Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Tuesday 31 March 2026

By authority of the Victorian Government Printer

Members of the Legislative Council

60th Parliament

President

Shaun Leane

Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Lizzie Blandthorn

Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

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

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

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

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

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

Party abbreviations

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

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Tuesday 31 March 2026

The PRESIDENT (Shaun Leane) took the chair at 12:02 pm, read the prayer and made an Acknowledgement of Country.

Bills

National Gas (Victoria) Amendment Bill 2025

Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Bill 2025

Royal assent

The PRESIDENT (12:04): I have received a message from the Governor, dated 24 March:

> The Governor informs the Legislative Council that she has, on this day, given the Royal Assent to the under-mentioned Acts of the present Session presented to her by the Clerk of the Parliaments:
>
> **10/2026** National Gas (Victoria) Amendment Act 2026

I have received another message from the Governor, dated 31 March:

> The Governor informs the Legislative Council that she has, on this day, given the Royal Assent to the under-mentioned Acts of the present Session presented to her by the Clerk of the Parliaments:
>
> **11/2026** Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Act 2026

Members

Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop

Absence

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:04): I think everyone has been notified that Minister Shing is absent today. Any questions for her portfolios can be directed to me.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Fuel supply and prices

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:05): (1285) My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, I ask: what advice, including advice on modelling, have you received as Treasurer about the impact of fuel shortages, both petrol and diesel, on the Victorian economy?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:05): I thank Mr Davis for his question. Of course, Mr Davis, this is a topic of conversation that is at every kitchen table and indeed in every cabinet committee that we are currently having. We know that the fuel crisis is hitting Victorians hard, and that is why we have made a number of announcements and are facilitating a number of further discussions, particularly in relation to measures that the federal government can take.

In relation to fuel cost implications and impacts on the state budget, in terms of other cost impacts, in terms of inflationary pressures, these are matters that are factored into the sensitivity analysis that goes into the preparation of the budget. As you would appreciate, the budget is in its final stages of being prepared for presentation to the Parliament next month. Of course these are factors that will be considered as part of the sensitivity analysis. This is not a new concept; we always factor in inflationary pressures, interest rate rises and other impacts on the broader economy that go to the preparation and delivery of the budget.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:06): Treasurer, I therefore ask: what advice have you received regarding the freight and logistics sector in light of the patchy supply of diesel and its impact on the Victorian economy?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:07): Mr Davis, all of these issues, as I said, have been canvassed in a number of ways with government. I would certainly point to the minister for freight, who is obviously taking a lead role in consultation with the freight and logistics sector, as would be appropriate, and feeding that information into the settings. In terms of the impact of all of these things on the economy, Mr Davis, these are things that we will watch, we will monitor, and we will –

David Davis: Have you had advice on that?

Jaclyn SYMES: These are conversations that I have every day, Mr Davis. It is not just a war that brings up these conversations. These are conversations that I have daily, weekly, with the Department of Treasury and Finance, and ministers in their portfolio responsibilities feed in all of that intel – a direct impact, a medium impact and the tail impact of things that we will continue to monitor, and we will adjust our settings as appropriate.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:08): I move:

That the minister's answer be taken into account on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Community safety

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (12:08): (1286) My question is to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. Minister, last week I visited Kilmore for an urgent community meeting, with other members of Parliament across the aisle, following the aftermath of a firebombing attack on a church to be converted into a mosque. This is on top of another arson attack on an Iraqi-run ice cream shop further up the road in Kilmore. These attacks are a part of a broader pattern of rising escalation in anti-Muslim hate and racism across Victoria. In 2021 your government formed the Anti-Racism Taskforce to provide strategic advice and recommendations to your government on preventing and combating racism-driven behaviours and acts of violence. Given the rise of white supremacy and far-right extremism and racism, Minister, can you confirm how many times the Anti-Racism Taskforce has met in the last 12 months to combat targeted racism against the Muslim community?

Jaclyn Symes: On a point of order, President, whilst I certainly invite any questions from non-government members during question time, I do take issue with misleading the house and providing information that is contrary to advice from Victoria Police. This is a particularly important matter, and I am just concerned that the framing of the question and alleging information that would be subject to confirmation by Victoria Police investigation is damaging to a sensitive issue.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: This investigation is still underway – unless the Treasurer knows more information that she would like to share with MPs. But that is what the community said: this was a firebombing and arson, and that is what I am framing my question on.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: The minister will answer the question as she sees fit.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:10): I do thank the member for the question. I find it a little disappointing the way that the question has been framed, for a number of reasons, which I will go into. Firstly, I think it is important to acknowledge that there are a number of members of Parliament who attended a public meeting at the Kilmore mosque late last week, including the Treasurer. It is actually in her seat, and she is very familiar with that community and has had ongoing conversations with them. I have certainly spoken with the leaders of that particular – I will not call it a mosque yet, because it is actually a historical church, which the Muslim community in the Kilmore area are seeking to redevelop. I have had a conversation with the leadership of the

mosque. Of course these matters are concerning, but as the Treasurer has outlined, they are still subject to police investigation, so I am not going to cut across that important investigation. But what I will say is that right across our state, our multicultural communities – not just the Muslim community but our multicultural and multifaith communities – are feeling very unsettled at the moment because of the rise in racism, anti-Muslim hate and, I will add, antisemitism right across the state. We have had many, many examples of places of worship that have been outrageously targeted, whether that is through vandalism or through racist graffiti and the like. These are matters that our government takes incredibly seriously, and it is why we have taken a number of steps to combat racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia. You are sitting right behind the member who co-chairs the anti-racism strategy, Ms Gray-Barberio, which meets regularly. I want to thank the members of the anti-racism strategy for calling out this behaviour where they see it but also driving –

Anasina Gray-Barberio: On a point of order, President, my question was: how many times has the Anti-Racism Taskforce met over the last 12 months? A figure will suffice.

The PRESIDENT: The minister is being relevant to the question.

Ingrid STITT: I am being very relevant to the question given the preamble to the question was very broad and went to a number of issues and made a number of assertions, which I am correcting. The Anti-Racism Taskforce has met regularly, at minimum three times a year since I have been the minister, and I know that the co-chairs of that committee take their work very seriously. That group has provided –

Anasina Gray-Barberio interjected.

Ingrid STITT: Do you want to listen to the answer?

Members interjecting.

Sonja Terpstra: On a point of order, President, there are constant interjections coming from that end of the chamber. I would like to hear the minister's answer. A question has been asked, and I ask that the minister be allowed to complete her answer in silence.

The PRESIDENT: I uphold the point of order.

Renee Heath: Further to the point of order, President, I think there has been much more noise coming from those opposite, so I just want to call them to order if that is okay.

The PRESIDENT: I think it would be terrific if no-one interjected at all through Parliament. Right through this week's sitting, no-one is going to interject. I am on board with everyone. I am with you all. This is great. Thank you so much.

Ingrid STITT: I do believe I have actually directly answered the member's question. I would also say this: if she is interested in the work of the Anti-Racism Taskforce, she ought to seek a meeting with me, and I would be very happy to go through in detail the important work that that group is driving and the continued effort of our government to stamp out this kind of behaviour wherever we see it.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (12:14): Thank you, Minister. I will accept that invitation. The Muslim community feel under siege and that your government is not taking full responsibility to safeguard social cohesion and get rid of the breeding ground of hate being exploited by certain individuals and hate groups. Minister, can you point to a single concrete outcome that the government's Anti-Racism Taskforce has recommended that your government has actually delivered to date?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:15): Ms Gray-Barberio, the

tone of your question tells us everything we need to know about where this is really coming from. The reality is that –

Anasina Gray-Barberio interjected.

Sonja Terpstra: On a point of order, President, I think Ms Gray-Barberio is in direct defiance of your earlier ruling in regard to interjections. The minister has barely started her answer and there is a constant stream of interjections again from that end of the chamber. The minister should be allowed to continue in silence.

The PRESIDENT: The minister to continue, in silence.

Ingrid STITT: Thank you, President. It is kind of ironic, because I actually spent most of my weekend with members of the Muslim community across the community as they celebrated Eid.

Anasina Gray-Barberio interjected.

Ingrid STITT: Yes, good for me and good for you. The reality is that our government has taken some really important steps to call out Islamophobia wherever we see it and has taken measures to combat anti-Muslim hate in the community. We were the first jurisdiction in the country to recognise the International Day to Combat Islamophobia. We have provided direct support to our peak bodies across the Muslim community for community-based projects about calling out this kind of behaviour, and there is much, much more that –

Anasina Gray-Barberio: On a point of order, President, the question was on one single, concrete outcome that the government's Anti-Racism Taskforce, under the minister's direction, has recommended to government that the government has actually delivered.

The PRESIDENT: A point of order is not an opportunity just to re-read the question. The minister has 3 seconds if she wants them.

Ingrid STITT: I would suggest that the member goes and talks to the dozens and dozens of Muslim communities who have received LARI grants to combat Islamophobia in their communities.

Ministers statements: digital jobs

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:17): Victoria is leading the way in preparing workers for the digital, AI and technology industry of the future. Last week I visited Chisholm TAFE in Frankston to launch the Victorian Digital Skills Compact. Chisholm Frankston will be the home of the new $30 million national digital, AI and technology centre of excellence funded by the Allan and Albanese Labor governments. The event was a who's who of the digital world, with over a dozen industry members signing the compact, including Microsoft, IBM, Commonwealth Bank and other leading companies. The compact was also signed by TAFEs and of course the Victorian TAFE Association.

By 2035 Victoria will need approximately 87,700 additional digital workers, and workers in all industries will need digital skills. The compact is a shared commitment between government, industry and training providers to open new doors to digital careers and strengthen the digital skills in our workforce. It has a focus on increasing opportunities for women, First Peoples, people with disability and regional Victorians. The industry will work with TAFEs and our adult community education sector to build and enhance the digital and artificial intelligence capabilities of teachers and students across TAFEs and Learn Locals. The response from industry has always been very, very positive. Microsoft's John Galligan wrote to me afterwards saying how much he is looking forward to working closely with us and to translating the compact's vision into meaningful, inclusive outcomes for Victoria – and I completely agree. TAFE is leading the way in preparing workers for the digital industry, and I thank the Victorian Skills Authority for bringing the industry together so that they can work on the common threads in the training of AI and digital workers for the future.

Fuel supply and prices

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:19): (1287) My question is for the Treasurer. Despite yesterday's Commonwealth excise cut, petrol and diesel prices remain far above pre-conflict levels. GST is levied on total fuel costs, so every cent of the price spike delivers additional revenue to Victoria. Conservative estimates accounting for business input tax credits and the excise reduction show Victoria receives a net GST windfall gain of $17 million per month from the fuel crisis. Treasurer, isn't it a fact that your government is profiting from the higher bills Victorian families are struggling to pay?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:19): Mrs McArthur, if you had asked this question before yesterday, I would have understood, but you have literally raised the issue that has been addressed through cooperation between the federal government and the states. Yesterday's announcement following national cabinet involved a 50 per cent reduction in the fuel excise. It dealt with some road user charges for heavy vehicles but also asked for the state governments to cooperate with the federal government in relation to the GST windfall and its role in the price spikes. Yes, in principle obtaining a benefit from this price rise is something that would be inappropriate. It is why the state government along with our state counterparts are working with the federal government to develop a model to ensure that the GST windfall can be taken into account in relation to further taking pressure off fuel prices.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:21): The Commonwealth has put $2.5 billion on the table to help families at the petrol pump. Your government has limited it to free public transport at this point in time, a measure that does nothing for the millions of Victorians who have no choice but to drive. So what are you doing for the families who cannot catch a train to work, cannot catch a train to school drop-off and cannot catch a train to the farm gate?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:21): I thank Mrs McArthur for her question. Obviously these are important issues. These are conversations that, as I said, everybody in the community is having. We continue to work with the federal government on the contributions that we can make as a state. As you have identified, we have announced a month of free transport. I would not put to the chamber, Mrs McArthur, that this only benefits metropolitan Melbourne; it is free right across the state. Of course I acknowledge those that are car dependent. That is why there are other initiatives that have been looked at. You just literally started your contribution with acknowledging the fuel excise reduction, which is about ensuring that the hip pockets of those that require to use their cars can have some of that pressure taken off. We know that free PT has the ability to help everyone because it takes pressure off the pump. It means that it takes pressure off the demand issues that are being experienced, particularly in – *(Time expired)*

Prisoner phone calls

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:22): (1288) My question is for the Minister for Corrections, Minister Erdogan. Minister, you have previously acknowledged that the cost of phone calls in Victoria's prison system is excessive. Evidence to the Yoorrook Justice Commission found that a single 12-minute call can cost up to $12.73, around 10 times the highest standard rate for a phone call. Further, the Parliament's 2023 inquiry into children with incarcerated parents found that the prohibitive costs of such phone calls actively damages parent–child relationships. My question to the minister is: can the government commit to making these phone calls free, to aid in family connection and rehabilitation?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:23): I thank Ms Payne for her question and her interest in these matters. From the outset I do want to thank the Yoorrook Justice Commission. It was a great privilege for me, and I know for many of the ministers that had the opportunity, to appear before the Yoorrook Justice Commission and contribute to that really groundbreaking and historic

work. I do want to say there was a commitment I made there, a commitment I am committed to keeping, around driving better outcomes, and one of them is around connection to family. We know that that is an important protective factor for people that find themselves in custodial settings. Just as we say employment and housing are protective factors, connection to family and community are key. As part of that I was proud to announce last year a halving of the cost of mobile phone calls in custodial settings, and now they are among the cheapest phone calls in the nation – cheaper than in New South Wales, usually a good comparator for Victoria. But I do understand that it is not completely free, and there are quite important reasons for that. Our calls system that we operate is required to prioritise operational safety, and that means monitoring and other needs such as ensuring that people do not contact people they should not – for example, victims – and in the past that has not happened. So it is important that we have it. We have free options in place, which I am proud to have rolled out across our system – in particular calls via Zoom or digital means, which we are rolling out – especially at our new state-of-the-art Western Plains prison. It has quite a digital set-up compared to historical prisons. I think that has been one of the big benefits of the upgraded, modern and effective corrections systems we lead. We have no plans to make those calls free, but they are among the cheapest in the nation.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:25): I thank the minister for his response. By way of supplementary: evidence to the Yoorrook Justice Commission showed that while video calls are free, many women who are incarcerated are not accessing them due to availability – they may not be very reliable – or a lack of awareness that they even exist. There are also concerns that some women are not comfortable with video calls for a range of reasons. How is the government ensuring equitable access to communication, including awareness of video calls?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:25): I thank Ms Payne for her supplementary question. I think part of that is in my answer to the substantive – that is, especially where we have got newer upgrades at facilities, we are rolling out access. That is part of I guess the induction to people's new settings that all prisoners do get, and we have had a large increase in people that find themselves in custody. But it is about making sure that they are readily available too. I think that is work that Corrections Victoria is committed to doing and to rolling out across all our sites. Video calls are free, but I realise they are not necessarily for everyone, so we still have in-person visits, which have returned to post-COVID, and there is still access to phone calls. But it is about making sure that Corrections Victoria proactively notify prisoners of their rights, which they do take very seriously, and they do do that work. But particularly with upgrades across the system, I think that is a good opportunity for a reset.

Ministers statements: family violence

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:26): It has now been 10 years since the Royal Commission into Family Violence. The commission exposed the scale and severity of violence experienced by women and children and called for fundamental reform. A decade on, Victoria has led the nation in delivering lasting change. We have built a system that is more connected, accountable and focused on victim-survivor safety. The Orange Door network has transformed access to support, providing a single entry point for people experiencing violence, those using violence and families needing support with children's care and wellbeing. Since 2018 it has supported more than 645,000 Victorians through a network of more than 70 sites and access points across the state. We have also gazetted 15 specialist family violence courts, and we have strengthened perpetrator accountability and focused on risk assessment through initiatives like the multi-agency risk assessment and management, the central information point and specialist responses targeting high-risk offenders. We have invested in prevention through Respect Victoria, such as our Respect Ballarat saturation model, because stopping violence before it starts is critical. But we are not pretending that the job is done. There is more to do, particularly as new challenges emerge. That is why we continue to adapt, tackling harmful attitudes, strengthening prevention, supporting our diverse communities and

refining laws and services, including for things such as coercive control. As we head into Easter, we know that risks can increase, but our reforms mean that support remains available when it is needed most. Our commitment remains clear: to build a Victoria where everyone is safe and where violence against women and children in whatever form it takes is never tolerated.

