do not think that is a point of order.

Sonja TERPSTRA: There is no point of order there, and I know Mr Ettershank is trying to waste my clock with frivolous points of order. I would ask that you note that, because frivolous points of order should not be entertained. Nevertheless, if we want to print off documents, paper actually requires a lot of water usage as well, so I am actually quite disturbed that Mr Ettershank cannot look at a URL but wants paper that requires the use of a lot of water in its production. Really what we are hearing today is a new level of ridiculousness from Legalise Cannabis – but, hey, what have we come to expect in this chamber? As I said, it is the government's practice not to oppose documents motions of this like. And I do look forward to the Nimbin Hemp Embassy emails. To whoever signed me up to those: wow. Aren't they a read? They take hours to get through, and the content is so heavy I wonder who wrote it and what they were on. But nevertheless, I look forward to the Nimbin Hemp Embassy's plan to recycle water that gets used on cannabis crops and in bongs.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (10:21): I thank Mr Ettershank for bringing this motion to the chamber. It is a timely and sensible and practical motion. We are all interested in the future with data centres. We all see the importance of data centres, but it is clear that there are significant challenges. The contribution that we have just heard – as the member leaves the chamber – is a contribution that I think is best left alone. I think it was an extraordinary contribution but shows how out of touch many in this government actually are.

For those who are interested, it is clear that energy usage on data centres will grow very significantly. The Australian Energy Market Operator has put out new figures, which are on the front page of the *Financial Review* this morning, suggesting 25 terawatts of power by 2036, up from a lower estimate just a very short period ago and climbing further beyond that – so there are genuine energy issues. There are genuine issues of community engagement and involvement, and Mr Ettershank has pointed to those. I note New South Wales, unlike Victoria, are going through a more thoughtful process of taking public submissions and working through a process of how they can put in place a proper framework to support these centres and put proper controls and practical steps around them. This is not too much to ask.

The Victorian government, in its usual secretive manner, does not want to engage with the community. The Port Melbourne case that Mr Ettershank pointed to is a case study in how not to engage the community or how to fail completely to engage the local community. The opposition, the Liberals and the Nationals, are very interested in this. We see the importance of data centres and we see the importance of the economy being driven by some of these changes, but it is important to have a proper framework around them. There do need to be proper steps for water. I note, and it has certainly been pointed out to me, that a number of the newer centres use a gel mix so the water requirements are much less, so there may be longer term some solutions to the water issue. But that is again a matter for proper investigation and proper engagement rather than the frivolous response that we had from the other side of the chamber just now.

Mr Welch and I are sort of looking at and talking to many people about these issues at the moment, and it is very much the state that Victoria is drifting a long way behind the other states on this in every

sense of the word. Mr Pearson and others say, 'Oh, well, we're going to do this and we're going to do that,' but having a sensible framework in place is what is actually required.

This motion is in the public interest. It is in the public interest to see these documents and, I would argue, any submissions, material or consultancy work that the government has relied on around its particular plan here, because that would inform the community as well and would enable members –

David Ettershank interjected.

David DAVIS: There is one, is there?

David Ettershank interjected.

David DAVIS: Well, no. If the government has done some thoughtful research – there is no particular sign of that, but if that is the case – it would be very helpful to see those documents as well, and we may well ask through FOI for some of those documents. I understand why you are wanting to seek a single document, but this is such a case that if there is taxpayers money being used on consultancies they should properly be in the public domain as well. Without labouring the point, this is a sensible motion and we support it.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (10:26): I thank Mr Ettershank for bringing this motion to the house. I have also been disturbed by the unbridled enthusiasm with which the Victorian Labor government has embraced data centres. They have adopted an approach of 'Bring them in and sort out the problems later'. Currently there are 58 data centres in operation, and there are many more – some extraordinarily large – on the way. These centres generate a lot of heat, and the bigger the hotter. To cool down they need to use either a lot of energy or a lot of water or a combination of both. We have seen reporting today that shows that electricity use in Victoria has gone up more than expected, largely because of data centres. But at the moment, because of water's relatively low price in Victoria and the permissive regulatory environment, this is actually the preferred option for cooling for many centres, and it is integral to the current plans for the hyperscale facilities that are being built across Victoria. These centres have computational intensity that generates heat loads that exceed the capacity of conventional air cooling, so they rely on evaporative cooling or hybrid water-cooled systems to lower their energy costs. If you want to know about the technical details, I will refer you to an excellent paper that was recently written by the Concerned Waterways Alliance.

While there is a broad load of greenwashing going on based on potential advances in gel mixtures and other things that could reduce the energy and water impact of these facilities, there are currently no mandatory requirements in place in Victoria. When challenged on the environmental aspects of data centres, the Labor government has talked about the sustainable data centre action plan yet cannot seem to provide any details about what this is. In fact it is not even clear that the plan exists, although we are told today by Ms Terpstra that what is on the website is the plan. It cost in excess of $5 million, we are told, to develop this plan, and if what is on the website is the extent of it, that is an absolute disgrace. That is not a plan. A suggestion that recycled water might be a bit better – that is not a plan. It is not a mandatory standard. When I asked an adjournment question recently of the Premier, the response I got was:

> … we want to make sure this growth is well planned, efficient and responsible. The Sustainable Data Centre Action Plan sets out how we will achieve this through a coordinated, whole-of-government approach to investment, planning and workforce development.

She said that the action plan:

> … addresses five key areas to sustainably grow the sector, from information on land availability and planning, to sustainable energy and water provision, and the skilled workforce needed for the future.

That is not a plan. We need more detail than that. There are no mandatory standards currently in place. That is what a plan would provide.

As I said earlier, the approach the government has taken is 'Approve now, deal with the problems later.' We only have to look abroad, as Mr Ettershank pointed out, to see why this is an absolutely terrible approach. The energy and water needs are devastating communities and ecosystems overseas, and countries are now being forced to play catch-up. When we know what it leads to, why on earth wouldn't we take the opportunity to get the settings right first? The cost of this is not just going to be felt in dollars, although as it stands water and energy costs for consumers risk being pushed up by data centres. Victoria's river systems are already experiencing severe flow stress. We are already consuming more electricity than we can meet the needs of with our renewable energy transition. All of these things are at risk. There are the flow-on effects of that: on our food production and ecosystem decline. Even our drinking water and the quality of it are at risk. Yet the Victorian Labor government are once again showing their true colours, putting the profit of private corporations ahead of people and the environment. If that is not the case, then I look forward to seeing evidence of that document that is being requested today, and I commend the motion to the house.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:30): The AI transition is going to come; there is no question about it. The real question is whether we are going to have a good transition or a bad transition. There are many attributes to a good transition, and you only need to compare them to a bad transition. One of the elements of a bad transition is lack of social licence and ethical basis. The Liberal–National position is that the ethical and social licence element of the AI transition is as foundational as data centres, and if you do not have that, then you will inhibit the actual growth of the value that we will gain from the AI transition. So I consider social licence an enabler, not problematic. If we can see where the plan is – the plan currently is whatever was in Danny Pearson's head.

Motion agreed to.

Public lottery licence

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:31): I move, on behalf on Mrs McArthur:

That this house:

(1) notes that:

(a) on 6 May 2026, the Treasurer announced a 40-year extension of Victoria's exclusive public lottery licence to Tattersall's Sweeps Pty Ltd, a subsidiary of the Lottery Corporation, to 30 June 2068;

(b) The Lottery Corporation described the contract award process as 'exclusive, bilateral negotiations';

(c) by contrast, the previous licence was awarded for 10 years, after a 20-month open process;

(d) the arrangement involves a $1.145 billion upfront premium;

(2) in accordance with standing order 10.01, requires the Leader of the Government to table in the Council, within three weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution, the following documents held by the Department of Justice and Community Safety, the Department of Treasury and Finance and the Department of Premier and Cabinet, and relevant ministerial offices, from 1 January 2024 to 6 May 2026:

(a) all briefs, submissions and advice concerning exclusive or bilateral negotiations rather than a registration-of-interest process, tender, or other open market process;

(b) all valuation advice or financial modelling concerning the 40-year licence extension and $1.145 billion premium;

(c) all records of meetings, in person or otherwise, including diary entries, agendas, file notes, minutes, electronic communications including SMS and encrypted messaging applications, and any other correspondence between the government and the Lottery Corporation and related entities concerning the arrangement;

(d) all advice, reports, assessments or recommendations provided by the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission; and

(e) the executed public lottery licence agreement, including side letters or ancillary agreements.

Everyone is aware that a budget operating surplus is not the same thing as a cash surplus and that effectively it is just an accounting conjuring trick to create a budget surplus using the operating budget.

We also know that, in effect, whilst the state's financial position continues to deteriorate significantly as we rapidly head towards $200 billion in debt, there is no genuine plan for how we arrest that slide into debt. There is no genuine plan to arrest the accumulation of interest liability that we have. In fact the fastest growing line item in the budget is interest payable. It is rising at a rate faster than state revenue. That is clearly an unsustainable situation. The ability then to present to the public, as if we are making progress, an operating surplus is obviously a fudge, and it is a fudge of a particularly misleading kind. The community's worst suspicions about that fudge come when you look into the elements by which the surplus was actually achieved.

The extension of the lottery licence for no less than 40 years is one such fudge. Let us examine it a little bit. It says it is to accrue $1.4 billion in revenue to achieve the budget surplus, but the net present value of that money over 40 years would be substantially less than that. So while the community are looking for solutions – they would like to see lower tax burdens upon businesses and residents and homes and people's incomes – the only way they can be achieved is if we actually manage our finances better. But as we slide further and further into debt, the government's only plan for this is either to go further into debt itself to fund these things or to tax us deeper, and that is clearly unsustainable. You cannot tax your way to prosperity and you cannot borrow your way out of debt. Everybody knows that.

What we would like to see is we would like to get some clarity around this extension of the public lottery licence to Tattersalls. We would like to understand what public tender took place. Was this genuinely true value for it? It is very hard to do that if there was not an open marketplace in which it could be considered. The previous licence was awarded for 10 years. That is pretty appropriate, and that was after a 20-month open process. So if this was done with probity, if this was done with proper due process, there would surely have been clear market consultation and a clear invitation to others to perhaps tender a better deal for Victoria. None of that seems to have occurred.

In accordance with the standing orders, we would like to see the Leader of the Government table in the Council, within three weeks of this motion being agreed to, the following documents held by the Department of Justice and Community Safety, the Department of Treasury and Finance, the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the relevant ministerial offices from 1 January 2024 to 6 May 2026: all briefs, submissions and advice concerning exclusive or bilateral negotiations and –

Ryan Batchelor: You're doing well. You've got 1½ minutes to go.

Richard WELCH: Thank you – all valuation advice and financial modelling concerning the 40-year licence extension and the $1.145 billion premium; all records of meetings in person or otherwise, including diary entries, agendas, file notes, minutes and communications; all advice, reports, assessments or recommendations provided by the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission; and the executed lottery lease agreement, including side letters or ancillary agreements.

We also note – in the last minute I have got – that although this was all done behind closed doors, it was also done in conjunction with a major Labor Party donor, so all the more reason for probity and for public confidence in the process that it should be open and transparent. But it is a yet another deal done by the government behind closed doors where the public do not get to see the terms and conditions, where we do not get to understand whether it represents true value for money for the Victorian people and where we do not get to see that in a context where the state is heading to $200 billion of debt, where we pay more on interest alone than we pay for police, ambulance and kindergartens combined, with a billion dollars left over. In that sort of environment we are entitled to clarity, and these documents would at least bring a modicum of that clarity.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:37): I am pleased to rise on this motion. I will acknowledge that there were a few rather large, gaping holes in the arguments that Mr Welch was making. However, I will at least give him some credit that once again we have seen the continual train wreck that is the Victorian Liberal Party, and the broken tyre of the car bouncing down the steps of Parliament and down Bourke Street as a result. Mrs McArthur did not bother to turn up to read in her

notice of motion and did not apparently think it serious enough to warrant her presence in the chamber, so I will at least acknowledge Mr Welch for jumping in enthusiastically. Perhaps he can be forgiven for not being entirely across the detail because he was led astray and left asunder by the recalcitrant Mrs McArthur. I am not sure where you were, Bev, but it is good to see you here in the chamber now at the very least.

We have had a lot of conjecture from members opposite, and once again the defeat-seeking missile that is the Victorian Liberal Party in search of a problem when there are perfectly sensible, straightforward answers that have already been provided. The Department of Justice and Community Safety and the Department of Treasury and Finance undertook the comprehensive assessment of the public lotteries market as part of this process, as is their due process. That included the market sounding of potential interest in the next licence from domestic and international participants and their ability to deliver lotteries. It was also overseen – as I am pretty sure the Treasurer outlined yesterday in question time – by an independent probity adviser and the independent review panel which was appointed under the Gambling Regulation Act 2003.

It does align with practice in other states. The 40-year deal is the same number of years that we have seen in both New South Wales and South Australia, while in Queensland their current deal is a 65-year deal. I would point out for the benefit of members trying to draw comparisons to other states though, that the Victorian lotteries contract does not in fact and has never involved the sell-off or the sale of assets. Unlike in some other jurisdictions where there was a state-run lottery system at some point or another, Victoria has not had that since the 1950s when the first Tattersalls licence was established – I believe in 1954. Any comparison would need to be mindful and cognisant of that. I would also acknowledge and point out that this deal does provide for more certainty and surety for the many, many hundreds of small business operators who do rely on this contract as well, indeed with a 10-year retail licence extension – most other states only provide five-year certainty; we in Victoria provide 10. And of course we do retain the 79.4 per cent lottery tax as well, which funds many essential services.

But there are two points in particular that Mr Welch touched on which actually ignore the basis of what we are talking about here. Trying to claim that this is in any way related to the Labor government's successful delivery of the operating surplus completely disregards the facts. It actually flies in the face of Australian accounting standards, specifically accounting standard AASB 15, which provides that the revenue gained from this contract is not taken into the budget as some one-off hit right now. For the purposes of counting towards a surplus this is actually recognised each year over the 40 years of this contract, so that figure is diluted then by 40. But it also starts when the contract starts, which is in 2028–29. So to say that one-fortieth of an amount that is not even going to start until 2028 is being used by Labor as a creative trick to achieve the operating surplus in 2026 is, quite frankly, laughable and ridiculous on the face of it. What it does do, however, is provide that amelioration towards our net debt from later this year, meaning that we can obtain the net debt benefit.

However, in terms of the claims of Liberal Party members – and we have seen social media videos as well – once again they are not bothering to engage with the facts, but just go out and run with something without recognising the fact that if you are going to talk about this, it is probably appropriate to get your heads around it. I will give Mr Welch leeway; of course, he was not given any warning. But as well, when you are talking about the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission it is quite remarkable indeed for the Liberal Party to be coming in here questioning the probity that they have done when they are at the same time including the VGCCC on their list of cuts announced just last week. I would love to go into this in greater detail, but I believe I am out of time.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (10:43): I rise to speak on this documents motion, which is at its heart about transparency, integrity and public trust. Parliament has a responsibility – and in fact we would say in this place it is one of our primary responsibilities – to scrutinise government decisions. And the public has a right to understand how major decisions such as the one in question are made. That is especially so given the sky-high rates of gambling harm in Victoria that

have persisted under this government and decisions involving valuable public licences, long timeframes and gambling regulation.

Just last week the Treasurer announced that Victoria's exclusive public lottery licence would be extended to Tattersall's Sweeps, a subsidiary of the Lottery Corporation, until 30 June 2068. A licence running until 2068 is not just a routine administrative decision; it does lock in the structure of Victoria's public lottery system for decades, and it will outlast this Parliament, this government and many future governments. The government has announced a $1.145 billion up-front premium. It is a very large sum of money. In and of itself, though, it does not prove that the public has gotten the best deal out of this arrangement. It does not explain how that figure has been calculated. It does not explain what alternatives to this award were considered or whether an open, competitive process could have delivered better value for Victorians.

Yesterday the minister was asked in this place directly about the contradiction at the heart of the decision, where the Premier has characterised the process as full and open while the Lottery Corporation itself has described it as exclusive bilateral negotiations. The minister's answer did not come near to resolving that contradiction. The minister referred to market sounding, commercial advice and assessment of industry participants, as Mr Galea just has, but ultimately said the best value was achieved through negotiation with the existing licence holder. When asked to table the relevant market testing or tender documents, the minister then relied on commercial confidentiality and legal privilege, which is exactly why this motion is needed.

The government says that this was a full and open process. It should produce the documents that show that. If the process was in fact an exclusive bilateral negotiation with the incumbent, Parliament and the public are entitled to know why that path was chosen, especially in the context of this award having happened to a large donor to the Labor Party. The documents sought by this motion go directly to those questions: advice about the negotiation process, valuation advice and modelling, records of meetings, regulatory advice and the executed licence agreement. This is not just about the money and the budget bottom line, although that is extremely relevant in the weeks we find ourselves in. This is also about gambling policy. When the state grants a monopoly gambling right for 40 years, Parliament should be able to see the evidence, the risk assessment, the regulatory advice and the public interest rationale, if that is what the government says is the reason for choosing this path. The Greens support this documents motion because transparency should not be optional. If this was the best deal available, as the government asserts, they should have no difficulty producing documents that support that.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (10:46): I thank my colleague Mr Welch for moving the motion in my name. Victorians deserve to know how a 40-year monopoly lottery licence was awarded, why it was awarded behind closed doors and whether the public got full value for one of the most significant gambling licences in this state's history. On budget day the Treasurer announced that Victoria's exclusive public lottery licence had been handed to the Lottery Corporation (TLC) for 40 years – not 10 years, as in 2017, not after a competitive tender and not after a public registration of interest, but 40 years to 2068 through what the company itself told the Australian Securities Exchange were 'exclusive bilateral negotiations'. 'Exclusive bilateral' is pretty clear. It means no other parties. It means one-to-one. It means a closed-door deal without any competing bids, the largest gambling licence decision in this state since 1993 settled between the government and a single company with no public process whatsoever.

Compare that with last time: in 2015 the government published a formal registration of interest. There was a probity investigation. The Secretary of the Department of Justice and Regulation reported to the minister. The process took 20 months. This time no ROI, no competing bids, no 20-month evaluation, and the announcement came not from the Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation but from the Treasurer. Why? Because this was never about gaming regulation. It was always about plugging the black hole at the centre of Labor's budget. Did Victorians get value for money? Well, we have not yet seen any public evidence that the government obtained an independent valuation. If it did, now is the time to produce it. If it did not, this government sold a 40-year monopoly without

knowing what it was worth. What we do know is that the Lottery Corporation told the Australian Securities Exchange that the deal 'significantly lowers the risk profile of the business' – clearly a win in their eyes. The Premier says the matter went through an appropriate process. Very well, table the documents, show us the tender and show us the market testing. Something is wrong here because by definition a process cannot be both full and open, as the Premier claims, and 'exclusive bilateral', as Mallesons, TLC's lawyers, described it.

Then there is the question of donations. The Lottery Corporation has donated at least $132,000 to the Australian Labor Party since 2022. A company that donated to the governing party has received a licence projected to generate more than $600 million a year in lottery duty for 40 years without a competitive tender. The minister told me yesterday in question time that the donations were completely irrelevant. I am not sure that passes the pub test. I make no allegation of corruption because I do not need to. The perception alone is enough. In 2021 the Finkelstein Royal Commission into the Casino Operator and Licence exposed catastrophic regulatory failure. In response this government established the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission, a dedicated independent regulator with a statutory mandate to oversee the licensing, supervision and control of gambling businesses. That was barely three years ago. Yet when it came to the biggest gambling licence decision since Crown, where was the VGCCC? There is no public evidence the commission was consulted or that it conducted any investigation. It was not involved. The government has not said so. If it was not involved, then the government created an independent regulator and immediately excluded it from the decision that mattered most.

This motion seeks the documents. If the process was clean, produce them. If the valuation was fair, produce it. If the VGCCC was consulted, produce the evidence. The government says this was done with appropriate probity. 'Appropriate probity' is just two words, and Victorians – *(Time expired)*

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:51): Twenty-five seconds is not much time to get to the point. This deal is the best lottery deal, coming in for Victorian taxpayers, that we have seen across the country. It is quite remarkable that the Liberal Party is standing up here today and criticising the government for getting a good deal for Victorian taxpayers. That is absolutely flabbergasting.

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Local government integrity

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:52): I move:

That this house notes that:

(1) local government reforms passed in 2020 established a requirement that each council adopt its own councillor code of conduct and associated processes, provided they were consistent with the 'standards of conduct';

(2) reforms passed in 2024 replaced this requirement by imposing a model councillor code of conduct to all councils and limiting the scope of internal resolution procedures;

(3) during debate on the 2024 reforms Minister Blandthorn expressed a hope that it would lead to fewer frivolous cases;

(4) frivolous and vexatious cases are still going through the internal arbitration process, relying on external independent arbiters at significant cost;

(5) despite section 5 of the model councillor code of conduct stating that it is not intended to 'limit, restrict or detract from robust public debate of issues in a democracy' it has had this effect;

(6) robust political debate is critical to ensuring that issues of public concern are subject to discussion and consideration in our democratic institutions;

and calls on the government to review the model councillor code of conduct and associated laws and regulations to ensure that councillors are free to express opinions and challenge ideas and policies without being subjected to lengthy arbitration processes.

As members of Parliament we have significant freedom of speech – in fact far greater freedom of speech than the average citizen. We are covered by privilege for things that we say in this place. In my experience I have been very careful on the rare instances where I have exercised that privilege so as not to abuse it, and I have spoken to many other members of Parliament who feel the same way. The reason that freedom of speech is really important for members of Parliament is because we are elected to call out issues and in fact we are expected to call out issues. We are expected to call out corruption where we see it. We are expected to state whether we agree or disagree with the government or with a proposal by a crossbencher and whether we agree or disagree with the opposition or with things that are happening in our society that are significant to our constituents. We are expected to say those things. Many councillors who are elected to local government in fact have stood because they were not happy with the council or have stood because they saw problems with the council, and what they find after they have been elected is that in many cases they are effectively gagged from talking about these issues. I do not claim that this is an intentional feature of the system. I note that in the debate on this when the last local government bill was put through in 2024, Minister Blandthorn herself said she hoped that it would reduce vexatious or frivolous complaints, so I think that the government actually does not want these frivolous or vexatious complaints happening. But nevertheless, it appears that the operation of the system at the moment is having that effect.

I will go through a few examples. One of the examples is of Cr Barker, who is actually in the gallery here today, from Surf Coast shire. The council put out a media release stating that a number of people came to an event; I think they claimed it was about 2500 people. Cr Barker stated publicly that he queried that number, and there was discussion about what the correct number was and that sort of thing. It seems a fairly tame sort of criticism of council to question a number, but nevertheless, he was investigated, had to face an independent arbiter and was suspended from council for one month. Cr Hughes from Frankston council was a fierce advocate for lower rates for ratepayers – fair enough – and his public criticism of the high rates of Frankston council and their restrictive social media policy for councillors led to his regular appearance before an independent arbiter. Cr Rowe was investigated by an arbiter for not clapping on the election of the deputy mayor. Cr Martin was investigated for accidentally bringing and then not drinking alcohol to an outdoor movie screening that he did not realise was alcohol-free. Cr Conlan was found to have engaged in misconduct for publicly stating that he thought it was shameful that some other councillors left the chamber before a debate on a Palestine motion, and Cr Kellander has had to defend her political speech several times before an independent arbiter. As you can see, these restrictions on speech through complaints that end up with the arbiter are not restricted to one side of politics at all. They happen left, right and centre depending on the local council.

My concern here – this is why this motion is so important and it is so important that we fix this – is that councils are responsible for the management and distribution of billions of dollars in services. Some of these are really essential, like collecting the rubbish and all these other things that people think are not very interesting but actually are really essential things that need to be managed well. We know from history, since my time in this place, that there has been corruption at councils, there has been misconduct and there have been poor decisions, frankly, made by councils. Even when there is not misconduct or corruption, councils sometimes make poor decisions – either through the councillors themselves or through the council operations and staff. That is why it is so important that councillors have the ability to call this out. They should have the ability to call out when they think that something's gone wrong, when they think that the council is doing something wrong or when they think there is some sort of corruption or something happening.

The problem that we have is when councillors are pulled up for such tiny things, such as some of these examples – and I am sure we will see many more examples coming after this debate – they are terrified of saying anything publicly because they do not want to get suspended from council. They do not want to get dragged in for investigation by these arbiters. When they get pulled up for such small things, imagine how timid they must be when faced with calling out something really serious. That is my concern here. I think that when people vote for councillors and elect councillors, they expect them to call out stuff that is going wrong. If they see corruption, they expect them to call it out. If they disagree

with the council's decisions, they expect them to say so. And if they disagree with their fellow councillors, they should be able to say what they think of their decisions.

Clearly that is not the way that the system is operating at the moment, so I think it is very important that we fix this. The regulations under the act have a clear statement. Section 5 of the model councillor code of conduct states that the code of conduct is not:

> … intended to limit, restrict or detract from robust public debate of issues in a democracy.

But that is not what is happening, and I think that we need to do something here. I am not being prescriptive in this motion on what I am actually saying should be done, but something needs to be done to ensure that section 5 of these regulations for the code of conduct is prioritised so that councillors do feel empowered to say what they think is right, say what they think is the truth and call out things that they think are important for the people that elected them to do their job.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:59): I rise to make a contribution on Mr Limbrick's motion. Mr Limbrick is always consistent, so I thank him for his interest in this matter. It is about free speech, and he is advocating for or raising concerns in regard to various councillors who have, I guess, come in for attention under the councillor code of conduct who are elected in various local government authorities. I guess the essence of what Mr Limbrick is arguing is that there should be some more appropriate balancing of councillors to be able to express their views as they are often representing the views of their communities in regard to these matters. The motion goes on to talk about various things that have happened and how reforms were passed in 2024 which involved a model code of conduct. There was a further debate on that motion, which the government was hoping – Minister Blandthorn was the minister at the time – would lead to fewer frivolous cases and the like.

Before I came into Parliament in this place, I did try and nominate to run for local government. What I can say is that my experience, even as a candidate, I found particularly bruising. It was particularly around the interactions with some other councillors and the way that other councillors can treat each other. In my current role I have the benefit and opportunity to interact with a range of councillors from a range of councils across my region, and I have found that most of those experiences have been pretty pleasant. But that is also because –

Members interjecting.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Sorry, Acting President, I –

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): I ask that conversation in the chamber be kept to a minimum. I will count myself in that too.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Sorry, I could not hear myself speak. I guess the thing I was alluding to is that most of the interactions I have had with councillors in my official role as a government MP have been reasonable, normal and pretty nice. But being a candidate and being in a different position, I did note that there was quite a lot of hostility. I think the nub of it is this: as somebody who works in this environment, this environment can be a pretty hostile environment as well, but we all get to represent the views of our constituents, and we can argue those views and talk about them openly. We have the benefit of parliamentary privilege. What Mr Limbrick is trying to highlight is the tension that is there in the councillor code of conduct, which he believes is a brake on freedom of speech.

I want to point out a couple of things. I am not going to go to all the detail that is in the code of conduct, but I do support local government having a strong councillor code of conduct, because my experience as a female candidate, and as a candidate more broadly, was that some of the behaviour that I was subjected to was pretty ordinary. We should have the right to argue points, but there are also ways in which arguing points can be exploited and used as microaggression. For example, you might be in a position where you are arguing some policy thing at a council meeting, whatever it is, and you express your view. But when you repeatedly express it and you raise your voice and become argumentative,

the behaviour that goes along with that argument is not appropriate. I guess my point that I am trying to make is that you can argue your point, but often it is the way in which you argue it, right?

The examples that you have raised, Mr Limbrick, I do not know of them personally, so I am not going to speak to individual examples. I can only speak to my own experiences – for example, if you continually raise, say, with a CEO or a council officer a policy that is something you are saying your constituents need or want and raise it one, two, three, four, five times after being told that that is not going to be something the council is getting behind at this point in time, to continually argue it is argumentative, unhelpful, unproductive and unprofessional, and therefore it is not respecting the decision of the council. Those sorts of things can also be seen as microaggressions and create a hostile work environment. Vexatious, repetitive arguments and arguing around points where you will not just accept the decision that has been made are not helpful.

Whilst Mr Limbrick did talk about some examples, when you look at them in isolation, they do not seem problematic. However, what I will say is that context is everything, and you cannot just bowl up something without having the context around it, because sometimes facts present and you think, 'Well, yes, what's the problem with actually looking at something or making a point?' Again, context is everything. I have seen examples even in this chamber and in working on committees with people – again, the behaviour is terrible – where someone will not accept a decision of a committee chair when they are in a hearing, for example, or where people might bowl up questions that are not in keeping with the terms of reference. Someone would repeatedly ask for meetings every day, which is not consistent with, for example, the rules around no surprises and how you should have something on the agenda. But these things were constantly bowled up, and these things do create an inappropriate action on the part of that person to then undermine the chair and put the chair under pressure.

So again, you will not find anything written down about that, and it points to what I am arguing now, which is about context. Often people will exploit these loopholes, if you like to call them that for want of a better term, when there are no particular rules around how somebody might present themselves, and someone will do this. So arguing something repeatedly, not letting somebody finish their point without interrupting them, talking over somebody – these are all things that go to creating a hostile work environment. Again, I go back to the point of the motion, which talks about a code of conduct. There needs to be some kind of framework to guide councillors about their behaviour. I accept Mr Limbrick's point of view that he says that this is a brake on freedom of speech; it is not intended to do that. What it is intended to do is to guide councillors about appropriate behaviour when they are fulfilling their role as councillors. That is why you have the inspectorate and arbiters and that who will look at the facts and particular circumstances and take all of those things into account and then make their determination.

I understand that sometimes a person who is forcefully arguing something can get carried away in the moment and raise their voice. I personally do not have a problem with that. I do not think if you are raising your voice to make your point, that is a problem; however, if it is directed at someone directly or if you swear in a speech and you are swearing at someone, these things can be interpreted in a particular way that can be harmful and hurtful. So again, context is everything. I cannot reiterate that enough: context is everything. It is unpleasant for everybody to have to go through these sorts of investigations, whether you are the person who is on the receiving end of it or somebody who has to give evidence in it. Nobody likes having to go through these sorts of things. It really is about trying to provide guidance for councillors in how they conduct themselves, because we did go through a period where there were lots of disagreements and disputes between councillors on councils. So really the intention of it is to try and provide a better environment.

Also there are issues around health and safety. I know there have been examples of where people have been asked to not attend meetings and all those sorts of things because of the environment. So it is about trying to understand each other and what is actually trying to be achieved. But at some point, too, sometimes a councillor or whoever it be might just have to accept that if the answer is no, that is the answer, and continuing to argue the point does not help you. It just means you are being a pest and

irritating. Those are the things you might have to wait another term or whatever it is to get. When things change, the policy changes, and you might be able to get whatever your point of view is across the line at a different time, but pestering somebody who is a decision-maker is not really the right thing to do. Again, it is about trying to get people to comply with rules or frameworks. The intention is not to have a brake on free speech. There are other examples like Mr Limbrick talked about: having alcohol at an alcohol-free thing. That is not technically about free speech, is it? It is just maybe you did not understand the rules – I do not know – or it was not explained. But again, I defer to whoever the arbiter is or whoever the investigator is that is charged with looking at these particular incidents.

In my experience I have worked in investigating things. I have investigated lots of things in my time as a lawyer. In all sorts of things there are a lot of facts and circumstances that need to be weighed appropriately and then a determination is made. I understand a person may not agree with it, but most often they will have the opportunity to have a say. Whenever a determination is arrived at, you get a right of procedural fairness and natural justice to respond to anything like that, and the thing will land where it lands. Sometimes that is not a very comfortable space for people. Nevertheless, I think these are important reforms. It is important to have guidance for councillors in the way that they conduct themselves. I will leave my contribution there.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (11:09): On behalf of the opposition I am pleased to support this timely and important motion moved by Mr Limbrick. Let me start with a simple proposition: councillors are elected by their communities to represent them, to argue firmly, to advocate fiercely, and in doing so councillors might sometimes offend. I would hope that causing offence is not the goal, but it can happen in the cut and thrust of politics. Frankly, it is what happens in this place every single sitting day. Take it from me: I have been slammed by those sitting opposite on several occasions, and I have certainly not held back. But we do not take things personally. Why? Because it is our job to defend and advance the interests and values of our constituents. That is the nature of representative democracy.

As part of the 2024 reforms, a single mandatory statewide model code of conduct was imposed on all 79 councils, replacing locally drafted codes. What we have seen through the current code is a gradual, systematic chilling of democratic expression at the local government level. I asked several pointed questions during the committee stage of the bill, about the lack of consultation, the cost of mandatory training, the overly broad definition of 'serious misconduct', the costly appointment conduct panel members and the minister's power to suspend councillors. As alluded to in Mr Limbrick's motion, I asked Minister Blandthorn whether this legislation would reduce frivolous complaints. This was the minister's response:

> The clear intent of the bill is to both clarify the code of conduct and also provide training in it. It would be anticipated, and hopefully found to be the case, that greater clarity around that and greater training in that would indeed lead to less frivolous cases, I would hope.

I am sorry to say, Minister, that hope is not a policy, and on the evidence before us today that hope has not been realised. We are still seeing cases work their way through the internal arbitration panels. It demonstrates that the code is being weaponised by some councillors to settle petty scores against their opponents. Let me give you some examples. Cr Danny Goss of Baw Baw shire was suspended for a month, in part for publicly calling on council to stick to its remit and stop putting up notices of motion about foreign conflicts. Cr Paul Barker from my region, who is in the gallery today, was also suspended for a month. What was the so-called offence? Questioning council-reported crowd numbers at a truth-telling event and criticising the handling of a council meeting where petitions relating to Australia Day were presented late. Cr Barker is now fighting to clear his name in the Supreme Court – a major test for this code.

What is actually in it? As this motion points out, section 5 says the code is not intended:

> … to limit, restrict or detract from robust public debate … in a democracy.

Yet clause after clause does exactly that. Clause 2(1)(b) prohibits behaviour:

> … that intentionally causes or perpetuates stigma, stereotyping, prejudice or aggression against a person or class of persons …

Clause 2(1)(c) bans so-called 'discrimination or vilification'. While I am all in favour of treating people respectfully, these terms are not properly defined. They are excessively broad and could encompass legitimate criticism of ideological positions or state government policy. Clauses 2(1)(d) and (e) effectively require councillors to actively support their council's approach to issues like gender and Indigenous affairs. It makes you wonder: if a councillor opposes men entering council-owned women's spaces, will they face suspension? What if they oppose the government's treaty? Will that councillor also be suspended? These provisions go beyond regulating conduct, they compel alignment with a far-left ideology of the government and their agents. They tell elected representatives what they must think and what they can and cannot champion. This is not the purpose of local government democracy. Councillors are not bureaucrats implementing state policy, they are elected representatives. Their communities send them to council chambers with mandates that may well include challenging the fashionable orthodoxies of the day, and they should not have to fear a code of conduct complaint every time they do.

Unlike my opposite number, both current and former, I have travelled the length and breadth of this state. I have met with hardworking councillors from Warrnambool to Wonthaggi and everywhere in between. These councillors are deeply critical of the current model councillor code of conduct and are concerned, very concerned, about the impending model governance rules. Councillors do not want it, and their communities do not benefit from it. It distracts councillors from the work of governing. It drains council resources on legal processes, and it deters good people, people with courage and ideas, from running for council in the first place. The government should fix this code. It should ensure that councillors can express opinions, challenge ideas and hold robust debates without fear of lengthy arbitration processes. I have long said that politics is about the contest of ideas, and our councils – our most accessible democratic institutions – must engage in that contest to drive necessary change. This state government, this ideologically driven Labor government, should not be telling people – elected representatives – how they can think, how they must act, how they cannot question, how they must not challenge any orthodoxy, whether it is from the bureaucrats within the council or from each other. They should be encouraged to engage in free and robust debate. Likewise the constituents, the ratepayers of every council, should have the opportunity to question their representatives. They can chuck them out in four years time, just as they can chuck us out.

Thank you, Mr Limbrick, for bringing this motion forward. Thank you for highlighting what is so wrong about what is happening in local government at the moment, where the politicisation of these rules is a challenge to democracy. I commend the motion.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (11:17): The Greens will be supporting this motion today. However, that support is qualified because while we feel that the code actually requires strengthening, we also feel that there are a broader range of issues that need to be dealt with in relation to the application of the code. We may not agree with some of the examples that have been provided about individual councillor cases. I am sure we could argue about whether each individual case did actually constitute a breach of the code of conduct or not, but perhaps that is the very point. The code of conduct and its enforcement fail to provide clarity, consistency and fairness, and therefore it is not fit for purpose. As democratically elected representatives, councillors should be able to engage in robust political debate, which should include, for example, being able to ask questions of council officers and raise concerns. It should include being able to put forward a notice of motion. It should include being able to criticise the state government. But debate should always be respectful, and councillors should not be subjected to bullying, discrimination or other forms of intimidation by other councillors. Further, the code should support good governance and help to instil community confidence in councils and their decision-making.

The changes made by this government in 2024 to the Local Government Act 2020, through a bill which, for the record, we opposed, were justified by this government on the basis that they would reduce the number of frivolous cases but also create stronger protections for councillors experiencing bullying and discrimination. Since then we have seen not only inappropriate application of the code, which might be described by some as frivolous use in some instances, but also a total failure of the code to protect councillors from discrimination and bullying. The recent Victorian Local Governance Association census evidence shows that 48 per cent of women councillors experienced bullying by another councillor, and 22 per cent of men, yet 51 per cent of women councillors say arrangements to deal with inappropriate behaviour from another councillor were either not in place or were ineffective.

One of the key issues that has been identified by many councillors I have spoken with has been the fact that under the 2024 arrangements mayors are given extraordinary protection from having to comply with the code of conduct, instead being effectively given the final say over whether the code of conduct has been adhered to. This means that if a mayor themselves happens to be the perpetrator of bullying or has otherwise breached the code of conduct, there is very little recourse. I am increasingly hearing stories of mayors who are preventing other councillors from doing things like moving a notice of motion, moving amendments or even making contributions to debate. That is basically blocking councillors from doing the job they were democratically elected to do, all under the guise of supposed code of conduct breaches. At the end of the day the mayor is just another councillor, and the same rules should apply to them too.