Water policy

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:28): (1289) My question is to the Minister for Water. Minister, will the government be imposing water restrictions in metropolitan Melbourne this year?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:28): I thank the member for her question, and indeed all people who are particularly interested in water in terms of storage levels. As the member well knows, the advice that government receives in terms of restrictions comes from individual water corporations, and that has occurred, since I have been minister, in areas such as Apollo Bay and Lorne and Daylesford. All of those communities are not facing water restrictions at the moment, but they were in place for a period of time.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:29): President, my question to the minister was around metropolitan Melbourne, not Apollo Bay or Daylesford, so I will ask to have that question reinstated. But my supplementary is: Minister, the government is running an advertising campaign telling Victorians to take shorter showers, effectively to restrict their water usage, so will you be placing an order for water from the desalination plant to avoid water restrictions this year?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:30): In terms of the substantive question, if I can go to that, I was using the points of examples as an example of how it works, because clearly the member does not understand how the water system works at all in this state.

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, the minister is debating the question. I asked: will the minister be placing an order for water from the desalination plant? I would ask you to bring her back to the supplementary question. Yes, I did give it some context, but in relation to this question, could you ask her to come back to answering this?

The PRESIDENT: The minister to continue.

Gayle TIERNEY: Again, this government is very much interested in ensuring that we have got accessible water and indeed that we get the right messages through to the community. There are water-saving rules in place, and they have been in place for a long, long time. In terms of that, we have also added a campaign into the community called 'Count every drop, save every drop'. It is about making sure that people understand what the responsibilities are in terms of shorter showers, not hosing down concrete, all of those sorts of things, including watering your garden between 6 and 10 at night. These are – *(Time expired)*

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:31): I move:

> That the house takes the minister's answer into consideration on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Daily Living Disability Services

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:32): (1290) My question is to the Minister for Disability. Daily Living Disability Services in Traralgon closed its doors amid media reports of massive debt and alleged insolvent trading. This has left 60 families who have been accessing the services at this facility in complete disarray. Minister, what steps have you taken to support this community?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:32): I thank Ms Bath for her question. The pricing for disability services and those services in

particular that are offered as part of the NDIS remains a matter for the Commonwealth. I do not have at hand the particular finance situation around the services that Ms Bath is referring to, but what I will say is that the Victorian government on numerous occasions and through my advocacy, both at the Disability Reform Ministers Council and to the minister for the NDIS, continue to have a conversation around what is fair pricing for disability services to ensure that people who are accessing particular services as part of their NDIS plans are getting the supports that they need in their plans that meet the costs of the services that they require. This is an ongoing conversation with the Commonwealth, but ultimately fair pricing for disability services accessed by participants under the NDIS remains a matter for the Commonwealth government.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:34): Thank you, Minister; I appreciate your response. My particular question was around supporting this community. You will understand that this has caused complete chaos for some families, with work disruptions to parents and siblings who are now caring for their loved ones who were previously engaged in day programs. Minister, will you undertake to have your department contact each of these approximately 60 families individually to offer respite and other required supports in the short term?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:34): I again thank Ms Bath for her question, her advocacy and her interest in these matters. But I would again remind the house that the national disability insurance scheme is indeed that – a national scheme – and plans and pricing are a matter for the Commonwealth government. Ms Bath's advocacy may actually be better directed to the Commonwealth.

Ministers statements: Rick Madigan

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:35): Hundreds of people work day in, day out away from the limelight to support our youth justice system and keep Victorians safe. Today I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge an individual whose service of more than two decades speaks to that deep commitment to that important work. Rick Madigan was one of many youth justice staff that we recognised at a recent service. I am pleased to note his immense contribution to our state in the house. Rick commenced his career at Malmsbury youth justice precinct in 2003, following many years working as a shearing contractor. He began working on the floor, and through dedication and capability progressed to a range of leadership roles. This included unit supervisor, unit manager, operations manager and acting deputy general manager. Rick is again playing an instrumental role as we scale up the youth justice system and bring the Malmsbury site back online. He is supporting the site's readiness as part of the government's broader work to strengthen the youth justice system and keep the community safe. Widely regarded as a highly capable operator and trusted colleague, Rick is someone deeply committed to achieving positive outcomes for young people. His advice is sought across the system by the commissioner and senior leaders and frontline staff and external stakeholders. I want to take this opportunity to thank Rick for his outstanding contribution to youth justice, delivered with professionalism, sound judgement and always good humour. I congratulate him on this incredible milestone. Well done, Rick.

Government accountability

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:36): (1291) My question is to the Minister for Corrections, and it follows standing order 8.01(1)(a), which allows a question to be put to ministers relating to public affairs to which the minister is directly connected. Is the minister part of the Labor MP group connected to disposing of the Premier Jacinta Allan?

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! I have a bit of a different interpretation of that part of the standing orders to what you may have, Ms Crozier, but thanks for firing up the chamber. It is not a question that I am prepared to put to the minister.

David Davis interjected.

The PRESIDENT: It is not. I will move to the next question.

First Nations mental health services

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:38): (1292) My question is for the Minister for Mental Health. Minister, the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System made multiple –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: If we could set reset the clock; it is hard to hear.

Sarah MANSFIELD: My question is for the Minister for Mental Health. The royal commission into the Victorian mental health system made multiple recommendations regarding Aboriginal mental health and wellbeing. For example, recommendation 33(1) of the royal commission calls for the government to:

> build on the interim report's recommendation 4 to support Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing, and resource the Social and Emotional Wellbeing Centre to establish two co-designed healing centres.

These centres are yet to receive funding, despite also being consistent with Closing the Gap targets 1 to 14, the Yoorrook Justice Commission's recommendation 8(c) and the clear evidence for the need for and potential benefit of these services. In the upcoming budget will your government commit the $36.2 million required initially to fund the healing centres?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:39): I thank Dr Mansfield for her question. These are important issues, and of course we are seeing disproportionate impacts when it comes to Aboriginal Victorians' mental health and suicide rates, which I know everyone in this chamber would surely agree is something that we all have a collective responsibility to try to address. I know that these issues are also relevant when it comes to the Closing the Gap efforts across our nation. We have been really proud to work with our ACCOs and with VACCHO on making sure that we are supporting social and emotional wellbeing teams right across the state, and that is work that has been consistently funded through my department and also as a direct result of the recommendations of the royal commission. Just last week I and my colleagues Minister Thomas and Minister Horne attended the Aboriginal health partnership forum, which is a regular interaction between our ACCOs and our Aboriginal mental health and health services and the government and which really is embedded in the principles of self-determination and that Aboriginal communities have the answers that will be relevant to their own situation. I will continue to support those measures, including through our budget processes that are centred around what Aboriginal communities are calling for.

I cannot pre-empt the decisions of the budget that is being deliberated on as we speak. The Treasurer will have more to say about the budget on budget day, but I am absolutely committed to continuing to work both through the Aboriginal health partnership forum and the agreements between the government and that governance group but also in progressing our royal commission recommendations when it comes to trying to change that trajectory for Aboriginal Victorians so that the unacceptable situation where Aboriginal Victorians are three times more likely than the general population to attempt suicide or to have mental health challenges – we all have work to do to continue to try to drive down those terrible statistics and to make a real difference for Aboriginal communities. I would say that our government, whether it is in health or any other policy area, are absolutely committed to doing that in a way that is consistent with our commitments to treaty.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:42): Thank you, Minister, for that response, and I look forward to hearing the outcomes of those budget discussions. Another example is recommendation 33(4) of the royal commission, which calls for the government, in collaboration with

VACCHO, to resource a culturally appropriate, family-oriented service for infants and children who require intensive social and emotional wellbeing supports. The Nest is VACCHO's proposal to fulfil this recommendation and would require just under $55 million in initial state funding to develop. Appreciating that you cannot pre-empt the decisions of Treasury, are you putting forward a bid for the Nest in the upcoming budget?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:43): I thank Dr Mansfield for her question, and again I will not be tempted – there is a budget process and there is a well-understood timeframe for the budget to be announced in detail by the Treasurer, so that is appropriate. I meet with both VACCHO and ACCOs really regularly about what their priorities are, and I know that both the healing centres and the Nest are key priorities for them. I am proud of the fact that the health department was one of the first departments to actually facilitate and support self-determined budget bids. That is important in the context of treaty and in the context of recognising that Aboriginal communities hold the answers to these complex issues when it comes to mental health and wellbeing, and they have a unique insight into what will work in those communities.

Ministers statements: early childhood education and care

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:44): I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is delivering historic investment to build, upgrade and expand early childhood education and care services right across the state. Earlier this month I joined the member for Sydenham to visit the construction site of the future Deanside children's and community centre. This brand new centre will open next year and will provide kindergarten places for up to 237 local children. In addition to four kindergarten rooms, the centre will include space for maternal and child health services, consulting rooms, multipurpose community spaces and outdoor play areas. Located just next door to Deanside Primary School, the centre will support children to transition smoothly to prep while helping parents to ditch the dreaded double drop-off. Facilities like this are so important because of how they support families through every stage of their early years, beginning with our universal maternal and child health services and moving into pre-kinder for three- and four-year-olds and transition into prep at the local primary school. It is this type of integrated support that makes such a difference for families in our growing communities like Deanside. That is why we are proud to be delivering this project through our Building Blocks partnership with the City of Melton. To date, the government has entered into 20 Building Blocks partnerships with local government and the non-government sector. These co-funding partnerships will support 119 new and expanded kindergarten projects, providing more than 15,000 kindergarten places. This is all in addition to delivering more than 100 new and expanded kindergartens on school sites and 50 Early Learning Victoria centres, 18 of which are open as of this year. Over the lifetime of this Labor government, $3.6 billion has been allocated to early childhood infrastructure alone, and this generational investment is a central part of our Best Start, Best Life reforms, supporting more children to attend more hours of kindergarten, easing cost-of-living pressures for families and helping parents and carers get back to work or study if they so choose. Only a Labor government will continue to deliver for children and their families.

Constituency questions

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (12:46): (2262) My question is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. How is the Allan Labor government maintaining key roads in the Southern Metropolitan Region? Residents in the City of Bayside are set to see some significant improvements from roadworks and resurfacing that have just commenced along Hampton Street between Beach Road and Ludstone Street, including outside of Hampton Primary School, which is also getting a new gymnasium, new classrooms and a new performing arts centre thanks to the Allan Labor government. 1.2 kilometres of road along Hampton Street is being resurfaced. It is a busy road, with shops,

restaurants, a train station and school drop-off and pick-up. The night works are underway, and they will continue over the next few days, between 7 pm and 5 am to minimise disruption to local traders and residents. It is all part of the Victorian government's better roads blitz, which is happening right across Victoria.

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:47): (2263) My question is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. When will the minister improve safety for pedestrians walking to the bus stop at the intersection of Yan Yean Road and Doctors Gully Road. I have been contacted by several parents of children who catch a school bus on Yan Yean Road, near the roundabout at the intersection with Doctors Gully Road. Parents drop their kids along Doctors Gully Road, who then walk around the corner to the bus stop, but access is now restricted on Doctors Gully Road due to the construction of the Yan Yean Road upgrade. A recent car crash damaged the footpath, which has been closed off. This forces children to walk all the way around the roundabout, crossing several lanes with heavy traffic where there are no refuge islands and no crossing supervisors. The Department of Transport and Planning wrote to a parent to say that the project operator suggested a zebra crossing would be a suitable safety enhancement, and this should be raised with the relevant authority. The minister must take urgent action to improve safety at this intersection, which has become dangerous for pedestrians.

Western Metropolitan Region

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:49): (2264) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. On Saturday I attended the launch of Brimbank council's Fix Taylors Road campaign and spoke with many constituents who endure daily nightmare commutes. They want the road duplicated and declared a state government asset due to the significant volume of traffic and ongoing safety concerns. From 2019 to 2024 there were 25 crashes on the 1.4-kilometre unduplicated stretch, compared with only eight crashes over the same distance on nearby duplicated Hume Drive. Of course duplication and declaration alone will not meet the demands of a growing west. Public transport must also be frequent, connected and reliable. My constituent asks: will the minister work with Brimbank council to declare Taylors Road a state road and make the road fit for purpose by duplicating the section in question, and when will this be completed?

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:50): (2265) My question is to the Minister for Agriculture. My constituent Andrew, a farmer, tells me that since hostilities began in the Middle East the price of urea, on which his cropping program depends, has increased by 84 per cent, on top of a 7 per cent rise in his other fertiliser costs, not over a quarter of a year but in barely four weeks. Australia imports virtually all its urea, over half from the Persian Gulf, and has no domestic production capacity. The Victorian Farmers Federation president says the federal fuel excise cut does nothing at the farm gate, and farmers remain at the back of the queue. The government found $71 million for a month of free trams in Melbourne. What has the minister done to ensure Victorian grain producers can access affordable fertiliser and fuel to complete the winter sowing season?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (12:51): (2266) My question is to the Minister for Housing and Building. My electorate of Northern Metro has more renters than the state average and is one of the most multicultural regions in Victoria. You see it in the many languages spoken at home: Hindi, Arabic, Italian and Greek. A recent study by the University of Melbourne and Tenants Victoria found 69 per cent of renters from multicultural backgrounds experienced racism when trying to secure housing, and 61 per cent were denied housing or treated less favourably. Families are contacting my office describing being forced to pay six months rent in advance or to pay above advertised prices or to accept substandard housing with mould and pest infestations, just to secure a home – conditions that breach Victorian rental laws. Minister, in a housing crisis, what are

you doing to hold racist property managers and agents accountable and stop my constituents from being discriminated against when seeking rental housing?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (12:52): (2267) My question is to the Premier. As fuel prices continue to soar and impact family budgets, my question is about the issues that need to be urgently resolved with the government's Servo Saver app. The Premier's media release last October referred to reporting fuel prices in real time to cap the price once a day and lock that ceiling in place for 24 hours or until when the price is reduced. It goes on to say:

> … when you arrive in the morning to fill up, there'll be no surprises.

But I have heard examples of local retail staff at service stations being abused because there have been surprises when people have gone to buy fuel and found the price to be very different when the app price has not matched the bowser. Some mobile phones are not updating the pricing in the app. This is causing confusion and putting extra pressure on retail staff. This is a significant problem with the government's app, and I ask that you ensure that these issues are urgently resolved.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:53): (2268) My question today is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. Currently there is a night-time truck curfew for vehicles over 16.5 tonnes on Rosanna Road, Lower Plenty Road and Greensborough Highway. As part of the North East Link project precinct, the community and local council want to see these roads have a 24-hour truck ban. There have been a significant number of reported truck crashes and near misses on these roads, and residents are really concerned for the safety of road users and the broader community at large. Minister, will you implement a 24-hour truck ban on Rosanna Road, Lower Plenty Road and Greensborough Highway?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:53): (2269) My constituency question is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. Last year I asked the minister about the lack of progress on vital transport extensions to Fishermans Bend. The minister's response referred to the:

> … rapidly growing precinct, set to be home to 80,000 residents and 80,000 workers by 2050.

The government spruiks its housing and transport goals but fails to deliver. The Victorian Auditor-General's Office report last year into Fishermans Bend identified a lack of transparency on the status of key projects, which means that the public cannot understand if intended outcomes outlined in the framework are being achieved. Montague precinct is expecting the highest population growth in Fishermans Bend, and Port Phillip council is still waiting for the finalised Montague precinct plan. After years of inaction, the community deserves better. I am asking the minister to release the Montague precinct plan as a matter of priority.

Western Victoria Region

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (12:54): (2270) My question is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport, and it relates to public transport connectivity at St Arnaud. St Arnaud is up in the Mallee and has 2500 to 3000 people. Bus services are critical at the moment. I have had locals tell me that if they want to take a bus to either Ballarat or Bendigo, the timetable allows them to get there in one day, but there are no return services, so they effectively have to stay overnight, which is insane. You have to literally book a hotel to stay over if you go to Bendigo or Ballarat. My question to the minister is: will you look into this situation, and will you do anything about it, to ensure that my constituents are not left hanging out to dry in a situation they should never have been put in in the middle of a fuel crisis, when people are looking to public transport as opposed to paying for petrol and putting it in the car?

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:55): (2271) My constituency question is to the Minister for Health. The Swifts Creek Bush Nursing Centre has provided 24-hour, seven-day-a-week service to our beautiful remote community despite a woeful lack of recognition and resource funding from government. Because funding has not increased, the committee of management has now discussed the terrible option of having to cut services back to Monday to Friday, 9 to 5, with no after-hours or weekend cover. Swifts Creek has no resident paramedic hours. Ambulance response times can exceed an hour, and ambulance community officers cannot administer emergency drugs or IV fluids. This means no local response for heart attacks, car accidents, maternity emergency, palliative care or urgent care, as previously supplied by this amazing group of people. Minister, will you urgently address this funding failure and restore sustainable support for a 24-hour service at the Swifts Creek Bush Nursing Centre so this remote community is not left without essential care?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:56): (2272) My constituency question is to the Minister for Police, and it concerns an escalation of crime in my electorate. Minister, just last week another terrifying story of a home invasion in the north made headlines – a 42-year-old mother in Meadow Heights dragged from her bed by her hair and assaulted. This comes on the back of the most recent crime data, which shows once again crime is on the rise in the north, with an increase of 8.7 per cent in the City of Hume. Minister, this is not good enough. My constituents deserve to feel safe in their homes and on the street. Will the minister urgently increase police resources in the northern suburbs so that local residents no longer have to live in fear?

Western Metropolitan Region

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (12:57): (2273) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety and is regarding Wattle Avenue traffic congestion in Werribee, in light of another accident last week. Wattle Avenue in Werribee is facing ongoing traffic congestion, an increasing volume of through traffic and heightened safety concerns for residents. With a growing population, this issue has arisen particularly due to changes in surrounding arterial roads managed by the state's roads management. Can the minister please update my constituents on whether the Department of Transport and Planning has undertaken or plans to conduct any further traffic modelling or assessment of conditions on Wattle Avenue following the abandonment of the previous proposed changes to the intersection of Princes Highway, Tarneit Road and Wattle Avenue?

Southern Metropolitan Region

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:58): (2274) My matter is for the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, and it concerns the rising tide of violence against our Jewish community. I ask what action she will take to respond to this completely unacceptable antisemitism. Figures from the Jewish Community Council of Victoria released recently show 564 antisemitic incidents in the state in 2025, but even anecdotally – this weekend on Glen Eira Road in Ripponlea a Hyundai sedan drove towards a group of Jewish community members, shouting out words that I will not repeat in this chamber, and then a woman could be heard saying 'They're coming back' as a group of males wearing traditional Jewish clothing were seen watching the car honking its horn and making an illegal right turn at the junction of Glen Eira Road and Hotham Street. This is very local. It is right near the Adass synagogue that was bombed. These incidents are continuing, and they must stop.

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:59): (2275) My question is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. The roadworks around Bald Hill Road in Pakenham have restricted customer access to local businesses, resulting in massive declines in revenue and income. Some businesses have lost a staggering 70 to 80 per cent. My question is: why hasn't effective hardship or income support been provided to businesses harmed by poorly managed and prolonged state road closures? While I have

got time, I just want to point out that this has been so disappointing. I have been raising this for months and months. We have written to the council, and they have palmed it off to the State Revenue Office. I have written to the State Revenue Office, and they said I had to write to the Treasurer. I have written to the Treasurer, who has not responded. I have asked this question twice. After two weeks, one said, 'You've got to ask the Minister for Transport Infrastructure.' Everyone has been palming this off, and it is time to show some compassion and care and help these people.

Bills

Electoral Amendment Bill 2025

Council's amendments

The PRESIDENT (13:00): I have received a message from the Legislative Assembly on the Electoral Amendment Bill 2025:

> The Legislative Assembly informs the Legislative Council that, in relation to 'A Bill for an Act to amend the **Electoral Act 2002** and for other purposes' the amendments made by the Council have been agreed to.

Petitions

Writers Victoria

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) presented a petition bearing 10,989 signatures:

> The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council concerns that the Allan Labor Government, through Creative Victoria, has announced that Writers Victoria will have its annual funding reduced by 100 per cent, that is to zero. Victoria will now be the only mainland state without funding to a writer's organisation to support writers.
>
> The move to completely cut funding threatens jobs, programs, access to opportunities, and the very survival of Writers Victoria that has long played a vital role in supporting the ongoing development of Victorian writers. The cuts are also inconsistent with Melbourne's position as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) city of literature.
>
> **The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to reverse the decision to cut state funding to Writers Victoria.**

David DAVIS: As this is a petition qualifying for debate under standing order 11.03(10), I give notice that I intend to move 'That the petition be taken into consideration' on Wednesday of next sitting week.

Victorian Health Promotion Foundation

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) presented a petition bearing 3889 signatures:

> The Petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that in 1987 the Cain government created VicHealth, the world's first health promotion foundation to promote health and prevent chronic diseases like cancer, diabetes and heart disease. They set a small annual income in the legislation, and gave it independence so it could say things that governments might not want to hear.
>
> The Victorian Government is planning to dissolve VicHealth into the Department of Health, which already operates on a tight budget. This effectively means VicHealth will disappear. VicHealth's ability to be a world leader in vital health promotion relies on its independence.
>
> The Petitioners therefore request that the Victorian Government save VicHealth, protect its funding and independence and reverse the plan to absorb it into the Department of Health.

Sarah MANSFIELD: As this is a petition qualifying for debate under standing order 11.03(10), I give notice that I intend to move 'That the petition be taken into consideration' on Wednesday of next sitting week.

Committees

Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee

Alert Digest No. 5

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:02): Pursuant to section 35 of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, I table *Alert Digest* No. 5 of 2026, including appendices, from the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee. I move:

That the report be published.

Motion agreed to.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Report on the 2024–25 Financial and Performance Outcomes

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:03): Pursuant to section 35 of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, I table a report on the 2024–25 financial and performance outcomes, including extracts of proceedings, from the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and I present the transcripts of evidence. I move:

That the transcripts of evidence be tabled and the report be published.

Motion agreed to.

Michael GALEA: I move:

That the Council take note of the report.

It is a good opportunity to talk about this very important part of the PAEC's function as it pertains to the slightly lesser attended to or slightly lesser observed hearings that we do but that are no doubt just as vitally important, which is when it comes to assessing the actual budgetary outcomes – the financial performance outcomes – of the Victorian state budget and indeed of the various elements and agencies of the overall general government sector, the public financial corporations, the public non-financial corporations and indeed the more than 260 various different entities which fall under their purviews. I would like to at the outset thank our secretariat, including in particular Igor Dosen and Charlotte Lever and their team, for the once again, as always, very attentive, very detailed and very considered piece of work that they have put into supporting the committee to undertake its work and come to its findings and conclusions.

Members will find in the report 94 findings in relation to the financial and performance outcome hearings this year, and they will find 22 recommendations for ways in which various agencies or government departments can update their reporting mechanism to improve that transparency as well, which is a very important part of what the PAEC provides for the Parliament and indeed for the Victorian community as a whole when it comes to the assessment of actual government spending and an overall economic look for the year as well. It was a good opportunity to see that, as members will know, the economy continued to grow in the 2024–25 financial year, with a 1.1 per cent increase in gross state product in that time. We also saw, for the first time since the pandemic, a real uplift in wages. I detour briefly to acknowledge the decision announced just a couple of hours ago by the Fair Work Commission that 18- and 19-year-olds, for the first time, will be paid as adults, as they rightly should be. That was a marvellous thing to see this morning in the federal space. We know that wages in Victoria grew for the first time in real terms since the pandemic, which, particularly as we come into the challenges that we are facing right now in the present financial year, will no doubt give families that little bit of extra support.

We also saw that the net result from transactions led to the deficit reducing from $4.2 billion to $2.6 billion. Again as we have seen through the annual financial report of late last year, and there have been various comments in this chamber, the state budget position continues to improve, which is

something that can happen when we have a strong and growing economy, which Victoria continues to enjoy. We also looked at the important issue of workforce shortages.

David Davis interjected.

Michael GALEA: You may disagree, Mr Davis, but it is terrific to see those workforce shortages, in the space of education and teachers particularly, starting to improve and that problem being ameliorated. Indeed that was something that we saw just last week. In a different committee's hearings into public school funding we saw that the workforce shortages are easing, but there is more work to do. It is the same story for nurses and for paramedics as well. There are still some challenges in the spaces of aged care, in alcohol and other drug services and indeed in Victoria Police, and I acknowledge the ongoing work to address those workforce shortages as they occur. PAEC is known for its robust questioning –

Bev McArthur interjected.

Michael GALEA: Indeed, Mrs McArthur, we saw some robust questioning from your friend the member for South-West Coast – some very robust questioning, with a real zinger of a question asking the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions about the failed grand prix legislation and what sort of risk that would present to the state of Victoria. It was a real gotcha question. Unfortunately for the member for South-West Coast, the department answered that the upper house had actually passed that bill several weeks prior, so not so much of a zinger there, not so much of a gotcha – perhaps not the most robust of questions that the Liberal Party could have asked, Mrs McArthur. As a former member yourself though –

Bev McArthur: Do you miss me?

Michael GALEA: I do miss you. I am sure you would have made no such silly mistake as the member for South-West Coast did. Nevertheless, as we do have budget estimates again in just a few weeks, I do want to acknowledge the other members of the committee: the chair Sarah Connolly, the member for Laverton, who has always done an excellent job; other members from the Assembly and other members from this place, including Mr Welch and indeed Mr Puglielli, who I am very hopeful to soon hear a poem from on the hearings. With the depth and detail in this report, I can commend it for members to consider.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:08): I also rise to speak briefly with respect to the tabling of this report. I would like from the outset to thank the other committee members and the secretariat Igor and the team for how hard they must work in pulling all of it together – a report that I hope lots of people read given how much work goes into it. It is always quite the process. The outcomes hearings do not get quite as much attention as estimates, but still we persist. If I were to summarise the experiences of this year's outcomes hearings in haiku form, I would say:

Answers dodge the light
Words bend into empty forms
Truth seeps through the cracks

Or:

Questions circle still
Answers blur in department words
Government guards the books

Or:

Mountains are our debt
Queries meet closed doors
Budgets tell wild tales

Motion agreed to.

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

Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (13:10): Pursuant to standing order 23.22, I table the select committee's interim report on the inquiry into the early childhood education and care sector in Victoria, including an appendix. I move:

That the report be published.

Motion agreed to.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I move:

That the Council take note of the report.

I am pleased to present the interim report for the inquiry into the early childhood education and care sector in Victoria 2026. The select committee for this inquiry was established by this Parliament following serious child abuse allegations against educator Joshua Brown in July 2025. These deeply distressing allegations most profoundly affect our most vulnerable – Victorian children, babies and toddlers and their families – exposing critical systemic failures. The interim report gives an update of evidence the committee has received so far, including 99 submissions and five days of public hearings. It has been informed by the lived and living experiences of children, families, educators, advocates, regulators, service providers, unions, community organisations and First Nations- and disability-led representatives across the sector.

The committee has heard a range of emerging themes, including how the early childhood sector is undergoing a significant change, with surging demand and increasing complexity. However, regulation, oversight and investment have not always kept pace. The committee has heard of challenges and workforce shortages, sustained pressure on educators and insufficient resources, support and training to meet children's increasing presentation of complex needs. The inquiry has also heard concerns about the rapid expansion of the for-profit sector and the risk that this growth presents in shifting the paramount focus away from children's safety and wellbeing, placing further strain on quality and oversight. During the course of the inquiry there were also several changes that occurred, and they have included the strengthening of the working with children check; the new regulator, the Victorian Early Childhood Regulatory Authority; the national early childhood register; new offences and penalties; and a CCTV trial in certain areas. There is unequivocal evidence so far that stronger stewardship is needed at both the Victorian and national levels. Safety, quality and accountability must be guaranteed, not optional. The committee will continue its work, with the final hearing in May. The final report will be delivered with findings and recommendations by 30 July 2026.

I thank all those who have contributed so far, particularly those who have shared their experiences. Your voices are central to this work. As expected, there is high public interest in this inquiry. I would like to thank my committee colleagues deputy chair Mr Galea, my Greens colleague Dr Sarah Mansfield, Ms Crozier, Ms Bath and Ms Ermacora for their work so far to ensure that a range of views are heard on this sensitive and important issue. Finally, I would like to thank the committee secretariat staff: committee manager Matt Newington, inquiry officer Te Kooanga Awatere, administrative officer Sylvette Bassy and other staff in the committees office, including Julie Barnes and Monique Riordan-Hill. I commend this report to the house.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:13): I am also pleased to rise to share a brief contribution on this report and acknowledge our chair Ms Gray-Barbero and indeed all other committee members – I believe all of whom are in the chamber – for the work that we have undertaken so far. I would also like to particularly thank our secretariat: Matt Newington, Te Kooanga Awatere and their team, who have been a wonderful support to us.

This is, as Ms Gray-Barberio said, an important inquiry for us to be looking at. It did arise out of some shocking circumstances last year. At the time that this house was considering this inquiry the rapid

review had already been initiated, and since the commencement of the inquiry that rapid review has reported and the government has indeed acquitted those actions. This inquiry presented a valuable opportunity for the house, through our committee, to examine in particular the rapid review and the government's actions in response to it, as well as other factors and other settings in the early childhood education and care sector. We heard from witnesses overwhelming, if not unanimous, support for the government's actions in acquitting those rapid review recommendations. We heard from multiple witnesses who acknowledged that Victoria, as of now, has the strongest settings and protections in place.

There were also various other topics canvassed and many topics that we will be able to, as a committee, explore as we conclude the final hearings and deliberate on the substantive final report, including the interplay with the Australian quality framework, Australian quality standards and various other aspects of how the system as a whole operates and can be most effectively supported and most effectively regulated in order to ensure that it is providing as much safety and security as parents rightly expect. I look forward to discussing the final report at a further date.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (13:15): I also rise to make a few remarks in relation to the interim report of the inquiry into the early childhood education and care sector in Victoria. As other committee members have acknowledged, in the work that has been undertaken so far with the number of hearings and those witnesses that the committee has heard from, I think there has been some significant evidence that has been provided, indeed on the work that has been undertaken to ensure that the events that were disclosed last year never happen again in this state. I also want to acknowledge the work of the secretariat, of course, who have put in an enormous effort in bringing the hearings together and coordinating all of the witnesses.