Further, code of conduct complaints can only be lodged covering a specific instance that has occurred in the last three months, meaning that persistent patterns of behaviour may not be captured. Behaviours like bullying, failure to comply with the Gender Equality Act 2020 or being disrespectful, prejudiced or biased, which are all part of the code, often occur as part of a pattern, and the three-month rule stops councillors from being able to provide the context that is often necessary to rule fairly in a case. When a complaint is made under the code of conduct, despite the 2024 changes many are still essentially going straight to arbitration. They are not being dealt with by the councils in the first place. And once the matter ends up in arbitration, what happens next seems to be pretty arbitrary.

Arbiters' rulings and sanctions have been inconsistent across cases, creating uncertainty for councillors and often disproportionate outcomes. The parameters of an arbiter are not well defined. For example, the rules governing them state that they are free to make their own judgements; they are not attached to or explicitly linked to any other acts, such as the Gender Equality Act or the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006; and there are also no guidelines and no transparency around how they choose from the suite of penalties available to them. Further, things like whistleblower protections and legal restrictions do not apply to the arbitration itself, only to an appeal, which can lead to some odd situations – and I have heard of things like illegally obtained evidence, like a recording of a conversation without consent, being accepted as evidence by an arbiter. Finally, the appeals process, which was changed in 2024 from VCAT to the Supreme Court, is extremely costly. This was one of the many reasons we opposed the 2024 bill. The changes make the appeals process financially out of reach for many councillors, starting at a minimum of around $5000 and ranging into many tens of thousands of dollars, at the cost of the applicant. While this was intended to reduce frivolous appeals, this actually leads to appeals only being able to be sought by those financially able to do so. These are just some of the many problems with the current Local Government Act that need to be addressed, but I have very little faith that this government is going to do so.

I think this state government would actually prefer to have administrators run councils like boards and act on the state's direction, rather than being democratically elected levels of government in their own right. They have shown this time and time again: they do not respect local government. We see it in the way that they starve them of funding while pushing more and more responsibilities onto them, only to turn around and use councils as scapegoats when any issue arises. We see it in the way they are eroding councils' role in the planning process, creating planning scheme amendment after planning scheme amendment, yet continuing to falsely blame councils for the housing crisis. We see it in the

way they completely ignore sector feedback when they introduce changes to the Local Government Act yet pretend to care about rates of bullying, particularly of women, and are appointing more and more monitors for supposed governance failures. But councils are not boards, and nor should they be run like them. The whole point of having democratically elected representatives is to ensure that the community can directly shape the decisions that are made to deliver for their needs. Those democratically elected councillors should be enabled to do their job properly. That means being allowed to engage in robust but respectful debate while also being protected from bullying and discrimination, and I do not believe that that is currently the case.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (11:24): I rise to speak on Mr Limbrick's motion today in relation to the model councillor code of conduct. Before I speak on what the code was designed to do, I think it is worth taking a step back to understand why changes to local government conduct frameworks were made in the first place. In 2023, IBAC tabled its Operation Sandon special report to the Victorian Parliament, which followed investigation into the allegations of corrupt conduct involving councillors and property developers at the City of Casey. In the same year the Local Government Inspectorate's chief municipal inspector launched their own-motion examination into the efficacy of the existing councillor conduct framework. The earlier local government culture project also examined factors influencing culture and conduct across the sector. Taken together, these findings highlighted serious areas of improvement across Victoria's local government sector. These included the need to strengthen councillor conduct frameworks, better manage conflicts of interest and improve ethical culture to ensure that community interests remain paramount.

The government, in response, has made changes in legislation to reflect these findings, showing our commitment to ensuring accountability in local government and to making sure that councillors are serving the best interests of their communities. It is in that context that the model councillor code of conduct must be understood. When the Local Government Act 2020 was introduced, one of its central purposes was to establish a system through which the behaviour of elected representatives in local government is managed. It was this legislation that created the councillor conduct framework, an entry point to dealing with misconduct complaints. This framework established the arbitration process before the introduction of the model code of conduct. The Local Government Amendment (Governance and Integrity) Bill 2024, passed in June 2024, enabled the creation of a uniform model councillor code of conduct in regulations. The subsequent Local Government (Governance and Integrity) Amendment Regulations 2024 were developed in October 2024 to prescribe the model councillor code of conduct. Once introduced, the model code of conduct created a uniform standard of governance applicable across all Victorian councils. Every councillor across Victoria's 79 councils, from Melbourne's inner suburbs to regional Victoria, would be held to the same standard of conduct. This brought together a united standard, ensuring that all councillors were held to account.

The code goes beyond simply setting standards of behaviour; it also sets out a number of key obligations. For instance, councillors must act with integrity, exercise reasonable care and diligence and take reasonable steps to avoid any action which may diminish the public's trust and confidence in local government, including ensuring their behaviour does not bring discredit upon the council. They must also not deliberately mislead the council or the public about any matter related to the performance of their public duties. The code restricts councillors from making council information publicly available when doing so would be contrary to the public interest. Councillors must also refrain from making public comment, including to the media, that could reasonably be perceived to be an official comment on behalf of the council unless they have been authorised to do so by the mayor. Additionally, councillors must not in their personal dealings with councils, as ratepayers and planning applicants or as a recipient of a council service, expressly or impliedly request preferential treatment for themselves or any other person connected to them.

Under this framework a breach of the code of conduct will be considered misconduct and will be grounds for an internal arbitration process. These obligations were designed to establish a baseline standard of conduct across the Victorian councils. They help ensure that councils act in the best

interests of the communities they represent, ensuring that local government representatives remain accountable and protecting both councillors and those affected by genuine misconduct. Since its activation there have been a few cases where councillors have been referred to the arbitration process with an alleged breach of the model councillor code of conduct. Local government, like every level of government, has the foundational role of representing public interest. Codes of conduct and dispute resolution processes exist to support that role, which is to ensure respectful engagement among elected representatives and to maintain public confidence in our local democratic institutions.

As a councillor in local government, you are held to a higher standard of conduct as you are a representative of your community. It is also the right of every Victorian to expect a high level of governance and integrity standards from their councillors. Public confidence in local governance is an important part of ensuring that our councils run smoothly and serve their communities well. Therefore it is important that councils are held to the strict guidelines that maintain standards of conduct expected by their communities and, most importantly, these codes of conduct exist because local government sits closest to the community. It is important to bear in mind that the abuse of that proximity, whether through self-dealing, deception or the misuse of confidential information, can cause harm to people in the community.

This motion suggests that the code of conduct has contributed to frivolous arbitration matters. However, the arbitration process was in place before the model councillor code of conduct was introduced. The arbitration process was set up as under the councillor conduct framework as the entry point to dealing with complaints of misconduct. The framework, which provides a hierarchy for the management of the councillor misconduct issues, was established under the Local Government Act 2020. This timeline provides important context, because it highlights that the premise of the initial motion is flawed. With less than two years since its implementation, there has not been enough evidence to necessitate its review. There is no evidence to support that the model code of conduct has created more cases, rather the opposite. The number of arbitration decisions, based on the published data, suggests that the volume has been lower than what was there before, directly contradicting the basis of this motion.

The arbitration process was designed to provide an early mechanism for less serious forms of councillor misconduct. This was intended to ensure concerns can be addressed before escalating into more significant governance issues. Whether the conduct affects council staff, fellow councillors or the broader community, misconduct can undermine confidence in local government institutions. Under the framework established by the Local Government Act 2020, applications for internal arbitration are heard by the independent arbiters appointed through the principal councillor conduct registrar. The independence is an important safeguard within the process, helping to ensure complaints are assessed impartially and in accordance with established procedures. Importantly, the framework also provides flexibility for matters considered more serious in nature to be referred through the appropriate channels. Taken together, these measures demonstrate that the conduct framework was designed to support consistency, accountability and procedural fairness across government. It is therefore important that any review of these arrangements be considered carefully with regard to the evidence available regarding the operation and effectiveness.

These reforms were made for a reason. The model code of conduct is working as intended to set expectations of standards for councillors. The Allan Labor government holds elected representatives of the community to a high standard of integrity. The Local Government Amendment (Governance and Integrity) Bill 2024 represented one of the most significant reforms to councillor conduct standards in recent years. It was developed through an extensive consultation with councils, peak bodies and the local government sector and built directly on recommendations from IBAC and the chief municipal inspector. Under the Local Government Act all councillors are required to complete induction training within four months of taking office and to undertake professional development training annually. Mayors and deputy mayors must complete mayoral training within one month of their appointment.

This training, along with the model councillor code of conduct, creates a consistent standard of behaviour and accountability across the state.

Most recently, the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2026 introduced an array of measures to promote the integrity of local government. This includes amendments to the Local Government Act 2020 to ensure former councillors cannot be appointed to a CEO role within two years of leaving office. These reforms represent significant changes to the councillor code of conduct framework and broader government relations. These reforms to the act and associated regulations aim to support improved integrity, accountability and governance across Victoria's 79 councils. Therefore it is important to uphold the standards for councillor conduct and good governance practices that are embedded in the model councillor code of conduct.

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (11:33): I too rise to support this motion, and I thank Mr Limbrick for bringing it to the house. There are certainly a lot of challenges with the statewide model councillor code of conduct, primarily that it can be weaponised as an aspect of lawfare against those that the majority of a council might disagree with, such as a member of a minority on a council. If there is a majority view, someone who has a minority view can be persecuted through this process, and that should not be allowed.

Local government should be a place for free expression of ideas, regardless of where they come from. Of course we want people to debate things in a respectful way. We always go by the rule that you play the ball, not the person. I do not think anyone would disagree with that. But other speakers have spoken about, and Mrs McArthur particularly mentioned, the example of the Surf Coast Shire, where Paul Barker was suspended for a month for questioning how many attendees turned up at a council-run event. If just questioning how many people turned up to a council-run event is enough to suspend a councillor, surely that is a red flag to show that maybe this code of conduct is not quite right. There have also been significant issues in the Melton City Council, where the code of conduct has been weaponised and this has resulted in a number of court appearances. It has distracted the council and taken it away from its core focus. Perhaps that needs to be considered in light of this debate. What are we actually trying to do here? The code of conduct is there, as government members have said, to be a guide for behaviour, but it should not be used as something to direct behaviour. Common sense has to prevail. I do not think the example of Paul Barker passes the pub test, the commonsense test. The everyday person in the street would look at that and think it is just bizarre.

I want to reflect on some of the comments from Ms Terpstra. She talked about vexatious comments. Those sort of comments – who determines that? They are, by their very nature, subjective. What I might consider to be offensive or vexatious, another person might not. I understand there is an arbiter process that is available, but at what point do you consider an off-hand comment vexatious versus something which is a full-blown attack? One thing that she did say which I agree with is that context is everything. That just underscores the problem of having one approach – one size fits all – when each local council operates in a different context and where different needs are obviously arising. The fact that we are talking about one overarching set of guidelines that impacts every council across the state when each council has their own different context just seems to not make sense.

She also mentioned things about the lesser aspects, like raising your voice and disagreements about public policy. Those things to me are normal. I think the word she used was 'pestering' someone who is a decision-maker when they may not necessarily have got their way. I have seen examples where there have been legitimate requests for information that have been continually denied and a councillor has repeatedly requested those pieces of information but has been told, 'No, you're a troublemaker. Please stop asking for information.' I would hate to think that there is a situation where a councillor cannot ask for legitimate pieces of information on public and council matters, where they are denied just because they are considered a pest.

I do note Mr Berger's comments before too. He mentioned things about misleading the public. I mean, we could talk about that in this chamber, to be fair. When the government talk about a surplus, they

say an operating surplus. We say, 'No, there isn't. There's a cash deficit.' You could argue that that is misleading. The same thing applies in local government. What you consider to be misleading depends on the context that you are coming from. It is a subjective measure, and those sorts of things should not be embedded into something that applies to literally every elected councillor across the state.

Another thing Mr Berger said was that a councillor should not be able to comment publicly because it might be perceived as representing council as a whole. If a councillor cannot publicly comment on their views as an elected councillor of a local government area, why are they a councillor? What is the point of being elected to local government if you cannot speak? And more so, why would you engage in the democratic process if those who elected you do not know what you think and cannot hold you accountable? It actually stops you from being an effective councillor, because those who elected you cannot hold you to what you said you would do and cannot hold you to the way you voted. I do not know how you determine how someone else in the public perceives someone's comments as a councillor as representative of the council view or not. I do not know how you control that. I know I have, in my personal experience as a councillor, made it very clear that my comments are my own, but you should not really have to. If you are commenting as a councillor, you are commenting as a councillor.

I do want to go to the model code of conduct as well, and I did have a look at it before. Section 2 talks about behaviours, and I will quote directly from there. It says:

> A Councillor must treat others, including other Councillors, members of Council staff and members of the public, with dignity, fairness, objectivity, courtesy and respect …

Objectivity: that is a very interesting one to put in there. What is objective from one person is different, so by the fact that it is even in there, it is subjective. It is so strange to put that in there. It also includes:

> … not engaging in demeaning, abusive, obscene or threatening behaviour …

I do not think anyone wants to engage in any of those sorts of behaviours, but the interpretation of what those behaviours actually are is again subjective. They are subjective tests, up for interpretation. That underscores that there is a real weakness in this model councillor code of conduct, and I thank Mr Limbrick for drawing upon this and seeking to have it reviewed. I hope that it is an independent, objective review as well, and I hope that if there is a review it looks at things like promoting the freedom for a councillor to say what they want, as the ratepayer who has elected the councillor has a right to know what their elected councillor is saying and thinking. That to me should not be a revolutionary thought. It is a basic foundation of democracy. I do not understand why that is such a controversial thing. Anyway, I commend Mr Limbrick for his motion, and I hope the house supports it.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (11:42): I rise to make a brief contribution to the motion from Mr Limbrick and advise that Legalise Cannabis Victoria will be supporting the motion. I thank Mr Limbrick for bringing this question before the chamber, and I would like to endorse most of the comments that were made by Mr Limbrick and also Dr Mansfield in her contribution. I want to say at the outset that I love local government. It is the one level of government that is immediately accessible to the community. Local governments address a range of issues that immediately affect their own communities. They speak to their communities, and they are part of their communities in an organic manner that we cannot replicate here. And yet you see them regularly treated with such a lack of respect, with a paternalism, by both major parties.

The model code of conduct was introduced in 2024 and applied from the start of that term. Prior to that it was incumbent on each council to create its own code of conduct based on the principles found in the Local Government Act 2020 and decide what its internal dispute resolution process should be. It was a good process, as it required councillors to actually sit around the table and figure out how they would work together. It was an exercise in sharing responsibility for the culture and good governance of the council. While it did not automatically guarantee good behaviour in council, it did at least afford

councils the opportunity from the start to seriously grapple with the question of what makes for good governance and what makes for a healthy culture.

With an imposed top-down model in the form of the councillor code of conduct, which is the only thing this government seems to do well – well, the only thing this government seems to do – it is little wonder that councillors are appealing to external parties more often to adjudicate on disputes and to correctly interpret those rules, rules that councillors had no hand in writing or endorsing. There is a lot of inconsistency between arbiter decisions – and that has been discussed in the chamber already – and that is both within councils and between councils. Some decisions have been surprisingly harsh, while others have been fine and others have failed to get the point. This inconsistency erodes council and public confidence in the process. Plus, arbiters are expensive, and most of our councils need additional costs like they need a hole in the head.

I believe the increasing use of external arbiters to resolve disputes is an obvious result of the state removing the requirement for councils to take responsibility for developing their own codes of conduct and their own internal dispute resolution processes. Local governments, as I said, are the most accessible part of our democracy and the most immediate form of local representation, but they are treated with contempt by both the parties. Local councils are not the only place, and certainly not the only level of government, where you will find racism, homophobia, sexism or corruption. They certainly do not have a monopoly on bad behaviour. Yet you would not know that if you saw how paternalistically councils are regularly treated by state governments.

Why then do they have a code of conduct imposed upon them which hampers the ability of councillors to engage in the work that they are set up to do? I thank Mr McCracken for his contribution. It was really good. Freedom of speech is a given in this place. We are protected by parliamentary privilege. Councils are shaped by and make decisions for their local communities, and like all forms of government, they should be forums for rigorous discussion and diversity of opinions. How else can we ensure that issues of public concern are given the broadest possible consideration by our representatives?

Mr Limbrick's motion is therefore entirely appropriate. The Victorian government needs to review the model councillor code of conduct laws to ensure our local representatives are free to challenge ideas and policies without the threat of unnecessary and expensive dispute resolution, which not only dampens debate but erodes trust in local government and discourages local participation.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (11:47): I speak today on Mr Limbrick's motion in relation to the model councillor code of conduct. I note that a good number of former councillors are making contributions, and I am certainly a former councillor. It is important to remind the chamber of how the model code of conduct came about. In 2023 IBAC tabled its Operation Sandon special report into allegations of corrupt conduct involving councillors and property developers in the City of Casey. Two councillors were found to have accepted combined benefits of more than $1 million in exchange for promoting a developer's interests. The entire Casey council had already been sacked in 2020 as a direct result of that investigation. IBAC made 34 recommendations and the Allan Labor government accepted 32 of them. One of those was a recommendation to introduce a uniform mandatory model code of conduct, a clear statewide statement of expectations to guide councillors in their interactions with each other and with the community they serve. The Local Government Amendment (Governance and Integrity) Act 2024 passed in June 2024, and this enabled the creation of the uniform code of conduct. Subsequent Local Government (Governance and Integrity) Amendment Regulations 2024 then described the model code, which came into force on 26 October 2024.

What does this model code actually say? Some of my colleagues in the chamber have already mentioned a few elements. It has five standards in it. Section 1 is about the role and what your job as a councillor is. Section 2 is around behaviours. If you imagine what the prep classroom rules are around listening to each other, respecting each other and keeping your hands to yourself, essentially these are the same rules, except for the councillors. Then section 3 is about good governance, and most

of section 3 is consistent with the ASX good governance guidelines that some of the biggest companies in Australia and around the world comply with. Section 4 is about integrity and not misleading the council or the public and not seeking preferential treatment. Section 5 is about robust public debate, which Mr Limbrick mentioned, and it is a very important section. I think it is really important not to conflate section 5 with, say, section 3 and section 4.

Since its activation there have been a small number of cases where councillors were referred to the arbitration process for an alleged breach of the model code, but the arbitration process itself was in place well before the model code. It was established under the councillor conduct framework as the entry point for dealing with complaints and misconduct, and this was part of a clear hierarchy that runs from internal arbitration for less serious matters through to conduct panels, VCAT and eventually the Supreme Court. The framework was established under the Local Government Act 2020, and the timeline provides important context. With less than two years since the model code's implementation, there has simply not been enough evidence to justify a review. The number of arbitration decisions based on published data suggests the volume has actually been lower than what it was before. The model code is working as intended by setting clear expectations and standards for councillors across Victoria – standards that none of us would argue with, really. The system also has proper protections built in for councillors who feel aggrieved. There is a process in place where a respondent, an impacted councillor, can seek review if they are dissatisfied with an arbiter's decision. It is open to any councillor to obtain independent legal advice about their rights, and it is open to any person affected by an arbiter's decision to seek judicial review with the Victorian Supreme Court under the Administrative Law Act 1978. These are not hollow assurances.

A conduct framework is not the problem in these cases. I had the privilege of serving as a Warrnambool city councillor for 12 years, two of which I was the mayor. I know what it is like to chair a meeting, and it is pretty easy to recognise disrespectful behaviour and note the difference between disrespectful behaviour and vigorous, robust debate. In fact that is exactly what we have in this chamber on many occasions. They really are not the same thing. Passionate disagreement is democracy. Bullying a colleague is not democracy. Challenging a policy is democracy. Harassing a staff member is not. Checking the probity of a commercial process is the job of a councillor. Leaking commercial information about that process is not the job of a councillor; in fact that is not only a breach of the council code of conduct, it is a breach of governance principles. So essentially that is the difference. If some councillors are using the arbitration process as a political weapon against opponents, the answer is better screening and faster dismissal of bad complaint applications, not dismantling the protections that genuine victims of councillor misconduct rely on. As I have mentioned, the model code originated from IBAC's Operation Sandon report. The government accepted the recommendation for a uniform code so that councillors' behaviour across all Victoria can be exemplary.

These standards meet community expectations. Previously every council had its own code of conduct, its own processes and its own definitions of what constituted crossing the line. That fragmented system is gone now, and what replaced it is consistent, clear and evidence based. It is part of a broader series of governance and integrity reforms that the Allan Labor government has introduced in the local government sector. But if we do check, it is also incumbent upon members in this chamber that we are complying with the parliamentary integrity commissioner and the rules that we have put in place in this chamber in terms of respecting each other, in terms of not being racist and in terms of being respectful to everybody and to our colleagues. Most of the time that is certainly what we observe.

These governance rules that lay over the top of the behaviour and conduct of councillors in Victoria are very, very similar to the governance rules that we have set for this very chamber and that other governments in other places have set for their chambers as well. Good governance does matter and good leadership does matter, and leadership behaviours influence how other people behave. Local governments are the closest tier of government to the community. The decisions councillors make and the services they deliver have a direct impact on residents' everyday lives. That proximity is exactly

why the standards we hold councillors to must be meaningful and enforceable, and therefore it is important to uphold those standards for good councillor conduct and good governance practice. For any councillor who is unclear on where they stand in relation to that, there are advice avenues available. I will leave my contribution there.

The PRESIDENT: I acknowledge in the upper gallery a former Premier, Denis Napthine.

Business interrupted under sessional orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Cohealth

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:00): (1317) My question is for the Minister for Health. Congratulations on your new portfolio. In November last year your government and your federal counterparts jointly commissioned a review of Cohealth's general practice and related services. The terms of reference for this review state the 'desired outcome of the review is to identify options to support the continuation of these services to the community'. Does the review recommend long-term funding for Cohealth?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Ambulance Services, Minister for Health, Minister for Water) (12:00): Thank you, Dr Mansfield, for your question. I think we are in fact catching up later today to have –

Sarah Mansfield interjected.

Harriet SHING: I am always happy to catch up with you about any matter to do with the health portfolio, Dr Mansfield, and I am looking forward to those conversations continuing. I would like to perhaps take you back to an earlier part of your question around the commissioning of a review. That was done by the Commonwealth. I want to be clear about the fact that the Commonwealth commissioned that particular review around Cohealth's operations, governance and risk management frameworks and its ongoing work. I also think it is important for the purpose of this conversation that we address the ongoing support that Cohealth receives as it provides those really central services to people with often very, very complex needs and that that needs to happen as part of an integrated process on assistance, whether it is for primary health care, referral on to specialist needs, or assistance with a range of other matters that are connected to health and wellbeing. This is where we do provide around $14 million directly to Cohealth, which sits alongside broader investment beyond the health funding for community health totalling around $60 million.

Last week, as you would be aware, there was an announcement on 8 May from the Commonwealth around securing the future of Cohealth with an additional $1.5 million to assist them with services remaining open at Collingwood, Fitzroy and Kensington while Cohealth undertakes improvements in its operations. That means, as was noted last week, that patients and families and communities can continue to get that care and the support that they need. The terms of reference for the review that you have referred to indicate an independent review team with very specialist expertise on health systems to be able to identify areas for improvement in health systems, general practice management, community health services models and financial management and that that review is to be provided to the Commonwealth.

Sarah Mansfield: On a point of order, President, while I appreciate all of the context that is being provided, I only have limited time for a response. I feel that my question, which was a very straightforward question, has not been addressed. It is: does the review recommend long-term funding for Cohealth?

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

Harriet SHING: As I said, we remain committed to supporting Cohealth to become and remain sustainable, transparent and accountable and to address those risk management and governance issues

which pre-empted or precipitated the review in the first instance. As with all processes for funding of community health across the health system – again, there is record funding support for the health system of $32 billion – we will continue to work alongside Cohealth, and the Commonwealth will also do so. But again, this is about, as I said, the announcement of Cohealth beginning and continuing to undertake improvements to its operations. The Commonwealth will continue to review the processes from there.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:04): I would point out that community health funding is a joint responsibility of state and federal governments, and the infrastructure in particular is squarely with the state government. My substantive question was about the review and whether it recommended long-term funding for Cohealth. I do not believe that question at any point was answered. Minister, have you seen the review and its recommendations?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Ambulance Services, Minister for Health, Minister for Water) (12:04): Thank you very much, Dr Mansfield. I have been briefed on the review, and I have been privy to a discussion about the terms of the review and the outcomes of that review. However, that was a review that was commissioned by the Commonwealth – just to be really, really clear – and that was done in partnership with Cohealth. They are the two parties that auspiced the review and participated in that process. Again, we will continue to provide funding as we have done to Cohealth – $14 million most recently as part of more than $60 million in investment across government. So by no means, I think, is it reasonable to conclude that we are not providing funding or support to Cohealth, and by no means is it reasonable to conclude or open to conclude fairly that we have in any way turned our back on this really important cohort of people with particular vulnerabilities in providing them with the support that they need. Again, we are looking forward to continuing to work alongside the Commonwealth to assist people to have the confidence that they need around sustainability, accountability and transparency.

Public lottery licence

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:06): (1318) My question is to the Treasurer. I refer to the government's 40-year extension of the lottery licence given to a Labor Party donor without public tender. On 5 May the Lottery Corporation told the ASX that the payment of $1.145 billion would be made in two parts – on 3 July 2026 and 1 October 2026. Will you confirm to this house that you told the media last week that it does not deliver the government an operating surplus in 2026–27, contradicting what your own advisers told the *Herald Sun* in the budget lock-up?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:07): I thank Mr Welch for his question.

A member interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, it was a contribution. What I will take the opportunity to do is explain this as simply as I can, Mr Welch. The issue that arose last week was that the opposition was attributing the lotto licensing to the surplus, and that is just false. I think we went there in the documents motion, because the information was provided to our speakers. I am not sure if you heard them, but what they would have said, I am quite confident, is that Australian accounting standards mean that we recognise the revenue from the extension of the lottery licence in the operating statement over the life of the licence. There is nothing inconsistent in that with what I have said on the public record.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:08): Thank you, Treasurer. Yes, the payments just happen to arrive this year! Will the Treasurer then also confirm to the house that the $1.1 billion-plus has been applied to state debt – the billion that has been received – meaning that the net debt would have passed $200 billion without this deal?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:08): Mr Welch, I am not accepting any assertions that you

try and put to the chamber. When you look at budget papers, when you look at all of the things that go in and go out, you can never attribute one particular input to an outcome in any way, shape or form, because when you are compiling a budget it is all about choices and it is all about priorities.

I will take the opportunity to put on the record some of the benefits of the extension of this lottery licence. First of all, it is the highest price ever paid to operate an Australian lottery licence. This was a very, very good deal for Victorians. The proceeds from the lottery licence go into a fund known as the Australian Hospitals and Charities Fund, which goes to world-class health care. What I would also put on the record is that what this does is give certainty to small businesses, which Ms Lovell is very familiar with. The small businesses right across the state – *(Time expired)*

Ministers statements: disability services

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:10): President, you will be very interested in my ministers statement, because I rise to update the house on our visit last week. Last week I had the pleasure of visiting a property in Doncaster East, alongside you, which is part of the government's pilot program to build contemporary models of specialist disability accommodation as an alternative to larger group homes. Specialist disability accommodation is a form of specialist housing for people with extreme functional impairment or very high support needs, and the Victorian government is the largest provider of SDA in Victoria. In this year's budget we are investing an additional $18.7 million to build 13 new contemporary SDA homes. The government's purpose-built SDA homes are built to the NDIS SDA design standards and contemporary building standards, designed to provide a safe and comfortable environment that supports residents' wellbeing, their choice and their control. In addition, our properties are in fantastic sites around metropolitan and regional Victoria, close to local amenities such as shops, public transport, health services and parks.

The investment in this budget builds on a $27.5 million pilot program to build 27 new and innovative SDA dwellings. I am proud to say the cumulative investment from this budget and the pilot program will see over 50 residents living in new homes. Our market-leading SDA properties have a number of key features, including flexible floor plans that are adaptable to enable resident's individual needs to be supported whilst helping them stay connected to their community; accessibility features like step-free entrances, wide corridors, spacious bathrooms and reinforced ceilings to allow for the installation of hoists; access to natural light and green space for quiet time, gathering and connection; drought-tolerant and low-maintenance landscaping with accessible features such as paths to provide wheelchair access into the garden; and raised planter boxes to support residents to grow their own plants and vegetables. Lastly, hardworking support staff have not been forgotten either, with large and light-filled office spaces being created, as well as their own bathroom facilities. With high ceilings, lots of natural light and additional multipurpose spaces, I am pleased to report that the Doncaster East units are a great example of modern architecture and quality materials providing flexibility and choice for people with disability to meet their needs and their preferences. Congratulations to the team at Homes Victoria, and I look forward to seeing the pilot program progress.

Liquor regulation

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:12): (1319) My question is for the Minister for Mental Health. In the last sitting week I asked the minister for liquor regulation about illicit spirits that were being sold in Victoria. I have since met with academics and spoken with police about this issue, and it is a far greater issue than what I thought. Apparently every postcode in the state has retail outlets that are selling illicit spirits – about 30 per cent of stores. I have seen these things being sold myself. Apparently they contain adulterants such as methanol, denaturants, paint stripper, rust and other contaminants. It is also my understanding that not many people are testing this, apart from academics and apparently the ATO. My question is: what is the government doing to monitor this situation, both the prevalence and the types of adulterants that might be in these products?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Government Services, Special Minister of State, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Multicultural and Multifaith Victoria) (12:13): Thank you very much, Mr Limbrick, for your question and also for the conversation that we had recently about these issues. I know that you are very concerned about these reports of the increase in illicit or bootleg alcohol circulating within the Victorian community, and we obviously know that the consumption of illegally manufactured alcohol can have really serious health risks. We have seen some terrible examples of that in recent times, because often these products can contain substances that are potentially harmful.

Of course the import of any such bootleg alcohol is a matter that is outside of the Victorian government's jurisdiction, but I know you are talking about the increase in locally manufactured bootleg alcohol, which of course we are concerned about. The Department of Health does continue to monitor those harms through their established surveillance and poisons information systems. There is some responsibility, both with me and with Minister Shing in that regard, in terms of the work that the Department of Health does around minimising harm. But following our discussion, I have actually asked my department to look at what other measures might be looked at in terms of strengthening that surveillance. The current surveillance system does include gathering information from emergency department presentations and advice from our clinical and toxicology experts. Obviously we would want to ensure that any effort also had a public information element to it to make sure that the community understands the dangers of buying alcohol that is not from a reputable or licensed retailer and avoids those products that are ridiculously and unreasonably cheap – that is because they are probably cheap for a reason. But I understand the points that you are making around the significant increase in illegal alcohol.

I also just want to note that enforcement around these issues is the responsibility of the Minister for Police, but I am advised that Victoria Police's ongoing investigations into the alleged illicit alcohol supply and enforcement agencies continue to work very closely together to address that risk, including looking into whether there are organised crime links around these unsafe products. I am very happy to continue to talk with you about these issues, Mr Limbrick.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:16): I thank the minister for that response. Indeed many of these products can be found at what would be called reputable retailers. I found personally, to my surprise, that you can buy them pretty much anywhere. With regard to the minister's comments on surveillance testing, has there actually been any testing? My understanding is that the Victorian government does not actually have the ability to do this type of testing, which is rather concerning considering the types of adulterants that might be in these drinks. What sort of testing has actually been done as part of surveillance testing?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Government Services, Special Minister of State, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Multicultural and Multifaith Victoria) (12:17): Thank you very much for that supplementary question, Mr Limbrick. Obviously I did touch on the established surveillance approach and the poisons information systems that currently exist within the Department of Health. But one of the issues that I have asked my department for some further advice around is whether there are other mechanisms that could be easily deployed around testing. So I am happy to take that element of your question on notice today and come back to you once I have received that advice from my department.

Bushfire preparedness

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:18): (1320) My question is to the Minister for Environment. Forest fire management staff are essential to bushfire mitigation, delivering and supervising the ground-based fuel reduction work that enables contractors to do their vital work and operate and mitigate bushfire risk for communities and the environment. Minister, what assurance can you give that no regionally based forest fire management jobs will be cut this year?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Environment, Minister for Outdoor Recreation) (12:18): I thank Ms Bath for her question and her interest in Forest Fire Management Victoria. They are an amazing team, and I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge everyone in Forest Fire Management Victoria for the work they have done, especially considering the bushfire season we have had. I want to extend those thanks to people and members of our emergency services of all disciplines that have been doing that work.

In terms of the budgetary outcomes for Forest Fire Management Victoria, I think we have been very clear. I think the Treasurer has been very clear. Our government is investing more into frontline services, not cutting from frontline services, and that is where our investments have been directed to. We do not just talk about this work, we invest in it. Since 2021 the Allan Labor government has made unprecedented advancements for bushfire preparedness, fuel management and frontline capability, including $517 million since 2021 and a further $80 million in last year's 2025–26 budget. This year's budget, which we will obviously have an opportunity to interrogate at PAEC, has further investments into Forest Fire Management Victoria. So, yes, I can guarantee we are injecting more resources, not less.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:20): Thank you, Minister. I note in that response you actually did not answer the question. You did not give an assurance that no regionally based forest jobs would be cut. Minister, given you failed to give that assurance and given you failed to give that guarantee, how will vital winter fuel reduction and forest management work be delivered if the frontline workforce is undermined?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Environment, Minister for Outdoor Recreation) (12:20): I thank Ms Bath for that really hypothetical question, which invites me to respond. What I will say is that bushfire preparedness is not something that happens only in summer, it happens year-round, and you should understand that as a regional member of Parliament. It involves planned burning, mechanical treatment, fuel break maintenance, emergency response planning, community information and frontline readiness. With the budget that has been delivered you will see we are making further investments. There was an announcement – if you look at the press release by me and Minister Ward – in relation to the additional resources and assets we are investing to do this work. We are also investing in the frontline staff that are crucial. I want to thank them for their work. We trust their operational experience to tackle the tough bushfires that we do face in light of the changing climate – climate change that those opposite do not accept.

Ministers statements: recreational fishing

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Environment, Minister for Outdoor Recreation) (12:21): I rise today to talk about our government's focus on making it easier and more affordable for families to get outdoors and enjoy everything our state has to offer. Fishing plays a really important role in boosting regional economies, drawing visitors to local towns and supporting small businesses, including the popular tackle shops and cafes across our state. I am pleased to inform that the Allan Labor government has committed $5 million to extend the highly successful Go Fishing Victoria program into the 2026–27 Victorian budget. Thanks to the program, Victoria has stocked 10 million fish in three of the last four years, an outcome no other state even comes close to matching, and it is not just me saying that.

Last week I had the pleasure of visiting Kennington Reservoir in the electorate of Bendigo East – well represented by our Premier, the hardworking local member. I had an opportunity to speak to the local community about this incredible announcement, and were they pleased! I was joined by the Victorian Fisheries Authority CEO Travis Dowling, the VRFish deputy chair Scott Jefferis and many from the Bendigo Legion Angling Club and the Bendigo & District Fly Fishers. At Kennington Reservoir I saw firsthand the outcome of this great program. I even had the opportunity to release a few Murray cod myself.

Our waterways are receiving injections of fish spanning 12 different species and are being supported to thrive. This investment is about supporting local communities and families, backing volunteers and fishing clubs and harnessing their passion and experience. More importantly it strengthens ecosystem health and ensures sustainable fishing populations for future generations. Only Labor is making it easier and more affordable for families by investing in the recreational activities communities rely on, especially our regional communities.

Firewood collection

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:23): (1321) My question today is for the Minister for Environment. During the clean-up after the January bushfires many trees were removed for public safety, especially in the area of the Longwood bushfire. These trees now sit in piles all along the roadside unused, with no real plan for what to do with them. Many of these trees are minimally damaged and are perfect for use as firewood. Meanwhile families, the elderly and vulnerable people in the Northern Victoria Region go cold, either with nowhere to legally collect firewood or being forced to pay exorbitant prices from wood sellers. Minister, will you instruct DEECA to make these removed trees available for residents to collect?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Environment, Minister for Outdoor Recreation) (12:24): I thank Ms Tyrrell for her question on a really important issue. It is something that I have really looked at closely since getting into the portfolio, because it affects so many people, especially as we enter into the winter season. Firewood is an important source of heating for many Victorian families, not only in the regions but even in the suburbs. Labor understands how important it is to have fair and reliable access. You would appreciate that our government has developed a clear framework for incidental timber by-products so that suitable material can support domestic firewood access, community uses and appropriate timber utilisation where possible.

Timber generated through firebreak construction, roadside clearing and storm recovery should deliver benefits back to local communities, so I am working with the department to make sure it is more accessible. There are many examples where DEECA has worked with local communities and where Forest Fire Management Victoria has worked with communities so that we can provide access to important firewood and forest by-products. We are doing that work. Obviously it complements some of the work we are doing with native timber harvesting, so there is a bit of a crossover. But we will make sure that in the autumn domestic firewood collection season – which is open now, since 1 March, with adjustments in fire-affected areas following the January bushfires – we are working quickly to establish new collection points. There will be new collection points. I understand the department is working on that, and there will be further information provided in due course.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:25): I thank the minister for his answer. Last fire season showed us what happens when fuel load reduction works are lacking. It puts lives and communities at risk. Allowing residents to collect deadfall from state parks and forests could greatly reduce the risk of bushfires in the coming years. Will the minister open the state parks and forests in the Northern Victoria Region for firewood collection to aid in fuel load reduction?

The PRESIDENT: I am not too sure, but the minister is to answer as he sees fit.