But I do want to make some remarks regarding a number of the witnesses. We heard from the Ombudsman and the commissioner for children and young people very significant evidence that was provided to the committee around significant shortfalls in areas like funding, where the government has not provided enough support in these areas to deal with many of the issues. But I also acknowledge where there has been significant work, and that has been done by a number of organisations that have provided extensive evidence to us around the work that they have been doing since this horrific incident came to light and before that. I think it has been unfortunate that some witnesses and others have questioned and almost demonised the role that they play in this very important sector around choice, around an ability to cater for children across Victoria and to be able to support them in these very important early education years. So I would say to those witnesses, again, thank you very much for coming before the committee. We will continue our work, look at the failings that have occurred and ensure that we make recommendations to further strengthen the system.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (13:17): I also want to make a contribution on this interim report and thank the secretariat for the work so far but also acknowledge the horrific circumstances in the particular case that brought this inquiry into being and acknowledge that part of the contributions that we have heard so far have been significantly around definitions of grooming, definitions of what safety means and what multiple peak bodies have said about the strengths and weaknesses in this space. This interim report forms a really good baseline to the next steps in our inquiry. In particular it paints a picture of the reforms that have been undertaken since the incident came to light, in a number of different spheres, but also we are looking very carefully at the regulatory environment that childcare service delivery sits within in this state. I look forward to the next phase of the inquiry, and I thank everybody that has been involved, particularly those that have submitted evidence and spent time with the committee in the public hearings to date.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (13:19): I rise to make a brief contribution on the tabling of the interim report of the inquiry into the early childhood education and care sector in Victoria. Just following on from my colleagues in this select inquiry, it is a very, very important inquiry. Of course, it did begin from that shocking and deplorable situation where children were allegedly – and there is a court case at hand – terribly manipulated by somebody who should have been a trusted figure. It is

very interesting, some of the discussion in relation to the point around compliance in the early childhood sector: it does not necessarily mean child safety. Compliance is one thing, but making sure that child safety in every corner of every centre is fulfilled and achieving that aim is far more than just compliance. Also we spoke to and heard from many in the childcare sector who had been in that sector for a very long time, and I want to put on record my thanks to all the staff who have dedicated their lives to children. I also want to say I do not think there needs to be this divide of 'We must have profit' or 'We must exclude profit' in the sector. We need all: we need a matrix of profit, not-for-profit, community and council-led, and we should not be demonising one over the others. In many parts of rural Victoria there are childcare deserts, very much so, and we need to fulfil those to support our regional families to access great child care. We really look forward to continuing on this work, and I thank the secretariat for their diligent efforts. I think the final report will be most illuminating.

Motion agreed to.

Papers

Papers

Tabled by Clerk:

Auditor-General – Results of 2024–25 Audits: Local Government, March 2026 *(Ordered to be published) (released on 30 March 2026 – a non-sitting day)*.

Members of Parliament (Standards) Act 1978 – Register of Interests – Returns submitted by Members of the Legislative Council – Ordinary Returns, 1 July 2025 to 31 January 2026 *(Ordered to be published)*.

Parliamentary Budget Office – Operational Plan 2026–27: Priorities and protocols.

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

Banyule Planning Scheme – Amendment C172.

Glen Eira Planning Scheme – Amendment C278.

Melbourne Planning Scheme – Amendment C494.

Victoria Planning Provisions – Amendments VC300 and VC304.

Safe Drinking Water Act 2003 – Report, 2024–25.

Statutory Rules under the following Acts of Parliament –

Bail Act 1977 – No. 18.

Victorian Energy Efficiency Target Act 2007 – No. 19.

Wildlife Act 1975 – No. 20.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule Nos. 16 and 18.

Petitions

Responses

The Clerk: I have received the following papers for presentation to the house pursuant to standing orders: the Minister for Health's responses to two petitions, titled 'Colorectal and pelvic reconstruction service at the Royal Children's Hospital' and 'Train GPs to diagnose and treat ADHD'; the Minister for Roads and Road Safety's responses to two petitions, titled 'Pedestrian and cyclist safety on Moreland Road' and 'Retain Maryborough VicRoads services'; and the Minister for Transport Infrastructure's response to a petition titled 'Noise wall at Diamond Creek westbound ramp.'

Business of the house

Notices

Notices of motion given.

General business

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (13:39): I move, by leave:

That the following general business take precedence on Wednesday 1 April 2026:

(1) notice of motion given this day by Renee Heath on crime;

(2) notice of motion given this day by David Davis on the rejection of the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Follow the Money) Bill 2026; and

(3) order of the day 1, listed for Wednesday 1 April 2026, resumption of debate on the second reading of the Equal Opportunity Amendment (Medical Treatment) Bill 2026.

Motion agreed to.

Members statements

Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly & Community Health Service

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (13:40): Last week I had the pleasure of calling in on Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly & Community Health Service in Portland. CEO Tamika Holt and her team showed me their upgraded GP clinic section, thanks to the $1.4 million in grants from the Regional Health Infrastructure Fund. A particularly lovely feature is that each of the rooms has been named for local medicinal plants. This links the work of the dedicated team at Dhauwurd-Wurrung with the strength of traditional Gunditjmara health care. I was happy to tell the team that they had been successful in their application to the Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drugs Capital Renewal Fund. A grant of just over $154,000 will enhance the safety and security of the facility for both staff and mental health clients. South West Healthcare in Warrnambool will also benefit from $684,881 for improvements to the clinical consult areas of their community health and wellbeing building.

Bendigo housing

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (13:41): Over the past two weeks Victorians should have been enjoying the Commonwealth Games and proudly cheering on our Australian athletes. Instead we were shaking our heads at the utter embarrassment of the Allan Labor government's shambolic planning and eventual cancellation of the Commonwealth Games, wasting $600 million of Victorian taxpayers money. Labor promised to redirect their games budget to investments in regional Victoria, but residents of Bendigo will be waiting years before they see any concrete results. The former Bendigo Teachers' College in Flora Hill was supposed to be an athletes village for 160 residents during the Comm Games. After Labor cancelled the games in July 2023 the government promised that that housing project would still be delivered as social housing, which is desperately needed. But construction of homes at the Flora Hill site will not start until 2027. If the games had gone ahead the village would not have been ready for the athletes and they would have been sleeping in tents, just like many Victorians who do not have a roof over their head because of Labor's failed housing policies. The Flora Hill site is currently surrounded by hoarding, and the department's webpage says that staged construction of the project will not be fully complete until 2030. Meanwhile there are over 3000 families on the social housing waiting list in Bendigo, and rising regional rents under Labor are pushing even more families out of stable housing.

Feed Me

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (13:43): Recently my team and I had the pleasure of supporting local charity Feed Me's annual fundraising dinner in Queenscliff. Feed Me was started in 2019 by Lana Purcell and head chef Ant, who drew on their personal experiences to create an incredible service that now extends across the Geelong region. Feed Me's foundation is food rescue from supermarkets and restaurants, and creating meals for delivery to people, no questions asked. They also run a 'Take what you need, pay what you can' mini-mart. There is no judgement, no intrusion – providing people with dignity and respect as well as access to nutritious food regardless of their circumstances. The growing demand for their service as cost-of-living pressures and family violence

as well as isolation increase speaks to the failure of successive governments. I would hate to think what thousands of people in my region would be dealing with without Feed Me there.

One Planet festival

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (13:44): Also on the weekend it was terrific to take my kids along to the Parents for Climate One Planet festival in Ocean Grove. We learned about everything from flying foxes and solar cars to electric heat pumps and native gardens, as well as great local initiatives like Farm My School. So many people came along seeking a better, more sustainable future for all of us, and all the organisations and businesses there showed that it can be possible.

Melbourne Highland Games & Celtic Festival

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:44): What a spectacular day we shared this past Sunday at Eastfield Park. As the sun set on the 2026 Melbourne Highland Games & Celtic Festival it was clear that the spirit of the highlands is not just alive and well here in Victoria, it is thriving. From the stirring opening notes of the Victorian pipe bands to the energy of the dancing stages, Sunday was a masterclass in heritage and community as we saw many a pipe band fill the air with the soul of Scotland. But for many the heart of the day was found in the heavy events arena. We watched in awe as athletes pushed the limits of human strength and endurance, carrying forward traditions that are centuries old. I want to extend my congratulations to this year's champions: in the open men's category, Terry Sparkes; lightweight men's category, Craig Harrison; open women's category, Lexie Kermond; masters men's 40-plus, Sean Poole; masters women's 40-plus, Kel Glaister; and masters men's 50-plus, Craig Monument. To the committee and in particular Alistair McInnes, the volunteers, the competitors and everyone who donned their clan's tartan this year I want to extend my heartfelt thanks. You turned Eastfield Park into a sea of culture and camaraderie. Whether you were there for the heavy games, the haggis or the haunting sound of the pipes, you helped make the 2026 games a year for the history books, and I cannot wait to see you all back again there next year. Slàinte mhath.

Victorian Seafood Industry Awards

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (13:45): Who does not love seafood fresh from our oceans and streams? The Victorian Seafood Industry Awards were held recently, and many of my Gippsland businesses were recognised for their awards, as were others. The San Remo Fisherman's Co-op, recognised for their commitment to sustainable high-quality seafood, received three awards: the Business Award, Young Achiever Award and Take-Away Award. I have enjoyed their fare. Other exceptional winners were Off the Wharf in Lakes Entrance – I have enjoyed their fare as well. There was the Research, Development and Extension Award, won by Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation; the Environment Award, Corner Inlet Fisheries Habitat Association; the Seafood Experience, TIDAL festival, San Remo; an honourable mention to Jake and Katie Cripps from the Port Albert Fish and Chip Co for their takeaway seafood; the Primary Producer Award (Wild Catch), Victorian Abalone Australia; the Primary Producer Award, Ocean Road Abalone; R and D, Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies; the Young Achiever Award, Emily Dove; and the Russell Frost Industry Ambassador Award, Luke Anedda. I just want to thank you all very much, those people in the whole food chain, for being out in the ocean, in our streams, in that production we so enjoy. We benefit our lifestyle and our health by eating fresh seafood.

Rushworth Field & Game

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (13:47): Last week I was delighted to revisit the Rushworth Field & Game club to see the progress they are making on building and placing nesting boxes for native parrots, kookaburras, bark bats, tree marsupials and waterbirds. This club is committed to working in conjunction with local schools and neighbouring field and game clubs to ensure the conservation and rehabilitation of native populations in the Goulburn Valley. Upon my visit I was surprised to see hundreds of these boxes ready to be delivered to the fire-ravaged areas of the

Longwood fire, where they will be installed in suitable trees to encourage and assist native wildlife back to the area and re-establish healthy populations. I want to commend the members of the Tallygaroopna Men's Shed, who played an important role in the construction of these boxes also. Finally, I would like to thank Graeme Wall for taking the time to show me around their conservation areas and explaining how they are working towards better management practices in the local environments.

Shop, Distributive & Allied Employees' Association

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (13:48): This morning I drove past the statue of Zelda D'Aprano on Lygon Street. Zelda holds a sign that says, 'No more male and female rates. One rate only.' Her statue represents a struggle, a movement and ultimately a historic outcome: equal pay for work of equal value. Today the Fair Work Commission after decades of struggle, after the tireless advocacy of the movement and in particular the SDA, has made another historic decision. After years of advocacy, today the SDA has secured the path to 100 per cent pay at 18 for workers across the country. For decades in this country we have told young people that at 18 they can drive to work but when they get there they will be paid less than the adult rate for the same work. Your petrol bill does not cost less because you are 18. Indeed none of your bills cost less because you are 18. As a former official of the SDA I have discussed these challenges with workers on the shop floor, and in recognition of these challenges there has been a longstanding campaign from the SDA to ensure that workers receive 100 per cent pay at 18. Today across retail, fast food and pharmacies these essential workers have now won. They have achieved a path to 100 per cent pay at 18, 19 and 20. This is historic, described by the SDA today as a landmark decision up there with the introduction of equal pay for women in the 1970s. This change could result in some workers earning up to $10 more an hour when the changes take effect, a significant improvement to their wages. This is the power of real unionism. I pay credit to Victoria's SDA state secretary of 30 years Michael Donovan, current national secretary Gerard Dwyer, former national secretary Joe de Bruyn and former national assistant secretary Ian Blandthorn, who I know proudly as my dad.

Crime

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:50): Today I want to draw the chamber's attention to the violence that we are seeing in Ashwood and a particular case at an Ashwood Drive home. In recent days a husband and wife were forced to barricade themselves in their bedroom while a gang of masked robbers ransacked their Ashwood home. It was 1:30 am. He was asleep. She was scrolling on her phone when she heard something, and the man, who wishes to remain anonymous out of fear of reprisal, was woken. They could hear them moving through the house. People are scared, people are frightened. This is the second time it has happened to this family – the second home invasion in a relatively short period of time. This is suburban Ashwood. People have had enough. They are frightened. The government has withdrawn police services and closed police stations. The Ashburton police station closed in recent years under this government. The crime rate has gone up in Boroondara. The crime rate has gone up in Monash. The number of police has fallen in the City of Boroondara. After several minutes of opening cupboards and ransacking the house, the thieves snatched two sets of car keys. The CCTV captured the four youths speeding away in the couple's white Audi. The police said to the couple, 'There's nothing we can do.'

Glenferrie Festival

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (13:52): It was an absolute pleasure on the weekend to head to the Glenferrie Festival and speak with the huge crowds that flocked there to enjoy the afternoon. One of the families that I spoke to got onto the topic of housing. It was a mum and dad and their young son, who had just moved to the area, and we were talking about the shared concerns of this family around getting access to affordable housing. As we heard before, less than 1 per cent of rentals in the Boroondara area are affordable, so this family were worried about how their son was

going to manage the rent. One of the things we talked about, which has been proven to work in other jurisdictions like the ACT, is rent controls. This was ultimately a very hopeful conversation. I really loved connecting with the people who were there and speaking about their local concerns and things that are coming up for them every day. My congratulations to the traders association and to Boroondara council for putting on such a wonderful event. All afternoon there were cultural performances, dance, music and of course amazing food and shops to explore for people who were in attendance. It was a really wonderful day connecting with the community.

Medical research

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (13:53): This morning, along with my colleague John Pesutto, I attended the 100 Lab Coats event, a call for stronger investment in Victoria's medical research, which was held in Parliament Gardens. It was a fantastic event where researchers dressed in their white lab coats with messages of hope and the importance of the medical research sector. On the other side of the podium, however, there was a string of other coats, grey coats, that represented just what is happening – with the coats hanging in a ghostly manner, I might add – because of the lack of funding that is being provided to this very important sector. This sector does amazing work. It contributes so much – $600 million to the state economy each year – and yet they cannot get enough funding from the state government to assist with their ongoing viability. I have got lots more to say on this, but I want to implore the government to understand this important sector. I do not think they do understand; they give them no time whatsoever. Last year there were 500 jobs that were lost in this sector. This is a sector that innovates and provides hope and discovery. I want to also acknowledge Steven and Juli – Steven for telling his very personal story about the extraordinary advancements in cancer research and his recovery.

The PRESIDENT: I acknowledge an important delegation in the gallery, which includes an honourable member of the Indian Parliament. You are most welcome.

Bills

Justice Legislation Further Amendment (Miscellaneous) Bill 2025

Council's amendments

The PRESIDENT (13:55): I have received a message from the Legislative Assembly in respect of the Justice Legislation Further Amendment (Miscellaneous) Bill 2025:

> The Legislative Assembly informs the Legislative Council that, in relation to 'A Bill for an Act to make miscellaneous amendments to the **Fines Reform Act 2014**, the **Guardianship and Administration Act 2019**, the **Infringements Act 2006**, the **Marine Safety Act 2010**, the **Open Courts Act 2013**, the **Road Safety Act 1986**, the **Coroners Act 2008**, the **Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1996**, the **Crimes Act 1958** in relation to certain offences, the **County Court Act 1958** and the **Sentencing Act 1991** in relation to the operation of the Drug Court Division of the County Court, the **Road Safety Act 1986** in relation to procedural matters in the Magistrates' Court, to make related amendments to certain other Acts and for other purposes' the amendments made by the Council have been agreed to.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:56): I move:

> That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 1367, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Education and Training Reform Amendment (Free TAFE Guarantee) Bill 2026

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Gayle Tierney:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:57): I am pleased to rise to speak on this bill, the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Free TAFE Guarantee) Bill 2026. Vocational training sits at the centre of something very important: training the electricians, nurses, tradespeople and technicians who actually build and run this state. I will start by acknowledging the TAFE teachers across Victoria that work under sometimes genuinely difficult conditions. They are not the problem in the system; they are the reason the system functions at all. The coalition strongly supports free TAFE in principle. Removing financial barriers to training is a sensible objective. We have never previously opposed this policy, and we will not be opposing this bill. But supporting TAFE and free TAFE is not the same as endorsing this bill uncritically, because when you read the legislation – not the second-reading speech, the legislation – you will find that its title is doing a lot of work the bill itself does not do. This is a 45-page bill, and around five pages deal with free TAFE courses and funding guarantees. The other 40 are about expanded ministerial powers, reporting frameworks, budget veto powers, guidelines that TAFE must comply with and ministerial representations on TAFE boards, so the honest title would be ministerial powers over TAFE bill. That is what the bulk of the bill does. It is worth noting that this bill gives effect to the commitments made at the 2022 election. It is now 2026. If these were pressing reforms, they have had four years to do them. The timing of the introduction of the bill in an election year is perhaps it is own commentary.

Before getting into the bill's provisions, it is worth being honest about the state of the sector this bill is supposed to strengthen. The Productivity Commission report released in February this year confirmed Victoria has the lowest VET completion rates per capita in the nation with the sole exception of the ACT, so it is lower than New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia, and student satisfaction is at or below national averages. The real recurrent expenditure per training hour has fallen 18 per cent since 2020, from $23.77 to $19.44, and that is the lowest in the nation. The number of TAFE locations across Victoria has, you could say, nothing less than collapsed – from 6349 in 2022 to 1923 in 2024 – a 71 per cent reduction – and the government does not seem to want to talk about that much.

Several TAFE institutes are under significant financial strain. Box Hill recorded an $18.3 million loss last financial year. Chisholm recorded a $14.8 million loss, William Angliss $6.1 million and Melbourne Polytechnic $1.2 million. To round this out, the Auditor-General found that only five of 12 TAFEs would have achieved a net surplus without a one-off capital grant from the government to prop them up. Ultimately, TAFEs do not need to turn large profits, but they do need financial stability and the ability to invest in equipment, facilities and teaching capacity. Strategically for the state, they need some kind of operational redundancy built in which gives them the ability to adjust and pivot where opportunities arise in the training sector. But exactly like this government runs its own budget, we are running these TAFE organisations so close to the wind financially they have absolutely no budgetary headroom for strategic reform or adaption, and when they need to do it, they either hit a hard limit or they fall into deficit. That, structurally, is very bad.

When I reflect, I think particularly in my case as shadow minister for AI, on AI skills as an example, this is an area that needs a major pivot. I am very worried that, despite a couple of piecemeal announcements recently, the government's investment in this has been so small, so piecemeal and confused that the existing five-year gap we already have with New South Wales in AI adoption and the economic advantages that they have gained will only get wider. I will have a lot more to say about that when our AI policy is announced, but I can tell you now: there is a pivotal role for TAFE in

Victoria's AI transition – pivotal – but it is currently completely misread and mismanaged by this government because it does not understand what training on or the skills for AI actually are.

With institutes running structural deficits, what is the government's solution? It is more reporting requirements and more power for the central government. If that is what the bill refers to as 'reform', then we are in for a very rough ride in TAFE, because that is essentially where this bill lands. The Silver review, commissioned by this government, found that the VET system had continued skill shortages in priority industries, completion levels lower than the national average and student satisfaction at or below national averages. Financial viability, it noted, remains an issue for several TAFEs – and that is the government's own appointed reviewer speaking. Meanwhile, Victoria needs 373,000 additional skilled workers by 2028 and 1.5 million by 2035 just to meet current demand. That is the scale of Victoria's problem, and the bill does not even begin to go anywhere near addressing any of it, certainly not with the sense of urgency I think it requires.

The centrepiece of this bill, according to its title, is the free TAFE guarantee. Read that carefully, because the guarantee requires the minister to publish each year a list of VET courses that will be provided free of tuition fees. That is the guarantee. A list is the guarantee. It is a guarantee there will be a list. There is no requirement for a minimum number of courses. There is no guarantee that existing courses remain free. There is no requirement that the courses on the list this year appear on any future list. If you want the clearest possible statement of what this guarantee is actually worth, go to the new section 3.1.1A(4) of the bill, which states in plain language:

> This section does not create a legal right in any person or give rise to any civil cause of action.

So the guarantee, by the government's own drafting, is not legally enforceable. A student cannot take action if their courses are cut, and the government cannot be held accountable if the list shrinks. It is there in the bill. It is not my personal critique; it is in the bill itself.

In 2024 Labor conceded that only 53.7 per cent of free TAFE students had completed their four-year course since the program started in 2019. Since then the government has declined to release updated completion rates. They say the numbers are improving, but they will not say how much or from what base, so it is a statistically meaningless statement. And there is a broader point embedded in these completion figures. The bill assumes that the primary barrier to skills formation in Victoria is cost. Cost is a factor, clearly, but if you open the front door wider and wider and do nothing about the completion rates, you have not built a system, you have built a funnel with no output. When a student enrols in a course but does not complete it, what is the point? If we are not concentrating on completion as much as enrolment, then what is the point? It is a misallocation of capital.

I totally support the principle of free TAFE, but using the word 'guarantee' to describe something with no minimum requirement and no legal standing has not got much to do with policy or reform outcomes. It is pure marketing and hoping no-one notices. Well, business has noticed. I have been to many businesses in the last year – all sectors, all sizes – and apart from the tax and regulations killing them, the skill shortage is always in the top three. The cost of a skill shortage is what? It is low productivity. It is employee churn. It is inflation. It is inability to deliver. It is frustrated expansion plans. It affects Victoria's fundamental underlying competitiveness. It also obviously means that we are not getting people into the employment they deserve – which makes it all a real pity, given the challenges before us. I do not quite understand how as a government you can be content playing at this level. And I cannot understand the lack of ambition around it. You are pinning badges on yourself about having allegedly saved TAFE, but I think some others from this side will have some pretty strong evidence to back up the fact you did not. But for all that, when it is in your hands and you have terrible completion rates, the state has an acute shortage of skills and you can do something about it, all you can do is this bill.

The second promise with the TAFE funding guarantee of this bill is that 70 per cent of VET funding will be directed towards TAFE institutes and dual-sector universities. That might sound meaningful, but it is not. Under the National Skills Agreement, Victoria is already required to direct 70 per cent of

Commonwealth funding to public providers in order to receive the $3.1 billion five-year allocation. The government's own officials confirmed this at the bill briefing – that the TAFEs already received 73 per cent of VET funding in 2024–25 and are on track for 80 per cent in the current year. So this bill's funding guarantee basically legislates what is already happening to satisfy what is already a Commonwealth requirement. It is not a new initiative, it is paperwork formalisation of existing obligations. It is a bit like the title of the bill – a casual misdirection and a creation of a narrative or impression that does not match the actual content. It is marketing. It also includes a three-year averaging mechanism, so the 70 per cent can be met by averaging across a three-year window, so in any given year there is no guarantee of actually meeting it. If they are in a bit of a budget squeeze, there is nothing stopping a financially tight government from back-ending the funding and not meeting the requirements at all. That is a target –

Jacinta Ermacora: Is that your promise?

Richard WELCH: Well, it is your bill. It is your policy. It is your response to the skills crisis.

Jacinta Ermacora interjected.

Richard WELCH: We are not debating our bill, we are debating your bill. If you do not want to talk about your own bill, that is fine. Do not talk about your own bill, because it is not a good one.

The PRESIDENT: Let us not have a discussion across the chamber, please.

Richard WELCH: Apologies, President. I should have gone through you. The guarantee says nothing about independent registered training organisations, who according to data, support around 88 per cent of all students in skill training. They get no funding protection under this bill. If the government was serious about a whole-of-system skills solution and not just parts of it, you would think that RTOs would at least feature somewhere, but they do not, which I find incredible. I would not have thought RTOs are the enemy, but it is pretty clear that this government hates them and does not want them to succeed.

Here I have dispensed with the five pages of the bill that actually talk about free TAFE, whereas the bulk, another 40 of the 45 pages, are about ministerial control over TAFE. The bill creates expansive new ministerial control architecture over the TAFE network. The minister will be able to issue a statement of priorities that every TAFE must implement. Each TAFE must then produce a formal response explaining how it meets those priorities. The minister can reject that response and impose their own. Separately, a TAFE must submit annual budgets to the minister. The minister can accept it, amend it or veto it. If the minister vetoes the TAFE's amended budget a second time, the minister simply writes the budget for them. Then there are also new reserve powers – that is the phrase that the bill actually uses, 'reserve powers' – allowing the minister to appoint a ministerial representative to sit on a TAFE board if the minister considers the board is underperforming. The representative can attend board meetings, request any information they want and report back to the minister. They cannot vote, but boards must consider their advice and hand over whatever they ask for. The minister can also issue guidelines on how TAFEs prepare their responses, budgets and progress reports, and under the new general information powers, the minister can demand details of any commercial arrangement or third-party contract a TAFE has entered into.

The government says these powers are needed to improve efficiency and accountability – maybe. The sector does have financial problems, as the Auditor-General has been saying for some time, and the Silver review recommended structural reform around shared services, some possible mergers and asset rationalisation. But there is a pretty big difference between improving accountability and micromanagement. When a minister can set the priorities, veto the plans, write a budget and place a representative on the board, you have moved from oversight into something closer to direct operational control. The TAFE boards, in any meaningful sense, become an advisory committee to the ministry, and what you get from the TAFEs is probably not better performance – you get compliance theatre,

more reporting, more directed responses, more progress reports on progress reports. None of that fixes a structural deficit or makes up our increasingly lost time to get a skilled workforce in Victoria.

The minister's own second-reading speech says that previous reforms have seen the TAFE network operate more efficiently and collaboratively. But if that is true, then why these new powers? You either have a functioning system that needs support or a broken one that needs intervention; this bill claims the former and legislates for the latter. I will tell you what this is in reality: this is the government's elaborate vote of no-confidence in TAFE – the TAFE that they like to pat themselves on the back for, claim total political credit for, and the remaining speeches will no doubt do that. But if that is the case, then explain this bill – because you want the credit for TAFE but you do not trust TAFE. You do not fund TAFE properly and you do not care what the completion rates of TAFE are. That is what the bill says unambiguously, and you can try and deny it, but it is there in black and white.

Labor actually hate TAFE because they do not yet control it fully, and they are going to put a stop to that. And Victoria will get to see, yet again, this government's unique ability to stuff things up further, as only Jacinta Allan and her size 14 clown feet ministers can do over and over and over again. Crime, machete bins, circular economy reforms, energy, wind farms, planning, bail reforms, housing, police numbers, emergency services funding, negotiating with teachers, ambulance ramping, organised crime on the Big Build and the lack of a royal commission, losing the motorbike grand prix, the Avalon air show and the Commonwealth Games – this government stuffs it up over and over again. In fact you will stuff up TAFE so badly that you can only assume that this is one of the gold-plated Jacinta Allan policies. It is 2026, and Jacinta Allan is coming for the TAFE sector – not good. The last thing any institution in Victoria wants right now is to be fixed by Jacinta Allan. They would be hiding under their desks at the mere thought of it.

The one other thing worth noting is that the dual-sector universities – Federation, RMIT, Swinburne and Victoria University – have significantly more protection here. The minister cannot veto their responses or impose their priorities on them, given their independence under their own statutes, so the full weight and control of the architecture fall on the standalone TAFE institutions. They are the ones with the least protection and the most financial pressure. The coalition will move one amendment in this house, and I ask if that could be circulated now. I will just talk to the amendments briefly. Under the funding guarantee provisions, the minister is already required to report annually on whether the 70 per cent target has been met. We are proposing to add to that report a requirement to publish completion rates for the free TAFE courses on the same metrics. This is not a complicated task. No-one could imagine this would be a complicated task. It falls into part 4 of the bill, which is not due for implementation until 2027. It should not add any complication or delay to anything else that the bill is attempting to achieve. But the completion rates will tell you whether the training is actually producing qualified workers and giving people careers, which is the whole point. Students deserve to know whether courses lead to qualifications, industry deserves to know whether programs produce skilled graduates and taxpayers funding this at significant expense deserve to know what they are getting. The government stopped publishing completion rates in 2024. They were at 53.7 per cent at that point, and the reason given for not continuing to publish them was that 'they are improving'. Now, that is not a measurement. At this point, without data, that is just an assertion. And who knows what 'improving' means and in what context. It is eminently sensible and practical, and I cannot think of any objection to simply publishing the completion rates. It seems absolutely common sense. Transparency on outcomes should not be a contested proposition. If the bill is going to use the word 'guarantee', the least it can do is tell us how well the system is actually performing against it.

We will not oppose this bill. We support free TAFE as a principle, and we are not going to use this as a political football. It is too important for games. But let us be honest about what is in front of us: this is not a bill that addresses Victoria's skill crisis. It does not improve completion rates. It does not bring RTOs into the skills ecosystem better. It does not fix the financial position of the struggling institutes. It does not answer how this state will produce the workforce it needs for the next decade and for the new technologies we must adapt to. What it does is centralise ministerial control over a sector that is

already under strain and attach a label to that process that suggests something more ambitious than what it really is. The people who notice the difference between the label and the reality are the students who do not complete their course, the employers who cannot find the tradespeople they need and the TAFE teachers who are doing the actual work while the reporting workloads multiply around them. They deserve a system that works, but that is a different bill to this one.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:21): I rise today to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Free TAFE Guarantee) Bill 2026 on behalf of my Greens colleagues and me, which we absolutely will be supporting. It is always good to support the passage of good Greens policy. I say that looking back over the last few elections and some of the TAFE policies that the Greens took to those elections, and we specifically in those instances supported a continuation of free TAFE as well as a 70 per cent funding guarantee for public providers. So I am really pleased to see both of these things legislated by this bill.

TAFE is great. It provides quality, affordable and accessible training to so many people here in Victoria, and it should be free. TAFE students really benefit from the practical hands-on learning that TAFE offers, and it provides great pathways to employment. Cost should not stop people from accessing this important training. TAFE can play a really important role in preparing people for jobs of the future – practical, often technical, jobs that cannot be done by robots and cannot be done by AI; jobs that protect and restore our environment, training people in land conservation and ecosystem management; jobs that support the rollout of renewable energy in Victoria, with TAFEs training people to install solar, wind and batteries across the state; jobs that support our circular economy, reducing waste in all of its forms; and jobs that build sustainable and energy-efficient homes for Victorians. Skills learned at TAFE can help us prepare for the impacts of climate change. These are valuable jobs and roles that build our state, and TAFE plays a critical role in preparing people for these roles, so we must invest in it.

I will have a range of matters during the committee stage that I will be raising with the minister, particularly with respect to Aboriginal community controlled registered training organisations, as well as some other matters in addition, but I will leave those matters for that stage of the Council's deliberations. On behalf of my Greens colleagues and me, I commend the bill to the house.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (14:23): I am absolutely delighted and I am also honoured to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Free TAFE Guarantee) Bill 2026, otherwise known as the free TAFE guarantee bill. Free TAFE began here in Victoria, and it was introduced by the Victorian Labor government in 2019. Free TAFE was born of a conviction that the cost of training should never be the reason a person cannot transform their career, and it has worked so well that the Albanese government has now rolled it out nationally, with spectacular success. This bill will protect the legacy Victoria has built, and I want to be clear that this is an issue deeply felt in my community in south-west Victoria. The Baillieu Liberal government's VET reforms cut $10 million in government funding from South West TAFE – 70 South West TAFE teachers lost their jobs, 169 courses were cut over two years and student fees rose by between 50 and 400 per cent. The Hamilton and Portland campuses were threatened with closure, and Glenormiston agricultural college was closed. I was mayor of Warrnambool at that time, and I knew that not only were the job losses devastating, the reduction of courses would be terrible for many people who looked to TAFE for their first step into secondary education, and it was also terrible for those industries in our region relying on trained and skilled graduates.