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Environment, Minister for Outdoor Recreation) (12:26): I thank the member for her question and her interest, because it is an issue of real importance to many people as we enter the winter season. It is a policy that our government has created a clear framework on, but I think domestic firewood collection must balance community access with bushfire safety, road conditions, biodiversity protection and long-term forest sustainability. We are working to increase supply. I think that is a priority, and that has been clear in my discussions with the department – that we want to see greater supply as we enter the winter season. But that needs to be done responsibly, and we need to make sure that seasonal protections are in place for public safety. We cannot open it all up. I know that some may

feel that that is logical; that is actually risky. It puts the community at risk as well. We are going to do that response in a balanced way. Just look out for further announcements before winter.

Illicit tobacco

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:27): (1322) My question is to the Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation. Minister, I see you have bowed to pressure and increased the number of tobacco licensing inspectors from 14 to 42 in 2026–27. I am glad you were listening, Minister. It is still well short of other states, with New South Wales having 78 and Queensland hiring another 43 – more than your entire staffing. I guess they can afford it but you cannot. Anyway, Minister, you said in the chamber on 1 April that the number of inspectors alone does not paint the picture and that instead you are using an intelligence-led approach. Why the sudden backflip, Minister?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Environment, Minister for Outdoor Recreation) (12:28): I thank Mrs McArthur for her question, but I do reject the premise of the question. No government in the history of this state has done more to tackle this illicit tobacco market. That is why we have implemented our first ever tobacco licensing scheme. When you were in government you did not have a licensing scheme. We have not only set up this licensing scheme, we have invested record amounts, with further investments – thank you, Treasurer – of $46 million and an additional $13 million in this year's budget. Under this scheme tobacco can only be sold by people that have passed a fit and proper person test, and enforcement has begun.

But I have always said that this is a national problem that requires a national approach. In other jurisdictions that have had longstanding licensing schemes they have similar issues, you would appreciate, because there are a number of factors for the cause of the growth of the illicit tobacco sector. Again, that is not me saying it, that is the sector saying it. Let me quote Theo Foukkare, CEO of the Australian Association of Convenience Stores. He said:

> Excessive excise has created a massive price gap that is fuelling a multi-billion-dollar black market.

The Master Grocers Association said that independent retailers are following the law, but they cannot compete with unregulated products. Julian Hill, the federal assistant minister, said:

> … high-rates of excise over the last decade has contributed to creating a large price differential …

There are a number of factors, which include obviously the price differential and the fact that these products enter into our country but also the fact that there are criminal organisations behind the supply of these products. These are not only issues for our tobacco licensing scheme, Victoria Police and federal police. International criminal organisations are behind it, so it means federal agencies, including ASIO, need to tackle this issue all together, and we are working together to tackle these issues. Victoria is doing its bit. Our Treasurer has announced further announcements. They are on the ground; they are making inspections. Almost 4 million cigarettes have already been seized in the period in which the regulator has been on the ground – 4 million off our streets. And there is a high number of arrests: 200 offenders have already been arrested. So I think we know this work is being done, with cooperation between the tobacco regulator and Victoria Police. I want to thank all our frontline staff, whether they are in Tobacco Licensing Victoria, whether they are in Victoria Police or in our federal agencies that are working together. This issue is a transnational criminal organisation issue.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:30): Thank you, Minister. Your own budget papers reveal a target of only 500 tobacco licence inspections for the whole of 2026–27 and yet simultaneously show that 8000 licence applications are expected next year alone. How can these 42 inspectors, visiting barely 6 per cent of licence applicants between them, possibly stop the firebombings, lawlessness and crime running rampant on your watch?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Environment, Minister for Outdoor Recreation) (12:31): I thank Mrs McArthur for her supplementary question. It might also provide an opportunity for me to inform the house that the numbers you are quoting are based on estimates. Now we know the size of the legitimate market, so we can target the illegitimate part of the market. Since the regulator has been in place we have had 4900 applications for licensed premises. But I think the goal is clear. We do not want to go to all 4000 stores, because we would be overburdening legitimate businesses that are low risk. We are talking about the supermarkets and the master grocers that are owned by legitimate mum-and-dad businesses. It is not right. So what we are targeting is the risky end. We are intelligence led, working with Victoria Police and working with federal agencies to target them. So I think it is not about the number, whether it be 100 or 500; it is where the problem is, and that is what we are tackling.

Ministers statements: aged care

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Government Services, Special Minister of State, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Multicultural and Multifaith Victoria) (12:32): I rise to update the house on a recent visit I made to Grampians Health's Talbot Place public sector residential aged care home in Ballarat, where I saw firsthand the incredible work staff are doing to care for our older Victorians close to where they live. Victoria's public aged care services play a critical role in regional communities, supporting older Victorians with complex needs and helping patients leave hospital safely. This year's budget continues the Allan Labor government's strong investment in services for older Victorians. We are investing $17 million to expand residential inreach services, delivering more care directly into aged care homes and reducing avoidable hospital transfers. This means older Victorians can receive more treatment and support in familiar surroundings while easing pressure on our ambulance services, emergency departments and hospitals.

In 2025–26 Grampians Health is on track to deliver more than a thousand residential inreach episodes of care to over 550 aged care residents. More than 96 per cent of residents who received residential inreach care avoided hospitalisation and instead received treatment in a familiar environment. Grampians Health also deliver the statewide Victorian aids and equipment program, which is receiving a $5 million boost in this year's budget to help meet the growing demand. The program supports Victorians with permanent or long-term disability to remain safe and independent at home through access to subsidised aids and equipment. Last year alone, nearly 23,000 Victorians received support through this program, with around 75 per cent aged over 65. I would like to thank the staff at Grampians Health for the care and compassion they show older Victorians every day. Our government will continue backing regional communities and investing in high-quality care close to home.

Social Services Regulator

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:34): (1323) My question is to Minister Blandthorn. Last year the Office of the Public Advocate's community visitors scheme lodged 15 reports of abuse, neglect and violence occurring in supported residential accommodation with the Social Services Regulator. Women and LGBTQI+ people are particularly vulnerable to violence, including rape and sexual assault, in these settings, as highlighted by the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. Minister, how does the Social Services Regulator enforce standards to protect SRS residents with a disability, particularly women and LGBTQI+ people?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:35): I thank Mr Ettershank for his question. I find it quite a puzzling question, given that last year we sought the permission of this chamber to increase the powers of the Social Services Regulator to address exactly many of the issues to which you refer, and Mr Ettershank did not vote for the extension of those powers. So I find it extremely troubling that he is now standing here asking a question effectively about the Social Services Regulator's powers. At the time I questioned whether or not Mr Ettershank had given due consideration to that bill. But I think the question that we have here

before us shows that he did not give due consideration to that bill, because those expanded powers for the Social Services Regulator would have provided greater protection for children and greater protection for adults with disability in particular.

To be very specific, Mr Ettershank, what we sought was the power to ensure that dodgy disability workers could be prohibited from ever working with people with disability or children and to ensure that there was greater intelligence and information sharing to inform a reassessment of NDIS worker screening checks. This would ensure that in scenarios like the ones to which you refer a regulator does not just close off complaints – indeed as the Victorian Disability Worker Commission currently only has the power to do, which is closing off complaints with an apology – but the Social Services Regulator could indeed consider incidents in their totality and the extent to which they pose an individual risk to either a child or another vulnerable person. We also sought to establish a dedicated complaints function so there was greater intelligence to act earlier on concerns whenever parents, carers or advocates saw that something was not right. But, Mr Ettershank, you voted against those powers. The Greens, Legalise Cannabis and indeed those opposite voted against those powers. It was this side of the chamber, with some support from other parts of the crossbench, that was committed to ensuring that we protect vulnerable people. So to stand here and ask me a question about the powers of the Social Services Regulator is a little troubling.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:37): Thank you, Minister, for that enlightening response. The Mental Health Legal Centre has been informed of multiple incidents of sexual assaults occurring in SRSs over recent years. In a recent case of a woman who was sexually assaulted, not by a member of staff, the police and the regulator were not informed until some time after the incident, by which time the victim had moved to another SRS. The perpetrator was not removed, and residents were left uninformed about the assault or the fact that the perpetrator was still in their midst. This is an obvious breach of the Social Service Regulator's standards, which SRSs must adhere to – existing standards, Minister. What is the government doing to improve coordination and information sharing between the police, the regulator, SRS operators, residents and the general public so that timely reporting and consequent actions are taken to protect vulnerable residents?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:38): I do not have enough time to deal with the hypocrisy of this question, but indeed it was this government that previously strengthened the regulatory framework and indeed it was this government that only last November–December, as I just outlined in my substantive response to your first question, sought to ensure greater intelligence and information sharing to inform reassessments of workers, to share information across agencies, across independent regulators and with the police and what currently exists – and Mr Ettershank, you voted against it.

Dental services

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:38): (1324) My question is to the Minister for Health. Alex is 17 years old and is profoundly autistic. He has been waiting for basic dental care since February 2024, including a check-up X-ray and a clean, which he needs to have under a general anaesthetic. He was deemed to be a category 2 patient – treatment required within 90 days – but instead he has been waiting 835 days and his parents have been told that he will not be seen until at least July or August. Minister, why are vulnerable Victorians like Alex waiting for over 900 days before they can be seen for necessary dental care?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Ambulance Services, Minister for Health, Minister for Water) (12:39): Thank you very much, Ms Crozier, for raising this issue with me today. As I said yesterday – and as is common practice, including when you were in government – I am not going to be commenting on individual cases in the house.

David Davis interjected.

Harriet SHING: I am going to take you up on that interjection, Mr Davis, because when you were the minister you made it very clear that you would not comment on individual cases. I would invite you, Mr Davis, to check *Hansard* in that regard. You made it extremely clear that it was important to have conversations about individual matters when and as detailed information is able to be provided.

Ms Crozier, every Victorian expects – and reasonably – the opportunity to be able to access timely, quality and safe health care, and that includes for the purpose of being able to access appropriate and safe dental care and treatment. For people with specific neurological or other conditions that require adjustments to be made in the way in which treatment, diagnosis or care is provided, we work really hard to be able to allocate funding, supports and workforce to provide that care. This includes, as part of this year's budget, an additional 4000 surgeries and an additional 45,000 specialist appointments.

With that case that you have raised, Ms Crozier, I would encourage you to raise that issue directly with my office. I am very happy to have that conversation with you, but I also want to underscore the importance of consent and privacy in the way in which that information is sought – and indeed exchanged – and matters are discussed further. Patient privacy and consent, Ms Crozier, as you would well be aware, is at the heart of the capacity that we have to discuss these matters in this place. I know that in many cases people's experiences will differ significantly. So if the individual has not already contacted my office, I would encourage that to happen or them to email me directly. We can then look into that matter, of course, where consent is provided.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:42): Just to help you along, Minister, just like yesterday, when Ava's parents wanted me to raise this with you in the Parliament to highlight to Victorians the failures within the system – so do not try and put it back on me, the patients' parents or the patients themselves – it is your government that is failing Victorians in every single sense of the word. Alex's parents have said:

> It is truly heartbreaking to be the parent of a profoundly disabled child and watch your child be left behind and be denied basic healthcare and basic human rights.

You just said you work really hard to allocate resources, but they have been told Monash Health has enough dentists but not enough theatres with dental equipment. So I ask: why won't the government properly fund our health services with the necessary resources to address the needs of all Victorians?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Ambulance Services, Minister for Health, Minister for Water) (12:43): Thank you, Ms Crozier. We invested record funding into providing health services with the capacity to administer care, including through operating theatre capacity being doubled, for example. Monash Health is one of the health services that continues to provide increasing volume in the support of operating and surgical processes and procedures.

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Harriet SHING: Again, Ms Crozier, to take you back to what I said in the answer to your substantive question, 4000 additional surgeries as part of this year's budget –

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Harriet SHING: We are talking about a surgical process to provide that care and treatment, Ms Crozier. We have opened 11 hospitals; you sold off 12 and tried to privatise two more. We are going to continue to invest because that is what Victorians deserve.

Ministers statements: budget 2026–27

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:44): I want to update the house on some of the budget deliveries in this year's budget, which is only a week old. We have delivered real cost-of-living savings while making life for Victorians easier, safer and more affordable. We have delivered an operating

surplus of more than $700 million, the only state on the eastern seaboard to do so. Our strong budget position is why we can directly tackle the cost-of-living impacts facing Victorian families.

There is free public transport for two months and half-price fares for the rest of the year, and the 20 per cent off rego rebate is putting money back into the pockets of Victorians. We are investing $92 million to improve train services – running services on the Shepparton line and increasing capacity on the Wyndham Vale line – and there is $100 million in the budget for increased bus services right across the state. Fifty-eight per cent of spending in this budget is going to health and education, as has just been pointed out by the Minister for Health – expanded maternity services at Mercy Hospital, a PET scanner for Shepparton and numerous other investments right across the state. We are also upgrading many schools, including Belmont Primary, Maribyrnong secondary and Yarrawonga P–12, just to name a few. We are providing $1.8 million to continue rural financial counselling, supporting farmers, and $8.5 million for community food security organisations, because of course no family should go hungry. The budget also provides $150 million to support our volunteer firefighters, including trucks and upgraded CFA stations at Mirboo North and Charlton, in particular. And one of the most personally rewarding is the almost $4 million to deliver a new pool for Rochester – and I know there are other supporters in the room. I am delighted to help Victorians who are under pressure. The budget and the reply prove that only Labor governments deliver disciplined economic management while investing in productive infrastructure and the essential services that Victorians rely on.

Constituency questions

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:47): (2321) My question is for the Minister for Community Sport, and it concerns the new Knox skate and BMX park, which I had the great privilege of opening along with Mr Tarlamis, the YMCA and local councillors in Knox over the weekend. This was funded in large part through a $250,000 grant from the 2024–25 Local Sports Infrastructure Fund and has delivered a major upgrade to the site at Gilbert Park. It was terrific to attend the opening and indeed see the site being well used, with many people using it at the time that we were there. It features a number of improvements, including new bowls, new lighting, a picnic shelter, improved pathways and landscaping. It also includes a Euro gap and a quarter pipe, and by coincidence, I also learned what a Euro gap and a quarter pipe are on the opening day too. So with those newfound skills and information, I look forward to seeing this wonderful new park continue to prosper, and I ask how the Victorian government's investment in this project is supporting the Knox community.

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:48): (2322) My constituency question is to the Minister for Health Infrastructure. How do my Eastern Victoria residents know this government has abandoned them? Because they have put out a press release, the government have put out an election commitment or the government are moving their lips. At the last election in 2022 this government committed $290 million to deliver stages 2 and 3 of the Wonthaggi Hospital, with construction 'to begin shortly'. Four years later there is not a single brick, and demand in this area is rising. Residents report to me that the pathology patients are forced to line up in hallways while waiting in this ageing hospital building for appointments – let alone the West Gippsland Hospital debacle. It is a disgrace. Can the minister provide a clear and credible timeline for when Wonthaggi stages 2 and 3 will be up and finished, and the mystifying loss of the West Gippsland Hospital – when is it going to be even started under this government?

Northern Victoria Region

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:49): (2323) My constituency question today is for the Premier, and my constituents ask: Premier, will you come to the Longwood bushfire-affected area and have a frank, respectful discussion with those who feel neglected? It is now four months since the January bushfires tore through this beautiful part of Northern Victoria. For four months these

wonderful communities have been trying to put themselves back together and rebuild after they were destroyed by fire. The government promised help. The government promised they would not face this alone. The government promised money to rebuild. This is not happening. These communities feel forgotten and neglected. They are doing this on their own. There has been little to no help with clean-up. Promised caravans and shelter to house those who lost everything never arrived. It is now winter. It is now very cold, almost freezing in the hills, and these people have to stay in makeshift shelter, expensive hotels or with family and friends. People are struggling. The amazing volunteers at the community hubs, like Colleen, are working to the bone to help everyone they can, reaching out to those – *(Time expired)*

Northern Metropolitan Region

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (12:50): (2324) My constituency question is for the Minister for Education. We know that it is only Labor governments that truly invest in our schools and deliver the world-class facilities our kids need to learn and grow. One school in my electorate that has been supported by our government is Spensley Street Primary School. They are receiving over $1 million in this year's state budget to modernise their toilets and their school facilities. This local investment is part of a massive $1.6 billion overall package to build, expand and modernise schools across the state, ensuring every child has access to a great local school. Last Tuesday I visited Spensley Street Primary with local councillor Sarah McKenzie and the federal member for Cooper Ged Kearney to deliver this fantastic news. The local parents we spoke to are absolutely delighted to see these upgrades being funded. It is a clear example of how the Allan Labor government is putting our students first and how only Labor can deliver these upgrades. My question to the minister is: what other schools in the Northern Metropolitan Region will be benefiting from the Allan Labor government's significant investments into schools in this year's budget?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:52): (2325) My constituency question is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, and it concerns the future of the Tram Road Reserve as part of the North East Link project in my electorate. Local residents are deeply concerned that works now proposed for the reserve will permanently change valued public open space that the community had been repeatedly assured would remain available for public use. The adjacent Eram Park has already been acquired by the government as part of the project, reducing pretty scarce local green space. Right now the residents have been advised that the Tram Road Reserve is also being taken from them, with the shortest of consultation periods and no understanding of the long-term consequences. I would ask the minister: will the government immediately extend the consultation period and ensure local residents' concerns are considered?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:53): (2326) My constituency question is to the Minister for Environment. During debate on the Australian Grands Prix Amendment Bill 2025 the government promised to establish an Albert Park advisory committee to properly engage Albert Park stakeholders, including sporting groups, lake users, tenants, local government and traditional owners. More than eight months later local constituents and stakeholders tell me that they have seen no sign of this committee despite major concerns following this year's grand prix – fair to say one of the most disruptive in its 30 years, including extended park closures, rubbish left behind including several thousand plastic cable ties that the community itself was forced to clean up and a temporary bit of infrastructure that is just still sitting in the park. Park users and locals are feeling totally trampled over, and it looks like this advisory committee is just another broken promise from this government. Minister, when will the Albert Park advisory committee be established? How will stakeholders be appointed? How can local rec users and wildlife advocates seek representation and, once appointed, will you meet with the advisory group?

Southern Metropolitan Region

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:54): (2327) My constituency question is directed towards the Minister for Education in the other place. One of the proudest things that we have achieved in government in the field of education has been our capital investment program. This has involved delivering 100 new schools across the state. It has also involved 2300 school upgrades. One school in my constituency that was the beneficiary of these upgrades was St Kilda Primary School. In May's budget we announced that St Kilda Primary School would be receiving $13.1 million in upgraded sporting facilities, including a new gymnasium and new school oval. Importantly, the Allan Labor government committed to the further full funding required for these upgrades, unlike the proposal from the member for Prahran for $12 million, which would have left a big black hole in that project. Alongside St Kilda Primary, this government also announced funding for upgrades to Boroondara Park Primary School and Cheltenham East Primary School, as well as targeted works at Melbourne High School. My question to the minister is this: how much total capital investment is the Allan Labor government making in public schools in my electorate in the 2026–27 budget?

Western Victoria Region

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (12:55): (2328) Progress on the duplication of the Western Highway between Buangor and Ararat has stalled. Locals are crying out for a solution that actually reflects easements, responds to the natural landscapes and contours of land and provides value for taxpayer money. I note with some interest that this project is being run by the Big Build. Will we see more corruption on worksites? Will we see strippers? Going on the past record of this government and their refusal to hold a royal commission, who knows what we will see? My question is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and it is simple: will you meaningfully engage with locals so they can have input into the design and the footprint of this project?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:56): (2329) My constituency question is for the Minister for Environment. My constituent is a Seaford resident who volunteers with Seaford Beach Patrol and has raised concerns about polystyrene waste. At Kananook beach in Seaford local volunteers conducted repeat audits of the same 9-square-metre area of sand. In this small area polystyrene was found 91 per cent of the time. Seaford Beach Patrol estimates that there are over 20,000 pieces of polystyrene littering Kananook beach alone. My constituent notes that this reflects a broader issue, with significant volumes of expanded polystyrene going into landfill each year. Expanded polystyrene is recyclable when collected and kept separate. However, there is currently no requirement for businesses to recover or take responsibility for this material. My constituent asks: will the minister consider a mandatory take-back and recovery scheme for clean expanded polystyrene packaging, so that businesses are responsible for its recovery?

Eastern Victoria Region

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (12:57): (2330) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, how is the Victorian government making sure that our emergency services in Eastern Victoria are prepared for the challenges ahead? Emergency services supported in the budget this year included the Port Welshpool Coast Guard, who will receive a brand new vessel so they can continue to support the community on their stretch of waters in Gippsland; in Mirboo North, a brand new CFA station; and in Lakes Entrance, funding for detailed planning and design for a new CFA station. Thank you to all our emergency service volunteers who serve your local communities, and I look forward to delivering these investments.

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:57): (2331) My question is to the Premier, and let us see if fifth time is the charm. Premier, for the last six months I have been asking questions of you and your government about the fate of the businesses and traders in Bald Hill Road in Pakenham, who are seeing

a devastating 70 to 80 per cent drop in business while the so-called Big Build closes access to their stores. When will the Allan Labor government, Premier and ministers finally do something to help compensate these businesses with the assistance that they need right now, rather than shirking their responsibilities, avoiding answering questions or passing the buck? These businesses cannot keep waiting. And I will say this, after an article this week: if this government is more interested in waiting to see what we will do in government in six months time, rather than helping the people they are elected to represent, I think it means you are tired, out of touch and it is time to go.

Northern Metropolitan Region

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (12:59): (2332) My question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. Minister, my constituent from Craigieburn struggles to access public transport on the Craigieburn line due to overcrowded station carparks at Craigieburn, Roxburgh Park and Coolaroo, alongside infrequent bus connections and 20-minute off-peak train services on the Craigieburn line. They have raised concerns that while free public transport initiatives help with cost-of-living pressures, without increased service frequency and better infrastructure, overcrowding and access issues will worsen for outer northern suburbs. Minister, what steps are you taking to improve train and bus frequency, expand station accessibility and parking capacity and invest in long-term upgrades to meet growing demand in Melbourne's outer north?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (13:00): (2333) My question is to the Minister for Community Sport. How is the Allan Labor government supporting the growth of women's sport in the Southern Metropolitan Region? More women and girls than ever before are participating in the sports they love, and the Allan Labor government is delivering new facilities to help them. I was recently down at Glen Huntly oval where the Allan Labor government is investing $400,000 to upgrade the pavilion's change rooms, in partnership with the City of Glen Eira. Delivered through the Local Sports Infrastructure Fund, we will upgrade the wet room and build new female-friendly change facilities. That oval is the home of the Caulfield Grammarians Football Club. I was down there on Saturday for their Mother's Day brunch eon, where their three women's teams were playing together on the same day for the first time – a huge turnout, great support, no female-friendly change rooms. That is going to change thanks to the Allan Labor government.

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (13:00): (2334) My question is for the Minister for Natural Disaster Recovery. Will the minister take immediate action to provide proper housing support to those affected by the 2026 summer bushfires? After the Black Saturday fires and the October 2022 floods there was a big effort to ensure that people in immediate need got housing, so over the past few weeks it has been extremely disappointing to hear from residents in the Longwood and Harcourt fire zones that the government has failed to provide an adequate housing response for people who lost their homes in the 2026 summer fires. Some dilapidated caravans have been donated, but there has been nothing substantial from the government to support people who have lost everything. It is vital that after a disaster housing is provided that allows families to remain present and connected in their communities as they recover and enables children to stay in their local schools. The Allan Labor government has let these people down, and I call on the minister to take immediate action to fix this.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:02): (2335) My question today is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. The platforms at Watsonia station are currently only accessible via a series of steep switchback ramps, which are considered unsafe for people using mobility aids. The poor amenity of this access and the lack of a lift to the platforms discourages or prevents use, quite literally, by some passengers. While the station precinct is planned to be upgraded as part of the North East Link Program, there are no current plans, to my understanding, to upgrade

the actual station to make it more accessible. I will put on record that I support Banyule council's advocacy for an upgrade to Watsonia train station. I ask: Minister, will you upgrade this station so that all residents are able to safely access the platforms?

Sitting suspended 1:02 pm until 2:03 pm.

Motions

Local government integrity

Debate resumed.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (14:03): I also gladly rise in support of this call by my colleague Mr Limbrick for a review into the councillor code of conduct framework. I have watched this issue unfold across the last few years with horror, and I have raised it many times with this government. The fact is that good, innocent elected councillors are having their lives destroyed and their reputations ruined and are generally just being damaged in every single way possible, in addition to not being able to do their jobs because of how badly this framework operates.

Of course I could open and close my case for this review with the simple example of Wyndham City Council. The mayor of Wyndham City Council, along with another man, who was almost set to come to this place and replace me, signed a character reference for their friend of over a decade vouching for his good character after he had pleaded guilty to child rape and attempted child prostitution. Later he claimed not to know the full details of the case before he wrote this letter – they both did in fact – despite the very easily verifiable fact that the Victorian sentencing guidance requirements are that referees need to be fully aware of the offending before putting their name before the court. The reference itself was disgusting. It discussed the child grooming and the sexual assault charges as just a one-off event and attempted to attribute the behaviour and blame the behaviour on COVID stress and isolation. That mayor has refused to step down. None of the other councillors want him there. One has resigned in protest. The community have been protesting over and over. They do not want to suffer through the indignity of having a person like that as their mayor. Two monitors have been appointed, and yet he is still there. What kind of a system allows a deadlock like that? That is an absolute disgrace.

I could move on to the example of Melton. Thankfully the majority of councillors there have managed to keep that boat pretty steady, but the same kind of deranged behaviour has been going on there since I was a councillor there. I still remember personally watching a particular councillor break every single rule in the book. People refused to be alone in a room with her because she would make up such ridiculous, spurious allegations, and the code of conduct framework basically could not deal with her. Nothing was done. She was not stopped even after she was chastised. That particular councillor and her partner have already lost a defamation case. There are AVOs out against them. I had to write via my lawyer to have some manufactured lies that she tried to slot into another of her complaints redacted or I would have sued the council myself. They have leaked confidential documents from that councillor, and what has happened to them? Nothing.

The core problem is that the councillor code of conduct framework punishes scrutiny, criticism and dissent, but it does not really respond at all to genuine collapses in integrity or conduct. The entire structure surrounding how it shapes councillor behaviour through fear of complaints, reputational destruction, financial pressure and procedural warfare is well known, and there are councils across this state who feel that it is being weaponised, not just by crybullies on a local level but politically. And they have got a point because of the way that it is set up and who picks who the arbiters are.

There are lots of things that need to change, and it is not just about how individual councillors behave, it is about how the framework actually operates. Good governance requires independence, fairness and equal treatment, and democracy requires a reasonable level of freedom of speech. We have suffered as ratepayers and councillors and have been suffering through having all of this mess cost us millions and millions of dollars. I know that one councillor was actually even provided with a lawyer

when you are not supposed to be provided with lawyers, but because she is Aboriginal, she gets a lawyer. I mean, there is nothing objective or fair in the entire system. It reads well on paper, but what happens in practice? It is completely corrupt and a total mess. I cannot believe, even though I have not very high hopes for this government to organise anything properly at all, we are in a situation where absolutely nobody wants a mayor – absolutely nobody in the whole state, even the government; everybody wants to get rid of this mayor – and he is safe and sound.

I was going to go back through the cases that have been raised. I might just touch on a few. Steven Hughes from Frankston was suspended after making negative comments about council performance. I mean, what if they were underperforming? Melissa Ferguson from Latrobe was forced to make a degrading apology for criticising someone who was investigated for paedophilia. I mean, that is a disgrace. Council and government and everybody should be apologising to her for putting her through that degrading, disgraceful treatment. If she had not done it, she would have been bankrupted. You should not be able to have your integrity and your reputation and your ability to defend yourself contingent on going bankrupt because of a rigged system. This has to stop, and it has to be managed through a proper system, not this one that we have, which clearly is biased and does not work for the benefit of the ratepayers and does not work in the interests of unbiased governance. I commend this to the house.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:09): I am pleased to also rise on this motion – 1424, I believe it is – that has been raised for us by Mr Limbrick today. It is a valuable opportunity to discuss the local government sector but also the reforms which have taken place. I confess perhaps I am not quite as prepared as I would normally like to be to respond to the rather extraordinary comments by Mrs Deeming, but what I would say is that it is a very good thing in fact that this government is banning the use of character references, particularly for sex offender cases and child sex offender cases. Whilst I am not personally au fait with the example that Mrs Deeming illustrated, I certainly did, along with the rest of Victoria, watch on in bewilderment as that debacle engulfed her party just a few weeks ago. Indeed, on the face of it those are extraordinarily disturbing things for anyone to have done, particularly on that rationale. I think I will leave my remarks on that particular component there, but I want to say, since we have gone on to this subject, it is worth noting that the government is taking strong action to eliminate the ability for people like that to allegedly provide references as despicable as that for people in those circumstances.

Moving on to the substantive motion at hand, I do acknowledge Mr Limbrick for raising this in the chamber, and I acknowledge all speakers. I did have the opportunity to engage with and listen to the majority of the debate prior to question time, and suffice to say there is an important principle here that as elected representatives – there is a distinction where those of us in state and federal Parliament do have parliamentary privilege – it is right and proper that we should all, federal, state and local, have the ability to voice genuine concerns of ourselves or members of the communities that we represent. There are obviously appropriate rules of conduct, and this is where we come to the heart of the issue.

I do not think anybody wishes to see these rules broken. They are designed to intervene in some of the practices we have seen in councils, some published or proven. There are a vast number of anecdotal cases of bullying by a small number of councillors against their council colleagues or against council staff or, quite potentially, bullying of councillors by others in the council as well or by executive staff. There is a very clear reason why we have this code of conduct and an arbitration process, which does predate the recent reforms. The data that I have seen shows that the number of arbitrations decreased following these recent reforms, as opposed to increased.

It is worth going to some history on this. As members will know, the implementation of this and the legislation which sets out the model code of conduct arose as a direct result of recommendations in the IBAC Operation Sandon report. That relates to some particularly egregious cases of wrongdoing and alleged wrongdoing in a council that both Mr Limbrick and Ms Payne, who I see in the chamber – in fact we have almost the whole south-east team here – are very familiar with, and that is the former council in the City of Casey, which did some outrageous things. It shows what can go wrong when

councils stray too far from relevant guidance. I do reflect on the fact that we need to have that appropriate balance, and the code of conduct is very specifically here to be for conduct, not for speech or for reasonable discussion.

I am drawn to the matters at hand in Operation Sandon and councillors engaging perhaps in ways which facilitated inappropriate activity and inappropriate planning decisions that they may have had a vested interest in. There is a fundamental right for elected representatives, be they federal, state or local, to make the decision that they see is best. We do not want to see some sort of bureaucratic overreach shrouded in the name of integrity that says that politicians, whatever their level is, must comply with a recommendation given to them by executives, bureaucrats, council staff, whatever the case may be, because that would fundamentally go against the point of having elected councillors and elected MPs. MPs, governments, councillors, must be free to make decisions as they see fit, even if it goes against what has been advised to them. You see indeed with Operation Sandon the egregious case of what can go wrong when that is allowed to go too far, and indeed there are certain appropriate probity checks and measures, ranging from the simplest of a conflict-of-interest declaration right through to more serious penalties, as there should be for inappropriate conduct where a councillor personally advantages themselves from a decision of their own council. That is obviously way out of bounds and should never be tolerated. I am mindful that it is appropriate of course for the government to fully enact recommendations that are made to us by integrity bodies, but we must also be mindful that governments, councils, do have the right to make their own decisions.

I reflect on an adjournment I gave in this place actually just the last time that we were sitting here, in the previous sitting week, when I raised concerns on behalf of constituents of mine in the new Casey council. Certainly it is refreshing to have councillors back there after a long period of administration, and there is no parallel between the current council and the former one. I was expressing frustration on behalf of community members of mine in the suburb of Berwick that related to a council decision. There is a very popular park in that council in my electorate, Wilson botanic gardens, that does draw in a lot of people, and they are having issues with traffic and the car park overflowing. As a result, council has proposed to build a new offsite car park at a different entrance to the park, at the rear and through parts of residential Berwick. This particular location, in my view and in the strong view of my constituents, is completely unsuitable given the nature of the street – the relatively narrow, winding nature and indeed steep hills – and traffic issues at the bottom of the street as it interconnects with Ernst Wanke Road, the main connector road. These are all very valid reasons for the residents to object.

I raised their concerns because I was not satisfied that council had appropriately taken their concerns into account, and indeed I maintain my concern and I appreciate the chance to have had discussions with many in council and will continue to do so. But I did say at the time when I raised this adjournment, and I maintain today: I disagree with this decision that council made, but council had every right to make it. Now, my understanding is that council has acted on the advice of the executive, and I am concerned as to how fulsomely perhaps that advice captured the various complications and circumstances of the residents of Kramer Drive. However, irrespective, if the executive have said, 'Don't proceed with this project,' and the councillors have said, 'We're going to do it,' they had every right to do that.

It is important that we maintain that distinction or that independence. Councillors and councils should be free to speak. Obviously it is not to be done in an outrageous, inappropriate or abusive way. We have our robust debates here in this chamber, and we all very much enjoy them. But there is an appropriate way to do things and there is an inappropriate way to do things, and nothing in providing councils with this freedom should infringe on the rights of councillors or council staff to be treated fairly and appropriately. I think, Mrs McArthur, in your contribution you said you have been slammed many times in this chamber, and I think I would agree with that. And I would possibly even submit to you that you have slammed others just as much in return.

Bev McArthur: I agree.

Michael GALEA: Indeed. I love our slanging matches, and in fact the fact that we are both in the chamber on a Wednesday and not screaming at each other already is quite remarkable for us, Mrs McArthur. The truth is we do enjoy that, but we know that there is a time and a place to do that. We certainly would not be doing that in the back corridors of the Parliament, having an all-right barney, and I know that you or I certainly would not be yelling at any of the staff of the Parliament in that way. There is an appropriate forum to do things, and obviously in Parliament we do show a particular side of it in this chamber as well.

But that is what the objective of the code of conduct is. And I understand and I know that the minister is invested and engaged in ensuring that it is as responsive and reflective of those ideals as possible, so that we can have councillors supported to do their jobs fully and council officers supported to do their jobs fully but in a way that still allows for that robust, vigorous and fair expression of debate that we do want to see at all levels of government, especially in our local councils.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): I acknowledge former member Fiona Patten in the gallery.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:19): Firstly, I would like to thank everyone for their thoughtful contributions on this debate. It does not sound like there was a lot of dissent on it. I would just like to pick up a few points that some members raised. Mrs McArthur raised the chilling effect. Indeed the big problem with what is going on here is not the frivolous cases that I raised; the big problem is: what are people not saying that they should be saying, or as Mrs McArthur raised, what sort of talent might be wanting to put their hand up for council elections and choosing not to do so because they feel that they will not be able to say what they think they should say? So I think that is a very good point, Mrs McArthur.

Dr Mansfield pointed out the applicability of these things to mayors, which is an excellent point, and also the idea that the arbiters are very inconsistent. This is indeed what I have noticed as well. A number of members, including Dr Mansfield and also some others – Ms Ermacora – raised the idea of the Supreme Court as an option for administrative review of any decisions. As Mr Barker will be able to tell you, this is not an accessible or cheap exercise. This is a very, very expensive exercise that limits justice for many people. As Mrs Deeming pointed out, some councillors would rather just acquiesce than face potential bankruptcy, which is not a desirable outcome at all. Mr Ettershank, I would like to thank you for your comments and also your contribution to this motion. You provided some excellent feedback, which we actually took on board. I think one of the points raised by Mrs Deeming was around how we still end up in a situation where some people doing bad things end up getting away with it and people who are trying to do good things get punished. Obviously that is not desirable. I do not think anyone would desire that.

But overall I would like to thank everyone for their support on this, and I hope that actually we can get some agreement that we need to do something here to make sure that the system works a bit better than it is working now. This was not something to smack the government with. I know that the government's intention was to reduce frivolous cases and protect robust debate, but the evidence from what I have seen and by talking to councillors and hearing their stories is that that is not the case across the state. I will leave it there.

Motion agreed to.

Cannabis law reform

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:23): I move:

That this house notes that:

(1) the Victoria Police operational manual states that:

(a) Victoria Police support the appropriate use of cautions, with the aim of redirecting eligible persons away from contact with the formal criminal justice system;

(b) in September 2024, Victoria Police updated guidance in relation to adult cannabis cautions to expand eligibility to include:

(i) removing restrictions on the number of cautions or diversions a person can be subject to;

(ii) removing the requirement that no other offences be involved unless deemed ineligible offences, that is all indictable offences that are not triable summarily;

(2) recent Crime Statistics Agency data shows that:

(a) in 2021, 34 per cent of unique alleged offenders received a cannabis caution compared to 2025 where 37.5 per cent of unique alleged offenders received a cannabis caution, despite the revised guidance;

(b) rates of cautioning for Indigenous people are 11 times lower than the rate of non-Indigenous Victorians in the cannabis possession statistics;

(3) given the broadened eligibility and removal of limits on cautions, the absence of a legislative framework risks inconsistent application and supports the case for establishing the cannabis cautioning scheme in legislation to promote consistency, transparency and accountability;

and calls on the government to investigate options for legislative reform to Victoria Police's cannabis cautioning scheme.

Victoria is going through a crime wave. Official data indicates the highest number of criminal incidents recorded in 20 years. As of late 2025, early 2026, crime has risen to record levels, with almost a 22 per cent increase in property and theft offences, including retail and car theft. Melbourne is also experiencing a surge in targeted arson attacks. Carjackings, family violence, hate crimes and home invasions remain stubbornly high and have the community scared. If the Victorian government are serious about tackling crime, we need to free up police time and resources and we need to do this immediately. One solution is simple: stop wasting police time and resources on policing small-time personal use of cannabis. We are not talking about drug dealers or organised crime, we are talking about police and court time and resources being wasted on a nonviolent, victimless crime. In good news, the police agree, and today I stand to debate a motion to have existing police policy brought into legislation.

The most damaging crimes are violent crimes. This is where police resources should be directed. Arguably the most damaging and persistent crime in Victoria is family violence. According to the Crime Statistics Agency family violence in Victoria is rising, with police recording close to 100,000 incidents in the 2023–24 year and a 6 per cent increase in the previous year. This equates to an incident roughly every 6 minutes. One woman is murdered every week in Australia by an intimate partner. At the same time Victoria Police are trying to manage critical staff shortages. There are 1400 to 2000 vacancies or more, declining members and station closures. We need to ask ourselves if we prefer the police to be stopping and searching Victorians for a joint or attending a family violence call-out. The community is under pressure, and police resources must be freed up to focus on preventing serious harm and protecting victims who are our community's most vulnerable.

Nonviolent crimes, such as the possession of tiny amounts of cannabis for personal use, is not where police resources should be directed, and evidently Victoria Police agree with us. In September 2024 they updated their operations manual, the Victoria Police manual (VPM), to prioritise cautions over arrests for personal cannabis possession. What this means is that serving police members are now recommended to issue a caution for small personal use of cannabis and not arrest: no arrest, no record, no waste of police time or court resources. This marks a meaningful shift in the policing of cannabis, and we strongly welcome this change. Let us be frank: no police officer wants to be arresting people for 5 grams of weed. I am from the Legalise Cannabis Party and obviously I do not think anyone should be criminalised for cannabis at all, but that is a discussion for another day.

For background, the Victoria Police cannabis cautioning program, or the CCP, was officially implemented on 1 September 1998. It allowed police discretion to caution rather than arrest people found in possession of small quantities of cannabis. In 2024 the VPM was updated quietly, very quietly – and I will return to that point – but updated nonetheless. The VPM now recommends that

police members caution people found with small amounts of cannabis rather than arrest and for the number of cautions to be unlimited. This is good policy. The Victoria Police drug strategy supports health-led, prevention-first approaches to tackling drug harms and treatment-based responses to use and possession for all drugs. For cannabis this means cautioning. We are so very pleased to see Victoria Police leading the way here. The reality is police do not want to waste their time on arrests for nonviolent crimes.

We spoke to Greg Denham from Harm Reduction Australia. Greg was a serving police member from 1980 to 2002, a distinguished 22-year career in policing. Greg rose to the rank of senior sergeant with Victoria Police and was a senior adviser in drug policy between 1997 and 2002. Greg was around when the cannabis cautioning program was first introduced in 1998, and he was part of the design of the program. In Greg's words:

> The idea was simple – save police time and resources, protect the public and, give police members a clear way out of an impossible situation. Nobody joins Victoria police to spend their shift busting someone for a joint. But we were stuck. We never wanted to ruin someone's life over something like that, so members were doing all sorts of things off the books – turning a blind eye, flushing it. That's not good policing. Legislate cautioning and give officers something solid to stand on.

Greg's views reflect what more than 80 per cent of Victorians already recognise: that personal possession of cannabis should not be a criminal offence. Criminalising cannabis has not worked. After almost 100 years of prohibition Australians still consume cannabis, and you know what, they always will. The question is whether we want to focus valuable police time and resources on that or more important matters.

From a harm reduction point of view we also need to ask if we want early intervention, which a caution approach offers, or punishment. To be clear on what this means in practice, if found in possession of small amounts of cannabis, Victorians who meet the criteria since September 2024 are issued a formal caution rather than facing charges or court proceedings. That means no criminal record. Having a criminal record for drug possession, no matter how harmless or small, has massive impacts on a person's life. It can limit access to jobs, education, housing and mental health support. However, nearly 4000 Victorians are still being arrested for possession of cannabis every single year.

The cannabis cautioning scheme was introduced in 1998, almost 28 years ago, and the police operations manual was updated in 2024. But arrests still remain high, at 48 per cent, and cautions remain far too low, at 37.5 per cent. Again, more often than not the offending is minor and the individual poses no risk to the community whatsoever. I am often asked about the relative harms of something like alcohol compared to cannabis. My response often is – I am half-joking when I say this, but it is true – 'Would you rather come across a group of drunk people in the park, on King Street or even in your home or a bunch of stoned people?' I think we all know the answer to that question.

The cannabis cautioning scheme was designed to allow Victoria Police to respond to small-time possession in a way that is proportionate and focused on reducing harm. It frees up police resources. It is also aligned with the international drug control conventions and Victoria's charter of human rights. As we know, Victoria Police are obliged to take human rights into account under the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006. The charter identifies several rights that may be relevant to cannabis-related matters, including: the right to recognition and equality before the law, section 8; the right to life, section 9; protection from torture and cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment, section 10; and the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, section 14. Under the core United Nations drug control conventions, including the 1988 UN convention, countries retain scope to respond to minor drug possession matters with education, treatment, rehabilitation and social integration rather than conviction or punishment. Both the Victorian charter and the UN drug policies share a key principle: that when cannabis use is minor, the best approach is to focus on reducing harms and avoiding unnecessary criminal charges.

Again, we welcome the update to the Victoria Police manual; however, we have some concerns. Interestingly, the change to the VPM is not well known. To be honest, that is a huge understatement. I was not aware of the change until quite recently. We spoke to multiple stakeholders who had no idea of this change either. We have spoken to current serving police officers and former police officers who are not aware of this change either. The VPM can only be found on CD-ROM, and to view this manual you have to either go into the State Library of Victoria or send Victoria Police a cheque and get sent a disc, no less. Even receiving that as a member of Parliament, I had to go around this building to find a CD-ROM drive for it to be transcribed for me. As a comparison, in New South Wales it is freely accessible online.

I talked recently to Professor Kate Seear, who by any measure is one of Australia's pre-eminent drug reform experts and has been for decades. Kate is a lawyer and is quite literally looking at these kinds of changes all the time. She said:

> I was very surprised to learn of the change in Victoria Police's manual. I had not heard anything about it before now, and I believe many other experts in the sector will also be surprised to hear of this development.

Professor Seear was concerned this meant in effect that cannabis consumers and their legal representatives are still not aware that they should be getting cautioned and not arrested for personal use. Take, for example, someone convicted of a small possession of cannabis charge. At the point of arrest, if they are aware of an update they could ask the police member why they are being arrested and not cautioned. When they go to court, their lawyer could be asking the same thing. At the point of sentencing this information is highly relevant to the defence. Rights cannot be exercised if they are not known. Professor Seear agrees with the updates in the police manual and says cautions should be handed out wherever possible. This should be done in a fair manner, consistently and in line with the law and with the charter of human rights. But again, according to Professor Seear, they can only happen if everyday Victorians understand how the caution process works, know they can ask for a caution and understand what accepting one means. She also warns that police decisions must be transparent, consistent and fair, not open to arbitrary interpretation.

The law should not depend on who stops you, where you live or how you are perceived, which brings me to the uneven application of cautioning as it currently stands. I have spoken many times in this chamber about something we all know: cannabis laws are not affecting all Victorians equally. First Nations Victorians are 11 times more likely to be arrested for cannabis possession than non-Indigenous people. This is nothing short of systemic bias. This and other statistics show the inconsistent application of cautioning guidelines. In an era of treaty we are still locking First Nations people up for minor cannabis use and we are locking them up more than anyone else. If we are serious about closing the gap, we need real, systemic change. Fair treatment under the law should not be optional.

What I am asking for today is that we remove this grey area. The cautioning scheme was introduced in 1998. It was updated in 2024, but no-one seems to know about it and it is being applied unevenly. The police manual is not easy to access even for police members. We are unsure how many of them are even aware of the update to the cautioning scheme. In theory members are supposed to keep themselves up to date with changes to their operations manual. In practice this means they would have to use spare time in their shift. Who has spare time as a police officer? They would need to use that time to scan a QR code, download the manual, read it, understand it – the cautioning scheme, we know, is very convoluted – and then apply it evenly. This is obviously impractical and unrealistic.

Victoria Police need clarity, and to this end today we ask for the government to support our call to enshrine cautioning in legislation. Victoria Police already want cautioning for personal use of cannabis. Every legal and health expert we spoke to agreed it is the very least we can do: stop Victorians being unnecessarily dragged through the criminal justice system. VicPol have led the way. We should support them and their members to do the practical thing and the right thing. Legislating cautioning ensures that we are meeting our human rights obligations in practice, not just in theory. It gives busy serving police members clarity and cover. The police we spoke to said consistently that

they and their colleagues do not like grey areas. They like to know what they should be doing with absolute certainty. All we are asking is that this clarity be provided in legislation. If any Victorian is found in possession of a small personal amount of cannabis and they meet the relevant criteria, they should be issued with a caution – no arrest, no court resources, no jail time. It is a proportionate and evenly applied consequence, a caution. No-one should have their life derailed over a joint. What we need now is for everyone to be on the same page to make that a reality.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (14:38): The truth is that this motion addresses a highly complex area of public policy, one where our justice system, our healthcare system and the fundamental wellbeing of many Victorians intersect. It is one that I have spent some time today truly contemplating while also thinking broadly about other issues of public health as we have a suite of public health professionals here in Parliament House today. At the very core of our approach to this issue is a foundational principle: the government recognises that drug use is first and foremost a health issue. As such it is always open to considering reform that may divert people away from the justice system and improve the health outcomes for people who use drugs, especially vulnerable Victorians. We know that health-led policies towards drug use yield positive social and economic outcomes and that law enforcement alone does not address the issue.

There is so much that I could say in the short time that I have got, but I will recognise that the Victorian government has a position and acknowledges and recognises that cannabis remains the most widely used illegal drug in Victoria and the effects of cannabis can absolutely vary from one person to another. The government will continue to work across government, police and other agencies to prevent and reduce the harms associated with cannabis through coordinated efforts and evidence-based action. Within that framework the Victorian government supports diversion programs for low-level offending. We will continue to consider options to enhance diversion pathways for people who engage in low-level drug offending and continue to invest in our specialist alcohol and other drugs treatment program, recognising that a police caution is merely the first step. It is an intervention point, but for that intervention to be truly transformative, it needs to be backed by accessible, compassionate health services. We cannot simply divert people away from the justice system. We must actively divert them towards health, recovery and support. And further work is underway to consider how drug use can be better addressed as a health issue and a law enforcement issue.

Currently any person found to have a non-trafficable amount of cannabis that is not in accordance with a prescription may be cautioned as an alternative to laying charges in order to keep them out of the justice system and minimise the associated harm. To fully engage with this motion's call for legislative reform it is important to outline exactly how the current program operates in detail. The program is governed by Victoria Police's Victoria Police manual, the VPM, issued under the authority of the Chief Commissioner of Police pursuant to section 60 of the Victoria Police Act 2013. It states that, at law, police members have discretion as to whether an enforcement action is taken against persons found committing an offence. However, members also have a duty to enforce the law, keep the peace, protect life and property and prevent offences. Under the cannabis cautioning program police may issue cautioning notices to individuals aged 18 years or over who have been apprehended for the use or possession of small quantities of cannabis. The aim of cautioning is to divert individuals away from the criminal justice system without further action or follow-up. The VPM sets out the policy, guidance and instructions to members for the operation of the cannabis cautioning program, and cautions may be issued for summary offences and some indictable offences triable summarily. There you go.

There is more to this. For all adult cautions there must be sufficient evidence to charge the person with the offence. Crucially, the person must consent to the caution. Importantly, prior criminal history does not deem a person ineligible for a caution. If appropriate, a person may be cautioned for more than one eligible offence arising out of the same set of circumstances. Specifically for the cannabis cautioning program, the following also applies. It can only be used for a small quantity of dried leaf, stems, stalks and/or seeds, no plants, hash or hash oil. The cannabis must be for personal use only. The interaction between the officer and the individual is a vital point of human intervention. The

investigating member must provide the person with the details of the offence committed. They must explain how they do not have to consent to the caution and may choose to have the matter dealt with by the court. They must explain that the caution will be recorded in police records. However, it is not disclosable as part of a criminal history check. They outline that the caution is a formal process and provides an opportunity for the person to consider and address the offending behaviour and avoid entering the criminal justice system. They are warned that after being cautioned any further offending may result in the person appearing in court. However, they are assured that once a caution is issued, the matter is final.

Perhaps most critically from a harm reduction perspective, the investigating member may also have an informal discussion seeking the underlying reasons for an offence and to discuss inappropriate behaviour and its consequences. Once an individual consents the police officer completes the relevant caution form, processes the drugs as property in police possession and provides the official caution notice. The entire framework aligns with the Victoria Police *Drug Strategy 2020–2025*, which is aimed at focusing police efforts on drugs that are causing the most harm in the community. It details Victoria Police's commitment to preventing drug-related harm through diversion, referral to treatment and early intervention to prevent offence escalation. While police use their intensive training and discretion to determine a proportionate response, they also maintain an uncompromising focus on community safety. Where a drug-related arrest is made, it is done in the interest of both public and personal safety. As Victoria recognises, and Victoria Police recognises, that drug problems are first and foremost health issues, police use their training and discretion to determine a proportionate response. The government recognises the importance of the independence of Victoria Police when making these decisions. Victoria Police continue to tackle the problem of drug harm through a focus on targeted investigations into serious and organised crime using strategic state, Commonwealth, national and international partnerships, and on disrupting drug use and supply.

This brings me to the core request of the motion before us, which is legislative reform. Police-issued drug cautioning and diversion programs are not provided for in any legislation in Victoria. Instead they are an offence disposition approach developed by Victoria Police at its discretion, and guidance for their operation is provided to members through the VPM. Generally members have broad discretion in relation to what enforcement action, caution, infringement notice, prosecution et cetera is taken against a person found committing or reasonably suspected of committing an offence. Some direction is provided to members under legislation – I think particularly by the Bail Act 1977 and the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, which I know we have debated some changes to in this place.

The desire to see this scheme enshrined in legislation is often driven by a desire for structural consistency to ensure that outcomes are equitable. However, we must navigate this with immense care. It is important to note that the established statutory processes under section 10 of the Victoria Police Act 2013 prevent the government from directing Victoria Police in relation to enforcing, investigating or prosecuting individuals. It really is important to note this separation of powers, which ensures that Victoria Police can operate independently in undertaking its duty to enforce the law and includes Victoria Police's discretion when it comes to cautioning individuals. The government acknowledges this reality and respects it. As such, any decision to take away from Victoria Police's ability to exercise discretion needs to be carefully considered.

As we engage with the substance of this motion it will be essential to work with key stakeholders, including the Department of Health, the Department of Justice and Community Safety and Victoria Police, to consider what legislative options may be available and appropriate to deliver the intent of the existing cannabis cautioning guidelines and minimise risk of unintended consequences. We must not inadvertently create rigid frameworks that hinder a police officer's ability to assess a dynamic situation and act in the best interests of both the individual and the wider community. I will come back to where I began, which is that this is a health issue.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:48): I also rise to speak on Ms Payne's motion today. I have to admit I love talking to Ms Payne about this topic. I really enjoy the debate. We come from

completely different sides of belief in this. I really do enjoy talking to her about it, and there has been a lot about cannabis, hemp, all this sort of stuff, which I have turned a little bit of a corner on. This is not one of them.

I think that human rights is an interesting space, because there is a fine balance between individual liberties and community safety. It is an interesting one for us to balance and make sure we get right. I am going to raise some of those things. This is Parliament, you have to remember, so it is about debate, it is about differing ideas, and it is my responsibility to bring up the areas I do not agree with. One of the issues that I have when it comes to cannabis use – and I learned this during the cannabis inquiry – is that unlike with alcohol and other drugs, there is not a measure to use when it comes to impairment. I think that is a huge issue. So then it comes down to somebody who is already altered in the way they perceive things to make a decision about whether or not they can drive or do certain things like operate machinery.

This to me is a concern. There needs to be a way to measure impairment, because of course an individual – I should not say 'of course', because even that is debatable, but maybe I gave away a bit of my own bias there – should have the right to make decisions about their own life. That, I believe, is a given. But everything we do and every activity we undertake can have an impact on somebody else, so there must be a way, I believe, to measure impairment. Whether it is alcohol or whether it is other drugs that affect the cerebellum, maybe it is testing like that. Who knows? But come up with something. According to what I have read, there is a lot of different research going on. I would like to see more put into that.

I also will say that one of the things that we talk about here is the number of cautions given. We made this change – it even says so in this motion, I believe – that there should be an ability for cautions to be given at police discretion for minor offences and first-time offences. If it is for first-time offences, why would we uncap the amount of times that people are allowed to commit an offence? Surely that is completely counterintuitive. I believe it is. If there is a caution given and there is discretion given to an individual like a police officer for a first-time offence, there should be absolutely no reason to take away the number around that. It should be for a first-time offence. It is pretty black and white, I believe.

The third thing is I believe that a lot of this research completely overlooks the harms that are directly related to cannabis use. There are some, and I am going to talk about some of those not in my opinion but according to science. This is another reason why I do not want to see a blank cheque given just over and over again, 'Yeah, sure, you can flout the law and you can get away with it,' because even for that person making a choice – and to be honest, if that is your choice to smoke pot or whatever, it does not bother me – it is not going to be good for that person in the long run, not according to my opinion but because of the medical evidence that proves it.

Sixty peer-reviewed studies show cannabis is causal to 33 different types of cancer, double the number caused by tobacco and creating an even greater medical burden than tobacco does. That is interesting when we hear these things framed not as a social issue but as a medical issue and it is saying that it is causal to 33 cancers. If you are able to over and over again use a substance that is going to put you at risk of developing 33 extra cancers that you would not be at risk if you were not consuming it, is that going to put pressure on the healthcare system or take it off? I would say it would put a hell of a lot of pressure on. It ignores that 43 per cent of Australia's smoking-related costs – this was a decade ago – were from cancers. I know that has gone up. If we are now taking the brakes off – and I think it is important to have brakes on these things – we have to realise that there is absolutely a health cost.

Let us talk about it for a minute as a health issue, not a social issue, which I believe is splitting hairs, really, but let us do that. This is going to have an impact on the healthcare system. It omits other proven health harms such as birth defects, child cancers, psychosis, depression, suicide and violence – violence is one, according to the data – which are all heavily evidenced in peer-reviewed research.

It is so funny that sometimes when we talk about this in relation to crime there is almost this view that, 'Oh, the way to address violent crime is it would be a lot better if everyone was stoned.' The data says something quite different. I have shared a story both in committee and here in this place of one of my very good friends growing up who fell victim to one of these side effects, as rare as they might be. You can talk about that; I am sure you are about to. I have an extremely good friend, somebody who is extremely dear to me, who suffers frontal lobe damage. She has got temporal lobe damage from smoking marijuana. Sure, it could have been purer. People say maybe that is why we need to regulate it. On that, in California, according to the data – in fact I will read it, because I know it will be picked up by somebody – they say the California taskforce on cannabis regulation has confirmed that the black market there remains larger than the legal market. Even that argument, if you look at the data, does fall a little bit flat. But for my good friend it has been absolutely devastating. Every time you see her, you see this life of potential. She was one of my dearest friends. She will never work again. She now has to live in care. That is devastating and that is because of drug use. We cannot look at these things – I understand that it is good to talk about how we should give unending cautions – and not talk about why it is an illegal substance in the first place.

Just as a matter of time, I do not think that the way to deal with the crime crisis is to make criminal activities legal. It does fix the data, but it fixes nothing about the reality of what is happening on the street and in people's lives. These are things that I think, as uncomfortable as they may be, we have to absolutely look at. During the cannabis inquiry another thing made me very uncomfortable. I have spoken about drug use and I have experienced some incredible tragedy – I am talking death, I am talking so extreme I will not even go into it – because of drug use. I am not ashamed to say it: I hate drugs. Not so much cannabis, I am not going to put that in the same bundle. But I hate them because they have cost me the lives of people extremely dear to me. What I will say is I was extremely uncomfortable when we went up to Canberra. These things sometimes can be a bit of a Trojan Horse. I know you will not like me talking about that, but in Canberra it started with just cannabis. You get a $100 fine. But now, there, it does not matter what drug it is, you get a $100 fine, with no regard for what that is doing to people's lives, people's potential, people's ability to cope and the families around them.

I am open to many more conversations on this, but I will say this: I am far from convinced. I do not see how normalising drug use in any way, shape or form is healthy when cannabis leads to higher rates of psychosis, higher rates of depression, higher rates of disengagement from work or school or whatever – *(Time expired)*

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (14:59): I rise to speak in support of Ms Payne's motion, and I thank her for bringing this important debate before the chamber today. This, at its heart, is a motion about fairness, about evidence and about a commonsense, health-based approach to drug reform in this state. It asks Victoria to stop derailing people's lives for possession of a small amount of cannabis and to put into law what Victoria Police have already recognised themselves in policy: that cautioning should be the default response for minor personal possession. The Greens support this motion because we have long said that drug use should be treated as a health issue, not a criminal justice issue. Our policy platform on reducing alcohol, tobacco and other drug harm is crystal clear. Harm minimisation is often the most appropriate way to reduce the adverse health, social and economic consequences of drug use.

Cannabis has been prohibited in Australia for almost a century. The prohibition has not stopped people from using cannabis – in fact the opposite. What it has done is expose people to criminal charges, police contact, court processes and long-term consequences for conduct that should not actually be criminal in the first place. The material circulated by Ms Payne makes the problem very clear. Victoria Police have updated their operational manual, actually in 2024, to recommend the use of caution rather than arrest for personal possession of cannabis, which is a welcome shift by the police. But the data that we have seen recently shows that this shift is not working as intended. Crime stats reveal that cautioning remains low at 37 per cent, while arrests for personal possession of small amounts of cannabis remain at 48 per cent. Around 4000 arrests are still occurring each year, and of this group of

course – as we see in so many spaces across the state – there is a disproportionate impact on First Nations people. First Nations men have the highest arrest to caution ratios across almost every age group, and First Nations Victorians generally are 11 times more likely to be arrested for cannabis possession than other groups. It is not fair, it is not consistent, it is certainly not a best practice public health response to what is a health issue and it in no way serves justice.

The Greens justice principles are grounded in reducing harm, in reducing the overuse of criminalisation and imprisonment where they do not achieve public interest outcomes for the justice system and in addressing the structural causes of contact with the justice system. We know that criminal charges, where they are used, do not land equally on different demographics in our population, and criminal charges are not neutral here. They can make it harder to get work, harder to keep housing, harder to comply with existing corrections conditions and harder to break cycles of disadvantage and addiction, which is really pertinent to issues that people may come into contact with if they are arrested on minor possession charges. The Fitzroy Legal Service has described exactly those kinds of impacts, including where possession charges have arisen from family violence and welfare call-outs and cannabis has been used as an aggravating factor in sentencing. We know police discretion, as it is used in this state, can be applied unevenly and can be applied unfairly. We have seen that from the stats. Discretion does depend on the officer; the suburb; the person's age and their race, housing status and appearance; and their record or their perceived attitude. Despite us hearing continually that racial profiling no longer occurs, that is unfortunately not what we see in the stats. We know that it is still occurring in practice and needs further action to stamp it out.

Once again, here we see a good policy, when it is hidden in the police manual, by all available evidence not actually being used and implemented and having the outcome of reduced arrests on the street. It is not giving effect to a legal protection and to a shift in practice that Victoria Police, based on its own policy change, clearly wants to effect. It is not providing legal protection in practice, and in this case, as Ms Payne has pointed out, the policy here – the Victoria Police manual – is barely public. The briefing notes that we have seen have noted that many legal and health stakeholders are actually still unaware of this 2024 operational manual change and that the Victoria Police manual is very difficult for ordinary people and their legal representatives – and in fact even for members of Parliament, I will note – to access. It is only available on a CD-ROM, and you need to send a cheque to Victoria Police, which is pretty extraordinary in 2026. I thank Ms Payne, after going through this ordeal of obtaining the latest version recently, for sharing a PDF with my office, which will be treasured so we do not have to go through that.

This is a good policy change that Victoria Police have made internally. However, it needs further support and effect to be recognised and acted on in practice. That is why we support the thrust of Ms Payne's motion to make sure that this change is done publicly and is put in an actionable way before cops on the beat and the rest of the Victoria Police workforce. If the law continues to favour arrests, people will continue to be arrested. If the government agrees with Victoria Police that cautioning should be the default, then it should make that clear in legislation. This is also consistent with a broader harm reduction approach, which the Greens have called for. The Greens have called for the legalisation of personal drug use, the legal regulation of cannabis, pill testing, expanded treatment and rehabilitation and policies that direct people to health services and addiction support rather than punishment, which can exacerbate disadvantage and inhibit recovery. My Greens colleague Aiv Puglielli has put it plainly in his standing petition: Victoria needs to get smarter on drugs, and people who use drugs should be directed to health services for help, not prison for harm.

Though we have heard some wideranging comments from MPs in the debate, this motion does not ask the Parliament to solve every issue in drug law reform today. It does ask us to take one practical, evidence-based step to realise Victoria Police's own internal policy intent and to make cautioning real, consistent and enforceable. No-one's life should be derailed over a joint. I thank Ms Payne for bringing this motion to the house, and the Greens are pleased to support it.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (15:06): I am very pleased to rise to speak on Ms Payne's motion today regarding the changes that have been made to the Victoria Police operating manual in relation to guidance on adult cannabis cautioning, the recitation of a range of crime statistics and a request and a call for the government to investigate options for legislative reform to the cannabis cautioning scheme. In listening to her contribution and the genesis of the motion here today, the diligent work that our colleagues in Legalise Cannabis have undertaken in the last couple of years demonstrates the steadfast tenacity – I suspect that is probably the best way to describe it – with which they have pursued these issues. Certainly, having spent many hours in a range of inquiries dealing with some of these matters, it demonstrates the steadfast commitment that they, Ms Payne and Mr Ettershank, have to this issue.

What we see before us today is obviously a ventilation of pretty sensible sections of the Victoria Police operating manual in relation to the guidance the Chief Commissioner of Police is setting out to sworn officers here in the state of Victoria about their approach to the issuing of cautions with respect to those who would otherwise have been liable for an offence. I think that in the context of debate here – and I know that members in this contribution have walked this important line – and I think more broadly, it is important to say that the Victoria Police Act 2013 is very clear that operational decisions about policing in the state of Victoria should be made by the chief commissioner and that it is not appropriate for government or for ministers to be issuing directions to the chief commissioner about how police do their job. That is not what this motion calls for. I think the motion is very, very clear in calling for a legislative framework, and that is entirely appropriate. That is the way that these matters should be dealt with. But I think more broadly, in the broader community, if others are engaging in commentary on this I think it is an important line to hold, because I do not want to be in a state where politicians direct police how to do their jobs. The law should direct police, and the law should create the framework that police enforce, but I think the protections in the police act serve us all very well in a democracy.

The role that cautioning plays in policing is an important one. It is not just in the context of cannabis-related offences that the guidance that exists in the police operating manual from the chief commissioner to sworn officers in the state is an important part of how policing is undertaken in the state of Victoria. It is not a new function, and it is not a new element of the way that the police do their job. It applies in a range of settings, so I think it is an important feature of the way that policing is undertaken in this state, and that it is undertaken thoughtfully and in accordance with established processes and procedures, I think, is critical. More broadly, Ms Watt in her contribution did articulate a very clear position on behalf of the government that we do understand that harm reduction, particularly in respect to cannabis, is a very important part of the government's policy framework, particularly for personal use or personal possession, and that we will do whatever we can do for individuals to prevent drug-related harm through the use of diversionary processes, referral to treatment, early intervention – everything that we can do as a government to support or to prevent offence escalation for those involved. Certainly the way that Victoria Police undertake their approach to tackling drug harm is targeted at the serious and organised criminal ends of the system, leaving the issues around non-trafficable small personal quantities not in accordance with prescription able to be cautioned within the framework set out by the chief commissioner in the operating manual as an alternative to laying charges. Obviously that has the very important benefit for those individuals of keeping them out of the justice system and reducing the harm that may be associated with the pathway that criminalisation of that sort of behaviour leads to.

The framework that exists here in the manual, which has been described and uncovered through Ms Payne's work, demonstrates that this is the sort of benefit that Victoria Police has recognised in this approach. It is important to say that police are trained and have the discretion to determine what a proportionate response in these circumstances is, and it is important that the independence of Victoria Police in making those determinations on a case-by-case basis is reflected. The policy intent of the motion to try and provide a greater legislative basis for that is something that obviously Ms Payne is keenly advocating for, and the government, in supporting the motion, notes that that work would have

to be done to figure out how that would operate and is clearly open to the consideration of that work being undertaken.

I think the other broader question that we have – and obviously the debate has strayed a little bit from the intent of this – is to look at how individuals who may be caught with small amounts of cannabis receiving cautions in accordance with the framework are then sort of merged a little bit into the role that charging for cannabis-related offences occurs within the context of a range of other charges that have been brought against individuals. I think in some of the other contributions so far in the debate that may have blurred a little. I think that it is quite clear that the intent in general terms of cautioning arrangements – what they are designed to do – is to ensure that individuals are warned and cautioned and diverted from engagement with the criminal justice system. I think that is distinct and separate to the question of people who are being charged with a series of other crimes having a cannabis-related crime added to their charge sheet, and I do not think it is helpful in the context of the debate to blur those two issues, because they are fundamentally different and distinct.

We do know that people in Victoria use cannabis. There is reality to that, and we know that the effects of that use can vary considerably from one individual to the other. That is why it is important that the range of supports, the range of treatments and the range of other sorts of programs that we need as a state are consistent with the harm minimisation framework. It is why organisations like Victoria Police in their role in our criminal justice system have taken the time to develop processes and procedures as outlined in the operating manual to recognise that framework and to understand that there are circumstances where it is appropriate for individuals to be treated with a caution rather than a charge. That is a decision that police should be making on a case-by-case and independent basis.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (15:16): Our motion does nothing more today than ask the government to formalise in legislation what has been an established police procedure – but one that is not being applied evenly and one that very few people outside of a few Victoria Police officers even seem to know about. The cannabis cautioning program has been around since 1998, and since 2024 – as Ms Payne explained – the Victoria Police operations manual has recommended the use of unlimited cautions for personal cannabis possession over and above and in lieu of arrests. This is very good news. After seeing a disappointing lack of reform in the cannabis space, this represents real progress.

We have spoken many times about the wasted police and court resources that go into prosecuting cannabis possession charges and just as many times about the disastrous, life-changing consequences imposed on people who have been busted for a small amount of weed, so this change of procedure is very welcome. Unfortunately, as my colleague Ms Payne noted, the new policy has not translated into more cautions being issued or fewer arrests being made, so we are still averaging around 4000 people a year being arrested simply for having a small amount of cannabis on their person. At a time when Victoria Police is facing chronic staff shortages and there are currently, I think, somewhere around 1500 vacant positions for sworn officers that need to be filled and we are seeing a rise in violent crime, do we really want our police wasted on taking down kids smoking joints? The police certainly do not want to. They know it is a waste of time, and they are more aware than anyone in this chamber of how a single brush with the criminal justice system can cascade disastrously and destroy lives.

The legislative change we are seeking is modest, necessary and already part of the police procedure, so why don't we just do it? If anyone is unconvinced that this would be welcomed by police, they should look at the ACT. In Canberra, of course, decriminalisation of possession of small amounts of cannabis occurred in 2020, and six years later it is still working just fine. This is a big step forward from simply cautioning. The chief commissioner of the federal police in the ACT told the parliamentary inquiry into personal use when we visited there that while police initially had many concerns about the drug changes, none of them had come to fruition – other than that police arrests are down by 94 per cent. It is worth noting in that context that a health department review of the legislation after its first five years of operation found that usage among young people had actually decreased and there had been no increase in hospital admissions or any social or health indicators that could be identified.

I would like to address some of the contributions my colleagues have made in this debate. But before I do, I just want to talk about the recent 420 event. We held that in Sunshine, and I would like to compare that to previous events in Flagstaff Gardens. It is a tale of two 420s if you will. 420 is an annual protest and a celebration of cannabis. It is a protest against prohibition, and so people turn up, have a bit of a picnic, light up a spliff at 4:20 and then go home. It is all very pleasant and very chilled – or at least it was. The 420 events held in Flagstaff Gardens in the last couple of years were marked by an intimidating and excessive police presence. Last year we had 60 armed police officers – who were being paid, I think, double time and a half or triple time because it was on Easter Sunday – with sniffer dogs, basically searching, handcuffing and detaining anyone they thought might have cannabis on their person. It was such an unconscionable waste of resources and did nothing more than harass and traumatise otherwise law-abiding people and foster resentment and mistrust of the police, and that was not lost on the police concerned. Compare that with the event held at a park in Sunshine four weeks ago. There were half a dozen police officers, but they kept their distance and were both exceptionally professional and unfailingly polite. There were people consuming cannabis responsibly, listening to music, drinking tea and eating cakes, and that was because it was called, after all, the 420 High Tea. It was extremely pleasant and everyone had a lovely time. Why can't that be the norm?

I want to return to the motion, but before I do that I would just like to pick up the comments from Dr Heath, because we have both been through the personal use bill inquiry and the workplace drug testing inquiry, so we have heard a lot of witnesses' evidence. I want to say, first and foremost, that I mean absolutely no disrespect, nor do I belittle your life experiences with friends and such who have been affected, as you said, by drugs – I think probably in a more generic sense. There are thousands and thousands of peer-reviewed studies, and it is very easy to tick a selective group of those and say, 'It's terrible.' It is basically the DFA, or the Drug Free Australia, approach to research. Mainly they footnote themselves or these ancient studies. It is also known as the Reader's Digest devil's lettuce approach to medical research. We have been through these inquiries. We have heard so much evidence, and it is quite clear that cannabis consumption has not fundamentally changed in consumption quantities over decades. It is quite clear that there are no major medical indicators coming from places where it has been fully commercialised, and that is the reality.

Most importantly, this discussion was very well clarified by Mr Batchelor in his contribution. We are not debating: is cannabis good for you or bad for you? We could equally debate: is Coca Cola good or bad for you? And I suspect it is worse. It would certainly be much worse if we were debating alcohol or tobacco. It is a fraction of the harms. Putting that aside, this debate is: should we be keeping young people in particular and people from marginalised communities, who we know are overwhelmingly the victims of the justice system for minor offences, out of the criminal justice system? That is the debate. That is the question we are seeking to clarify, not: is weed good for you or bad for you?

Serving police officers want clarity and they want certainty, and as Ms Payne noted, the police we spoke to want to know what they should be doing. They do not like grey areas. The formalisation of the cautioning scheme in legislation will fundamentally help police. They know that their time is being wasted. I think Ms Payne quoted Greg Denham, an experienced officer, and those were his exact words: 'Nobody wants to do weed paperwork for a minor offence.' Community, justice and health stakeholders all agree on the damage that even one encounter with the criminal justice system can inflict on people. They are in lockstep on the need to stop arresting people and funnelling them through the criminal justice system for a small amount of weed. And 80 per cent of Victorians agree that it should not be a criminal offence. I do not know how many times we have debated issues where there is that level of community consensus about legislation that should be changed. But we are not debating that, we are just trying to say, 'Keep people out of the criminal justice system in the short term.' Cautioning should be legislated. It is the best way to reduce those systemic biases towards First Nations Victorians, young working-class people and other marginalised communities and ensure that there is consistent and equitable application of the cautioning scheme. I commend the motion to the chamber.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:26): I am pleased to rise to speak to the motion put forward by Ms Payne today and to speak to it a little bit earlier than I expected, because I see that

the opposition list has completely collapsed. Mrs McArthur, I am disappointed that you have run out of steam. She is not engaging with me at the moment, but I am sure she will be in the next motion slot. But only one speaker from the coalition – that is okay; good of you to turn up anyway.

I do appreciate the opportunity to speak on this motion moved by my region colleague Ms Payne and I thank her for raising what has been quite an interesting discussion. It is far from the first time that we have discussed cannabis and related matters in this place. As has been referenced by colleagues, including Dr Heath and Mr Ettershank just now, we have engaged through the Legal and Social Issues Committee with various inquiries, in particular in relation to an analysis of the ACT model of decriminalisation, which I have spoken about numerous times in this place and may come back to to address some of the points raised by the members if time permits. What we effectively have here is a rather good situation in a lot of ways, as Ms Payne referred to in her opening remarks – that is, that Victoria Police is already taking the proactive step and, with the Victoria Police manual, undertaking the caution approach, which seems to be inherently eminently sensible. Effectively the position that we are in today is a situation of legislating to reflect reality.

I do want to note at the outset, though, that whilst at a high level that is a perfectly sensible and straightforward thing to do, and the government will be supporting this motion today for that reason and because we do maintain a health approach to the matter of cannabis and alcohol and other drug issues more generally, it is important to note that the statutory processes under section 10 of the Victoria Police Act 2013 naturally prevent the government from directing Victoria Police in relation to enforcing, investigating or prosecuting individuals. I would expect and hope that the reasons behind that restriction are eminently obvious to all members. What this does is ensure that Victoria Police can operate independently in undertaking its duty to enforce the law, including Victoria Police's discretion when it comes to cautioning individuals. As such, even though we would effectively be legislating what is already in practice, it would behove us to be mindful of any such step that we were taking to remove Victoria Police's ability to exercise their discretion. The appropriate consultation processes would therefore inevitably need to take place with Victoria Police and with the Department of Justice and Community Safety and the Department of Health in order to ensure that the enactment of this change would not bring about any adverse, unintended consequences.

Like many other members, this is something that has recently come to my attention: these updates to the Victoria Police manual, the VPM. They are issued by the Chief Commissioner of Police periodically under section 60 of the Victoria Police Act 2013, and it states that at law police members do have discretion as to whether enforcement action is taken against persons found to be committing an offence, but naturally that goes with the obligation to enforce the law, keep the peace, protect life and property and prevent offences. Under the cannabis cautioning program, police may currently issue caution notices to individuals aged 18 years or over who have been apprehended for the use or possession of small quantities of cannabis. The aim of course is to divert individuals away from the criminal justice system without further action or follow-up. The VPM's caution sets out the policy, guidance and instructions to members for the operation of the cannabis cautioning program, so they can of course be used for summary offences. They can also be used for some indictable offences which are triable summarily, so for all adult cautions, which additionally includes cautions for shop steal, drug diversion excluding cannabis and other adult cautions. There must be sufficient evidence to charge the person with the offence. The person must consent to the caution. Prior criminal history does not necessarily deem a person ineligible for that caution, and they may be cautioned for more than one offence arising out of the same set of circumstances. In relation to cannabis specifically, these rules apply if the amount is in relation to a small quantity – that is deemed to be up to 50 grams of dried leaf, stem, stalks and/or seeds – and the cannabis must of course be for personal use only.