This happened all across TAFE. What I just described in south-west Victoria happened across the state under the Napthine–Baillieu Liberal coalition government. These were truly the actions of a former government that hated TAFE. Under the former Liberal government more than 2000 TAFE teachers were sacked across the state, 22 TAFE campuses were shut and $1 billion was ripped from TAFEs across Victoria. When the Liberals were last in power less than half the state's training budget went to public TAFE. By early 2015 the number of regional students in training had fallen by 19 per cent – you can imagine the impact that had on our regional economy. Apprenticeships and traineeships were

down 40 per cent, and TAFE's share of the training market had collapsed from 44 per cent to just 25 per cent. I remember that as mayor I had a meeting with the CEO of the TAFE. When I walked in he said that he just had his local member in, Minister Napthine, who was asking the CEO of the TAFE what the impacts would be of the changes and what the changes were. He did not even know what the changes were that his very own government was implementing, and certainly he had not advocated for his own region. It became incredibly important at that point for a Labor government to rebuild TAFE, and we did. Step by step since gaining government we have rebuilt TAFE. When Labor came to government in 2014 the sector was projecting losses of $71.8 million across Victoria for 2014 alone. We provided South West TAFE and other regional TAFEs in financial distress with emergency funding so they could rebuild, and we created a statewide agriculture tech skills centre at Glenormiston. We invested $16 billion to rebuild a crumbling TAFE sector and built and upgraded 45 TAFE campuses. In 2019 we made it even better by introducing free TAFE.

Given the chance, the Liberals will cut free TAFE. Victorians will lose access to an opportunity, and our state will lose an important lever for economic growth. The likelihood of that happening if the Liberals ever were in government is very high. We now know, because of the take-up of free TAFE, that price is a barrier to accessing education. At this point, upwards of 5000 people have enrolled in free TAFE in south-west Victoria alone, at South West TAFE. That is people voting with their feet. That is people sorting out their next career and absolutely enjoying it as well. This bill will enshrine free TAFE in legislation – not just in policy, not just in a ministerial statement, but in the act, because governments can change, and we have seen what the other side do when they are given the chance. Across Victoria more than 225,300 students have benefited from free TAFE since it began, saving more than $727 million in tuition fees. For that figure of 5000 or more at South West TAFE, I want to congratulate the staff at South West TAFE and in particular CEO Mark Fidge. South West TAFE won the Large Training Provider of the Year award in 2020. I was a board director at that time. It was amazing, the detailed assessment across a range of categories that South West TAFE won in order to achieve that national award, not least of which was the highest completion rates in courses at the time. These are not small numbers. These are people who might not have considered further study, who assumed the cost would put it beyond them, who quietly shelved a dream for becoming a nurse or a childcare worker or an electrician. I just want to give you one example from the local newspaper at the time, Friday 7 February 2020. The article is headed, 'Free TAFE extended to childcare courses' and states:

> Working in the childcare field just got a lot more affordable with South West TAFE offering free courses in Early Childhood Education and Care for the first time in Hamilton and Portland.

They are the very campuses the Libs were going to close.

We know that free TAFE is particularly important for women. More than 60 per cent of all free TAFE enrolments to date have been women. Many of them are returning to work after raising children or making a mid-life career change or trying to get secure employment after years of casualised employment. For women living in regional and rural Victoria, being able to afford to study close to home is particularly valuable. Last year I visited Willaura health centre. One of the staff members I met was a young mum. She had qualified as a nurse because she was able to study locally and for free. That meant she had kept her career on track and it meant the hospital had a much-needed staff member.

Free TAFE has been profound in its inclusiveness on so many levels. More than 67,200 Victorians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have benefited since free TAFE began in 2019. More than 22,300 Victorians living with a disability have accessed free TAFE. This government is investing $36 million in the Gordon's disability inclusion centre of excellence. That is a facility that will train not just people with disability but a workforce that supports them.

Free TAFE also offers 80 qualifications and short courses without tuition fees. The most popular courses in 2025 tell a story about what Victorians actually need: certificate IV in training and assessment, certificate IV in accounting and bookkeeping, diploma of nursing, certificate III in

information technology and certificate III in individual support. These are the most popular courses, and contrary to some of what has already been said in the chamber this morning, these are the courses that train the people who keep our hospitals running, who care for our elderly, who keep the books of local businesses and who build the digital economy. These statistics demonstrate how free TAFE enables us to target the skills our economy needs. It stimulates growth in student numbers for in-demand jobs and helps students build successful careers. Victorian TAFE Association research tells us that 81 of the top 100 fastest growing occupations are attainable with TAFE education.

South West TAFE's 2024 annual report reported strong growth in health and community services, including aged care, nursing and community services programs – all growing sectors. We all know that these are the skills our economy desperately needs, particularly in regional towns. The latest figures from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research show that 86 per cent of students who completed a course at South West TAFE last year had found a job or gone on to further study. What an amazing figure. That is an incredible endorsement of the relevance of the work and the policy changes that have been put in place to position South West TAFE to achieve that. TAFE is the most direct route to jobs that matter, and a higher than 60 per cent completion rate is my understanding for South West TAFE's free TAFE.

I want to spend my last few minutes having a look what the bill is doing. It amends the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 to enshrine the free TAFE guarantee in legislation. It locks in the commitment that 70 per cent of all government vocational education training funding will be allocated to TAFE, unlike the devastating figures I referred to under the Napthine–Baillieu governments. This is something we promised at the last election, and this bill delivers on that promise. The Allan Labor government has invested more than $16 billion in new and base funding in skills and TAFE since 2014, including more than $660 million into the 45 new and upgraded TAFE campuses across the network. In regional Victoria more than $237 million has been invested in upgrading and building new TAFE facilities. We have put TAFE at the heart of our training system, and this bill keeps it there.

This bill also legislates the Victorian TAFE network, made up of 11 standalone TAFEs and four dual-sector universities. I will just give a short description of the peak body and governance reforms that have been underway under Minister Tierney. I will take this opportunity to express appreciation and congratulations to Minister Tierney, who has been at the tiller since 2016, at the head of the Victorian TAFE sector. These achievements are absolutely hers to share with all the other people that you have worked with.

In conclusion, with cost-of-living pressures continuing to squeeze Victorian families, we need affordable public education that they can rely on. This bill does exactly that. It is based on the core value of access to public education in this state. It is based on the core value of those that cannot afford it should be able to access it equitably like the rest. This is a really important reform that locks in the work of the TAFE sector, the work of Minister Tierney and the work of all of the TAFE teachers and the communities and the industries that have supported free TAFE since 2019. I commend the bill to the house, very much so.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (14:38): I rise to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Free TAFE Guarantee) Bill 2026, which the Liberal Party do not oppose. I listened to a lot of history there by Ms Ermacora, who is a relatively new member of this chamber and who probably does not have the full history of TAFE and what led to the problems that existed in the TAFE sector, so I would like to give her a little bit of a history lesson.

One of the benefits of being a long-term member of Parliament is I do have a long-term memory on the history of TAFE. I am also one of those people who does not throw away useful documents. I would like to read for a minute just a few paragraphs from an article that appeared in an educational journal in spring 2012. It says:

> The … TAFE4ALL Campaign was launched in 2008 when Jacinta Allan, the then Victorian Labor minister responsible for TAFE, undermined the public TAFE sector with a disastrous piece of public policy.

> Despite attempts by many stakeholders to warn the Minister about the damage that the policy would do to the public TAFE system in Victoria, she and her government refused to listen and introduced the Victorian Training Guarantee …
>
> Disregarding warnings that there was no effective way to regulate the system, no ability to rein in dodgy practices, that students would suffer and the public TAFE system would be undermined, the VTG was launched with the usual colour glossy pamphlets. It should have been called the Victorian Private Profit Guarantee!
>
> The government proudly marketed the policy as providing a guarantee to all Victorians that they now had access to a subsidised training place in either a public TAFE or a private for profit registered training organisation.
>
> The VTG policy saw an explosion in the number of private for profit RTOs and the plundering of public money and the undermining of the public TAFE … began.

Who said that? Which journal was it that wrote that? Well, this was actually in a journal called the *Australian TAFE Teacher* – its spring 2012 edition – which is a journal produced by none other than the Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union. In fact that article was written by Greg Barclay, the Victorian branch president for TAFE and adult provision in the Australian Education Union. This was the Australian Education Union saying that Labor were wrong with their direction on TAFE. I also have a couple of pamphlets that were produced during that time. This one was handed out in Bendigo. It is headed 'The Victorian government is changing TAFE' and it says:

> Tens of thousands of people are affected by a massive hike in fees and loss of concessions.
>
> Young people
>
> Women
>
> Single parents
>
> Koori families
>
> Unemployed people
>
> Disabled people
>
> None of them can afford these changes.
>
> New TAFE fees for diplomas and advanced diplomas …

will increase. The annual fee was going from $877 to $2000, and the concession rate for low-income students was going from $55 to $2000. The pamphlet goes on to say:

> Tell the Minister for Skills – your MP Jacinta Allan – that she's wrong.
>
> Join the campaign at tafe4all.org.au.

It gives a case study of a young woman who wants to work in aged care. She was studying a certificate IV in community welfare, and her enrolment fee was going from $55 – because she was on a low income – to $2000. She could not afford that, and the government told her to get a loan. What a disgraceful act that was. The AEU also conducted a whole heap of surveys on that, but I will not go through all of the history of that.

I remember standing on a polling booth outside the TAFE during the 2010 election, and a woman came up and absolutely started berating me and screaming at me that I had destroyed TAFE. I was saying to her, 'Hey, hang on a minute; I've never done anything to TAFE.' And she said, 'Yes, you! You, Jacinta Allan – you have destroyed TAFE.' I had great delight in telling her I was not Jacinta Allan; I was actually from the Liberal Party and I was there to help the electorate of Bendigo East, not to destroy it, like Jacinta Allan.

Anyway, let us get back to the bill. This bill has three main purposes.

Sonja Terpstra interjected.

Wendy LOVELL: If you would like, Ms Terpstra, I can go on about the failures of Labor in the TAFE system. I am happy to.

Sonja Terpstra: On a point of order, Acting President, I think Ms Lovell should direct her comments through the Chair and not across the chamber at individual members.

Wendy LOVELL: Sorry, I was responding to an interjection by Ms Terpstra. If she is going to interject, I will respond.

Sonja Terpstra: Further to the point of order, that is irrelevant. Ms Lovell must direct her comments through the Chair, whether she is responding to an interjection or not.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): I ask Ms Lovell to direct her comments through the Chair, and I ask that she be allowed to continue without interjection.

Wendy LOVELL: Through you, Acting President, if Ms Terpstra would like, I can elaborate further on the failures of Labor in the TAFE system and the way they almost destroyed it in this state – brought it to its knees. I am happy to do that if she would like. But I would like to talk about this bill, because the main purposes of this bill are that it requires the minister to publish a list of free vocational courses; it legislates that at least 70 per cent of funding goes to TAFEs and dual-sector universities; and it significantly expands ministerial control over public education institutions. Our TAFE teachers do a fantastic job. I know that the teachers at GOTAFE are very dedicated and they work very closely with all of the TAFE students at Shepparton. Our GOTAFE has always been a very good institution in Greater Shepparton, and we value having that in town.

The importance of vocational education in regional Victoria can hardly be overstated. Regional cities and towns continue to suffer from chronic skills shortages. My electorate needs more nurses in hospitals, more tradies on building sites, more educators in kindergartens and more carers for our ageing population. Regional TAFEs allow students to receive training and education while staying connected to their local communities. Most of those students will go on to make a big contribution to their home towns, where they help build, serve and care for the community. VET also offers pathways to new careers for ambitious students who want to explore wider opportunities and seek new horizons.

TAFE institutes are vital for the Victorian economy and deserve more support, but they will not get it from this bill. Do not be fooled by the title of this bill. It will not actually guarantee that any particular TAFE course or a minimum number of TAFE courses will be free. The only thing this bill guarantees is the production of more paperwork. This bill will require the minister to produce a statement of TAFE priorities. It will require TAFEs to produce a response to the minister's statement. It will require TAFEs to publish a progress report on how they are implementing their response to the minister's statement. It will require TAFEs and dual-sector universities to produce all these documents as well as review and revise their strategic plans. TAFEs will now be busier than ever publishing plans, statements, responses and reports. This bill should be called the TAFE paperwork guarantee bill of 2026.

The government claims that the main aim of this bill is to guarantee the provision of certain courses in vocational education and training, free of tuition fees. But when we look more closely at the bill and the detail of the bill, we can see that this guarantee is a hollow promise. Clause 19 inserts a new section 3.1.1A, which says in subsection (1):

> The Minister must determine in each year a list of courses of vocational education and training that are to be provided by TAFE institutes and dual sector universities free of tuition fee.

But the bill does not say which courses must be free. It does not say that a minimum number of courses must be free. It does not say that the free courses must be linked to identified skills shortages. It just says the minister will publish a list of which courses the minister has decided to make free. That might be 80 this year, it might be 20 next year – who knows? The list is entirely at the minister's discretion, and a list that can change from year to year provides no real guarantee. Then subsection (4) says that this section does not create a legal right anyway. What is the point of passing legislation for a free TAFE guarantee when included in the legislation is a clause denying that it guarantees anything or

creates a right that can be enforced? This guarantee is an empty promise that is not worth the paper it is printed on.

Clause 21 of this bill inserts a new section 3.1.2A, which at subsection (1) provides that out of all of that funding paid to TAFE institutes, dual-sector universities and private registered training organisations in a target year, at least 70 per cent must go to TAFEs and dual-sector universities. But this promise is nothing new to TAFEs, because it merely formalises what the state government is already required to do by the Commonwealth under the National Skills Agreement. As my colleague the member for Prahran said in the other place, this bill is nothing more than a press release on a legislative letterhead. The so-called new guarantees either are unenforceable or just replicate existing practice.

Labor is building into this bill creeping control over the TAFE sector. The one substantive change this bill makes is that it increases Labor's control over the public institutions, through clause 16, which inserts a new division 3. This will give the power to the minister to place representatives onto TAFE boards who will watch over TAFE boards and report back to the minister. Clearly, the government is not satisfied with its ability to appoint board chairs: the Brumby Labor government introduced that power in 2010, bringing the previous arrangement, in which the board appointed its own chair, to an end. Now Labor wants to appoint ministerial representatives to monitor the very chair and board that the minister has appointed. The Labor government is obsessed with monitoring and controlling public institutions everywhere. We have seen how the government has weaponised monitoring powers against local government authorities to intimidate councillors who resist Labor's agenda and probe into questionable decisions. This bill will also give that power to the minister to issue guidelines to TAFEs about their management of assets and financial decisions, in a clear shift towards a far more centralised and interventionist approach.

Completion rates are appalling under Labor at the moment. Significant public money is spent on TAFEs, and the government has a responsibility to ensure that students and Victorian taxpayers are getting value for money from that investment. The government wants to claim that free TAFE has been a game changer, but course completion rates remain lower than they should be. The Productivity Commission's latest report on government services, released in February, shows that Victoria has the lowest per capita completion rate in the nation, with the exception of the ACT. For example, the diploma of building and construction (building) had a commencement of 2819 students, but only 33 per cent completed the course, with a maximum subsidy per course of some $16,000. Thirty-three per cent is a failure in anybody's language, and this 33 per cent is a direct failure of this government. Some of them may have changed courses and gone on to complete other courses, but it is really alarming when only a third of students complete their training course in a key industry where skill shortages are hurting the ability to build more houses. Victoria continues to face a skills crisis, and the skills gap is not being filled by our VET system as effectively as it could be. The Productivity Commission also found that student satisfaction levels with VET courses are at or below national averages, which is no doubt contributing to people changing course or ending their studies. This government has failed when it comes to TAFE; they continue to fail Victorian students in the TAFE sector. I look forward to a change of government in November and to some real investment in Victorian TAFEs.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:54): I also rise to make a contribution on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Free TAFE Guarantee) Bill 2026, and I am very pleased and proud to be doing so, because one thing I know is that this government's commitment to public education is in our DNA. That is what Labor is about, and we are unapologetic about that. Free TAFE and the bill that enshrines our commitment to free TAFE is just another example of how we demonstrate our Labor values. I am also a graduate of TAFE myself. I attended many a TAFE course in my time, and I know many on this side of the chamber, including Mr Tarlamis and others, have also attended TAFE. Both of my children are tradies, and I am incredibly proud that they have been in the vocational training and education system.