There are various end processes which are followed, whereby the investigating member will be required to provide the person with details of the offence committed as well as explaining that they do not have to consent to the caution and may choose to have the matter dealt with in court; that the caution will be recorded in police records, however it is not disclosable as part of a criminal history

check; that it is a formal process and provides an opportunity for the person to consider and address the offending behaviour and avoid entering the criminal justice system; that after being cautioned, any further offending may result in the person appearing in court; and that once it is issued the caution is final. They must also have an informal discussion to seek the underlying reasons for the offence and to discuss inappropriate behaviour and its consequences. If an individual being offered this caution consents, the police officer then completes the relevant caution form, processes the drugs as property in police possession and provides the official caution notice. It is a straightforward and far more commonsense approach to dealing with these types of offences – people seeking to consume small amounts of cannabis and having it on them for their own personal use. We are not talking about large quantities, and we are not talking about drug dealers, we are talking about these people that do choose to take it up.

There are some comparisons with the previous ACT model, which Dr Heath referred to, but it is not the same as the simple cannabis offence notice, which was the charge of $100 that the ACT had in place. That is probably an evolution, probably another step forward, which was one of the various options open to our inquiry to consider as part of its deliberations. Indeed whilst there is still further analysis being done by the government on the way in which we progress reforms in this space going forward, whether that may be an option, that would actually be a step-up, and that would have no relation to the decriminalisation of any other types of substances. I do not necessarily buy into the wedge argument that is being made there, because the whole point of having legislatures – the whole point of having statutory reviews – is to evaluate, consider and challenge proposals; when appropriate, put them into legislation, into policy and into regulation; and then of course measure the outcomes of that. Indeed through the ACT model we did see that the model appears to be very successful in working for the ACT. It is a unique jurisdiction in many ways of course, the ACT, but it is in this case particularly unique, given its history of having a different legal framework in the lead-up to its decriminalisation with those simple cannabis offence notices. Whilst I have spoken frequently in this chamber in support of what the ACT has done, the number one question that I would like to see answered – that is not putting it on any one person – is: how do we best replicate those results in Victoria? I think if we did have that surety that we would have the same results in Victoria, it would be a very straightforward thing for us to be considering to legislate at some point. But factoring in the various different circumstances, that is where that further work needs to be done.

In the time I have left I would also like to reflect on the comments about health impacts. Now, I am certainly not an expert, and as someone who is not particularly personally au fait with these types of drugs, I am probably not the best-placed person to ask. But as someone who is been on quite a journey with this debate – indeed, having a family member who is no longer with us in large part because of difficulties with drugs, which started with cannabis – it is something that I have reflected on. My personal views have been challenged, because the more I engage with the subject, the more I see about it, the more convinced I am that having these discussions out in the open, having a healthcare framework on it and not an overly legalistic and overly punitive one, is the best way in which we can support people and indeed divert people off bad pathways. Certainly that is the case with pill testing and the on-the-spot drug information and advice that we can give people. I would just register those remarks to conclude my contribution to this motion, which I will be supporting today.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:36): I will say from the outset that the Libertarian Party will be supporting this motion from Ms Payne regarding the cautioning system for cannabis possession. I do so with some hesitation though. I do not like the cautioning system at all, and I doubt Ms Payne does much either. It is nothing more than lipstick on the pig of prohibition, in my view, and I think it is time to call out the bulldust that we hear from the major parties in here on this topic. Every time I hear cannabis debated in this place, it makes me more angry.

Firstly, I will start with the government. The government claims that they treat drug use as a health issue. A police officer does not give a caution to someone who eats too many hamburgers. They give them a caution because they are committing a crime. Either they are committing a crime that you think

is bad enough that they should be removed from society, or they are not really committing a crime that is bad enough. You do not really think that they are hurting anyone and give them a caution. That is what is happening. You are not treating it as a health problem at all. The government claims to care about making an impact on organised crime. Well, you know what would make an impact on organised crime? Taking away a billion-dollar market from them. That is what would make an impact on organised crime. It seems that every action that the government takes makes it easier for organised crime in Victoria and makes it more palatable for organised crime in Victoria.

On the opposition side I heard Dr Heath talk about how we have got to remember why we prohibited cannabis in the first place. Let me tell you why Australia prohibited cannabis in the first place. We did it in 1925 because we got pressured under a stupid international agreement, the Geneva Convention on Opium and Other Drugs, even though recreational cannabis use –

Renee Heath: On a point of order, Acting President, I think Mr Limbrick is misleading the house. I would have no clue why we did criminalise it, and I never spoke about that.

David LIMBRICK: I distinctly recall Dr Heath talking about why we prohibited it in the first place, but here is why we prohibited it in the first place. Australia got bullied into signing an international agreement despite having almost no recreational use of cannabis in Australia in 1925. It was available over the counter as a medicinal substance with almost no regulation. We got bullied into signing that agreement. That is why we prohibit it in Australia. Recreational cannabis use only became a big thing much later on.

The opposition talks about respecting individual liberty. I call BS on that as well, because you cannot respect individual liberty when you want to criminalise someone and give them a caution because they are consuming a plant that you do not like or you do not approve of. That is not what liberty is about. Liberty is about respecting people's individual choices, whether you approve of them or not. This is at the core – we see the major parties here make no movement on this whatsoever. They just continue with prohibition. The police know it is a joke. The police do not want to give out cautions and arrest people for possession of cannabis. They know that they have got far more important things to do, like arresting people for arson attacks or for home invasions or all these other things. But instead they get stuck giving cautions out to people for consuming flowers that the government has said that they are not allowed to have. It is the most ridiculous use of police resources that you could think of, yet we continue to do it, and the opposition still complains that we have a lack of police resources. Well, why don't we get them to stop doing silly things like policing possession of cannabis, because it is just a total waste of time? We always end up talking about the health effects. Whatever health effects happen, whether it is illegal or not, they are going to happen anyway. We have one of the highest cannabis consumption rates in the world, despite prohibition. It makes no difference whatsoever. At least in a legal, regulated market we would know what products we were getting.

That brings me to my other point. We do have a legal, regulated market in Australia through the medicinal cannabis system. It is working pretty well, and pretty much the main difference between someone who accesses cannabis through the black market or the legal market is that they are not as knowledgeable and they do not know how to access it through the medicinal market. It is a bit of a joke, really. There was another reference to California and how Californian legalisation did not destroy the organised crime trade in that state. That is actually very true, and we should be able to understand exactly why if we look at the newspapers in Victoria every morning. We know exactly why we get black markets involved in otherwise legal products like tobacco and alcohol: it is because of excessive taxes, and that is exactly what California screwed up. They screwed it up through excessive taxes and excessive regulation. It was still profitable for organised crime to be involved in the drug market there, and they continued to be so in exactly the same way as organised crime is involved in the tobacco and alcohol market in Victoria. Despite these being legal products, it is very lucrative for organised crime to get involved in the same way that organised crime is involved in the cannabis market in California. The lesson for us all is very clear: if we want to undermine organised crime and if we want to maximise

the useful use of police resources, the thing to do is to have a legal, regulated market for cannabis, which is what we should have had all along.

I do not like the ACT model either. The ACT model does nothing to address the supply side, which is organised crime; in fact it makes it easier for organised crime. I do not like the ACT model, despite it being a very slight improvement for consumers at least. It does not address the organised crime model. If anyone has been paying attention, organised crime is out of control in this state. We need to do everything we can to attack organised crime, and the way to attack organised crime is to undermine their markets, which the government have the ability to do, and they choose not to.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (15:43): I am pleased to speak on this motion. Certainly from my perspective, harm minimisation is where the evidence points us, and any opportunity for the police force to participate in harm minimisation by choosing to use a caution in the context of cannabis is a good idea. To provide a legislative framework that allows for a more consistent approach is also a constructive approach. We know about the absence of referral to supports and that taking the opportunity to figure out that a different course of action to deal with the issues that are sitting behind any kind of problematic behaviours associated with the use of cannabis is a better approach than a punitive or punishment approach to what should be seen as a health issue if it is causing problems.

I appreciate that Legalise Cannabis Victoria is very clear that use of cannabis should not be seen as a problem in itself. But we know with many legal drugs like alcohol that people do have problems with addiction, and that certainly is the case for cannabis as well, so it makes a lot of sense to include a process that provides a connection between a health service and a therapeutic support framework and the policing framework that we have got at the moment. That is where the cautions sit. If we put this scenario in the context of Indigenous – Aboriginal – people and their experience of this, as has already been said in this chamber, we know that discretion to caution can inadvertently be used inconsistently and in a way that might inadvertently be judgemental of a person's characteristics or circumstances rather than independent. That is another reason why having a more consistent approach and a more legislated framework that gives some clarity to avoiding discrimination in this context is also useful.

From the perspective of regional Victoria, policing in regional Victoria is a very personal thing. For any community that has got a police officer, or any police officer that has got a community, police officers live and work in their communities. There are no other suburbs. They live and work in their community, so they are almost compulsorily required to be on local committees and are shoved into leadership roles. Hence they know everybody, and this then becomes a really challenging situation to use cautions and not use cautions in different situations. Some families they know very well, others they do not. I think overall this is a very good idea. In the very short amount of time that I have had to contribute on this, I think there is a lot to be gained by supporting such a notion.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:48): First and foremost, I just want to thank everybody who made a contribution today. Everyone made very thoughtful and considered contributions. Ms Watt, Dr Heath, Ms Copsey, Mr Batchelor, my colleague Mr Ettershank, Mr Galea, Mr Limbrick and Ms Ermacora, thank you all for your valuable contributions.

At the outset it is really important that we do bring our personal experiences to what we debate in this place. With all due respect, I think it is really important to note that, be they experiences of loved ones or those that are dear to us, both positive and negative, those experiences are always are going to have weight in how we debate in this place, including, as Ms Ermacora said, from regional perspectives through to inner-city living or suburban perspectives.

I would like to point out, in relation to Dr Heath's contribution around measuring impairment – and I think we have all reiterated this throughout this debate – that is not what this motion is trying to debate. When it comes to impairment, though, police do have the ability to test impairment. But what is happening currently, particularly with the roadside drug testing, is that police are measuring presence, not impairment. They have the option to test impairment, but they do not use that. I guess it does also

highlight, while we are here today talking about cannabis cautions, that police have the option to use the caution but they may not be privy to that information or may not know that it is accessible. We are calling for this for that clarity – no more grey areas for police. They want to get on and do their job, and they want to do it well. They want to serve their community. As Ms Ermacora pointed out, many police officers are valuable members of their community, particularly in regional Victoria. This is about taking the pressure off police.

They have finite resources that need to be utilised elsewhere, particularly while these brazen attacks are going on all over this state. Picking a kid up for cannabis is not high on their priority list, and we want to take that pressure off them. Mr Batchelor, I thank you for your comments in relation to where the law should direct police. I think we are all in agreeance here that legislating policy, good policy that police are already using, is a step in the right direction to providing that clarity, providing that guidance and removing that grey area.

Another point I just wanted to make, and these are conversations I have had in and outside of this chamber, is when I make reference to roughly 4000 Victorians being arrested each year I want to make it very clear that I am talking about Crime Statistics Agency data, and I am talking about individual, unique offences. That is someone actually just being picked up for cannabis possession only. And when we do say that there are roughly 4000 a year, that is us keeping track of data over the last five years, including those unique offences. We do also have the data for offences where there may be cannabis as part of other convictions. But when I do specifically talk about individual arrests, I am talking about individuals.

I think this is a fairly easy step in the right direction because, as my colleague Mr Ettershank pointed out, 80 per cent of Victorians think that cannabis use should not be a criminal offence. So let us legislate. Let us let the police get on with their jobs. I commend the motion to the house.

Motion agreed to.

Budget 2026–27

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (15:52): I move:

That this house:

(1) condemns the Allan Labor government's reckless disregard for Victoria's future demonstrated in its 2026–27 state budget, and in particular:

(a) the expected increase in net debt to $199.3 billion in 2029–30, up from $21.8 billion in 2014;

(b) the expected increase in interest expenses to $11.8 billion per year by 2029–30, up from $2.1 billion in 2014;

(c) the expected increase in total taxation revenue to $50.2 billion per year by 2029–30, up from $17.9 billion in 2014;

(d) the expected increase in employee expenses to $45.5 billion per year by 2029–30, up from $18.5 billion in 2014;

(2) notes that the financial burden on Victorian families by 2029–30 will be:

(a) net debt per Victorian household of over $70,000;

(b) an interest bill of over $32 million each and every day;

(3) recognises that the burden of repaying this debt will disproportionately fall on, and reduce the future opportunities of, younger Victorians;

(4) calls on the government to commit to a long-term economic plan to secure Victoria's future so that it can prioritise policy solutions to:

(a) ease cost-of-living pressures;

(b) keep Victorians safe;

(c) strengthen healthcare; and

(d) enable home ownership.

I am pleased to move this motion on Labor's budget and finally get the opportunity to put forward some truths about it, minus the political spin, wishful thinking and, in some cases, borderline dishonesty we have heard in the last week. It is, of course, an election budget. As ABC business reporter Daniel Ziffer observed, the most important number in this budget is not listed on any of its pages. It is the 206 days until the election. Even Pitcher Partners, sober auditors and accountants, called it a classic election year budget, which is big on voter handouts and light on any significant reforms. The Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry was blunter still. Their chief executive Sally Curtain said:

> Budgets are about choices and business wasn't chosen today.

Last year was Treasurer Symes's first budget, and I noted at the time that we had a new Treasurer but exactly the same attitude. A year on I can confirm: same attitude, same trajectory, same fiscal fantasies, but with one notable difference. At least Tim Pallas had the brazen nerve to own the spending. He seemed quite happy to stand up year after year and boast about how much money he was throwing around, almost daring us to complain. We had to admire the sheer brass neck, however much the numbers made us despair. The new Treasurer takes a different approach. She pretends there is a surplus – and what a surplus it is. The government trumpets an operating surplus of $700 million this financial year, rising to $1 billion next year, the first in seven years, we are told. The Treasurer declared herself very proud. The Premier said Victoria could afford to provide cost-of-living relief right now, because our economy is growing and our budget is in surplus. It is an absolute fiction; the fakest of surpluses. To say you have delivered a surplus while running $7.7 billion in cash deficits is like a household saying it saved $50 at the supermarket while adding $40,000 to the mortgage.

Independent economist Saul Eslake told AAP that the focus on the operating surplus egregiously misrepresents the true state of the Victorian budget. He warned us not to be deceived. The bottom line is that until you start running cash surpluses, you cannot begin to repay debt. Indeed, you cannot stop adding to debt. S&P analyst Rebecca Hrvatin told the ABC that Victoria carries the highest debt in Australia and warned that there is no path to repayment of that debt and a risk that it becomes unsustainable. This is a credit analyst speaking, not a politician. The actual cash deficits tell the real story: $7.7 billion next financial year, rising to $8.1 billion by 2029–30. More than $30 billion in cash deficits over the forward estimates. The government is celebrating the fact that it is paying the minimum on its credit card while the balance keeps climbing and climbing.

I said last year that the government boasted of a surplus but that beneath the veneer lay cash deficits averaging $8 billion. Nothing has changed except the debt is now even larger. Net debt stands at $165 billion today. It will reach $175.6 billion by the end of the next financial year, and by 2030 it will approach $199.3 billion – almost $200 billion. I note that the Treasury managed to keep that figure just below $200 billion. That was clever. Imagine the late nights, the frantic rounding, the creative reprofiling required to land on $199.3 billion rather than a number starting with two. But the number that should truly horrify every Victorian is the interest bill. By the end of the decade we will be paying $11.8 billion a year in debt interest. That is $32 million every single day. Not building a school, not fixing a road, not hiring a nurse – just paying interest on money already spent.

As I said in 2024, every single week the Victorian taxpayer parts with vast sums and receives not a single cent's worth of services or infrastructure in return. Back then the weekly figure was $180 million, now it is heading to $227 million a week. That is the price of a decade of Labor budgets and counting. If you include the whole of the public sector – the water boards, Homes Victoria, VicTrack – total state borrowings approach $300 billion. Let that settle in this chamber for a moment: $300 billion. When Labor came to power in 2014, state debt was $21.4 billion. We are now approaching $300 billion. That is $21.4 billion compared to $300 billion.

I warned about exactly this kind of gamble in previous years when Tim Pallas predicted the economy would grow by a quarter in four years. I said then that it was not just fanciful, it was practically fraud. The fiction continues under his successor. Real gross state product growth for next year has been

slashed from 2.75 per cent to just 1.5 per cent, partly because of the Middle East conflict and partly because the Victorian economy is simply not performing. And yet the entire debt strategy depends on sustained strong growth that may never come. If growth weakens, the whole framework collapses. That is not my assessment, it is the assessment of every serious commentator who has examined these papers. S&P rates Victoria at AA, the lowest credit rating of any mainland Australian state. All three major ratings agencies have warned that Victoria's rapidly rising debt poses a serious risk of further downgrade.

What of the much-spruiked cost-of-living relief? A $2.5 billion package, rego rebates, free public transport, half-price fares – Victorians will welcome any help, of course, but Sally Curtain was right when she said:

> Short-term relief funded on the State's credit card is not an economic strategy. It may ease pressure today, but as every household knows, at some point you have to pay it back – with interest.

I liked RMIT Professor David Hayward's description of this election-year splurge:

> They didn't want to leave any of the chocolates, just in case there was a change of government.

The problem is, Treasurer, the chocolates were bought on the credit card, and you will certainly be leaving that bill behind you.

And what about business, the productive part of the economy that actually generates the wealth this government is so enthusiastic about redistributing? Nothing – no payroll tax reform, no land tax relief, no reduction in the cumulative burden. The COVID debt levy continues until 2033. State tax collections are forecast to exceed $50 billion annually by 2030. Property taxes now account for almost half of all state taxation revenue, up from 18 per cent just a decade ago, as the Property Council of Australia has documented. As Shadow Minister for Small Business I was waiting with great anticipation and interest to hear the Treasurer's commitment to this vital sector. I waited in vain. In an 11-page speech about the cost of living and the economy, the Treasurer found room for a bike track in Haddon and toilet facilities for Coburg reserve, but she could not manage a single mention of small business. It was not mentioned once – not the 700,000 small businesses that employ nearly half of Victoria's private sector workforce, not the local shops, the family businesses or the sole traders. The sector seems not to exist in the Treasurer's universe.

The budget papers give a similar message. Last year the government committed $2.5 million for small business support programs. That commitment has apparently vanished, in its place $1.6 million for one-year-only programs with no ongoing funding. New commitments across the industry, small business and medical research portfolio have fallen 67 per cent, from $26.3 million to just $8.6 million. At a time when small businesses are being hit by payroll tax, land tax, energy costs, insurance, retail crime and falling consumer confidence, this government's answer is a package that expires almost as soon as it begins and a budget speech that pretends the sector does not exist.

As for regional Victoria and my own electorate of Western Victoria, this budget does not just neglect us, it actively takes money away. The mayor of Warrnambool and chair of Regional Cities Victoria Ben Blain said:

> It really seems the budget papers are on Ozempic when it comes to what's coming out to regional and rural Victoria.

The Ararat and Beaufort bypass projects on the Western Highway, critical road safety projects on some of the deadliest stretches of roads in the state, have had $35.5 million stripped from them. Both have been reduced to just $500,000 each in spending for next year – effectively mothballed. The government says the money has been 'reprioritised' to the Western Highway duplication between Ballarat and Stawell, but that project's total cost has been changed, 'to be confirmed', and its completion date is also 'to be confirmed'. So the government has gutted the bypasses and cannot tell us what the duplication will cost, when it will be finished or when the bypasses will ever be built. The Western Highway has one of the worst crash records in the state, and the duplication was supposed to

be completed between 2009 and 2014. More than a decade later we get 'To be confirmed'. The Allan government found $432 million for free and half-price public transport, mostly in Melbourne. But Ararat and Beaufort cannot even get a confirmed timeline for a road upgrade that would save lives.

So regional roads remain a catastrophe. Agriculture funding remains inadequate. And the cost-of-living measures that dominate the headlines – free trams in Melbourne, half-price trains – do precious little for families in Colac, Warrnambool or Hamilton who depend on their cars and are being hit by the very fuel prices this government blames on Donald Trump. Meanwhile the billions continue to flow into the Suburban Rail Loop – $34.5 billion for the first stage alone – a project that gets nowhere near us. There is still no Melbourne airport rail completion date. The Geelong fast rail was axed two years ago, and the $2 billion promised to our region has simply vanished. To me, this is a rotten budget with dubious figures and cynical spin, based on an economic philosophy and political creed which I firmly believe is completely hostile to growth and prosperity in Victoria.

But at the end of the day, it is not what I think that matters. It is for the people of Victoria to decide. When they do, I hope they look beyond the handouts, beyond the fake operating surplus and beyond the weird slogans. Labor has not repaired the roof while the sun was shining. Instead they have borrowed money to print brochures telling us the weather is improving. The Treasurer has given us the final instalment in a decade-long story of higher spending, higher taxes and higher debt – the same old boasts, the same old excuses and the same inevitable course to a poorer, harder future reckoning. As I have said before in this place, Labor politicians are short-term populists who do long-term harm. This budget is the proof. In November Victorians will have their chance to say 'enough'.

So we call on the government in this motion:

> … to commit to a long-term economic plan to secure Victoria's future so that it can prioritise policy solutions to:
>
> (a) ease cost-of-living pressures;
>
> (b) keep Victorians safe;
>
> (c) strengthen healthcare; and
>
> (d) enable home ownership.

I commend the motion to the house.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:09): I am pleased to speak to the motion put forward by Mrs McArthur today. I acknowledge that she bothered to turn up for this one, so it is good to have the opportunity to debate it. Indeed it was a curious contribution there from Mrs McArthur and there is quite a lot of content to get through, so I will try and keep my remarks to the point as much as possible.

We saw this morning the Liberals completely misunderstand the budget once again by not understanding that payments that emanate from 2028 do not actually make any difference to the operating surplus in 2026, but here we go again. I was interested – it piqued my attention – when Mrs McArthur drew attention to comments from the economist David Hayward, particularly in light of his other perhaps more recent comments, which were given just today in the *Age*, where he said that the opposition's path to a cash surplus does not stack up and they had not shown a credible path to achieving it, with the quote:

> One of the problems is they're going to depend on pretty significant cuts to infrastructure to achieve it.

He also said:

> A cash surplus by 2032 seems only possible with major cuts elsewhere …

giving away the game that when the Liberal Party come in here and call to abolish taxes and to reduce debt, what that means is a cut to services. We know that no matter how much they might protest – 'We're doing this; we're doing this' – David Hayward, the economist that my friend Mrs McArthur herself was quoting, says that it would not be possible to do that in the way in which the Liberals are

putting forward. It is a facade. It is a joke, and we know it is a joke because we have had members of the Liberal Party in this place advocating for us to remove and abolish frontline services. We had an adjournment from Mrs Hermans last year, the day of the violence reduction units coming in, calling on the government to abolish what is an early intervention crime-fighting unit. I will come back to your key points down in point (4) later, Mrs McArthur.

You yourself have called on us to remove free TAFE, a cost-of-living measure for Victorians, empowering Victorians to train up and skill up for the future. It is a bit hard for any of us to believe it when the Liberal Party say 'We're not going to make cuts to frontline services,' when all you need to do to see that they are is to look at the statements of Liberal Party members in this chamber. In this chamber you are calling for cuts to frontline services, so do not turn around and say, 'Oh, no, no, we can do all this. Here's our magic pudding of cuts that's not actually going to affect anything or anyone.' It is simply laughable, and it shows once again the economic immaturity of this Liberal Party opposition in Victoria. It is no wonder your interstate colleagues are ashamed to associate themselves with you. It is no wonder they are appalled at the antics which you have displayed, because even when it comes to this topic, which you are supposedly the better managers of, despite all recent evidence to the contrary, you simply cannot get anything to stack up. If you come into this place saying that the government is relying on cash into the budget in two years time for an operating surplus this year, you are simply not credible.

Point (4) of your motion, Mrs McArthur, goes through a number of key points and calls on the government to plan forward in a number of important areas. Cost of living – the government has already brought in 20 per cent off all car and light vehicle registrations for Victorians this year, a very significant cost-of-living measure that is going to go directly to help working Victorians who need it the most. We have also partnered with the Commonwealth, adding to their cuts to the fuel excise by taking that off and giving that concession back for the GST that the states would otherwise be taking as well and therefore increasing the benefit there. There is free public transport for the months of April and May and of course half-price fares for the rest of the year and free fares ongoing for kids under 18 as well. Of course in fact we could also include the regional fare cap. Even under full circumstances regional commuters all the way from Mildura to Mallacoota – wherever you are – only pay the maximum of a metropolitan fare. Those are all real and genuine cost-of-living measures, as is free TAFE, which you call on us to remove; as is free dental for kids; and as is three-year-old kinder, which you also come into this place and advocate for the abolition of. On frontline services, time after time we have brought in cost-of-living measures and they have been shouted down – ineffectively shouted down of course, because you are the Liberal Party I have to say – by those opposite. Every time, almost every cost-of-living measure that we provide that provides meaningful benefit to Victorians is laughed at, dismissed and ignored by the Liberal Party.

On safety, we have a clear plan addressing sentencing, the bail laws and resources. We acknowledge that there is a large resourcing issue with Victoria Police, as there is in every jurisdiction and indeed many places around the world, and we are investing in it. We are investing in putting reservists into police stations. We are investing in those reservists in police stations and in PSOs so that they can go into hotspot shopping centres, as they have already very successfully done on a trial basis over the past few months, including in places like Fountain Gate in my electorate. We have brought in tougher laws for people that assault retail workers – we are bringing in this year workplace protection orders to keep retail and other frontline services safe. We have also brought in the violence reduction unit (VRU), the very same unit that the Liberal Party seeks for us to abolish the day it comes in.

Evan Mulholland interjected.

Michael GALEA: Mr Mulholland, a member of your party, who then went on to be specifically endorsed by the leader of your party, called upon this government to abolish the VRU, and we have still not heard any condemnation of that from anyone in the leadership team. Dr Heath has condemned it, and I commend her for that, but no-one in the Liberal leadership team, let alone your leader, has condemned that. If it is not true, Mr Mulholland, as you are saying, then put up and say that.

On Health, we could talk about the new hospitals. We could talk about Frankston hospital, Monash hospital, Dandenong Hospital, Casey Hospital – all the investments that we are making, and that is just in my region. We could talk about the community hospitals, including again Cranbourne Community Hospital, which is already providing services to the community. Through this budget we will also provide an urgent care clinic, one of the many urgent care clinics – more than 30 – that we will now have across our state, providing that essential primary care that was delivered by this government exclusively at a time when the federal Liberal government was too preoccupied to bother with providing these options to Victorians or Australians. We now have a government investing in it, whether it is Chemist Care Now providing easier access to prescription medications without the need to go through the primary health care network, or whether it is the Victorian virtual emergency department – again rubbished by those opposite. If they even bother to know that it exists, they rubbish it.

And on housing, where do I begin? Where do I begin, Mrs McArthur? I note that this is motion 1420, which was given notice of yesterday. Notice of motion 1430, which was given notice of yesterday by your colleague who sits two to the right from you, is a motion to revoke planning amendments which provide for activity centres, for reasonable density and for townhouse codes, providing those housing options. As the Grattan Institute has said, the number one lever that a state government can pull in order to provide more housing is planning. I know Mr Mulholland knows this and I hope very much that one day he comes back into the fold of supporting housing ambitions and aspirations for young people. I very much look forward to that in his contribution today maybe.

The Grattan Institute has said that is the number one lever, and we are pulling it. We are pulling it earnestly, and Mr Davis and his Liberal Party are trying to handbrake it. You are trying to stop us from building housing, and then you come in here and complain that we are not building housing. Never mind the fact that we are building more houses than any other state or territory. We are already doing that. We acknowledge we have more to do, but you are stopping housing in the areas where it is needed most. You say, like Mr Davis said yesterday, 'Just build it in Clyde South' at the very time when you are saying you are going to have to cut back on government spending and when you have got economists saying you have to dramatically cut back infrastructure. Who is going to service these suburbs? Where are the roads? Where are the schools? Meanwhile we have got empty capacity in the inner-city areas.

Bev McArthur interjected.

Michael GALEA: I will take you up on that, Mrs McArthur. I will take you on a trip to Clyde North and show you all the things that we have invested in. I can tell you we have done so much and it is barely keeping pace with population growth. Meanwhile activity centres are sitting there so close to the city with surplus capacity in schools, transport services and everything else, and they are not being fulfilled because of people like you in the Liberal Party who block and try and stop us from doing anything to support the housing ambitions of young Victorians. On all these issues Labor has a clear policy, and at every opportunity all we see from your side is spin and hypocrisy and dither.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (16:19): I always enjoy a good Wednesday debate, and I thank my colleague Mrs McArthur for her contribution and for bringing to the chamber this motion condemning the Allan Labor government's reckless disregard for Victoria's future, as demonstrated in this state budget. This budget is all excuses and no solutions. We see from this particular budget that the government claims to be in operating surplus. It does not want to talk about a cash surplus, because I think we can see from the comments from the Premier, the Treasurer and from ministers that they do not actually want Victoria to return to a cash surplus, which means they do not actually have a plan to reduce what is growing rapidly into a $200 billion debt pile that will punish future generations of Victorians for decades to come. They do not actually want a cash surplus and have no plan to realise that, as the Auditor-General has found.

They are not talking about community safety because they have shut police stations and have less police on the beat. They are not talking about health because elective surgery waitlists have nearly

doubled since 2014. They are not talking about education because teachers are marching in the streets. Instead, what are Labor talking about at the moment? They are talking about the Leader of the Opposition, Jess Wilson. They seem to be quite obsessed with the member for Kew. We see all these Labor MPs having a go at different catchphrases. We saw Mr Erdogan try to do it, laughably, yesterday, saying, 'You'll get less with Jess.' They are really trying to road-test this, pathetically.

John Berger interjected.

Evan MULHOLLAND: I will take the interjection from Mr Berger, because you will get less taxes with Jess. You will get less waste. You will not see $200,000 go into pot plants for the Suburban Rail Loop Authority or money go to painting a tunnel-boring machine. You will not see $15 billion go out the door to the criminal underworld and bikies on construction sites through the CFMEU. And you will get less crime on our streets with 3000 new police officers on the beat under Jess Wilson's plan. You will get less congestion, particularly in our growth areas, which have been starved of infrastructure due to the government withholding money from growth area infrastructure taxes. One thing you will get less of – and the Labor MPs know it, so they keep delaying their preselections – is elected Labor MPs under Jess Wilson, and they all know it. No wonder they are putting off group voting tickets and putting off Labor preselections, because they know they have a lot to worry about with Jess. They have a lot to worry about. You will get less taxes, you will get less crime, you will get less congestion and you will get less waste under Jess Wilson.

It is so hilarious to see the scare campaign of those opposite. They are all trying to wheel out 'Jess Wilson's ruthless cuts'. They are saying of a $22 billion plan that it is over $40 billion worth of cuts, but also some of them are saying there is an $11 billion black hole. Well, I know Labor's not very fond of economics and the Treasurer wants to dumb down the economics in her department, but it cannot be both. It cannot be an $11 billion black hole and over $40 billion worth of cuts. Clearly even they – the smarter people over there – understand that.

We see them wheel out with a literal wheel their new attack dogs Paul Edbrooke and Steve Dimopoulos. It is pathetic that they are the attack dogs. I mean, really, it kind of makes you wish to have people like Martin Pakula and James Merlino back if they are the kind of generation they are sending out to be their attack dogs with that pathetic display yesterday. Again, it is the only scare campaign I have ever seen where those perpetrating the scare campaign are blocking comments, deleting comments, and not allowing comments on their social media platform from those opposite and from the union as well.

Bev McArthur interjected.

Evan MULHOLLAND: They are getting absolutely ratioed. Have a look even on the Premier's posts. They always have more comments than likes, which is a good way of telling the punters' sentiment. There was one particular comment by a great Victorian comedian, Dave Hughes, who said on the Premier's post about Jess Wilson's so-called cuts:

> We pay the price for vic Labor's ridiculous rorting to the tune … of 2 million dollars a day and growing in interest repayments. Please stop this –

BS –

> … Our children will be sidled with this debt. Just stop it. Please:

And that is the sentiment of all Victorians. I mean, have a look at any of your social media feeds. That is the sentiment of all Victorians. They have had a gutful of dishonest politicians not telling the truth and of dishonest politicians not having a real plan to tackle the $200 billion of debt. What Jess Wilson is doing is putting forward a real 10-year economic plan to tackle the debt crisis here in Victoria, to tackle the economic problems here in Victoria, and we will end Labor's waste, absolutely, including the waste such as the $13 million on machete bins, the $200,000 on pot plants and the $15 billion lost to corruption on CFMEU construction sites that has gone to the criminal underworld. We will save

$1 billion over the next 10 years by repealing Labor's treaty process. We will save $20 billion over the decade by capping excessive public service salaries, as we have seen highlighted again in the last few days. This is a real economic plan. We will also reduce the cost of living for all Victorians by scrapping the emergency services tax, by exempting first home buyers from stamp duty up to $1 million, by having land tax relief and by abolishing the schools tax and the GP tax, which will save families on average $534 a year.

I guess the briefing was true a few months ago that MPs in electorates were only allowed one budget commitment – you know, one soccer club in Greenvale gets a couple of hundred thousand dollars, I think less. The poor member for Yan Yean: they have clearly given up on her, because they know the sentiment in that seat. While everyone wants Donnybrook Road duplicated, what does the member for Yan Yean get? What is the member for Yan Yean posting about? A bike cage for Donnybrook station, when it is almost impossible, as cyclists have told me, to ride a bike on Donnybrook Road due to the safety of that road, due to the potholes on that road. I mean, how pathetic, how insulting to the people waiting up to an hour in their estates just to get onto Donnybrook Road that they will be getting a bike cage for Donnybrook station, when currently it is a V/Line station and the V/Lines are not even running. How insulting. And you have also got the member for Yan Yean trying to go to war with the council for them to build a $90 million pool, when the state government is only contributing $10 million because that is all it can afford. And so she is trying to blame the council for something they clearly cannot afford.

You have consistently these examples. Again, I go back to the point that they all got one budget commitment per seat. Yet the Member for Bendigo East – how many commitments does the member for Bendigo East get? Five commitments. Five different commitments worth millions of dollars. Isn't it funny? Did the member for Pakenham or the member for Bass get five commitments? I do not think so, which proves Andrew Lethlean is actually already delivering for the people of Bendigo East. He is already. And as Labor sources have said anonymously, the Premier is more likely to lose than win. I would agree with that, with the response of people in Bendigo. We also see the government trying to promote themselves on the Suburban Rail Loop. I would remind you that as early as March this year Labor plotters against Jacinta Allan were actively proposing – what were they proposing? – pausing the SRL:

> A wide range of MPS, especially from the north and western suburbs, also remain deeply concerned about the affordability and viability of the SRL …
>
> Labor insiders say those opposed to the project, which have privately included Mr Carroll, view it as a dead weight hampering the government's ability to drive down debt and invest in key areas of health and education.

What do you know.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:30): I am not too sure what to think of that last contribution, but anyway, I will go through a few of the facts that will really ring true here. I rise to speak on the motion regarding the Allan Labor government's 2026–27 budget. Before I speak to this motion I would like to take a moment to acknowledge and thank the Treasurer for delivering the Victorian budget last week. It is a budget that speaks to the values of this government, one that delivers real help to Victorians at a time when global economic pressures and uncertainties are being felt in every household across our state.

Young Victorians do not benefit from a government that refuses to invest. They benefit from better, cheaper public transport, modern schools and stronger healthcare systems. This government is getting on with growing the economy and delivering on our fiscal strategy, unlike those opposite who announced a plan last week that requires more than $40 billion in cuts in its first five years. At its core, the Labor government's budget is focused on easing pressure on Victorian families while continuing to invest in the infrastructure, health care, education and transport systems that our growing state relies on. It is a budget that recognises the real cost-of-living pressures many households are facing, while

also taking a long-term view about the future of Victoria, and it is one that makes me proud to be part of the Allan Labor government.

This motion calls on the government to prioritise policy solutions in four areas: ease cost-of-living pressures, keep Victorians safe, strengthen health care and enable home ownership, which is funny because that is exactly what this budget does. It contains $2.5 billion in cost-of-living support and housing initiatives to make life more affordable for Victorians. We continue to prioritise investments in Victoria – in services and the future of this state. Under the Labor government the Victorian budget is and always has been focused on what matters most. This motion just goes to show that those on the opposite side of this chamber would cut funding to what is important to Victorians. This budget is funding hospitals; we are funding schools, we are funding transport infrastructure, we are funding frontline services. Those across the chamber only want to cut. This budget is not an abstract announcement but supports real relief.

To combat pressure at the pump we are giving Victorian motorists a 20 per cent rego rebate on light vehicles at a cost of $755 million. The Allan Labor government is also making record investments into a road blitz across the state, investing $1.04 billion to rebuild, repair and resurface roads across Victoria, with $36.9 million to clean up our 10 busiest freeways, with a focus on rubbish and graffiti removal, mowing and more. This is following up on last year's then record investment on road maintenance. We are supporting Victorians not just on our roads but through our public transport system as well. We provided instant relief with $155 million to make public transport free for everyone in April and May, taking the pressure off fuel demand, and invested a further $278 million to halve the price of public transport until 1 January 2027. That includes trams, trains and bus services across the state. These are just some of the practical examples of the Allan Labor government responding directly to everyday cost pressures.

With this budget we are providing further cost-of-living help with $120 million to support families with kids, including $28 million for the affordable school uniforms program; $24 million for outside-of-school-hours care for young Victorians with disabilities; $16 million to continue and expand the Glasses for Kids program; $15 million to continue providing free admission for under-16s to zoos across the state on weekends, public holidays and during school holidays; $14 million for school breakfast clubs; $11 million for approximately 55,000 more Get Active Kids vouchers; and $7.4 million for more kinder kids.