I was listening to some of the contributions by Mr Welch and unfortunately Ms Lovell. What is lost on those opposite is that the history of TAFE is about the government speaking to industry and providing government-backed skills training for industry based on what industry tell us that they need. For example, my son is a plumber, and he works in an industry that is part of construction, which is inherently dangerous. What you need to make sure, when you have someone carrying out works, is that they are carried out to appropriate regulations and standards, and what TAFE gives you is a guarantee that the government training that is being rolled out has been done in conjunction and in consultation with industry telling us what they in fact need based on what the government regulations are, and that in turn gives confidence to consumers who might engage tradespeople. Also for example, my husband started his life as a fitter and turner – another very important trade. He started work on the railways – metal trades play a very important role. Again, you want to have government training, because you have confidence in government training.

I am going to talk in a moment when I go through some of the history of these things, because I want to remind people who might be playing along at home and might be listening to these contributions today about what those opposite did to the trade training system. We can never forget that, because what that meant was that there was a lack of confidence in people who were getting qualifications that were not worth the paper they were written on. It is very important that consumers can have confidence in the work that is being carried out. Again, this is something that the government and industry work on together. It is based on what the industry have asked government to provide, and again you have quality in the TAFE training system that is provided, and people trust it.

As I said, I am a TAFE graduate, and my husband, my two children – my son has just finished his plumbing apprenticeship and is now a qualified tradesperson, and my daughter is still in the TAFE system undertaking her apprenticeship, and I could not be prouder of them. I could not be prouder of them, because both of my children –

Wendy Lovell: You should be proud of them.

Sonja TERPSTRA: I do not need a lecture from anyone on the opposition benches about what I should and should not be doing with my children. Certainly I am proud of my children for the fact that they are both in very important, in-demand trades, because we have a shortage of skilled trades in this country, because we have strong demand in construction and other trades occupations. It has only ever been Labor governments that have backed in trade training, because we listen to industry. Contrary to what you hear from those on the opposition benches about the need to have private sector investment and the like, we only have to think back to what happened when those opposite were in government. I can talk a bit about that now because it is important to remember. We all need to be students of history because we can never forget what happened.

I will quote from the *Victorian Training Market Report*, which was released in 2015, after those opposite were in government. That report indicated that the cuts that were imposed by the Liberal–National government when they were in power, under Ted Baillieu and Denis Napthine, significantly damaged the public vocational education system in Victoria. I will say that again, because it is important and we need to remember it: the cuts significantly damaged the public vocational education system in Victoria, ideologically driven by those opposite. The silly thing is that they affected and impacted people in regional areas as well. Regional students in training fell by up to 19 per cent under those opposite, apprenticeships declined by up to 40 per cent, there were closures of courses and there were closures of campuses. We saw TAFE enrolments drop by 33 per cent over the subsequent year, and the number of students in apprenticeships and traineeships fell by 40 per cent. Let us also not forget that some of the qualifications that were being awarded to people were not worth the paper they were written on – completely dodgy and ineffectual. When we think about and reflect on what those opposite are about, it is in their DNA that they hate public education. They hate it. They do not want to fund it. Their ideological passion is about making sure that the private sector can make profits from it, which is very contrary to the whole point of what public education is about.

Wendy Lovell: On a point of order, Acting President, I just draw the member back to the bill and to her commentary on the bill, because she is certainly currently trying to write coalition policy, and she is getting it very wrong.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Further to the point of order, Acting President, I am merely responding to some of the nonsense that was given in the chamber earlier by members opposite.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): There have been wideranging discussions in this bill about history, so I am not going to uphold the point of order.

Sonja TERPSTRA: As I said, if those opposite want to open a door, it opens the door for everybody in this chamber who wants to make commentary on it. Again, the bottom line is that our government knows how important TAFE and public education and trade and vocational training is, because industry and businesses want it. They know that what comes with public education and TAFE is a guarantee of quality, and we know that. What we are doing with this bill is establishing a free TAFE guarantee which enshrines this government's free TAFE program, legislating it and protecting it to make sure it continues into the future. Because as I said – and I just laid down the foundation for this – those opposite will destroy it. We should never forget what they did. What they did was bring the TAFE and vocational education and training system to its absolute knees. This is why this bill will enshrine this in law and protect it from future attacks from those opposite – because they hate public education; they hate it.

The other thing of importance is that, as I said, these reforms that the government is bringing forward will protect free TAFE by requiring the minister of the day to issue a list of free TAFE courses every year so people are aware of which courses they can attend for free. We know only too well and what we have seen is that free TAFE has been significantly important and of great benefit to many women who, after perhaps their children are off their hands or they have gone through some sort of divorce or separation, go and take up free TAFE courses to train and retrain. In fact I might talk about the fact of our fantastic tunnel-boring machine crews that are all women. These women have actually come from a diverse range of backgrounds, and I might just tell a story about when I visited the SRL East site last week. We were talking to the lead operator of the all-women tunnel-boring machine crew, who was telling us about one of the women who is now on that crew. She worked in retail – I think one of the supermarkets – her whole life, got to her early 50s and said, 'I'm going to go and train at TAFE. I want to become a tunnel-boring machine pilot.' And guess what, she is now a pilot on the tunnel-boring machine crew, the first all-women tunnel-boring machine crew in the world, which is building important infrastructure for Victorians down at Suburban Rail Loop East. I could not be prouder of that. That is a story that is going to make your heart full of joy and admiration for women who can take up an opportunity to train and retrain and be in well-paid, secure jobs, which TAFE provides a pathway for.

For these qualifications, again, this is what we did: we spoke to industry and said, 'What do we need?' We did not have a tunnel-boring machine institute, but we now have one at Holmesglen TAFE. What a fantastic initiative of this government. Rather than asking people to come in from overseas, we now train Victorians, locals, in our own TAFE facilities, which those opposite tried to destroy and would do so again if they had the chance. That is why this bill is so critically important – because we need to protect TAFE, and we need to protect it as well by guaranteeing that a minimum of 70 per cent of the state's training budget will go to public TAFEs. Again, they hate public education. They hate it with a passion. I will say it again: we will be protecting it by guaranteeing a minimum of 70 per cent of the state's training budget goes to public TAFEs. We will also protect the TAFE network by ensuring its existence and obligations in law, supporting collaboration and innovation, not competition for scraps of funding and market share, which is a hallmark of those opposite, because that is what they want to happen with the private sector. It is all about profit for them. It is not about student outcomes and it is not about qualifications, it is about making money. That is abhorrent, and it should never be a thing when we are talking about public education. The value of public education, not only to individuals but to the Victorian economy and to Victorian industry, is critically important, and this bill will protect all

of that. The bill also provides that TAFE will remain at the centre of Victoria's training and education system. As I said, 70 per cent of all training will be funded and guaranteed to public providers, and it will also create certainty around free TAFE as a key pillar of Victoria's training system.

As I said earlier, we know what those opposite would do if they ever got their hands on TAFE again. I have gone through some of the history around what we know those opposite did when they were in government. But, again, it is important to remember the history of vocational education and training. Let us not forget this is about government working with industry, understanding their needs and providing for them. It is about a guarantee which is about public confidence and consumer confidence in tradespeople who come away with a qualification – to know that they are appropriately trained, with government-guaranteed training as well, and that does provide consumer confidence.

This is a very critically important piece of legislation. We have heard all sorts of rhetoric and garbage from those opposite about completion rates and all the rest of it, and they have referred to the Victorian Auditor-General's Office and all this sort of stuff, but the bottom line is it is a dog whistle. It is a dog whistle for them to say they will destroy the public education system of TAFE and open it up to the private market. They will continue to point to failures, but they will not point to successes, because the successes outweigh any concerns. I listened very carefully to some of the commentary. VAGO actually talked about how the TAFE sector does have financial stability and the like, and it is actually doing okay, despite what those opposite say. But, again, they want to cherrypick what has been said in an Auditor-General's report, which is completely ridiculous. I can also point to key completion rates. We had over 568,000 students who had enrolled in fee-free TAFE by early 2025, and some of the modes in which students are studying at TAFE mean that they are not completing their courses in four years because they might be studying part-time. There is a different way in which people are now opting to undertake their training at TAFE as well. If you look across the board, though, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research is also talking about datasets, and some of the data is a little bit difficult to read, but there is certainly higher engagement with TAFE amongst students in states with larger fee-free TAFE take-ups, like Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland.

Those things are important to note, because those opposite will just cherrypick anything to bolster their argument, because what they want to do is try and rely on that – because we absolutely know, down the barrel, should they ever have the privilege of being in government again, what they would do. The first step that they would take is take the razor to TAFE, and they would completely destroy it. It took this Labor government and other iterations many, many years of trying to undo the inherent damage that those opposite created: closed campuses, cuts to courses and people who walked away without qualifications because things were on their knees. We can never forget that.

The clock is against me. I must say I never had a prouder moment than when I was fortunate enough to work with the minister as the TAFE ambassador. I had a great opportunity to go around and talk to many people in Victoria about the great benefits of TAFE. This is a very important bill. I commend this bill to the house. It is very important that we continue to back our TAFE and vocational education system.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:09): I rise to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Free TAFE Guarantee) Bill 2026 on behalf of Legalise Cannabis Victoria. The provision of quality and accessible vocational education and training is essential to the education system, to industry and to the community. However, I think it is fair to say that our appreciation for a technical or TAFE education has been diminished over several years. We live in an age of the university. The profound and revolutionary changes to the education system under Gough Whitlam in the 1970s were life-changing for many. They opened up pathways to higher education previously closed to people like me, those from working-class and low socio-economic backgrounds. This changed Australia for the better. Decades later our federal colleagues on both sides of the aisle could do with a reminder of just how many great Australian writers, lawyers, academics, thinkers and, yes, politicians would simply not be where they are today if Whitlam had not made higher education

free and thereby lowered the drawbridge to Australia's universities. A university education should be within reach for all who want it and are suited to it.

However, this course correction, while very welcome – revolutionary, even – did have some unintended consequences. One was that a university education was elevated above other pathways, including TAFE and work. Flash forward several decades, and schools, workplaces and families of all backgrounds have an almost laser focus on getting young people on the pathway to university. While not intended, this devalued TAFE. We all recall kids at school doing subjects like 'prevo', prevocational training, or 'home ec', home economics, being referred to in the negative. Practical and work-focused subjects and pathways beyond school were seen as the lesser option. The idea was that if they were smarter they would go to uni, and in one generation this has led to a glut of lawyers who cannot find a plumber. It has also seen many young people studying courses and pursuing careers that perhaps are not suited to them. Some people are more practical learners. They thrive in environments that are focused on doing rather than reading, writing and listening. Some of us like sitting in the office and doing Teams meetings – actually none of us like doing those – and others prefer working outside or in person with actual things and with people. Neither is better or more valid than the other. The best possible outcome for students, business and society is that we have education and training pathways available that suit us all.

When university education was made free under Whitlam and somewhat affordable under successive governments, higher education was opened up to many more, including people like me. I come from a working-class family in Newcastle, and I was the first woman in my family to go to university. I have been independent from my family since I was 16 years old, and without those reforms I would never have had the chance to do an undergraduate degree and later my masters in public policy. I am grateful, and this has been life changing. Indeed it is one of the many reasons I am here today. Having said that, I do not see other pathways to work and study as any less valid. Perhaps the pendulum has swung too far towards university at almost all costs. What this has led to is a lot of kids studying courses that they are not suited to as well as skills shortages in essential professions like nursing, disability support, mental health, information technology, cybersecurity, early childhood, horticulture, construction, hospitality and many more. We need to rebalance to respect university education as well as technical education and also work. There is nothing wrong with finishing school and getting a job.

The TAFE sector has had a few rough decades. The closure of technical colleges, the gutting of TAFE institutes and the shift to cheap and often nasty private registered training organisations (RTOs) all played their part in reducing the regard given to the TAFE sector. It cut the sector off at the knees, and now we see the results. We have less than ideal completion rates, and I will return to that point later. We have chronic shortages in health care, construction, hospitality and many more. You might be able to get your plans drawn up for your new home, but you most certainly will struggle to find the tradies to build it. For this and other reasons we welcome the provision of free TAFE courses and commend the government for righting the wrongs of previous decades and working toward a system where TAFE is no longer seen as the poor cousin of universities. We would welcome the provision of free education across the board, but that is a debate for another day.

We support this bill and appreciate greatly that TAFE is closer to getting the respect it deserves. However, we have a few caveats. The first point I would like to raise is that the guarantee in this bill is not really a guarantee. The guarantee contains no legal rights, cannot be enforced and only requires the minister to publish a list of free courses. The bill fulfils a 2022 Victorian government commitment to ensure that TAFE is guaranteed 70 per cent of VET funding. These amendments are part of the government's work to reform and rebuild Victoria's public TAFE system and for alignment to the National Skills Agreement with the Commonwealth. Current legislation does not define the role of TAFE as a public provider compared to other types of training providers, nor does it require TAFE institutes to operate in a coordinated way across Victoria. Moreover, I have heard significant concerns in my electorate around access to TAFE, and I mean literal physical access – getting there. Many TAFE institutes have been closed, and there are simply not enough of them in the areas where there is

need and demand. The Productivity Commission's February report on government services found that TAFE provider locations in Victoria have significantly decreased and that Victoria has the lowest rates of VET qualifications per capita in Australia. This is simply not good enough and needs to be corrected as a matter of urgency.

Part of the problem I am hearing from my constituents is that many TAFE institutes that do exist are very difficult to get to via public transport. We are making it all too hard. Almost all TAFE students are juggling multiple demands and challenges to study. Often they have responsibilities at home and at work. Most do not come from families that can support them financially to study; they must work. Many do not have cars or the funds to pay for the costs associated with driving long distances and parking. This problem is only increasing as petrol prices soar and the cost-of-living crisis worsens. Cost-of-living pressures hit working people harder than everyone else. If this prevents them from acquiring skills and training, it is a double blow. The best possible outcome and the one most likely to lead to higher completion rates, which is ultimately what we all want, is for TAFE institutes to be plentiful, located in high-demand areas and easily accessible by public transport. It is not rocket science. Any educator or researcher will tell you that getting to your place of study should be easy.

I recently had a constituent inquiry on this subject. My constituent is a resident of Beaconsfield Upper looking to study horticulture, with aspirations of becoming an arborist. He found course options in Cranbourne and Glen Waverley; however, he does not drive. There are no viable public transport options from Beaconsfield Upper to these locations on weekdays. Beaconsfield Upper is a suburb of Cardinia shire, which currently has no TAFE facilities, and I note that Cardinia shire is one of the fastest growing suburbs in the south-east. My constituent has no choice but to pay a rideshare service to travel to TAFE. That is absurd. Most students simply cannot afford to catch an Uber to TAFE. So while we welcome the free TAFE guarantee, this must be accompanied by a practical commitment to access, or it simply will not work.

I would like to return now to the vexed issue of completion rates. Obviously there is little point offering free TAFE courses if they are not being finished in decent numbers. I note that the Productivity Commission's report flagged this issue and highlighted a need for the minister's annual report to include student completion rates for all free TAFE courses. I suggest that it would also be helpful to know who is taking up these courses and why. If the purpose of free TAFE is to skill a future workforce, it is important that we know that the people who are in these courses are intending to use them for work or further study. I would imagine that there are some community members who would be keen to socialise at TAFE or dabble in a new area or new learnings. If people are looking for a fresh start or to change careers via TAFE study and they are not finishing the course, then we need to understand why that is the case. Free TAFE cannot be a feel-good exercise or a shiny media release. It is far too important. It must lead to real outcomes for individuals and the economy.