On community safety, we have responded to the increase in violent offending by introducing Australia's toughest bail laws. We have made adult time for violent crime laws that mean children charged with serious violent offences will face adult courts. This budget backs those policies with investments including $62 million to recruit up to 200 police reservists for police station counter duties; $55 million to support Victoria Police operations; $51 million to deliver 50 new PSOs; $229 million to increase capacity in the corrections system, including youth justice; and $43 million to deliver programs within prisons to reduce reoffending. This budget also invests $81 million to respond to and prevent youth crime. Somehow, I do not know if the opposition has even read this budget.

The Allan Labor government believes in investing in our frontline services, not cutting, which is why we will be injecting $32 billion into our healthcare system in 2026–27 alone. Through this budget we are providing $3.9 billion in new investment. As part of this commitment, we are also continuing our support for Victorians through the affordable urgent care clinics and virtual ED and Chemist Care Now. Additionally, $109 million will deliver 45,000 more specialist paediatric appointments and 4000 additional planned surgeries for children. But this budget also commits $2.3 million to support the secondary school immunisation program, saving families time and money on a trip to the doctor; $284 million to open and operate hospitals; and another $145 million for upgrades, making it easier and cheaper to access the healthcare services Victorians rely on.

This budget is increasing housing supply to make housing more affordable, including $97 million to continue delivering housing reform and to improve confidence in the building industry; $16 million

to protect consumers and raise standards in the building industry through registration and licensing requirements; $860 million into the Social Housing Growth Fund towards the delivery of more than 7000 additional social housing homes over the next decade; $16 million to continue delivering on our 10-year plan for Melbourne's greenfields and unlock new family homes with backyards; and we are extending the temporary off-the-plan stamp duty concession to April 2027, reducing stamp duty for eligible apartment and townhouse purchases, helping first home buyers get into their homes.

This motion allows me to highlight some of the remarkable things the Allan Labor government is providing for Victorians within this budget. The Allan Labor government will continue to invest in our children because we know they are our future. Across Victoria schools continue to benefit from investment in upgrades, modernisation programs and improved learning facilities. In my community of southern metropolitan Melbourne local school communities are already seeing the benefits of these investments through improved classrooms, learning spaces and infrastructure upgrades. Every child deserves access to a high-quality education regardless of their background or postcode. This budget also invests in the industries of tomorrow – data centres, mRNA manufacturing – and critical minerals and other priority sectors will receive an investment of $12 million to attract global talent. We want to make sure that our investment stays here and benefits our state, so we are putting $1.7 million back into Labor's fair jobs code to ensure that companies benefiting from the government contracts treat their workers fairly. We are also investing $99 million towards food relief and financial and homeless support for Victorians who need it most.

The Allan Labor government will not cut critical funding. Despite continued investment into hospitals, roads, schools and the cost-of-living support, Victoria is projected to deliver an operating surplus. The budget shows that the government is on track to deliver five consecutive surpluses between now and the end of the forward estimates, with an average surplus of $1.7 billion over the budget and forward estimates years. The last budget in 2025–26 was able to deliver a surplus of $700 million, the only one amongst the eastern states. That demonstrates a government balancing responsible fiscal management with investing in the infrastructure Victorians rely on. What this budget demonstrates is a government focused on practical support while continuing to invest in long-term needs of the state. It is a budget that acknowledges the pressures Victorians are facing right now, through the cost-of-living relief measures, transport affordability and household support. At the same time it continues investing in the infrastructure, healthcare system, schools and transport networks that Victoria will rely on well into the future.

Strong economies rely on strong infrastructure. They rely on skilled workers. They rely on functioning transport systems. They rely on accessible health care, and they rely on a government willing to invest beyond the news cycle. For communities across southern metropolitan Melbourne, many of these investments will be directly felt in daily life. This budget reflects a government that understands that strong public services and strong infrastructure are not optional extras. This is a budget grounded in long-term planning rather than short-term politics.

Those opposite are quick to speak about fiscal responsibility yet continue to make unfunded commitments without clearly explaining how they would fund them, leaving Victoria with a growing Liberal budget black hole and no credible long-term plan. Jess Wilson's $40 billion in cuts cannot happen without cutting hospitals and schools. Her plan will slash one in seven public servants, including health workers, disability workers and child protection officers, and we all know the Liberals will not stop there.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (16:40): I am pleased to be able to speak on this motion about the state budget put forward by Mrs McArthur. The Nationals are very pleased to support this motion, because I think it highlights quite a number of issues. When you think about the state budget, it is so important because it sets the priorities for where we spend money. If you think about it in terms of your own household, if you have a home loan and you are paying a lot of interest on that home loan, then you have got less money to pay to go and see your doctor, you have got less money to go and pay for your groceries and you have got less money for kids' sports. There are a lot of decisions that get

made when that interest bill continues to rise, and we have had 13 consecutive interest rate rises so there is a lot of pressure on families at the moment. This budget shows that the government is under a lot of pressure.

We are now 199 days away from the next state election. It is interesting timing that we are debating this today, because we have state net debt that is approaching $199 billion. If you think about every day between now and the state election as a billion dollars, that is a huge amount of money that we have in debt in Victoria. When I think about the interest, I think back to just a couple of years ago. I remember talking then about $15 million a day that we were paying in interest. This next financial year, we will be paying, or we are currently paying because we are nearly there, $24 million a day in interest. Just think about that: $15 million a couple of years ago to now $24 million, and we are predicted in this budget to soon be heading to over $30 million every single day in interest. Think of that money just going off on interest. Every dollar that goes in interest is a dollar less for schools, is a dollar less for hospitals, is a dollar less for improving our public transport.

It is important to highlight with the debt we have got – higher debt, as I said, higher interest, projected cash deficits totalling over $30 billion over the next four years – that there is no plan under this government for that graph to head in a different direction. It just keeps going up. When you consider behind the scenes as well, the bonds that are due for renewal – it was cheaper to borrow money during COVID. Now it is more expensive and that interest is continuing to grow, so the cost of borrowing is also increasing rapidly. Our credit rating, as Mrs McArthur spoke to, is on shaky ground. It has been on shaky ground. Victoria's rating is very low compared to other states. It is really, I guess, an analysis of how likely the government is to pay it back. That risk is continuing to grow. We have a government that talks about saving money and everything else, but we see expenditure just continuing to boom under this government. They do not seem to care when money goes out the door. We saw that with the CFMEU, with the corruption, and not even a willingness to follow that money and see where it has been going. It is extraordinary to me when we have such a need for services in this state and a growing population that you would not care about where taxpayer money is being wasted and chase every dollar, but perhaps it is a reflection on the culture.

You can see that in the Premier's own office with approximately 83 staff, it has been reported. That is quite extraordinary. I know each of us, including shadow ministers, get an allocation of two and a half staff, but there are 83 staff in the Premier's office and it continues to grow. We have the Suburban Rail Loop mentioned in the budget papers. There are lots of question marks over that – 'TBC' next to it. That is incredible. And with the Commonwealth, we had their budget and they certainly have not committed the amount of funding that Victoria was hoping for. Victoria is hoping that the state puts in a third, the Commonwealth puts in a third and value capture makes up the other third. When you look at the budget papers, it is very entertaining reading seeing where that value capture is coming from. It is all sorts of things: development, new levies and car parking. It is very creative indeed. I would be very keen to hear from this government how they intend to pay for that, apart from a TBC.

Revenue is a big part of this budget. We are paying a huge amount of tax in Victoria and it keeps going up. No doubt about it. We have had this government introduce a whole lot of new taxes and increased charges – over 60 in fact. We have got the emergency services tax. There is the holiday tax, and there have been increases to land tax. They have also got payroll taxes going up in this budget and the schools tax as well, so it is quite incredible. Yet with GST, you look at what we are actually receiving from the Commonwealth and Victoria is doing pretty well. Certainly compared to New South Wales we are doing a lot better, and yet the money is gone – out the door under this government. It is just astounding. The lottery licence extension that was granted – over $1 billion – there was a nice little uplift there. Guess what, no-one really knew about it; it was just announced during the budget. To hear the minister actually say today that he did not know much about it I think is a bit of a reflection on the lack of transparency in this government that we see time and time again.

The government does like to talk about the economy and how it is growing and businesses that are growing. When you look at the data they like to take credit for the growth in the business. I would say

when you look at the analysis of that ABS data it is interesting that the majority of the business growth comes from sole traders with just an ABN; they do not employ anyone. And when you look at the employment figures, those businesses have actually been declining. You could say that is people feeling more pressure, because I know a number of teachers and people that work in banks, for example, who are taking a second job. They are doing a side hustle, doing a little business on the side, trying to earn some extra money. That is a situation that so many families are in now, where it is not just a dual income. They are doing extra jobs as well or having an ABN on the side. That is a reflection – not something the government should be bragging about, but perhaps instead looking at the pressure that the increases in taxes are certainly placing on communities.

This budget also has a huge amount of money that is kind of allocated to unforeseen circumstances – things like the Treasurer's advances where there is not much forewarning about where money is being spent. It could be for election promises; we have got the election around the corner. But I think it is important for people to remember that this government does like to make big promises, but they do not deliver on what they promise. We saw that with the Commonwealth Games, which was spruiked right before the last election, and we know the history of that.

It is important to realise, too, that a budget is a prediction. It is how we expect money to be spent and allocated and what money is coming in. But when you look at the track record of this government, they have been off the mark time and time again. There have been cost blowouts and interest costs, and debt continues to rise. I think when you look at the actual budget papers themselves there is a nice $2.6 billion deficit at the 2024–25 financial year. We have seen before that they have been off target, and no doubt we will see that again.

I think it is so important to realise that Labor just does not manage finances well at all, and finances are too important – we have to get them right. We know in regional Victoria we have seen about 12 per cent allocated to new infrastructure spending, and yet we have 25 per cent of the population. We would certainly like to see our fair share of funding. Is this a responsible budget? No. Is it a disciplined budget? No. Is it a Labor budget? Well, with higher debt, higher taxes and higher interest, I would say yes. It was very good to see an increase in funding for financial counselling in the state budget, but I would suggest that perhaps the Treasurer and Labor members go and make an appointment. There is a Bring Your Bills day, and I would suggest they take along some of those bills and get some advice, because we certainly need a fresh start in Victoria.

I am part of the Liberals and Nationals team, and we are committed to ensuring respect for taxpayer money, making sure that we have value for taxpayer money and making sure that government works effectively, because what we are seeing under this current government is an absolute mess, and we need to get this state back on track.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (16:49): Well, what do you say? The Liberal Party is undertaking a desperate attempt to undermine the solid foundations of the Victorian budget, placed there by Labor, by the Treasurer, last week. And they will do and they will say anything to undermine the Victorian budget, to undermine the fiscal strategy here in the state of Victoria, before they get the chance to totally wreck it if they are elected in November. Because what we have seen from the Liberal Party in the last week is an absolute determination to drive investment in Victoria into the ground, to swing the axe on jobs and to curtail infrastructure spending right across the state. I will come to the utter hypocrisy of members of the Liberal Party and members of the National Party getting up in this debate and outside this Parliament and complaining that there is not enough spending on certain infrastructure projects, while their leadership commits to stopping infrastructure spending here in the state of Victoria.

Last week's budget, delivered by the Treasurer, delivered on yet another step in Labor's fiscal strategy for Victoria. We know there is a five-step fiscal strategy in the state of Victoria. There was creating jobs coming out of the pandemic, delivering a cash operating surplus and delivering an operating surplus after transactions; there was stabilising debt and then reducing debt as a share of the state's

economy. We are absolutely on track to achieve all five of those steps in our fiscal strategy, and the budget papers clearly show how Labor is doing that.

What we have had in response from the Liberal Party is a reply to that budget, a response to that budget, that rests on sacking thousands of public servants, that sharpens and swings the axe on jobs in the state of Victoria. Thousands of public servants face the axe under the Liberals. If the Liberal Party seriously think that they can cut $40 billion out of the state budget without affecting frontline services, tell them they are dreaming, because it is just not possible. You cannot swing the axe like Jess Wilson wants to and not affect schools and not affect hospitals and not affect police and our emergency services. You cannot make the cuts the Liberal Party wants to make without affecting frontline services here in the state of Victoria. If the Liberals try and tell you otherwise, they are lying, because that is what the consequence of the Liberals' alternative plan for Victoria is. It is built on job losses.

The second thing it is built on is stopping our infrastructure investment, because the centrepiece of the budget reply, given the other day by the Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Treasurer, who are the same person obviously, because the Leader of the Opposition has such little confidence in the rest of her team that she does not think any of them are up to the job of being Shadow Treasurer. None of them, she thinks, are capable of being the Shadow Treasurer in the state of Victoria. She has got to do the job herself. She said that over a 10-year period the Liberals want to get us back to a cash surplus and fund all of our infrastructure investment without borrowings. That is the Liberals' plan. In her contribution Mrs McArthur made reference to and quoted David Hayward, an economist and emeritus professor at RMIT, to justify and support her argument, so we can assume that Mrs McArthur thinks that Professor Hayward has some credibility. Well, this is what was said in the paper today:

> Economist David Hayward said the opposition's path to cash surplus did not stack up, and they had not yet shown a credible path to achieving it.

And to quote Professor Hayward:

> One of the problems is they're going to depend on pretty significant cuts to infrastructure to achieve it.

An expert that the Leader of the Opposition in this place thinks is credible enough to speak on the budget has just said that the Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Treasurer's economic plan – as put in a very beautiful, glossy document last week – rests on infrastructure cuts being delivered. What Victoria faces under the Liberals are cuts to services and cuts to infrastructure, and it is everyday Victorians that are going to pay the price. If you are in the growing suburbs of Melbourne and want access to a new school – like the nearly 100 new schools that Labor has opened – under the Liberals the school building program is going to come to a screeching halt because the only way, according to the independent experts, the Liberals can make their plan stack up is through cuts to infrastructure.

All those members of the opposition that were out last week criticising Labor for not investing enough are going to have to come clean with their communities and say that they are not going to deliver anything. For example, Mr Mulholland gets up and says there has got to be investment in Donnybrook Road. Well, you cannot fix Donnybrook Road, Mr Mulholland, if you are going to cut infrastructure investment. If you are not going to use the balance sheet and borrow to invest in infrastructure, no-one is getting a road, no-one is getting a school. Under the Liberals there will be nothing built in Victoria. They will stop building the new schools in our growth suburbs that we need. Frankly, those growth suburbs do not just include the parts of the community that I talk to, for example, Mr Galea about out in Clyde and Clyde North, but two of the big growth areas in our region are Southbank and South Melbourne. That is why this budget is investing millions of dollars to build another campus of South Melbourne Primary School. I am glad Mr McIntosh is here, because he will know the reason why Labor has had to build new schools in South Melbourne, and that is because the Kennett government closed them in the 1990s, because that is what Liberals do. The Liberals swing the axe. The Liberals cut schools. The Liberals sack TAFE teachers. That is what Liberals do. They have got form, because that is what they did in the 1990s. Labor had to fix their mess and deliver the infrastructure that Victorians needed and deliver the schools that Victorian children and their parents needed.

The only way the Liberal Party are going to be able to make their promises stack up is if they start swinging the axe across Victoria, stop infrastructure spending and sack workers who are delivering essential services. That is exactly what they plan to do. Thousands of public servants are going to be sacked, including public servants who are delivering regulatory and inspection services like at the new Building and Plumbing Commission, who are out there trying to support people who are building their own homes and cracking down on dodgy builders. They are going to get sacked by the Liberal Party. Those who are out there trying to enforce the law – Mrs McArthur often gets up and asks where these inspectors are – are going to get sacked by the Liberal Party, because the Liberal Party's plan is built on sacking public servants and stopping infrastructure spending. There will be no schools, no hospitals and no roads under the Liberals because their plan relies on stopping infrastructure spending, and the experts have belled the cat in the paper today. The experts have belled the cat on the Liberal Party today: they cannot achieve their plans without infrastructure spending cuts. They should come clean and tell the Victorian people what their plans really are.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (16:59): What an extraordinary display that just was about swinging the axe on Victorians when the government for the past 10 years have been economic vandals who have taken the axe, to use Mr Batchelor's words, to the Victorian economy, making it so hard for Victorians to – let us forget about thriving and prospering – survive. I might just start with a couple of facts that are going to be a little bit uncomfortable for Mr Batchelor and his crew over there. When Labor came to office net debt was $21.8 billion, less than 6 per cent of gross state product – $21.8 billion. Fast forward, and by the end of the forward estimates that number is going to be almost $200 billion. It is because of their reckless spending, their lack of management and their lack of foresight. I just want to remind you that you cannot spend like a drunken sailor and expect that no-one has to pick up the bill. Victorians have been footing the bill for your decisions now for almost a decade, and I am going to go through exactly what that means for Victorians.

Victoria's interest payments have exploded from $2.1 billion a year to $32 million every single day. So every hour – every single hour – the interest repayments are more than $1 million alone. Businesses like those on Bald Hill Road have lost 70 to 80 per cent of their revenue because the Big Build on a 1-kilometre stretch of road has taken over a year, blocking off access to their businesses, and not a single one of them has received any compensation. Imagine just what 1 hour alone of interest payments could do for them. Let me tell you, it would be absolutely life changing.

What about the other issues that are going on, like crime prevention? There is a crime committed every 50 seconds in this state since there are less police on the beat today than there were when Labor came into government. Imagine what $1 million, just 1 hour of interest payments, would do for that area alone. It is pretty insulting when you spend day in, day out talking to Victorians who are legitimately suffering, who are finding it hard to even put food on the table, for them to hear a rant like that about how the coalition, who have not been in government for a decade, are apparently taking the axe to things. You can figure out whether or not you are okay with that.

Victoria is now the worst performing state economically in the country on almost every single key metric. Labor is borrowing from the future to pay for things right now. It is pretty amazing that right now every child that is born in the state of Victoria inherits at least $20,000 of their own little patch of debt. I think it is amazing that Labor have stood there blowing their own trumpet, but here are some other things that you really should know about Labor. They have introduced or increased taxes 67 times – 67 new or increased taxes since this lot came to government. Payroll tax alone has more than doubled. Land tax bills have quadrupled for many Victorians. I stood here not that long ago and spoke about Goldstream RV in Pakenham and how their land tax had increased so much that they had to put off 40 full-time staff. That is in your electorate, Mr McIntosh. Those are the impacts of what Labor government policies are doing to the people that you are meant to represent – forty people. I sat with the owners of that business as they went through their land tax bill and told me what that meant to them. Not only that, but the land that the government then acquired for the duplication of the road there smashed these businesses.

It is things like land tax and payroll tax that are making it so hard and causing businesses to flee this state, and the new taxes keep on coming. We could talk about the emergency services levy and the fact that that money is going into state revenue. Things have been so poorly mismanaged that people are still driving around in trucks that are more than 30 years old while they are going out to protect their communities. The investment into the CFA has decreased, regardless of the fact that the emergency services levy is affecting every single landowner in Victoria. There is the GP payroll tax, the school tax, the short stay tax, the windfall gains tax – the taxes go on and on. It is pretty unbelievable when that side of the house talks about us apparently taking an axe to Victorians. That is absolutely disgraceful. Families are under enormous cost-of-living pressures in this state. I actually had Ben Smith in here today, who I saw probably about a year or 18 months ago at the food bank in Mornington. He said 18 months or a year ago that for the first time mortgage holders could not even afford to put food on the table and were accessing help there. This is the economic environment in Victoria that you have created.

What about small businesses that are struggling to survive every single day in Victoria? 350 small businesses closed their doors for good because the environment in Victoria has become so tough for small business. Recently I heard one of the government members get up and talk about how business is actually wonderful and flourishing in Victoria. When I went down and looked at those numbers, they were talking about the number of sole traders. Big businesses that have employed people, that have been the lifeblood of the communities, have been fleeing this state because they cannot afford to survive here, and then people have become sole traders so they can have a second or a third job to make ends meet – and this government are somehow patting themselves on the back and celebrating themselves. I think it is just so out of touch.

Investors are leaving Victoria. About one year ago I spoke in this place about how I was talking to some real estate agents in Pakenham who said that for every four rental properties that come onto the market, only one of them returns. The reason for that is the burden of red tape – because of all the different regulations and because of all the property and land taxes. It costs more to have a rental property in Victoria than it does in any other state, and that is causing them to leave. Well, about a month ago I spoke to that same real estate agent to ask if that same statistic was true, and he said, 'No, it's not.' He said it was four, but now for every six properties in that area that come onto the market that are rental properties, only one returns, exacerbating the housing crisis, which then of course explains why rental prices are rising.

When Labor run out of money, which they have well and truly done, they come after yours. They have come after it with the 67 new or increased taxes that they have brought in, and then they have come in here today and blamed the coalition because it actually has a responsible plan. We know that this is going to be tough. There are tough days ahead for Victorians because of the mess that this government has left us in. You have to realise that when you get here and you hold a taxpayer dollar you have got to be responsible with that. It is not just our children, it is our children's children that are going to be dealing with this mess. Labor claims a surplus while admitting a –

Harriet Shing: Do you drive on the Monash?

Renee HEATH: I do not know what Ms Shing is talking about right at the moment.

Harriet Shing interjected.

Renee HEATH: I am talking about businesses in your area, Ms Shing, so show some compassion. Labor claims a surplus while admitting to a $7.7 billion cash deficit. Imagine that. Imagine having $7.7 billion just on the credit card statement and saying you have a cash surplus. That is delusion at the next level. This budget relies on unrealistic assumptions about spending growth. When businesses are fleeing the state, and they are, and when rental properties are fleeing the state, and they are –

Harriet Shing interjected.

Renee HEATH: When Ms Shing says 'more affordable rentals', she is bulldozing public housing, and there will be less bedrooms.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (17:10): I have been really, really looking forward to an opportunity to contribute on this motion. The motion in itself is not a good one, but the opportunity to explore some of these topics is.

I do not know what Menzies and Bolte would think of those that claim to occupy that party now. They have not taken an eye to building our state, to being nation-builders, for decades and decades and decades. I have talked in this place about those seats now being occupied by people that through their university clubs worshipped Thatcher and Reagan, and they took that – I know I get criticised for referencing Kennett; I am not going to lose time here – and they acted on that in the 1990s in a way that communities across Victoria have not forgotten. You are so quick in the very many hearings that we sit in and the political conversations and narratives, whether it is in the media or in this place, to call any investment debt.

Minister Shing was highlighting before that Bolte was a nation-builder. There were investments in dams. There were investments in roads, in bridges, in powerlines – things that made this state productive and things that made this state competitive. You know what, I am sure at the time people thought, 'Gee whiz, are we going to invest' – I do not know, maybe it was this – '$5 million for a new powerline?' or maybe it was $20 million for a new road. I am sure that at the time those in positions of power had to make decisions and there would have been those saying, 'Hey, Mr Bolte, you are at 55 to 58 per cent debt to GSP,' but boy, have we as a state benefited out of those investments. If you have a look at the cost of those investments now, it is nothing compared to the return for multiple generations of Victorians.

When you take the approach that the current Liberals have, which is a far cry from what it was decades ago, you do not invest in people, you do not invest in the community and you do not invest in the productivity of this state. When you slash jobs, when you slash training pathways, you do not get people coming through qualified to work. We are seeing this in our trades. Everyone looks around and goes, 'I wonder why it is hard to get a sparky to come and wire my house sometime.' Remember what you guys did to the SEC, to the trainees, to the apprenticeships, to the pathways? Have a think about that.

We have seen surpluses in this budget. We have seen the consistent plan to get to surplus to reduce and see the net debt to GSP is on track. The way you lot bleat on and try to talk Victoria down at every single opportunity on every single measure is despicable. It is absolutely despicable. What worries me is if you lot get your hands on the levers, the things that we have built back up, whether it is our investment in early education or whether it is our investment in aged care – you know where a lot of those are; they are in regional areas where private operators might not fill the gap – you will bundle up and you will sell off in a heartbeat. Regional towns will be the first to suffer under a Liberal–National coalition, like they did in the past.

Train lines were ripped out around Victoria, schools were closed and things like the SEC were sold off. It is all very well for short-term decision-making for people today to sit there and go, 'Yes, we're going to flog that off. We're going to bring some money in.' But it is future generations that will suffer. Thank goodness we legislated to protect the SEC, because we have gone in and we have built what was at the time – still is, I think – the biggest battery in Australia. We have got our solar battery hybrid in Horsham and now our wind farm at Delburn. This is the biggest investment in the valley – $700 million, hundreds of jobs – and the Nationals still have a petition against it. What does that say about the Nationals and the Liberals? They never stood up for it. So it is this mentality that we have seen from the Liberals – their $40 billion of cuts – and we know they are going to come after services, services that people rely on. We invest in our communities. When we enable families to get back to work, when we give our kids a world-class education to start their lives, when we give them the training and skills when they come out the other side of school, do you know what? They are more productive when they enter the workforce, and that leads to a stronger Victoria.

The investments we have made in our road networks, in our freight networks – you never hear the other side talk about the freight networks that take hundreds of trucks off our roads for every container on the back of a train, because they ripped the trains out. They let them decay into nothing, and we had to come and build it all back up, and that enables our grain to get to the ports. We have built those infrastructure connections so we can move our economic goods as efficiently as possible and ship them so we have got $22 billion of agricultural output coming out of this state. But that does not just happen by turning a blind eye. It takes a commitment to investing in our state, investing in our people and investing in our infrastructure so that we get the most out of every single thing we do.

I am confident that Victorians are very mindful of the constant negativity of the Liberals talking down our state and what they would do, given half a chance, to the services in this state and the jobs and the families and communities that absolutely rely on them.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (17:17): Well, all we have heard from the opposite side over there is lies, lies and more lies. That is what we have had from you today. That is what has happened. You cannot defend this budget. You cannot defend the Premier. You cannot defend the Treasurer – the Treasurer who could not even mention the words 'small business' in her 11-page speech, could not mention the small businesses that make up the bulk of the productive population of this state, could not give them a mention. What we have got in this place here today is an absolutely abysmal defence of a shocking budget – absolutely appalling.

You talked about investment on roads. You have got to be joking. You need to get out of Northcote or Fitzroy or wherever you live, Mr McIntosh; get out on the western roads. You have probably got an EV – well, it would fall into a pothole. Try going down to western Victoria. My colleague from the western Victoria region, when asked by the Warrnambool *Standard* what she had delivered for South-West Coast, could not name anything and referred them to her colleague Gayle Tierney, our colleague in this place, who is no longer in the ministry. She could not even answer the question. You are a shocking bunch. We have got interest now at $1 million an hour. How can you possibly defend this budget? You are losing your credit rating; it is going down the gurgler.

Michael Galea: No, we're not.

Bev McARTHUR: You are. You have got more taxes than anybody anywhere else in this country. We have got more debt than most of the east coast joined together. You are a monumental disgrace, and you want to criticise Jess Wilson. Well, I will tell you this: Jess Wilson is Victoria's best friend and she is Jacinta's worst enemy; that is what Jess Wilson is. And as for that fabulous candidate in Bendigo East, he said that is what we are going to get less of – less Labor MPs and less Jacinta Allan. That is what is going to happen. Who have you got lined up for your leader now? We need to know whether the Minister for Health is going to get the number one spot in Eastern Victoria Region or Mr McIntosh, who lives in the city.

Our plan is to bring this economy back on track. That is what we are going to do. We are going to make sure this state is moving forward at a great rate, unlike you. You are sending us backwards. We are going to go forwards. You are making sure that our children and our grandchildren are going to bear an enormous debt. It is never going to be able to be paid back. And as for housing, the whole federal budget was predicated on providing more housing. Forty-two per cent of the cost of a house in this state is caused by you – your costs.

A member interjected.

Bev McARTHUR: Bolte was a fabulous fellow. What a great man Bolte was. If only you took some notice of what he did. You are a disgrace to even consider yourselves in any way like Bolte.

Anyway, I want to thank my colleagues Mr Mulholland, Dr Heath and Mrs Broad for their contributions. Look, I will even thank you, Mr McIntosh. I will thank Mr Galea. I will thank Mr Berger. He is a fabulous member in my electorate. He lives in my electorate. How is Southern

Metro going, Mr Berger? Was it a good trip in from Teesdale today? How many potholes did you encounter coming from Teesdale into here?

John Berger: None.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, you did. What did Teesdale get out of this budget, Mr Berger? Nothing – not a brass razoo. Anyway, I do thank everybody for their contributions, and I just urge you to support the motion.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (15): Melina Bath, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Noes (20): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, 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) (17:28): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Statements on tabled papers and petitions

Department of Transport and Planning

Report 2024–25

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (17:28): Building a more accessible and inclusive public transport system has been one of this government's key priorities since we came into government in 2014, and I rise today to highlight this government's recent achievements when it comes to making our tram, train and bus stations more accessible, as outlined in the Department of Transport and Planning 2024–25 annual report and the additional upgrades we are delivering through last week's budget. This DTP report is very clear: we are taking accessibility in our public transport system seriously. Tram stops, bus stops and train stations are particularly important in ensuring that passengers with mobility issues can access our trams, buses and trains. In 2024–25 our accessibility blitz delivered 12 new level-access tram stops along La Trobe Street in Melbourne, making it easier to access the heart of our great city. These new tram stops are not just about level access, though. They provide new shelters, seating and lighting, making these stops more accessible, safer and more comfortable.

The report further highlights the significant improvements we have made to our state's train stations, with 14 stations along the Dandenong line becoming more accessible, more welcoming and more usable for every Victorian. Finally, buses are part of the lifeblood of our public transport system, and we are not neglecting those either. Last year we upgraded more than 20 existing bus stops to meet accessibility standards, ensuring that these stops are now inclusive of all passengers. Complementing these upgrades, we have added over 40 new bus shelters across Melbourne, making the gateways to our public transport system more comfortable, more welcoming and, more importantly, more accessible. Our government is certainly taking action. Whilst the Department of Transport and Planning report outlines the significant advancement we have made in improving accessibility over the past year, we know that there is more to do, and last week's budget should demonstrate to

Victorians across the state that we are continuing to listen and continuing to deliver accessibility to our public transport stations and stops.

In my home in the heart of the inner north I have been working with disability advocates for years for accessible tram stops for the iconic Sydney Road corridor, and it was deeply encouraging to see funds committed to the design and consultation process for level-access tram stops across this corridor. With this process now kicking off, I am sure there will be stakeholders in our community, from disability advocates to cyclists, from vendors to residents, making their voices heard. I am proud that our community can work together with the government to consult on these much-needed upgrades. As well as the well-loved Sydney Road, Clifton Hill station is a bustling hive of activity and a key terminus for all that call our community home. On any given weekend you will see Victorians in footy colours heading to the G or young people heading north to see their family. We are making this critical hub more accessible in this year's budget, adding tactile ground surface indicators along the edges, making Clifton Hill safer and more accessible for low-vision passengers. This upgrade is part of a $7.1 million package to improve accessibility not just at Clifton Hill but also at Northcote and Eaglemont stations, making it easier and safer for all Victorians to get to where they need to go.

We are proud of the work we have done with disability and public transport advocates in delivering much-needed upgrades. I will also say we are looking to see what more we can do across the network. Our government is listening and our government is delivering to make our state's public transport system more accessible for every single Victorian.

Electoral Matters Committee

Inquiry into Victoria's Upper House Electoral System

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (17:32): I rise to speak on the Electoral Matters Committee report on group voting tickets. The report was tabled last year, and it could not have been any more clear in its first recommendation calling for reform 'as soon as possible, so that the new voting system will apply at the 2026 state election'. Well, here we are, 163 days later, and not a whisper from the government about doing this. We are now less than 200 days away from the election, an election where Victorians can vote for a fresh start, and Jacinta Allan and Labor are cooling their heels and refusing to bring forward this vital reform that the Victorian Electoral Commission has stated in its response to the report is only possible if legislated by August, so we are running out of time. Jacinta Allan's own MPs support this democratic reform. I am on the Electoral Matters Committee with a number of Labor colleagues, Mr Tarlamis included, and also Dylan Wight and the member for Preston as well – a number of MPs.

A report recently in the *Guardian* reported that one MP said the Premier had appeared reluctant to pursue the reform as it would benefit One Nation. No wonder why they have got delayed preselections on that side and many MPs concerned about the government's delay on group voting tickets. The Liberals and Nationals have been consistent with our principles. We supported and still support the abolition of group voting tickets, even when the political tides turn. When we supported the abolition of group voting tickets last year, it was quite clear that the Greens would be the beneficiary of a change to group voting tickets. Labor MPs are basically admitting that Jacinta Allan, the Premier, is keen on denying the democratic will of voters through keeping this dodgy system. Labor MPs have the audacity to lecture us about who we might and who we might not preference, but they are the only party keeping in place a system where the parties decide the preferences rather than the people.

The majority of the Electoral Matters Committee support this democratic reform. Kevin Bonham wrote quite a good blog, which I highly recommend you read, about the differences between how a system with group voting tickets and a system without group voting tickets would go under today's climate with current polling, how it would not affect One Nation if they are indeed already polling at a quota and how it might even be bad news for Labor. That does not bode well for people sitting in

number two positions and having delayed preselections. Labor Party state secretary Steve Staikos, in his evidence to the committee, said that group voting tickets:

> … undermine voter intent, foster distrust, encourage ballot bloat and enable 'preference whispering' …

But this Premier, Jacinta Allan, refuses to act. refuses to possibly assist all the people stuck in number two positions on that side – or God forbid, number three – instead continuing to enable group voting tickets. They are the ones that are going to be at risk if we keep a system that allows preference whisperers to decide who gets elected rather than the Victorian people. We run the risk again. We have seen Avi Yemeni plans to register a free Palestine party and multiple other parties that would preference right-wing parties. That is just as bad as the 'sack Dan Andrews' party which was set up before the last election and which ended up preferencing Labor.

This government wants to keep in place a system where the parties decide who gets what preferences, not the Victorian people. It is shameful that the Premier is now reluctant to pursue group voting ticket reform, and it is shameful that members on the other side, including members of the Electoral Matters Committee that supported this reform, are refusing to stand up to their Premier to get this reform on the table. It needs to be done by August, yet the government refuses to pursue this reform. The Premier continues to drag her feet based on political reasons, putting her own self-interest above the interests of democracy overall. We need a system where the people, not the preference whisperers or the Labor backroom operators, decide where preferences go. The government needs to bring forward this reform.

Department of Treasury and Finance

Budget papers 2026–27

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (17:37): I rise to make a statement on budget paper 2 from the 2026–27 budget, which was tabled yesterday, particularly to look at what the budget paper tells us about the state of the Victorian economy. We know that there are many on the other side who like to talk down Victoria and like to talk down the Victorian economy, but if you actually read what is written in the budget papers on the outlook for the Victorian economy, you can see some pretty remarkable facts. The Victorian economy continues to grow and our outlook is positive. It is not something that has happened by accident and it is not something that has happened by chance. It has happened because Labor have a plan that is investing in our economy and that is investing in jobs. As a result our economy continues to grow, our labour market is resilient, we have got a low unemployment rate, there is growth in household incomes, we are building more homes than any other state and business investment growth remains strong.

The budget papers do present some of the challenges that we are facing, particularly the challenges that many households are facing at the moment because of the impact that the war in the Middle East is having on global supply, particularly fuel but also fertiliser. We know that war has put up petrol prices. It has put pressure on households, and households are feeling that pressure. That is why the budget delivers support to households through things like a 20 per cent rebate on car registration and free public transport, which has been extended until the end of the month, and public transport is then half price for the rest of the year. We have got a midday power saver coming in in a couple of months. We have delivered and continue to provide free kinder. We have delivered and continue to provide free TAFE, and there is extra support for families to help with the costs of their kids' schooling, whether that is through free dental check-ups, free glasses or free breakfasts. The list goes on. Labor are helping families where we can. We are providing help, whether it is a cheaper commute to work, helping you realise the dream of buying your first home, getting a job, getting skills to get a job or coming home from work that little bit earlier. We are doing what we can to support families.

The resilience of the Victorian labour market is something that I think many, particularly those opposite, continue to talk down. One of the things in the budget papers I want to just briefly mention is if you look at page 27 of budget paper 2 you will see a quite remarkable analysis of the growth in female labour force participation here in the state of Victoria. The budget paper says:

> Victorian employment has grown strongly in recent years, rising by more than 8 per cent over the three years to 2025. Solid economic growth, together with an increase in labour supply aided by strong population growth and rising workforce participation, have supported this outcome.
>
> Victoria's total participation rate remained near record levels during 2025, driven by a large increase in female participation. Participation of women in the workforce has risen significantly compared with pre-COVID levels … This rise in female participation, coupled with strong demand for workers, has led to a significant rise in the share of Victorian women in employment to historically high levels.

The rise in female labour force participation in Victoria is no accident. It has been supported by a government that has been deliberately investing in support programs to make sure that women can get into the workforce and stay in the workforce – things like our Best Start, Best Life reforms, including free kinder; things like our free TAFE helping skill development, skill acquisition, which are critical elements on the path to jobs; and of course our support for work from home. All of these measures are deliberate decisions of this Labor government to support female labour force participation. What this budget shows us is that those policies are delivering that support, and female labour force participation is at record levels. This budget tells a lot of good stories. It tells a story of an economy continuing to grow, a resilient labour market and that the future is bright here in the state of Victoria.

Department of Treasury and Finance

Budget papers 2026–27

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:42): I rise to speak on the 2026–27 budget, which raises the funding for rail services across Victoria. On page 88 of budget paper 3 it says:

> Funding is provided for train services across metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria, including … nine weekday return services for the Shepparton Line.

I am pleased to finally see some funding in this budget for additional train services between Shepparton and Melbourne. But let us be clear: these extra services are three years overdue now and will probably be four years or more overdue before they are finally delivered, because there is no timeline for the delivery of them. In 2021 the then Minister for Transport Infrastructure Jacinta Allan promised that by 2023 there would be nine return weekday services between Shepparton and Melbourne and additional services have also been promised to bring the number of weekend services to five, but none of these have been delivered in 2026. Labor has continually delayed and delayed this project and even now has not given a clear timeline for the commencement of the full delivery of the promised service uplift. Page 83 shows that funding for this line item, which covers the Shepparton services as well as other rail services, provides just over $20 million a year for the next four years. However, on page 155 of the budget, in budget paper 4, it says that stage 3 of the Shepparton line upgrade has a financial completion date of quarter 4, 2027–28, with a footnote stating that:

> The TEI has decreased by $5.408 million due to budgeted amounts being reclassified as operating instead of capital expenditure …

These changing figures and completion dates are causing confusion for Shepparton residents, who deserve clarity from the government about when the services they deserve will actually start. It is vital that train services are expanded for Shepparton residents and other commuters along the line as soon as possible, and I have written to the minister to demand a timeline on when these urgently needed additional services will actually begin running

I note that the government's policy of free travel on public transport in general for the months of April and May has caused a significant surge in patronage, placing already crowded V/Line services under further pressure. There has been severe overcrowding occurring on the Bendigo line trains, which has prevented locals who rely on those services from boarding and in some cases has left mothers with prams and small children stranded on the platform. Commuters also report that V/Line staff have announced over the speaker that people in wheelchairs would not be able to board packed trains, as there was no room for them. This issue is particularly acute in smaller towns that are missed by express services or have shorter platforms that only allow boarding in the front three carriages instead of all

six carriages. Being unable to board a train could mean missed appointments or travel connections, with significant knock-on effects for those who are left stranded on the platform. If the government decides to make train travel free or reduce the price, it must take responsibility for the anticipated increase in demand. I have written to the minister asking for the government to put more carriages on popular services.

Another rail line I want to talk about is the Wodonga rail line, which is suffering severe overcrowding on the trains. This is due to the government's cap on fares for regional travel and free travel as well. The free travel policy has compounded this problem, making the overcrowding worse, and taking away the need for a ticket – which the government has done; you cannot book a ticket – has prevented people from being able to book a seat on the train, leaving them unsure if they will be able to sit down for their 3-hour journey. Steve Martin, the Liberal candidate for Benambra, tells me he has heard from many Wodonga locals about the stress of not knowing whether they or their family members will actually be able to get a seat when travelling to and from Melbourne. The government has completely mismanaged the free travel policy for regional rail services, and we need the booking system back now for Wodonga for those who are unwell or older and need assurance that they can travel safely and in comfort.

The final disappointment in this budget is that there is no funding for the Wollert rail extension. Extending the Mernda rail line from Lalor to Wollert is essential within the next 10 years, as Whittlesea council expects the local population to almost triple, with the number of people in Epping North and Wollert going from 35,000 in 2019 to 95,000 in 2041. These missed deadlines have caused delays on this rail line, and people need to know when these services will be delivered.

Respect Victoria

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

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:48): I rise to make a contribution on the progress made in Victoria in preventing violence against women and family violence. Respect Victoria's tabled 2025 report *Maintain the Momentum* details the strong progress that our state, led by the Allan Labor government, has made. As a government we will continue to make this a top priority and ensure that we are putting words into tangible actions. Structural change is paramount, and we cannot afford to be incremental in tackling this important issue. The Allan Labor government has invested an estimated $130 million in primary prevention programs and initiatives over the reporting period, which is the 2022–24 period, and that was more than any other state or territory. This is not just short-term, fragmented funding but the building of a stronger foundation for an evidence-based prevention program.

In 2024 Victoria created Australia's first Parliamentary Secretary for Men's Behaviour Change and now in April this year has created a ministerial portfolio, the Minister for Men and Boys, a cabinet-level role focused on changing behaviours and views and tackling the manosphere. This is an acknowledgement built into the architecture of government itself that men are not just a problem to be managed but are essential to the solution. We need to change the conditions that produce violence in the first place. The Allan Labor government has not only shown its commitment through funding and appointments but also made significant legislative reforms. The introduction of affirmative consent laws, the criminalisation of non-fatal strangulation and the continued implementation of the Gender Equality Act 2020 are all examples of government actively reshaping the conditions that drive violence, not just responding after the fact. The Royal Commission into Family Violence, the first of its kind in Australia, handed down 227 recommendations, and this reporting period saw every single recommendation being accepted and implemented by this government. The creation of Respect Victoria was spurred on by the royal commission, and it is the only statutory authority in Australia dedicated to the prevention of violence against women and families. It advises our government on where to invest, develops the statewide theory of change, runs social change campaigns, builds the

evidence base and provides the policy architecture that makes a difference to the women and families of this state.

Then of course there is the Respect Ballarat program, formerly the Ballarat community saturation model, which is a key program driven by Respect Victoria. I want to spend some time here because this initiative deserves to be recognised. In 2024 Ballarat experienced something devastating: the deaths of Samantha Murphy, Rebecca Young and Hannah McGuire shocked the community, and that community responded with grief, anger and a demand for action. Thousands marched and this government listened. It has invested $9.8 million in delivering a nation-leading community model that is designed to prevent gendered violence. What makes Respect Ballarat different is its scale and integration. It does not deliver one program to one group in one venue but brings together sporting clubs, schools, workplaces, health services, councils and community organisations. They are all coordinated and they all reinforce each other, all working towards the same goal. As Sally Hasler from Women's Health Victoria put it, the Ballarat model:

> … makes it real for people that don't necessarily understand how advocacy, communications campaigns and research all link together.

The cultural shift is measurable too. The Walk Against Family Violence drew a record 8500 Victorians in 2024, up from 5000 participants the year before. Respect Victoria reached an average of 1.65 million Victorians through social change campaigns. Up to 73 per cent of people who saw a Respect Victoria campaign took some form of action arising from it. The momentum we are talking about today is real and it is built on funding decisions, legislative reforms, workplace development, groundbreaking research and communities that are mobilising for change in greater numbers than ever before. This is what leadership looks like: not just words, but action and investment. The work is not finished, and of course there is always more to do. Too many women are being murdered, too many loved ones have been taken from families and too many women live in fear of violence. But the momentum exists in Victoria. We should be proud of what we have done, but we will keep on going.

Select Committee on the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria

Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:53): This evening I rise to make a brief contribution on the early childhood education and care sector in Victoria interim report March 2026. This report of course has been incredibly important, and this inquiry is incredibly important, because it highlights problems in the early childhood sector and outlines the need for the government to not only have greater accountability in this most vulnerable of areas but acknowledge that problems continue to exist and problems are not yet solved.

While there have been some changes that have been made, there is more that needs to be done to make sure that children in care are being looked after and that all opportunities to keep children safe are being taken. The government needs to acknowledge that stronger stewardship is required across both the Victorian and national levels to ensure safety, quality and accountability for all children and all families in the sector and for those who are working in it.

The inquiry was established on the emergence of serious child abuse allegations against an educator in July 2025, which of course we are all aware of. It exposed critical, systematic failures that enabled an individual to work across multiple early childhood education services while posing an unacceptable risk. It should never have been possible for a person with alleged paedophilic tendencies to be allowed to be employed not just once, not just twice, but several times across the sector, with many children being abused.

Again I highlight how incredibly devastating it is for these families and for so many people when they have babies aged between six months and two years having to be tested for sexually transmitted diseases because of a childcare worker. In the last 24 hours I have been exposed to a number of really concerning, heartfelt stories by constituents across a number of different areas. One of the things that

I want to say is that as a government this government have a strong responsibility to keep children safe, to keep parents safe, to keep mothers safe and to make sure that they are investing their money not just through words but through actions that can actually be translated into protecting people's lives, protecting their bodies and protecting them in all circumstances. When they go into the childcare sector it is incredibly important that the government takes this responsibility seriously – that it is not just ticking the box and saying, 'We've fixed this,' but is actually ensuring that we are not opening up the field in any way for any perpetrator to be employed. We need to be continually looking at ways that we can refine this sector and protect people and their children at all times.

I just wanted to highlight this. I am looking forward to not just an interim report but a report that will be ongoing. I think that this needs to be something that remains at the forefront of everybody's thoughts, because we do have a responsibility to our children and to our families in this community and in the communities that we represent. I thank the government for actually having an inquiry, but I want to encourage the government to continue to work within this sector and continue to realise that this is a very important and very serious situation. We need to be clamping down on it, because our children deserve better.

Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into Public School Funding

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:57): I rise to speak on yet another inquiry report. Today I would like to speak on the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's inquiry into public school funding report, which was tabled just yesterday. I will acknowledge again our chair Mr McCracken, who I see in the room with us, which is very exciting. It is a very important issue as we look at how we resource schools in this state. In the state where we have the strongest NAPLAN results in the country and the lowest student-to-teacher ratios there is always more that can be done, and that is why it is so important that we had this place-in-time inquiry to look at our progress towards this work. I would like to acknowledge the witnesses that gave up their time to appear before us to tell us about their concerns. We heard, most gratefully for us, from a lot of teachers, who shared their experiences. On that note, pay and conditions for teachers do count towards the SRS, the schooling resource standard, and that is something that I am very hopeful to see some further progress on soon as we work towards giving a very substantial pay increase – a well-deserved pay increase – to our teachers.

It was an important inquiry, despite the fact that we only had one member of the Liberal Party attend the committee hearings all throughout the days of hearings, which was disappointing. Perhaps we did not see the same level of interest or importance from that side. We did nevertheless, those of us who were there, benefit from hearing from those witnesses, learning more about the schooling resource standard, the student resource package, the ongoing work towards a permanent bilateral agreement between the Victorian government and the Commonwealth, many of the finer points dissecting the SRS and some of the issues with the fluctuation of what is actually a moving target throughout the year. Certainly we heard some advocacy about the SRS target for the year being locked in place by at least the end of term 1 rather than having the target move up and down, which – we received evidence – in many years it has done, in some cases by quite large degrees. In one such year the SRS target for the state jumped up by several hundred million dollars in early December. There is not a great deal that you can do to resource schools come December, when schools are packing down and preparing for the next year. To get the most value out of the investment that you are making it is not just a question of the amount but whether you are spending it as wisely as you can. There is certainly room for further discussion and engagement with the Commonwealth on that issue of target fluctuation.

Indeed the report is mostly unanimous in most of its areas, except for a few sections. One that I will note in reference is recommendation 2, where we saw, a bit out of the blue, Liberal Party members and Greens support a recommendation that would commit the government or any future government to funding an undetermined amount of money, so, once we have achieved the SRS, to then going back

and doing some sort of bizarre back pay arrangement, even though it is not quite clear what that would actually look like or what direct benefit you would actually be seeking to achieve with that money. Nevertheless it was interesting to see the Liberal members of the committee commit their party to deepening the black hole that they are diving into with their various budget fiasco promises and indeed a further uncosted policy, which would certainly make that job even harder.

One recommendation that I think we can all get behind, though, is recommendation 5, which is to advocate for Commonwealth funding for capital for schools. Capital is not counted towards the SRS, which does indeed place Victoria at quite a disadvantage, given we are the state that invests more than any other one into new schools and into existing schools too, if you look at total capital spend and also if you look at the fact that one in every two new schools built in this country is built here in Victoria. So when you are seeing that and the growth in Victoria's enrolment, especially when compared to other states, it is quite a drastic comparison. On the investment, if you were to incorporate capital spend as part of the SRS calculation, you would certainly see a much closer figure to that target. That being said, we are not here to advocate that capital should be part of the SRS; it should be kept separate so the SRS can focus on direct educational outcomes. But we do need to see the Commonwealth step up and put the same level of investment into the public school system capital that it does into non-government schools. There is also lots of interesting demographic data that we received and confirmation that there are tens of thousands of capacity vacancies in inner-city suburbs where the Liberals are trying to push people out of having housing, but that is a discussion for another day.

Petitions

VicRoads, Maryborough

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:02): I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration.

Nearly 170 years ago gold was discovered, and the town Maryborough was born. In search of wealth and opportunity, prospectors rushed into the area, and soon a police camp, post office, hospital and church sprang up. At its peak Maryborough brought in tens of thousands of people. It was one of the wealthiest towns in all of Victoria. If you have ever had the privilege of visiting Maryborough, you will no doubt have seen the incredible architecture from the gold rush period, particularly its grand old train station.

Sadly, like many of our rural towns, Maryborough is being left behind. Over the years, particularly under this government, Maryborough has seen a population shift to Melbourne, and every time a service closes the shift accelerates. You cannot expect people to stay when the government keeps taking things away. Why do young people leave? Because they do not see opportunities in their local community. They are forced to pack their bags and go in search of work. Eight years ago, in my maiden speech, I spoke about this very problem. I reminded this house that real decentralisation requires enabling infrastructure to shift the population from the city to the bush, and I stressed the importance of government providing the services that the private sector cannot. When Telstra leaves, when the RACV leaves, when local businesses pack up, that is a free market verdict on a town that has been left behind.

Government cannot control business decisions, but it can control whether it adds to the exodus or fights against it, and on VicRoads this government chose to add fuel to the fire. Maryborough has been at the coalface of that failure, and until we commenced our campaign just eight months ago VicRoads, Maryborough, was on the chopping block. So let me explain exactly what happened and why this community had to fight so hard. In 2023 the then CEO of the shire signed a document agreeing to the Maryborough VicRoads office being reclassified from a sub-branch to an agency. The crisis was triggered when VicRoads then changed its funding model, moving from full cost reimbursement to a transaction-based model. This left Central Goldfields Shire Council facing a shortfall of hundreds of thousands of dollars every year, with an interim arrangement only in place until 31 October last year.

In late September 2025, hundreds of people travelling from as far as Charlton, Swan Hill, Ararat and Melbourne packed the Maryborough Education Centre performing arts centre to demand answers. I know because I was there, and so were my colleagues Joe McCracken and Danny O'Brien. Earlier that day, business owners, transport companies and farmers had blocked Nolan Street for over half an hour to register their anger. It was about the farmers who rely on in-person services, the historic car clubs that cannot function without them, the elderly on driving restrictions who are geographically locked out of basic services, the year 12 students who have to choose between sitting an English exam or passing a driving test and an entire regional economy depending on a functioning VicRoads office. And what did the member for Ripon have to say? Reportedly, she admitted she found out about the crisis at the same time as the community. It beggars belief that a government MP does not know what her own government is doing.

I commend the organisers, particularly David Hendrickson, who is in the gallery today, for their efforts in the campaign. Thanks to them, we have two parliamentary petitions with over 3500 signatures on this issue. To collect that number of signatures, equivalent to nearly half of Maryborough, is no small feat. It reflects the mood of a town that feels ignored and forgotten. The Liberal Party sees you and hears you. Joe McCracken and I have raised this in Parliament on many occasions. As far as I can tell, Martha Haylett has done so just once, and during that contribution she spent half her time attacking the opposition and the other half congratulating herself. In December I asked the Minister for Roads and Road Safety to confirm that VicRoads has no plan to close offices. We need to keep the VicRoads office open – *(Time expired)*

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (18:08): I want to start off by acknowledging the 2000 residents of Maryborough who have signed this petition, but I want to be crystal clear – Maryborough VicRoads is here to stay, and it is staying with its full services. I am actually puzzled about how we find ourselves here tonight having this debate and with the Liberals whipping up fear. In communities, particularly in regional communities, in-person services are critically important, and if locals are looking at having to travel long distances – you know, having grown up regionally myself, I can understand where this fear can come from. It concerns me that the Liberals and the Nationals, the coalition, have been seeding this unnecessary fear in the minds of many locals.

Local MP Martha Haylett has made it clear – she stood in Parliament and stated that VicRoads is here to stay. Services in regional towns are critically important, and like Martha, I am proud to be part of a government that invests in services in regional communities. We are building state-owned early learning centres in Clunes, in Avoca and in Maryborough. We have invested $18 million in the P–12 school in Maryborough. We have funded aged care upgrades and $115 million for the hospital. Compare this to the history of the Liberal–Nationals. Bev is very, very good with history, but she has left a lot out of her contribution – oh, Mrs McArthur, I beg your pardon. We have got a relationship where we can go by first name, but I apologise. With nearly a decade in federal Parliament, their coalition member delivered nothing for Maryborough. And while the federal member may have delivered nothing, that pales in comparison to what the state Liberals did – closing schools, privatising hospitals and closing the railway. I grew up in the region in the 1990s, and I recall pubs closing and footy clubs merging. The services that were cut and the jobs that were lost had an impact on families. When manufacturers left Maryborough and the government services left and private companies followed on, it had a real, hard-felt impact across the district. I had mates that went to school in Maryborough – mates I lost in my late teens. There was a bitter feeling, and drought compounded it. When you put drought with these services being ripped out, it really impacts regional communities and families, particularly young people.

Mrs McArthur talked about people moving to Melbourne. I am proud that Labor, over subsequent governments, has reinvested in the rail services, has invested in education, has invested in health and has invested in early education so we can keep families in our regional towns and so we can make sure that there are jobs in our regional towns so that people who are from those towns can age in their towns

with their families, with their loved ones and with the communities they know, which is why the investments we have made in public aged care are so valuable.

I do not want to be too political, but it is very rich of Mrs McArthur to stand here and say X, Y and Z about the Labor Party when the lived experience of people in seats like Ripon is that it is the Labor Party that has made the long-term investments in infrastructure and the long-term investments in services that support the quality of life of people and support the longevity and the ongoing possibility for the town not only to survive but to thrive. We have seen a move back to regional Victoria in recent years, one that at my age seemed an impossibility as many farmhouses and houses were left to rot into the ground rather than be taken on.

I will just close by saying that we have seen the Liberal coalition budget reply, with its $40 billion black hole. From a political party who is ideologically opposed to government investing in communities and to government investing in people and families and ensuring the jobs and the services they need to make sure those towns have a future and the people who live in those towns have a great future, I think that regional Victorians should be very, very concerned indeed about what the Liberals have planned. I will leave my contribution there.

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (18:13): I am pleased as well to rise to support this petition sponsored by Mrs McArthur. The people of Maryborough are not asking for anything other than certainty. They want to know that VicRoads will continue to be there in Maryborough for the long term. I am not just talking about the next five years, the next extension, but the long term, because being able to access VicRoads should not be considered a luxury that city people get. It should be a standard service that government should provide – simple things like being able to register a vehicle, changing numberplates, taking a driving test, obtaining a licence or going in and speaking to a real person. It should not be a controversy that these simple functions are considered basic expectations that citizens of the state have a right to access. They should not be forced to drive to Ballarat or Bendigo in order to access them either.

However, when the threat of closure was thrust on the Central Goldfields community that understanding changed. I attended a number of community events along with Mrs McArthur to talk about the issue, including public meetings – and Mrs McArthur outlined the very huge public meeting at Maryborough Education Centre – as well as a public rally through the streets of Maryborough, and it was huge. These are not the violent protests that we see on TV going through Melbourne. These are decent, hardworking country people that are just trying to send a message not to forget them, and they feel forgotten by the government. All they want is some common sense.

I want to thank David Hendrickson for being at the tip of the spear in driving this grassroots local campaign. He is supported by a very capable local team. Without his tireless efforts, his strong sense of community and his ability to bring people together, we may have been bulldozed by this Labor government. VicRoads may have been savagely cut if it were not for people like David and the hundreds of locals who signed on the dotted line and supported this petition. Because regional communities matter. They may not matter to those over there, but they actually matter. We might be small, but we are important and you cannot continue to ignore us.

I stand proudly shoulder to shoulder with the Central Goldfields community in asking – actually no, demanding that a commitment is made by this Labor government to ensure that essential services like VicRoads are never even threatened to be ripped away again, because we all pay taxes in this state – and thanks to them, they are high taxes. You have got to look at our country roads. We know that the money is certainly not being spent there. We have got to look at our train services that they love to trumpet about. They are certainly not there. The Central Goldfields shire are pushing for that. You guys have ignored them. They are certainly not being sent there, so the least you can do is give certainty to a community to provide them with an office which is fully staffed and provides in-person services to those that want to access those services, just to pay a bill, just to take a driving test in their own

community in the conditions they would be driving in, to be able to talk to somebody who is local and who wants to serve locals. If you support country Victorians, you would support this petition.

I thank Mrs McArthur for sponsoring this petition and the huge number of people in the Maryborough community that have responded to it. I do want to respond to Mr McIntosh's comments just quickly, in that he was puzzled how we got here. I can understand why he would be puzzled. He said it was unnecessary fear.

Tom McIntosh: Why we are here, not how we got here, why we are here.

Michael Galea: Please do not verbal him.

Joe McCRACKEN: Unnecessary fear, you said. Well, I do not think it is unnecessary fear, and I would not say the same thing either, because it is those in the Maryborough community that are feeling that fear as well. To say that about us and the Maryborough community is not exactly fair, particularly those who want to bring this petition to the chamber and have their voices heard. We seem to have a fetish for Jeff Kennett, who left office 25 years ago, last century. He is living rent-free in your head clearly and living rent-free in Labor's head. The only black hole that we have got is a black hole of truth, which you seem to ignore straight away. Forty billion dollars is a figure – you do not even know where it has come from. You have made it up. You do not care about country people because you do not care. You are all mouth, no money and you have got nothing to offer regional Victorians.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (18:18): Thank you Mrs McArthur for bringing this petition before the chamber tonight, and to everyone who has actually signed this petition and had your voice heard in this chamber. VicRoads is a very important service. I have got three kids with P- plates now, and so I have been there a number of times, but I think it was something I raised in this Parliament before – the potential closure of VicRoads in Kyneton. I certainly raised that with the minister, because that was a concern raised with me by the local community. Maryborough – I recall when that issue arose as well, speaking to a local councillor and residents there who were very concerned that the service may close and people may be forced to travel so much further.

I do commend David Hendrickson, who has already been referenced in this chamber tonight, for his contribution and so many that were part of that campaign in the local community, because it is essential for elderly residents, people with limited transport options, those without reliable internet access, it is important to be able to go and visit VicRoads and access the services. But at that community meeting, people had a chance to share their concerns, and I commend Danny O'Brien, the Leader of the Nationals, who did attend, and he was a very strong advocate and spoke with media and wrote letters to the editor on this issue. But I remember looking into it at the time and VicRoads, and it is interesting, Mr McIntosh's comments tonight, because when Labor have taken moves to privatise, they call it a joint venture. It is okay when they can do that. But in this case, with VicRoads, they did a part privatisation. They did get a $7.9 billion up-front payment – the deal was finalised I believe in 2022 – and it was a 40-year partnership that they signed up for. So here we are with this situation that arose. It was pushing the costs again onto local councils, and we have seen that time and time again.

I have been part of local council sustainability funding. We have seen with library services and rubbish collection that there are a whole lot of areas where the government is mandating change and then pushing all the costs onto the local council, which ultimately is borne again by the ratepayer, so yet again we pay more taxes. But I think it is important to consider that the government made it clear, in doing that part privatisation, that they will maintain ownership and control of VicRoads, so any end to services is clearly a decision made by or the responsibility of the state government. I think being able to maintain that service is something that the Nationals are very keen to see. We always are committed to regional infrastructure, to investment, to services in regional areas and to keeping those essential services in regional communities. I do want to mention Jo Armstrong, who is the Nationals candidate for the Ripon electorate in that community. I know her on a personal basis. I think she has been a councillor now and a mayor for over 10 years, a farmer in business and an incredible advocate, and

she would be an outstanding member to continue to advance the need for maintaining services in regional Victoria.

As has been described previously, this whole situation about Maryborough and VicRoads was considered a David and Goliath battle, and I think it is a real credit to the local community that they did so much to advance the cause, and I think that is what democracy is about. Writing or signing a petition is your chance to have a say. There were some that organised a community meeting and did a bumper sticker. You can contact your local member of Parliament. You can contact your local newspaper, share your views and make sure that you are heard. You can even stand for election. I will say, with the state election in November, make your vote count, because we want to see services – essential services – maintained and expanded in regional Victoria.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:22): I thank my colleagues – Mr McCracken, Mrs Broad, even Mr McIntosh – for contributing to this debate today. While we are acknowledging people, I would like to acknowledge Megan Read in the gallery, who is a very highly regarded Ripon resident and very concerned about this issue.

The government claims that the service is continuing over the next five years, but what they are not telling you is that the service is already starved. There are reportedly just two people behind the counter, no phone lines or internet for customers to book appointments, no licensed testing officers to conduct driving tests and no recruitment underway, with just one manager qualified to conduct inspections. This is not a victory. This is not good enough, and this house should not pretend otherwise. Because here is the truth about what happens when government withdraws from regional communities: every service that closes is a reason for someone to leave and a reason for no new person to come.

Population decline is not a justification for cutting services; it is the consequence of cutting them. This government has had it backwards all along. The answer is not complicated: build the infrastructure, provide the services, and the people will come. Maryborough has the equipment, the demand and the community will; the only thing missing is a government that matches their commitment with its own. I call on this government to stop treating Maryborough as a problem to be managed and start treating it as a community worth investing in, and I thank all the thousands of people who contributed to the petition and who have stood at meetings and tried to advocate to keep Maryborough VicRoads office open.

Motion agreed to.

Business of the house

Adjournment

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (18:25): I move:

> That the Council, at its rising, adjourn until Tuesday 2 June 2026.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026

Introduction and first reading

The PRESIDENT (18:25): I have received the following message from the Legislative Assembly:

> The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council 'A Bill for an Act for the appropriation of certain sums out of the Consolidated Fund for the ordinary annual services of the Government for the financial year 2026/2027 and for other purposes'.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (18:25): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Jaclyn SYMES: I move, by leave:

That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Statement of charter compatibility

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (18:26): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (**Charter**), I make this statement of compatibility with respect to the Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026.

In my opinion, the Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026, as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with the human rights protected by the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

Overview of Bill

The Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026 will provide appropriation authority for payments from the Consolidated Fund for the ordinary annual services of Government for the 2026/2027 financial year.

The amounts contained in Schedule 1 to the Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026 provide for the ongoing operations of departments, including new output and asset investment funded through annual appropriation.

Schedule 2 of the Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026 contains details concerning payments from the Advance to Treasurer in the 2024/2025 financial year.

Schedule 3 of the Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2025 contains details concerning payments from advances made pursuant to section 35 of the *Financial Management Act 1994* in the 2024/2025 financial year.

Human Rights Issues

The Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026 does not raise any human rights issues.

As the Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026 does not raise any human rights issues, it does not limit any human rights and therefore it is not necessary to consider section 7(2) of the Charter.

Conclusion

I consider that the Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026 is compatible with the Charter because it does not raise any human rights issues.

JACLYN SYMES MP
Treasurer

Statement of treaty compatibility

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (18:26): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Statewide Treaty Act 2025:

In accordance with s 66 of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025*, I table a statement of Treaty compatibility for the Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026.

In my opinion, the Bill is compatible with the objects 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 Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026 will provide appropriation authority for payments from the Consolidated Fund for the ordinary annual services of Government for the 2026/2027 financial year.

The amounts contained in Schedule 1 to the Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026 provide for the ongoing operations of departments, including new output and asset investment funded through annual appropriation.

Schedule 2 of the Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026 contains details concerning payments from the Advance to Treasurer in the 2024/2025 financial year.

Schedule 3 of the Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2025 contains details concerning payments from advances made pursuant to section 35 of the Financial Management Act 1994 in the 2024/2025 financial year.

Consultation with the First Peoples' Assembly of Gellung Warl

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 each of the objects in section 66(3)(d) of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025*

1. I have considered whether the Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026 is compatible with the objects at section 66(3)(d) of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025* being:
   1.1 advancing the inherent rights and self-determination of First Peoples; and
   1.2 addressing the unacceptable disadvantage inflicted on First Peoples by the historic wrongs and ongoing injustices of colonisation; and
   1.3 ensuring the equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by First Peoples.
2. The Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026 does not in its terms deal with First Peoples. As noted in the Overview, the purpose of the Bill is to provide an appropriation of funds for the ordinary services of Government. Decisions have been, and will be, made in respect to the use of such funds, however, these are separate from the effect of the Bills.

Conclusion

I consider the Bill does not affect any of the objects specified in section 66(3)(d) of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025* and is therefore compatible with each of those objects.

JACLYN SYMES MP
Treasurer

Second reading

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (18:26): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

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

I begin my Budget speech by acknowledging the Traditional Owners and Custodians of this land.

I pay my respects to Elders, past and present.

The Allan Labor Government is proudly committed to Truth, Treaty and Self-Determination for First Peoples.

Speaker –

For a long time in this country, there's been this basic deal.

That if you work hard, do the right thing, and look after your family …

You'll have the opportunity to build a decent life.

Not an easy life. Not a perfect life – but a **decent** one.

You'll have a safe home and a secure job.

Good schools and good healthcare when you need it.

You'll be able to put enough food on the table.

And you'll even have a bit left over to enjoy the life you've built.

Speaker, my parents had that deal …

Growing up in Benalla, money at times was tight …

Mum and Dad worked incredibly hard to support their family.

And they made many sacrifices …

And there were times when things felt really stretched.

But my parents knew that if they worked hard enough – and if they kept going …

They could build a good life and a strong future.

And they did.

That hard work led somewhere.

It meant stability. It meant being able to provide.

It meant home ownership …

It meant opportunity for their kids …

It meant confidence that – however hard things were … You could keep moving forward.

But for too many Victorians, particularly families, that basic bargain no longer feels secure.

What was hard then, is much harder now.

Because over the past few years, global pressures that once felt distant have started landing right in people's everyday lives.

War in Ukraine. Tariffs and instability in the global economy. War in the Middle East.

One after another, they've pushed pressure higher.

And working people are the ones being asked to carry it.

You hear it wherever you go.

In schools.

On the street.

On hospital wards and factory floors.

People say it in different ways, but they are often describing the same thing.

They say:

I am working hard. I am doing my best …

But I still don't feel like I'm getting ahead.

And they aren't just talking about money.

Of course – it's there in the weekly shop …

The rent or mortgage …

The cost of getting to work and keeping the car on the road …

But it's the strain of it all too …

The extra hours. The time spent away from home …

The constant pressure …

The sense that even when you are doing everything right …

Life still feels like it's getting harder, not easier.

Speaker, this Budget is about getting to the heart of that feeling.

It is about helping with the cost of living.

It is about giving families more time in their day.

It is about strengthening the systems Victorians are relying on more than ever before.

It is about building a stronger economy, a more secure future, and opportunity for every Victorian …

It doesn't solve every issue that families are facing …

Or stop the wars and shocks and impacts from overseas …

But at its core …

It helps to restore that basic deal:

That if people work hard, they deserve a decent life.

It's a **Labor** Budget –

One that makes life Easier … Safer … and More Affordable for every Victorian.

Speaker, one of the clearest places families are feeling pressure right now is in the cost of getting around.

Getting to work.

Getting the kids to school.

Getting to appointments.

And right now, Trump's war in the Middle East is not some distant event for Victorians.

It drove up fuel prices.

It is adding to the cost of doing business.

And it is putting even more pressure on household budgets that were already stretched.

Families in Victoria are carrying more burden every day.

And when the cost of getting around rises, the effect is immediate.

And it leaves families with less room to cover everything else they need.

For many families, especially in regional Victoria, the car is not optional.

It is how they keep life moving.

And that is why this Budget helps there first.

We have already acted to keep fuel prices fair …

With daily price caps, Servo Saver, and strong action against operators who try to rip Victorians off.

And now, for those who have to drive, we are rebating some of the costs of running a car –

Giving Victorians 20 per cent back on the cost of their rego this financial year.

That means up to $186 back for a driver with one car.

And up to $372 back for a family with two cars.

That is practical help.

Help that families will feel straight away.

But reducing the cost of getting around goes beyond the car.

That is why we acted in April, making public transport free for a month.

And we have already seen the impact.

More people on the network.

Fewer cars on the road.

And less pressure at the pump.

When you talk to people on trains, trams and buses, they will tell you what it means.

It saves them money.

Which is why this Budget builds on that work.

Free public transport has been extended by an extra month.

And we are cutting fares in half, across the state, for the rest of the year.

Metro.

V/Line.

Trams.

Local buses.

Half-price transport, for every Victorian.

And we're investing almost $100 million for more buses, more often …

With new and upgraded routes in growing suburbs, and better connections to train stations, universities and jobs.

That means more services to La Trobe and RMIT in the north, a new bus network for Melton South, and better links from Dandenong to Chadstone and Monash.

It will put money back in people's pockets.

It will take pressure off family budgets.

And it will make the most of the record investments this government has made in public transport right across the state.

Because at a time like this, government should not stand back.

It should step in.

It should ease pressure.

And it should deliver relief that families can feel straight away.

Speaker, we know the pressure families are facing is not narrow.

It touches transport, healthcare, schooling, household bills, and the time it takes to hold everything together.

Government can't solve everything – we know that.

But we can make life just a little bit easier.

It is why we are continuing free public transport for every child in Victoria.

It is why we are continuing free dental checkups in schools and expanding the Glasses for Kids program.

Because if a child cannot see the board, they cannot learn properly.

Since it began, Glasses for Kids has delivered more than 68 000 eye tests and 13 700 pairs of glasses.

We are continuing Free Kinder.

Building and upgrading more public schools, because every family deserves a great local school close to home …

And we are backing the people who care for some of Victoria's most vulnerable children …

Foster carers, kinship carers and permanent carers step up to provide care, stability and a safe home … and they deserve support to keep doing it …

That is why this Budget increases care allowances – delivering around $400 more a year at the lowest level and up to around $1 700 more at the highest.

This year, we are also spending more on our health system than ever …

That means easier care through Urgent Care Clinics –

The Virtual ED –

Chemist Care Now –

And it means expanding our world-class care, especially in the west.

New post-natal beds, more sonography appointments at Joan Kirner, and more special care nursery cots for babies with complex needs.

$95 million to open the upgraded Werribee Mercy Hospital Emergency Department … doubling capacity and allowing local doctors and nurses to treat 25 000 more patients every year once fully operational.

We're also investing in a fast track for kids' care so they can get the surgery or the specialist care they need – more quickly …

Because Victorian families deserve to know that when they need care, it will be there.

And because no family should ever have to worry about where their next meal is coming from, this Budget continues our Government's commitment to ensuring food relief providers and support organisations can continue providing vital support to Victorians in need.

Speaker, the reason that this Budget can go so far and do so much to help families with the cost of living, to save them time, and to keep them safe – is simple …

We have made responsible economic choices.

We have made disciplined decisions, cut inefficiencies, consolidated entities, and kept our focus on what matters most –

Protecting frontline services and building the strength Victoria needs to weather uncertain times.

This Budget confirms Victoria's first operating surplus in seven years, the only surplus on the eastern seaboard –

A higher than forecast $727 million operating surplus in the current year.

And surpluses averaging $1.7 billion being maintained over the budget and forward estimates period.

Debt as a share of the economy is on track to decline from 2026–27 …

And with this Budget, net debt is lower in every year over the forwards, compared to the budget update …

Importantly, we have also helped grow the economy.

Despite everything going on in the world – Victoria's economy remains resilient…

Over the past decade, it has grown faster than any other state in the country.

Our economy is estimated to be almost 15 per cent larger in real terms in 2025–26 than it was before the pandemic.

Business investment has grown by 44 per cent since 2020, the strongest in the nation.

Since June 2020, more than 123 000 net new businesses have been created in Victoria – again, the largest percentage growth of any state.

Over the last three years, 300 000 Victorians have found work, a higher percentage increase than the rest of Australia.

And since the peak impacts of the pandemic, 646 000 more Victorians are in jobs – yet again, the strongest absolute increase in the nation.

That strength must mean something in people's lives:

More security.

More opportunity.

More secure work.

More homes in our state.

That is why Victoria continues to lead the nation in delivering new homes each year …

With more than 16 000 social and affordable homes being delivered …

More than 12 000 underway or complete …

And another 7 000 to come through the Social Housing Growth Fund.

We have looked after the economy so that we can look after Victorians.

And because we have built that strength, we can help families now – and keep building for what comes next.

Strong economic management is not separate from helping families.

Labor's Budgets have built the productive infrastructure Victoria needs and created thousands of jobs as a result.

Roads, rail and tunnels that provide for a growing population and give families more time – and the economy more opportunity.

Easing congestion with level crossing removals; better connecting regional Victoria through the Regional Rail Revival; opening a new link with West Gate Tunnel; and transforming commutes by switching on the Metro Tunnel.

Construction of the North East Link continues at pace – closing our critical missing link.

Melbourne Airport Rail is turning Sunshine into a Superhub.

And the SRL will transform the way we move around the city – and will deliver thousands of new homes.

This Budget invests a record $1.04 billion to rebuild, repair and resurface roads across Victoria – enough to get rid of 200 000 potholes, 200 000 graffiti tags, and much more.

This is the biggest roads blitz in the state's history – with 70 per cent of the funds going to regional Victoria.

Labor has invested nearly $3 billion over the past three years – the largest sustained investment in road maintenance in Victoria's history.

Because better roads do more than get people from A to B.

They make the trip safer.

They make it easier for parents, tradies, and regional communities to get where they need to go, sooner.

That is what investment looks like when it is real – not abstract, but felt in the trip to work, the school run, and the journey home.

Because government investment should not live on a balance sheet – it should make life work better for people.

We also have to ensure that every Victorian feels safe …

Safe at home.

Safe in their communities.

Safe where they work, study and travel.

That is why this Budget continues to back Victoria Police with more resources, better tools, and more officers where they are needed most.

It includes $62 million to recruit 200 police reservists for station reception and front counter duties, freeing up more frontline police.

It includes $79 million for police IT systems – so officers spend less time on paperwork and more time in the community. And giving police faster access to accurate data on firearms, weapons and the private security industry.

But keeping communities safe is not only about response.

It's about prevention.

That is why this Budget invests $33 million in the Violence Reduction Unit …

Backing early intervention, lived-experience mentoring, school support, and community programs that help keep young people engaged and away from crime.

Because when a young person stays connected to school, support and community, we get better outcomes for them – and safer communities for everyone.

More police.

Stronger prevention.

Safer communities.

That is what this Budget does.

Speaker – helping families through this moment matters.

But our job is so much bigger than that.

We're making sure the future being built in this state is a future that every Victorian can see themselves in.

A future where the young people training in our Free TAFEs are the ones working on offshore wind …

Installing solar panels on rooftops …

Building the next generation of trams, trains and advanced manufacturing …

Working in the data centres, clean energy projects and biotech facilities of the future…

And earning decent wages from it, in good, steady jobs …

That is how you build security.

That is how you build the future.

A future where Victorian families are not just protected from change – but part of it, and better off because of it.

Speaker, this Budget is not only about the big picture.

It is also about the difference good governments can make locally.

What our investment means – and how it is felt and seen – in the towns, suburbs and communities people call home …

Almost $4 million for Rochester's pool.

$19 million to open Pakenham Community Hospital.

A new school gym and classrooms at Wales Street Primary in Thornbury.

A brand-new CFA station in Mirboo North.

A new pump track in Haddon.

Toilet facilities for Coburg Reserve.

Different places.

Different projects.

But the same idea behind every one of them:

Backing local communities.

Building on what makes them strong.

And making sure every part of Victoria can share in the future we are building.

Because, Speaker, we should be proud of this state.

In tough times it's easy to feel pessimistic, but there is lots to be positive about –

This is a strong state. A capable state. A state people can believe in.

You can see it in the growing economy and the businesses choosing to invest here.

In the workers choosing to build their lives here.

In the families choosing to make their future here.

In uncertain times, that matters.

And that strength is something we can use …

To support families.

To keep services strong.

To back jobs.

To keep building.

Speaker – at the end of the day, this Budget is about people's lives …

A cheaper trip to work.

A lower rego bill.

A child getting to school for free.

A family saving money on dental care, glasses, kinder or energy bills.

A parent getting home earlier.

A household with a bit more room at the end of the week.

That is what this Budget is all about – real help, right now.

And real confidence in what comes next.

Because if people are working hard to build a decent life –

They deserve a government working just as hard to make sure they have it.

That is what this Labor Budget does.

It makes life Easier … Safer … and More Affordable.

And it builds a stronger Victoria for the future.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:26): I move:

That debate be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026

Budget papers 2026–27

Cognate debate

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (18:26): I move, by leave:

That this house authorises the President to permit the second-reading debate on the Appropriation (2026–2027) Bill 2026 to be taken concurrently with the debate on the motion to take note of the budget papers 2026–27, contingent on such a motion being moved.

Motion agreed to.

Appropriation (Parliament 2026–2027) Bill 2026

Introduction and first reading

The PRESIDENT (18:27): I have received the following message from the Legislative Assembly:

> The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council 'A Bill for an Act for the appropriation of certain sums out of the Consolidated Fund for the Parliament in respect of the financial year 2026/2027 and for other purposes'.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (18:27): I move:

> That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Jaclyn SYMES: I move, by leave:

> That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Statement of charter compatibility

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (18:27): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

> In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (**Charter**), I make this statement of compatibility with respect to the Appropriation (Parliament 2026–2027) Bill 2026.
>
> In my opinion, the Appropriation (Parliament 2026–2027) Bill 2026, as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with the human rights protected by the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.
>
> **Overview of Bill**
>
> The purpose of the Appropriation (Parliament 2026–2027) Bill 2026 is to provide appropriation authority for payments from the Consolidated Fund to the Parliament and its agencies in respect of the 2026–2027 financial year.
>
> **Human Rights Issues**
>
> The Appropriation (Parliament 2026–2027) Bill 2026 does not raise any human rights issues.
>
> As the Appropriation (Parliament 2026–2027) Bill 2026 does not raise any human rights issues, it does not limit any human rights, and therefore it is not necessary to consider section 7(2) of the Charter.
>
> **Conclusion**
>
> I consider that the Appropriation (Parliament 2026–2027) Bill 2026 is compatible with the Charter because it does not raise any human rights issues.
>
> **JACLYN SYMES MP**
> **Treasurer**

Statement of treaty compatibility

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (18:27): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Statewide Treaty Act 2025:

> In accordance with s 66 of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025*, I table a statement of Treaty compatibility for the Appropriation (Parliament 2026–2027) Bill 2026.
>
> In my opinion, the Bill is compatible with the objects 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 Appropriation (Parliament 2026–2027) Bill 2026 will provide appropriation authority for payments from the Consolidated Fund to the Parliament and its agencies in respect of the 2026/2027 financial year.

Consultation with the First Peoples' Assembly of Gellung Warl

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 each of the objects in section 66(3)(d) of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025*

1. I have considered whether the Appropriation (Parliament 2026–2027) Bill 2026 is compatible with the objects at section 66(3)(d) of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025* being:
   - 1.1 advancing the inherent rights and self-determination of First Peoples; and
   - 1.2 addressing the unacceptable disadvantage inflicted on First Peoples by the historic wrongs and ongoing injustices of colonisation; and
   - 1.3 ensuring the equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by First Peoples.
2. The Appropriation (Parliament 2026–2027) Bill 2026 does not in its terms deal with First Peoples. As noted in the Overview, the purpose of the Bill is to provide an appropriation of funds to be used by the Parliament and its agencies. Decisions have been, and will be, made in respect to the use of such funds, however, these are separate from the effect of the Bills.

Conclusion

I consider the Bill does not affect any of the objects specified in section 66(3)(d) of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025* and is therefore compatible with each of those objects.

JACLYN SYMES MP
Treasurer

Second reading

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (18:27): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

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

The Appropriation (Parliament 2026–2027) Bill 2026 provides appropriation authority for payments from the Consolidated Fund to the Parliament and its agencies in respect of the 2026/2027 financial year, including ongoing liabilities incurred by the Parliament such as employee entitlements that may be realised in the future.

Honourable Members will be aware that other funds are appropriated for parliamentary purposes by way of special appropriations contained in other legislation. In addition, unapplied appropriations under the *Appropriation (Parliament 2025–2026) Act 2025* have been estimated and included in the Budget Papers. Before 30 June 2026, the actual unapplied appropriation will be finalised and the 2026/2027 appropriations will be adjusted by the approved carryover amounts under section 32 of the *Financial Management Act 1994*.

In line with the wishes of the Presiding Officers, appropriations in the Appropriation (Parliament 2026–2027) Bill 2026 are made to the departments of the Parliament, and the independent officers of the Parliament.

The total appropriation authority sought in the Appropriation (Parliament 2026–2027) Bill 2026 is $313 713 000 for Parliament in respect of the 2026/2027 financial year.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:28): I move:

That debate be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Adjournment

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (18:28): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region bus services

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:28): (2512) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport, and it concerns the large amount of bus upgrades that we have seen very excitedly announced in the Treasurer's budget last week. I would like to have an update from the minister on the very many upgrades in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region, specifically in regard to a number of routes that I am very excited about.

For one, we are going to see a reform to route 795, which will for the first time not just bypass around the edge of but directly serve the two suburbs of Junction Village and Botanic Ridge, just to the south of Cranbourne. It will also see a dramatic increase in frequency, going up from five buses a day to an hourly service. That will then continue, with buses branching in to serve different parts of the Casey coastal villages. There is also going to be the introduction of a new route 896, which will serve for the first time communities in the south-east of Cranbourne, including the Livingston and Mayfield Estates, with a minimum weekday frequency of every 40 minutes. Clyde and Clyde North will continue to see further new bus services, with the extension of routes 888 and 897. In the case of the former route, the 888, the main Clyde Road corridor route is being upgraded as well to a new weekday daytime frequency of 20 minutes, up from 60 minutes.

Indeed in other parts of the south-east as well we are seeing dramatic service upgrades, including through the very important Dandenong North corridor – I know that is an area very close to my colleague Mr Tarlamis – with the reform of the existing routes 802, 804 and 862 into a combined, simplified and massively upgraded new route structure. We are taking three disparate, disconnected and meandering routes that link from Dandenong through to the northern part of the area and onto Waverly, Monash and Chadstone into two new routes, leading to a simple, direct, high-frequency and quicker journey time as a result on route 802. This will see frequencies of up to every 15 minutes on that central key corridor and will then be supported through the connecting areas by the new route 804.

Indeed down in the sand belt as well we are going to see a major upgrade to route 833 and a whole overhaul as well of the 777 linking Carrum Downs directly through Skye and Seaford with Karingal Hub. I know the member down there, the member for Carrum, has been particularly excited about that, just as the member for Cranbourne has been very excited about the 795. We did actually get to spend some time with her down at the Botanic Ridge shops just recently and, talking to locals about it, to say there was a positive reaction would be a distinct understatement. I would like to acknowledge all those local members for their advocacy and indeed reiterate that the action that I am seeking is an update on how this year's state Labor budget is delivering significantly improved bus services for the south-east of Melbourne.

Electricity infrastructure

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:31): (2513) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Energy and Resources, and the action I seek is that she reject AusNet's application for compulsory acquisition powers for the Western Renewables Link and pause all compulsory access and acquisition activity on both the Western Renewables Link and VNI West until the relevant environmental assessments are complete and genuine alternatives have been assessed. This is no longer theoretical. AusNet has applied to the government for powers to compulsorily acquire easements across private farmland for the Western Renewables Link. This has been made possible by Labor's changes allowing compulsory acquisition to run in parallel with the environment effects statement before that process has concluded and before the Minister for Planning has made an assessment. That is an extraordinary position. The government is allowing the machinery of acquisition to begin before the project has

cleared the process meant to determine whether, where and how it should proceed. As Victorian Farmers Federation acting president Peter Starr has argued, 'Landholders cannot treat negotiations as voluntary when the other side is simultaneously seeking the legal power to take the easement away.' Hepburn shire mayor Tony Clark has also warned that granting these powers before the EES outcome would disrespect landholders and call the process into question.

On VNI West the situation is just as troubling. VicGrid authorised officers have warned that infringement notices may be issued not only to landholders who decline access but to neighbours and fellow farmers who attend a property in peaceful support. The idea that a farmer could face fines for standing peacefully at a neighbour's gate is a disgrace. It goes against the ethos of mateship and regional communities, where neighbour looks after and looks out for neighbour – it is deeply un-Australian. This is what happens when a government botches its planning, fails to persuade and turns to coercion. Labor has turned consultation into notification and negotiation into compulsion. Its use of the term 'social licence' is a sick joke. The Liberals and Nationals have a clear alternative: we will pause VNI West and Western Renewables Link and conduct a full review of the Victorian transmission plan, including a cost–benefit analysis and alternatives such as urban solar parks generating power on commercial and industrial rooftops.

Animal welfare

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (18:34): (2514) My matter is for the Minister for Consumer Affairs, and the action that I seek is for him to work with the Minister for Agriculture and relevant agencies to implement mandatory labelling requirements requiring egg producers to disclose whether the eggs they sell come from supply chains that involve the maceration of male chicks or whether they instead utilise in-ovo sexing technology. The best way to avoid hen and chicken cruelty is of course to leave eggs off the menu altogether, but most consumers who do buy eggs factor welfare standards into their decision-making. They know that labelling systems distinguish between cage, barn-laid and free-range eggs. Despite these labels often being deceiving and in need of improvement, they exist as a decision-making guide because consumers have a right to know how animals are treated in our farming systems.

But what most consumers do not know is that every single year millions of male chicks are killed by the egg industry on their very first day of life because they cannot lay eggs. This is usually done by maceration, meaning they are sent down a conveyor belt and literally minced in an industrial-sized blender. It is a practice that is met with horror and disgust upon consumers learning of it, and it was clearly kept secret by the industry intentionally. In fact every single time I have spoken in this place about maceration and shared what I have said publicly, I have been contacted by Victorians asking how they can avoid purchasing eggs that are linked to this practice. Previously my answer was that it is simply not possible when buying commercial eggs, no matter how ethical their labelling seemed, and that every egg on supermarket shelves has involved the maceration of male chicks – including organic and free range. That was until now.

A few months ago, in a previous adjournment debate, I asked the Minister for Agriculture to support a trial of in-ovo sexing technology here in Victoria, and last week I was thrilled when it was announced to be in place at Australia's largest hatchery, which is located in my electorate, on 1 June. This technology allows the sex of chicks to be identified early in incubation, with male eggs then prevented from hatching, and it has already been used in other countries for many years with great success. While it is a huge relief that this technology is now available, it will not be mandatory, and still consumers will have no way at all of identifying eggs linked to maceration. I am sure that the minister agrees with the existing legislation requiring transparency around whether hens are confined to cages and that it only makes sense to extend that transparency to cruel chick shredding too.

Public IVF services

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (18:37): (2515) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, Harriet Shing. No Victorian should miss out on becoming a parent, and that is why IVF will become available publicly with a $43.4 million investment into Australia's first publicly funded fertility program, launched by the Labor government in 2022. The action I seek is an update on how this investment is expanding access to fertility treatments for Victorians, including regional Victorians.

South Gippsland health services

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:38): (2516) The matter I have tonight is for the Minister for Health, and it relates to a very delicate and tender issue that has occurred at the start of this year in Leongatha and the broader South Gippsland community. That community faced what can only be described as an unprecedented situation with the loss of a very large local medical service and clinic. It has caused distress in our community, and there have been many left hanging on a positive way forward. The community is certainly resilient, and I hope now a positive pathway is emerging. There is genuine appreciation for all those who have dealt with this. I commend the Rail Trail Medical clinic, a new and developing practice. They stepped up at a critical time to ensure continuity of care, and their commitment to the community deserves recognition, as do many other practices in the area that bore the weight of additional patients whilst coping with this situation.

The practice faces a complex issue regarding the proposed transfer of the former Leongatha Healthcare server and patient medical records when in receipt of the server – and we hope that that is soon. While this is intended to support continuity in care, it carries significant responsibilities. Under Victoria's Health Records Act 2001, accepting these records – meaning assuming full legal responsibility for their storage, their privacy, their access, their cybersecurity and their long-term retention – for a very small regional practice newly minted represents a substantial and ongoing burden, with financial and compliance issues if not properly supported. They are very, very happy to take on this role. I also want to acknowledge my colleagues Danny O'Brien and Mary Aldred, who have been working in the background. I also want to acknowledge that the former state health minister and current federal health minister have been recognising the delicacy of this but also acknowledge their support in practice where they can. Now I feel that there is an opportunity for the federal health minister to be able to provide material assistance. Rail Trail is going to step up. Their willingness is exemplary to support the community, but it will have a cost. It will cost resources, it will cost time and it will cost funding.

The action I seek from the Minister for Health in this house is to advocate to her federal counterpart the Honourable Mark Butler for material financial assistance, through the primary healthcare network potentially, to support the safe and compliant transfer and management of these records, noting it could take many months of work to satisfactorily complete. This is about supporting this community, and I ask the minister to play her role as she can.

Electric bikes and scooters

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (18:41): (2517) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport, and the action I seek is for the minister to introduce measures to keep under-18s safe while riding e-scooters and e-bikes, including education programs for parents and young riders. This issue was raised with me by Helal, a member of my office's multicultural youth advisory committee, which brings together young people from diverse backgrounds to advise on issues affecting them in their local communities. Helal is an active member of his local community and cares deeply about outcomes for young people. Helal spoke about the increasing number of young people in his community riding e-scooters and e-bikes unsafely, often without understanding the road rules or safety requirements. He has witnessed serious and life-threatening injuries among his peers as a result.

St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne has also reported a 400 per cent increase in e-bike injuries since 2019. The Greens are supportive of innovative ways of creating a bigger, better transport network that includes active options and makes our cities easier to get around. However, this must be carefully balanced with public safety. This could include expansion of separated bike lanes for both bike and e-scooter use. As these forms of transport become more common, the state government has a responsibility to ensure both young people and parents are properly educated about the rules and risks in order to prevent further harm. Minister, please heed the calls for action from our young people for better measures to keep under-18s safe while riding their e-scooters.

Tourism

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:43): (2518) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Tourism in the other place, Minister Suleyman. The Allan Labor government has invested in making Victoria a first-class tourist destination for both domestic and international travellers. This includes investments in cultural and live music events throughout Melbourne and significant promotion of sporting events across our state. Significantly, Melbourne has secured the American National Football League to play a regular season's game here in Melbourne. This firmly puts Melbourne on the global stage as a prime tourist destination. Beyond just our capital city, we are also investing in tourism in the regions. This includes supporting tourism infrastructure and regional events. These investments provide a much-needed boost to small and family businesses and tourism operators in our region. The action that I seek is that the minister provide me with information on how many jobs are created by the visitor economy, including in Southern Metro.

Mount Atkinson bus services

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (18:44): (2519) My matter is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport regarding the ongoing delay in delivering essential public transport in Mount Atkinson. The action I seek is for the minister to provide a clear and transparent timeline for the urgent commencement of bus route 140. A responsible government should ensure that infrastructure keeps pace with the community's changing needs. At present Victorians are in the middle of a fuel crisis, to which the government has responded by providing free public transport. But what about the community in my electorate, in Mount Atkinson, which cannot benefit from this assistance due to a complete absence of public transport infrastructure in the area? It is no good having free public transport when there is no access to public transport infrastructure. Mount Atkinson is one of the fastest growing communities in Victoria. It had zero residents in 2017 and 11,000 residents living there by the year 2025. Despite this, there is no indication of scheduled bus routes inside Mount Atkinson. Indeed the nearest public bus stop is outside the suburb, along the main route, which is about a 30- to 50-minute walk, depending on where you live in the suburb. This is an enormous amount of time just to be able to access public transport. My Mount Atkinson locals are right to call the suburb a bus desert.

Inequality in the west is not uncommon under this Labor government. This needs to change. Mount Atkinson residents are faced with an enormous increase in daily expenditure due to not having access to public transport for work, education, medical services and groceries, compared to those living in the eastern suburbs, especially those with established public transport, who have now been given $34 billion for the Suburban Rail Loop. There has been promise after promise. Funding of bus route 140 was announced in the previous budget in 2025–26. However, a year has passed since the announcement and no buses are operating, no timetables have been published and no confirmed start date has been given. It is unacceptable. There has been continuous delay in delivering this basic public transport infrastructure to my constituents in the west. So, Minister, could you please provide an update, with a very clear timeline, on when this promised bus route 140 will begin? The residents of Mount Atkinson deserve the same level of affordability and infrastructure as everyone else in Victoria.

Animal care and protection legislation

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (18:46): (2520) My adjournment is to the Premier, and the action I seek is that she immediately put the Animal Care and Protection Bill back on the parliamentary agenda. The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986 is now 40 years old. Greens MPs have been advocating for stronger animal protection laws since we were first in this place. In her inaugural speech in 2006 former Greens MP Sue Pennicuik said:

> Animals cannot advocate for themselves. They need people to do it for them …

She committed to working to end cruel and exploitative practices. After 20 years of delay, Victoria is still waiting for animal welfare laws that meet community expectations. Finally in 2017 the Labor government committed to replacing our outdated laws, and since then there have been reviews, consultation papers, stakeholder meetings, an exposure draft and years of work by animal welfare organisations, legal experts, industry advocates and community members. After all of that, the government has shelved the bill – a decade of work. Labor should be ashamed of itself.

Animal welfare organisations have condemned this delay. Humane World for Animals has said that the current act is 'one of the oldest pieces of animal welfare legislation in the country', 'not fit for purpose' and 'failing animals'. World Animal Protection has said:

> The Victorian Government has had years to get this reform right. Failing to introduce the legislation again in 2026 sends a deeply concerning signal that animal welfare is no longer a priority …

for this government. The need for reform is real and urgent. In February this year RSPCA, in just one of the latest examples, seized 13 horses and 24 cats from a property linked to a repeat animal cruelty offender. RSPCA said that more than 400 animals had been removed from this same person's care over the past decade and that this was their fourth breach of court orders. In response to that case RSPCA Victoria CEO Dr Liz Walker said:

> It's simple: Animal cruelty is a crime in Victoria, but we need stronger laws and tougher penalties for offenders …

The government has given an excuse that this parliamentary calendar is too crowded. After a decade of consultation, that is not an excuse, it is an admission of failure. If Labor can find time for racing, gambling and industry priorities, it can find time to protect animals from cruelty and neglect.

The PRESIDENT: Sorry, Ms Copsey, but an action calling for legislation is not allowed in the adjournment. Your action could be to review policies and legislation in regard to animal cruelty.

Katherine COPSEY: President, on your ruling, if I can, we checked the wording with the table office prior to me delivering this adjournment this evening –

The PRESIDENT: That is a good practice. We will come back to you. If I am right, we will make sure you get an action out of it.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you, President. I appreciate that.

Economic policy

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:50): (2521) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Treasurer, and the action that I seek is for the Treasurer to update me on what the impact would be of the $40 billion worth of budget cuts proposed by Jess Wilson and her Liberal opposition should they ever have the privilege of winning government and what that might do to jobs, access to services and things like public health, public education, free dental for kids, Glasses for Kids and other publicly funded programs in my electorate of the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region. I look forward to the minister's response.

Bushfire recovery

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (18:50): (2522) My adjournment is to the Premier, and the action I seek is for the government to prioritise support for communities struggling to recover following the summer bushfires. Disasters hit regional communities the hardest, and the government's community-led approach to emergency response recovery has left people feeling abandoned, because many have been. Listening to those directly impacted, a community-enabled approach is needed.

Following the bushfires, I have spoken with residents. CFA volunteers shared their frustration about relying on ageing fleets and failing equipment; calling for backup strike teams and air support with none available; asking for more water and being told no; driving past their own homes on the back of a truck and watching them burn; residents in communities where backup for essential services failed, which put lives at risk; an elderly couple just out of Alexandria still buying bottled water over a hundred days after the fires; the Fawcett community desperately calling for star pickets to rebuild fences destroyed by fire; residents in need of mental health support being told to wait or that none is available; confusion and delays with the state government's clean-up programs so far behind; a lack of government support to assist with euthanising stock; and delays seeking the support of wildlife volunteers.

The slow-turning wheels of disaster recovery funding arrangements between federal and state governments are full of bureaucratic red tape. Our state government expects local councils to step up during a disaster but failed to deliver the funding or resources to help communities get back on their feet. Inequitable funding adds to the pressure, especially for communities with the greatest impact, like Murrindindi and Strathbogie shires. It is easy for the government to put out a media release that support is available, but requiring people to apply for assistance across various different agencies shifts the burden onto individuals who are already struggling to survive. Facing a pile of paperwork when you have experienced such loss simply adds to the trauma.

During the hearings I shared community concerns and called on the government to extend the waiver for tip fees – it was due to expire yesterday, 12 May. The day before the government extended the waiver until 30 June. That is not long enough and again adds to the pressure and red tape that residents continue to face. I am part of a parliamentary committee considering the state's response to the summer bushfires and I do not wish to pre-empt the findings or recommendations of the report, but as the Nationals representative for Northern Victoria I have a responsibility to highlight these issues.

The fact that we have no standard playbook for support following disasters is problematic when Victoria is one of the most bushfire-prone areas in the world. The fires are no longer in the media headlines, but the communities are still suffering, and I ask the Premier to ensure that the communities impacted by the fires can access the services they need to get back on their feet.

LGBTIQA+ support

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (18:53): (2523) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Equality. We know that in Victoria equality is non-negotiable. It is a core value of this government that every person, regardless of who they love or how they identify, deserves a place where they can come together, feel safe and celebrate with pride. I am absolutely thrilled to see that the Pride street party has secure funding in this year's state budget. This event is a true gem for my electorate, and every year it brings together community in a spectacular display of inclusion and joy. Seeing Gertrude Street and Smith Street come alive with colour and celebration is a testament to the vibrant LGBTIQA+ community we have in the inner north.

The Allan Labor government has a proud record of delivering real reform to strengthen Victoria's anti-discrimination laws. We have taken the necessary steps to strengthen the system, such as narrowing religious exemptions so that schools and organisations can no longer discriminate in key settings. We have also expanded anti-vilification protections, because no-one in our state should be targeted for who they are. Backing events like Pride street party is about building an environment of

belonging. We know that building a Victoria where everyone feels included and respected must be a priority across the board, whether it is in health care, education or local events like this that bring people together. This budget investment ensures the inner north stays the vibrant, inclusive heart of Victoria that we all know and love. The funding for the Pride street party is just one example of how we are celebrating the LGBTIQA+ community and supporting it to be visible and celebrated. The action I seek is for the minister to inform me of what other initiatives or programs in this year's state budget support the LGBTIQA+ community within my electorate.

Scouts Victoria

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:55): (2524) My adjournment is for the Minister for Youth, and the action I seek is for the minister to meet with me and Scouts Victoria to consider their proposal for $16 million over four years to upgrade and maintain ageing facilities and to establish a presence in Victoria's rapidly growing communities. Scouts Victoria has a long and proud history, and I had the great privilege and opportunity to meet with representatives from Scouts Victoria. I know that we have not enough facilities and not big enough facilities, certainly in the south-east. In fact our family has purchased Christmas trees from the Cranbourne Scouts each year, and we know that they have a very tiny facility in an area that has now grown and become no longer a country town but a very large suburb and a growing and sprouting suburb, at that, of many different suburbs. We have Cranbourne East, Cranbourne West, Cranbourne North and Cranbourne South, and yet we still have one tiny, little Scout hall out that way.

For more than a century Scouts have provided opportunities for children and teenagers to develop confidence, teamwork, problem-solving skills and a strong sense of civic responsibility. In fact, if we consider the mission of Scouts, we can actually look at how they are building resiliency in young people. In a time and era when we have such a high amount of crime in all of our areas throughout the south-east, to not be able to support things that will actually change it that are run by volunteers is, in my opinion, not wise. To not keep up with the times and support these programs so they can have facilities to take in new families that are growing and are in growing areas is also short-sighted. The state's growth corridors, particularly in the south-east, the west and the north, are home to thousands of young families, and many of these families have little or no Scout presence at all.

Scouts Victoria has identified that without investment they cannot meet the demand in these new communities or continue to safely operate in older facilities that are no longer fit for purpose. Their proposal seeks $16 million over four years to do the following: upgrade and maintain ageing Scout halls across the state; build new facilities in growth communities; ensure safe, accessible spaces for young people; and expand programs that support leadership, wellbeing and community engagement. This investment would strengthen one of Victoria's most trusted youth organisations and ensure that future generations have access to the same opportunities that have benefited so many before them. Scouts Victoria are not simply asking for funding, they are asking for a partnership that recognises the role they play in building the next generation of Victorian leaders. Minister, I call on you to meet with Scouts Victoria and me and explore how the government can support their proposal, ensuring that young people across our state have access to safe, modern facilities and the life-changing opportunities that Scouting provides.

Energy policy

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:58): (2525) Tonight my adjournment is for the attention of the Minister for Energy and Resources, but it will be of interest to the Treasurer as well. It relates to two federal exposure draft bills that are out for discussion right now: 'Treasury Laws Amendment Bill 2026: Strengthening the foreign resident capital gains tax regime' and 'Treasury Laws Amendment Bill 2026: Renewable energy asset discount capital gains for foreign residents'. The current arrangements are that a capital gains tax is not leviable on foreign residents. At present foreign residents disregard capital gains if they occurred in relation to an asset that is not taxable Australian real property. Currently, under the existing regime, foreign investors disregard these capital

gains liabilities in relation to energy infrastructure assets such as solar arrays, batteries and gas pipelines. This is not an exception specific to energy infrastructure but rather the application of an overarching regime.

But the government proposes to introduce capital gains tax for all energy infrastructure, and this will have several effects. First of all, those who already own pieces of infrastructure will be hit with the uncertainty and the unpredictability that is associated with changing the goalposts after they have invested. Those wanting to invest further from overseas will face additional barriers, and this does not seem to have been thought through clearly. Mr McGowan and I are well aware of this. We have talked to a number of firms, including renewable energy firms, and there is a proposal that there be a renewable energy discount on this, but a 50 per cent capital gains tax would still apply. It seems the federal government is a little bit obsessed by capital gains tax just at the moment. They are launching new attacks on every front, including on people holding residential property which they might be renting out, and now it seems energy infrastructure is in the gun.

There are a few points here, and I am asking the Minister for Energy and Resources to raise this at the energy ministers council and say there are some dire consequences that have been ill thought through here. This is going to push up the price of energy, both traditional energy sources and low-emission technology sources as well. It is going to make it more expensive for Australian households and more expensive for Australian businesses. This is an absolute clobber. They do not seem to understand that you cannot tax your way through this. They want to tax energy. I thought they were going to cut energy prices by $250 or $270 for families, but actually they are going to put a new set of taxes on every piece of energy infrastructure. This tax is a dire one. I understand why you might want to tax foreigners, but you would not want to do it retrospectively and you would not want to clobber the renewable infrastructure. The energy minister needs to take this up – *(Time expired)*

Health system

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (19:01): (2526) My matter is for the attention of the Minister for Health. I have just received a text message this evening from somebody whose sister is in the West Gippsland Hospital. She is a mother of four with acute appendicitis who needs surgery, but because there are no beds she is sitting in a chair. She has been sitting in a chair for hours. She has had a CT scan and a number of rounds of IV antibiotics but has been told to go home and come back in the morning for surgery. This is an acute case. This woman needs surgery, but there are no beds. What I am concerned about is the state of our health system. I want to talk about not only the acute care that is required but also those that are waiting for surgery, and that brings me to the matter that I really want to raise this evening, because this is how badly our system is operating under the Allan government, who seem to be completely aloof about the whole reality of what is going on.

What I want to understand is what is happening to those tens of thousands of Victorians who are waiting for surgery. We have not got the latest data from the Victorian Agency for Health Information. It was due out days ago, and it is overdue yet again. This government is lacking in transparency, lacking in accountability and lacking in responsibility, and Victorians have had enough, as have I. Every quarter that this data is due we have to wait. The government will put it out, no doubt, when it suits them – when other distractions are occurring – but this data is overdue. It is a bit like the health questionnaire for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. Every other department has provided the questionnaire for PAEC – not the Department of Health. We have no information, and PAEC hearings commence on Friday. This is a government that is utterly appalling in its ability to provide transparency and information that the public needs.

The action I am seeking from the minister is to explain why the Department of Health is so incompetent – or are they being directed to delay this data release for political purposes that are not in the interests of the public? I would like the minister to provide to the house an explanation as to why this information has not been provided.

New Gisborne Primary School

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (19:04): (2527) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Education. The action I seek is that the minister allocate funding for substantial upgrades to New Gisborne Primary School. Victoria is supposed to be the Education State, but under the Allan Labor government students in the Macedon district are suffering. New Gisborne Primary School was one of 21 schools to be given the worst 2-star rating for the condition of their buildings, yet this school received no funding at all from the 2026–27 budget.

New Gisborne Primary School has a long history. It was founded in 1863 as a Church of England common school before becoming a state school a decade later. In the 1980s the old weatherboard schoolhouse was demolished and new classrooms were built for the growing number of students, but those buildings are 40 years old and now rather dilapidated. The *Herald Sun* fought for years to force the government to release its condition assessments for Victoria's schools, and those documents reveal that New Gisborne Primary was among the group of schools that received the lowest 2-star score. The school has longstanding drainage problems. It sits lower than the street level, so heavy rainfall means run-off from the road or pavement runs down into the school, and despite receiving some funds in 2021 for water works, much more needs to be done. There are also troubling electrical problems. After a switchboard fire 15 years ago a new power board was installed, but many of the switches still have masking tape over them with written notes saying 'Do not touch the switch due to fire.' The school is financially stretched and does not have any money to carry out important maintenance work. When there was a fire in the art room in 2011 the local community had to raise the funds to replace the room themselves. Along with drainage and electrical upgrades, the school needs classroom upgrades, outside pavement repairs, replacement carpet and new furniture.

These students at this school deserve much better, but they have been let down by the local member for Macedon, who is retiring and has clearly given up on her electorate and did not secure vital funding for the school in her district. I am retiring too, but I am still fighting for my constituents in Macedon to get the schools, hospitals, train stations and intersection upgrades that they need and that they deserve. The massive housing development coming to Riddells Creek has parents worried about capacity at the local school. They have been told there is room at New Gisborne, but it is clear that the facilities and buildings there are not up to scratch and desperately need an upgrade before a wave of new students can arrive. I urge the minister to immediately allocate funding for substantial upgrades to the New Gisborne Primary School.

Economic policy

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (19:07): (2528) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs. Given his portfolio, you would think that the key concern and consideration he would have had in the budget was exactly that: economic growth. Anyone who understands these matters knows that economic growth is deeply tied to the economy's ability to generate productivity gains through it. Speaking to business leaders, CEOs and industry leaders, they are a mixture of frustrated by and despairing of the fact that within this budget there was not a single measure that would assist business and assist productivity in order to generate economic growth. We are all well aware of the statistic that over the last two years only two out of 10 jobs generated in Victoria were generated by the private sector. The rest was by the public sector. We are all well aware that our economic growth has practically halved. We are all well aware that we are a deeply uncompetitive state and that we have other states directly calling our businesses to entice them across the border. We all know that we have fallen way behind other states on key industries such as the AI industry and data centres.

We are a deeply uncompetitive state, and yet there was very little, if anything, to give businesses and industry in this state hope that something was going to change. There was no tax relief from land tax and there was no tax relief from payroll tax – two things that are absolutely integral to a business's ability to deepen its capital and innovate, by which we create productivity growth in this state. We will

continue to run as the state with the highest inflation and with the highest unemployment because we cannot grow the economic capacity of the state, because we continue to confiscate capital from those businesses to pay down the ridiculous amounts of debt in this state.

Even in that environment, you may expect, then, the government would put other measures in place – other measures that would encourage economic growth and productivity growth, vehicles such as Breakthrough Victoria or LaunchVic or exercises such as the Avalon air show, all things that would encourage these things. Breakthrough Victoria certainly had its problems, but now there is nothing. There are no tax cuts. There are no special bodies set out to help businesses accrue and develop their capital to produce productivity, which produces economic growth, which produces wealth for the next generation.

The action I seek from the minister is a really simple one, actually: please explain. Please explain to Victorian businesses what measure you have to increase the productivity and the economic growth of this state, so that business conditions can get up from the floor – we are the last-rated state for business in the nation – into a state that is top of the heap once more.

Maroondah Hospital

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (19:10): (2529) It is somewhat serendipitous that at the end of the first parliamentary week since the budget was handed down I have the opportunity tonight to address my matter to the Treasurer directly. It is very fortunate, Treasurer, that you are here today. I know that it is a pleasure for you to perhaps reconsider – and that is what I am asking you to do today – your position insofar as the government's policy stands in respect to the Maroondah Hospital. In particular – I will be specific – what I would like you to do is make a special allocation consistent with your government's own policy as enunciated in 2022, where the then Premier went to Maroondah Hospital, with a number of your colleagues, and promised to invest between $850 million and $1.05 billion in a brand new hospital in Maroondah, for the people of not only Ringwood, Ringwood East, Blackburn, Vermont, Nunawading and Mitcham but much further afield. It is a critical piece of infrastructure, and much more than that, it is a device. It is a place of unbelievably valuable staff – from the nurses to the doctors, to the cleaners, to the orderlies – and it is a community service that benefits so very many people in the eastern suburbs. To have that project not budgeted for in the entire forward estimates – not a single cent for construction – is devastating.

I will take this opportunity to remind the government of what was said previously. The previous Minister for Health Mary-Anne Thomas said the Queen Elizabeth hospital – I am not going to keep using that renamed title because it really is quite inappropriate – will provide modern facilities for our hardworking nurses, midwives and doctors, the facilities they need to provide the very best care for families in the growing eastern suburbs. The minister was right: we have not got it. The then Labor candidate for Ringwood said:

> Everything I've heard from local residents tells me that our community really understands the importance of Maroondah Hospital. This investment will mean so much not just to patients and families, but to healthcare workers as well.

The Labor candidate was right. Then there was the member for Ringwood at the time, Mr Halse. He said:

> I know firsthand how hard our nurses work –

true; no-one disputes that –

> and I couldn't be prouder that a re-elected Andrews Labor Government will build the hospital our community needs, and our healthcare workers deserve.

I am in complete agreement. Then we had the member for Bayswater Mr Taylor, who is still in this place, in the other chamber, and he said:

> The outer east deserves first-rate hospitals …

There is no argument from me there, Mr Taylor. Last but not least, we had the Labor candidate for Monbulk, who is today the member for Monbulk. That member said, in the same press release – I did not have to collect these from news clippings and videos at the time:

> People I love get treatment at the Maroondah – I'm so thrilled the extraordinary healthcare workers will be able to deliver their care in the world class facilities they deserve.

That is what we all want. That is what we were promised. We were promised construction would start last year, in 2025. Sadly, that has not come to fruition. We were promised that the hospital would open in 2029. That will not happen. Minister, I ask you to urgently review that decision and fund it appropriately.

Responses

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (19:13): Tonight there were 18 matters raised by members that will all be referred to the relevant ministers. Mr McGowan, you took the opportunity to point to me as the Treasurer in the chamber at the time, but you obviously wrote your adjournment for the minister. You actually asked your question to the minister at the end of your adjournment, and as you would appreciate, it would be much more appropriate for the Minister for Health to answer it, who in fact probably went some way to answering that during question time anyway. But I will be happy to refer that to the relevant minister on your behalf. Everyone else will get answers in due course.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (19:14): Under standing order 4.14, I seek an explanation from the Premier about her failure to provide a response to adjournment matter 2454, regarding the continually failing boom gates at the Donnybrook Road level crossing. I raised this matter on 31 March, and the response was due on 30 April. This is a serious and urgent issue. The Donnybrook Road boom gates failed again this week, and the Premier's failure to give an answer is a slap in the face to the Donnybrook community.

The PRESIDENT: I ask Minister Symes if she could follow up that response, please.

Jaclyn Symes: I will do that.

Nick McGowan: On a point of order, President, I would ask if you could review the Treasurer's intentions and perhaps advise me and/or the Treasurer. The action I sought was specific because it called for a special allocation from the Treasurer. The minister herself cannot make that decision; that is why I have asked that action of the Treasurer herself. But in the likelihood or the possibility you do not agree with me, I would ask that it does not go to the Minister for Health but rather the minister for building infrastructure in the other place.

Jaclyn Symes: The Minister for Health Infrastructure.

Nick McGowan: Correct.

Jaclyn Symes: Yes, okay, sure.

The PRESIDENT: I think the minister has taken that on board. The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 7:15 pm.