Speaking of potential, it would be remiss of me not to take this opportunity to highlight the missed opportunities in the TAFE sector for cannabis-related study, including the myriad benefits of hemp. The cannabis market is estimated at over $25 billion worldwide and growing rapidly, pardon the pun. Cannabis has been used for millennia. Some use it for a good time; others use it for relaxation, socialisation, sleep, appetite, inflammation, epilepsy, perimenopause, ADHD and many other conditions. Consumers report finding it less addictive and harmful than alcohol and with much fewer side effects than a range of commonly prescribed medications. Despite recent prohibitionist propaganda in the press, the health benefits of cannabis are well documented. There are close to 700,000 medicinal cannabis consumers in Australia and many more general consumers.

What gets less attention are the environmental and other benefits of hemp, which are numerous and indisputable. Hemp is being used all over the world in construction, fashion, packaging and much more. Hemp is a multibillion-dollar industry. Just ask famous heartthrob Zac Efron, who recently built a fully sustainable house in Australia out of hemp and who champions it as the building material of the future. The cannabis and hemp revolution is here, and it is going to require a workforce in medicine, in manufacturing and in construction. TAFE institutes should – like in comparable countries like

Canada, the US and many other European countries – be at the forefront of equipping our health, horticulture, pharmaceutical, construction and other workforces. There are so many opportunities for employment in the cannabis field, especially in an age when AI is decimating other industries. The immature and outdated stereotypes about this wondrous plant need to stop, and we need an education system and workforce ready to harness her many benefits.

Cannabis is now and has always been a working-class issue. We would like to see the TAFE sector at the forefront of the cannabis education revolution. Right now we are being left behind. We should have plentiful public TAFE institutes offering courses, like the Linnaeus Competence Center Hemp in Germany, which develops vocational education and training approaches to industrial hemp cultivation; like the WeCann Academy in Brazil, which offers an international certification in endocannabinoid medicine designed for healthcare professionals; or closer to home, like Ballarat's Federation TAFE, which will be the first campus in Australia to deliver nationally accredited training in medicinal cannabis cultivation and production. Federation University provost Liam Sloan said:

> Federation will be the first in Australia to deliver the Certificates III and IV in Medicinal Cannabis Cultivation and Production. The design and development of these courses presents many opportunities for Federation TAFE and the communities in which we operate, including the potential for hundreds of jobs in manufacturing, agriculture, research and development.
>
> Industry partnerships are a key element of Federation's co-operative education model …
>
> Federation TAFE is committed to addressing skills shortages and is also excited to work with our industry partners to play a part in improving the quality of life for patients suffering from a range of conditions who will benefit from easier access to a range of reliable and locally produced medicinal cannabis products.

The market is there. The students are willing. Our education system is not keeping up.

Another issue I would like to flag is the concern from the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, or VACCHO, about unintended consequences of the bill. While VACCHO supports the intention of the TAFE funding guarantee, we share their concern that the training providers defined in the TAFE funding guarantee are too narrow in focus. They are calling for a change to the wording in the bill from 'TAFE and dual-sector universities' to a more general term of 'public vocational education and training providers'. This change removes the possibility that Aboriginal community controlled RTOs could be excluded from funding and does not change the outcome of the bill, and I just want to acknowledge that, from what I understand, the minister will be speaking to this in the committee-of-the-whole stage.

At Legalise Cannabis Victoria we commend the government making TAFE more affordable. These changes are starting to bring the reputation and standing of TAFE and the technical education sector back to where they should be. There is honour in any work that is done well and to a high standard. Working people take pride in their work, and they should also take pride in the education and training they undertake to be able to do this work. We all should be proud of TAFE. We commend this bill and hope that in the very near future the provision of publicly accessible, affordable and local TAFE education is a reality for all Victorians.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (15:25): I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Free TAFE Guarantee) Bill 2026. This bill includes a number of different areas: new objectives for the TAFE network, new powers to the minister in relation to the TAFE network and a strategic planning framework for the TAFE network providers. I would like to note for the house that I do have something in common with Ms Terpstra. It is worth mentioning at least one thing in common. We have very different policies, I note, but we both have sons involved at TAFE. I am certainly very proud to be a mum of someone who is going through an apprenticeship at the moment, and I think we have so much to be thankful for from our TAFEs. I have spoken with a number of teachers, and I think they do an incredible job – and it is not an easy job to do at all, because you have got to be trained to be able to teach as well as be trained in your actual trade.

We have 90 campuses, and in our regional areas they are so important. We know that the Sunraysia Institute of TAFE covers the north-west area; we have got campuses in Mildura, in Swan Hill, in Robinvale and in Ouyen. At the GOTAFE we have got campuses in Shepparton, in Seymour, in Benalla and in Wangaratta. I remember visiting Wangaratta and seeing the TAFE there, and that was fantastic. Also Bendigo TAFE, which is local to where I live, have got some great facilities there and even a place where you can go and get your hair cut, which is fantastic. There is a lot of work being done at those sites.

There are certainly a number of issues, though, and I know Ms Ermacora in her contribution said free TAFE helps you target. But I think when you look at the statistics, they show that just over 53 per cent are completing a free TAFE four-year course. Back in 2024 the government gave that information, and that shows that there are certainly a lot missing those targets right now. I received a letter from a group training organisation, and I think it is worth quoting from it. It says:

> Victoria faces a significant and rapidly escalating skills crisis. Apprenticeship training contracts have fallen from more than 58,000 in 2022–23 to fewer than 25,000 today, while youth unemployment, school disengagement, and critical shortages across construction, manufacturing, health, social housing, and emerging industries continue to intensify. At the same time, substantial government investment – particularly in programs such as Head Start and Fee-Free TAFE – has not translated into the outcomes Victoria urgently needs.

We know that there is some recent data that has been released, and it confirms that the number of Victorian apprentices and trainees in training and commencing an apprenticeship continues to fall. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research figures published yesterday for the 12 months ending September 2025 expose the Allan Labor government's continued failure to address Victoria's shortage of skilled workers. The report provides a snapshot, and it shows that the number of commencements was down 22.6 per cent, with 3480 fewer commencements for trade occupations and 3340 fewer commencements for non-trade occupations. The number in training also fell by 13 per cent, and the number of completions for non-trade occupations fell 16.5 per cent, with 14.7 per cent fewer females completing their apprenticeship or traineeship. The data shows that Victoria continues to have the lowest rate of students complete VET qualifications per capita in the nation, with the exception of the ACT, with student satisfaction levels at or below national averages. That should highlight some major issues, and I think we should be asking why. Why is that happening? This is just going to further contribute to Victoria's skilled workforce shortages, which lead to higher prices and restrictions on economic growth.

Recently I have been participating in the electric vehicles inquiry, and we had the National Electrical and Communications Association come, and they were sharing some of the challenges that there are at the moment with workforce, particularly with the electrical industry. They were asked: are there enough contractors available to complete the work? They said:

> The answer is no. In 2030 – the analysis has been undertaken – we will be, across Australia, 32,000 electricians short. If you consider the rate of people, electricians, leaving the industry, as opposed to those coming into the industry – 35,000. It is a four-year apprenticeship. 2030 is four years away, so theoretically, because the completion rates for apprenticeships are close to 50 per cent, we should have 70,000 electrical apprentices enrolled today. We do not, and we will run short. The dilemma that you will have is not only this. You have the community home batteries program, which is extracting a lot of our workforce. You also have everything to do with net zero and energy efficiency drawing on it. You have a housing and infrastructure shortage. This is where all the electricians are going to be dragged from.

They went on to make a number of other important points. They talked about needing to engage with more mature-age apprenticeships. They said:

> We are seeing a lot of people over the age of 21 who want to enter the trade, but there is a cost barrier with mature-age apprenticeship rates. A lot of employers, especially the small- and medium-sized enterprises, will not pay those additional funds even though they are probably better performers.

One other aspect that they mentioned during the inquiry, and I thought this was worth highlighting, was training and how important it is. It said:

> … training needs to be reviewed to make sure that it is keeping up with incoming technologies and stuff like that. The trade schooling was written last century in the 1980s and 90s, and it does need reviewing.

They talked about how:

> … the baseline for an A-grade electrician is still moving forward to keep up with the evolving technologies, and we need to put more investment into post-trade training to make sure that they are skilled for energy demand, monitoring, control, batteries, EV charging, and all that sort of stuff as well.

So that is from the Hansard from the inquiry, which I thought was worth noting today.

Another area that I have certainly been made aware of is agriculture – I know Bendigo TAFE is one of the places that offers agriculture – and it is such an important part of our industry and contributes so much. The gross value of agricultural production was $94.3 billion in 2022–23; that is Australia-wide. And in 2021–22 Victoria's gross value of agricultural production was $20.2 billion, accounting for 23 per cent of our GVAP, making Victoria Australia's second-largest agricultural producer. The North Central LLEN provides this information. They, in their presentation, highlight the importance of employment: 154,000 people employed in the sector, in agricultural production and manufacturing, 75 per cent of those being in regional areas.

I am aware of the challenges that there are in our TAFE system and the training, and some of those have been highlighted. Recently, I was hearing about insufficient staffing. Courses are frequently staffed with temporary or reduced teaching capacity rather than stable, industry-experienced educators, undermining that continuity and practical supervision. Inadequate equipment and learning materials can lead to issues. Essential machinery, workshop tools and up-to-date learning resources are either unavailable or so limited that hands-on learning is compromised. Also, the lack of marketing, sometimes, of courses such as agriculture can mean that it can see declining enrolments and reduced industry awareness of the pathways. I know, just talking more broadly of some of the challenges the industry is facing, those declining VET enrolments despite the rising need for the training in those areas are because of that limited access to practical hands-on training and the infrastructure that you need to be able to deliver those courses. The trainer recruitment and retention challenges there, the travel and access barriers that have been referred to in this debate as well for school and regional learners – I know I have spoken with grandparents that have had to take grandchildren very long distances, while parents are working, to get them to training. That risk of misalignment between training delivery and contemporary farm practice can be a challenge, because we know in agriculture there are very advanced technologies out there today.

We heard earlier about the group training organisations and the important part they play in connecting people between school and workplace; they also face some challenges. I know they currently operate under seven different regulatory bodies, which creates significant duplication, confusion and cost. I note that their funding has remained unchanged, at $3.2 million, for more than 20 years despite growing demand and the removal of federal support in 2014. The correspondence I received from one of these organisations says fee-free TAFE has broadened access to training but completion rates have fallen significantly. This is a glaring issue.

As I mentioned earlier, apprenticeship training contracts have dropped by 33,000 from 2022–23 to today. That is a major problem that we have. Ms Terpstra, I heard in the debate, talked about our side taking a razor. This is a challenge. I believe it is time that this government started taking accountability or responsibility. They have been in for 12 years; we hear a lot of replaying of the old records, looking back. But what is happening right now, if the government want to put the focus on the razor that they are using – I certainly know the complexity allowance in our rural and regional schools has been cut. It is being phased out under this government right now, over the next three years. Another area in which they are impacting regional schools is in tuition funding support that has been cut. Another area is the community-use facility. Again, the razor of this government right now is cutting funds to our

rural and regional schools. If they want to talk about razors, I would suggest that the government look at what they are doing right now in education and to our regional students, because we know that we do have significant need for a skilled workforce in Victoria. We need that to grow our economy, and the challenge we have right now is that growing divide between those with the skills and those able to deliver.

It is so important. TAFE provides so many important pathways: builders, plumbers, electricians, painters, hairdressers, beauty and nurses – I know Ms Lovell in her contribution talked about the need for that in our regional areas – hospitality and tourism, veterinary studies, finance and business, agriculture and horticulture, like I mentioned, and transport and logistics. These are all so important. This bill is a missed opportunity. As Mr Welch referred to earlier, it is a nice twist with the title, but what we see under this government time and time again is just spin. Ms Terpstra mentioned the open door. I would say the exit door is ready for this government in November, because I think people really do want to see a change. We need a strong VET system. We need a TAFE network that delivers for students and for industry, and we need jobs if we want to grow Victoria.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:39): Today we are using that word again, the word that this government loves to use so much: 'free'. Free, as if things are free. We heard this morning about our free public transport for a month, which apparently is going to cost $80 million – it is not free at all. When the government says something is free, they are really trying to obscure who is paying for these things. It is quite illuminating. Lots of members in this place have spoken about the mysterious low completion rates. I think Mrs Broad quoted a rate that was last reported in 2024 of a 53 per cent completion rate, so 47 per cent waste in the sector. If you do not complete a course, it is not very useful if you do not get the ticket at the end of it. It is almost as if people cannot see the connection between something being free and something not being valued enough to actually see it through to completion. It is so obvious that that is the cause. It is remarkable that people cannot see that that is one of the core reasons why the completion rates are so low and why we are wasting so much money on this.

Actually I think the HECS system is not too bad, and I would far prefer to see a system in Victoria where there is some sort of investment and buy-in. It would not reduce accessibility for people, because anyone could still access a loan, but then people would think far more carefully before taking on a course if they knew that they had to one day pay for it out of their wages. I think that this would dramatically improve the completion rates. In fact I am quite confident of that fact: it would improve the completion rates. Also it would have this other great effect that the courses actually offered at TAFE would be market driven. They would be driven by people who really want to do it and are willing to take on a debt to do it, or their employer is willing to pay for them to do it because they value it. You would end up with courses that actually reflect market sentiment rather than what the government think is fashionable at the time or what they get lobbied into providing. It would be driven by what the requirements actually are – what people actually want to put their money up for. The good thing about that also is it would not cost as much money for the taxpayer. That is a good thing too. These businesses that want the people and that have been upset about not having enough labour would all of a sudden maybe not have as many taxes – maybe their business would be more successful.

I think that one of the big problems with what we are doing with this bill is I feel like it is actually homogenising the education system even further, limiting competition and putting us in a situation where the government is dictating what will and will not be done in courses. They say they have got this great big course that they want to run over here because they have got these requirements, as if they can centrally plan – as if central planning has not been a disaster throughout history. Rather than responding to the market in an organic, bottom-up way, they do everything in a top-down, direction-driven way, which I think is going totally the wrong way about it. If you want to get completion rates up, I think getting people to buy in to these courses is an excellent way to do it. When something is stated as free, we all know it is not free. We are just changing who pays for it. And when we make it free and we have such poor completion rates, we are not getting good value for money either. If the

completion rate really is only 53 per cent, that means we have got 47 per cent waste in the system. I do not think anyone wants that. I do not think the government wants that. I am sceptical about whether taxpayers are getting good value for money here when there is clearly so much waste in the system. I would far prefer this to be market driven rather than being driven by the government's dictates.

I note with some of the other things in this bill about the statements of purpose and this sort of thing that it was brought up by the opposition that this is just creating more paperwork. It remains to be seen. I will be very interested to see what these actual statements of purpose look like. Maybe we will see a documents production order one day in the future, where we can look for these and the government can not provide them – I do not know. We will wait and see what happens with these statements of priorities and what the TAFEs actually do with this. I also concur with what some of the other speakers have been saying here, that the title of the bill is quite deceptive. It does not really entrench any of these things. In fact it is really formalising many of the things, including the funding, that already happen according to the strings that are attached with the federal government funding.

With that said, I am not happy with the way the system works at the moment. I think that there is a lot of room for improvement. I really feel like this is a missed opportunity to reform our TAFE system so that it is more market driven, that there is more buy-in from people who are taking these courses and that the funding model is more appropriate rather than just saying everything is free, like this government likes to do.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (15:44): I am very pleased to rise to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Free TAFE Guarantee) Bill 2026. The TAFE sector is something that we should absolutely value and cherish in this state, and that is something that this Labor government does. Not only do we value it and not only do we cherish it, but we want to protect it, and that is at the heart of the bill that is before us today – locking in the protections and the support that Labor has provided to the TAFE sector, particularly through the form of free TAFE. Since free TAFE began several years ago we have helped more than 225,000 Victorians to reskill, upskill and secure their dream jobs. We have saved students an average of more than $3000 per course – millions of dollars have been saved in tuition fees. At a time when many in the community are concerned about the rising cost of living and the pressures on families, one thing that they know is that under Labor TAFE will be free. If you want your kid to get a good trade, get skills for good jobs and have the prospect of employment into the future, under Labor TAFE will be free. We have trained nurses, we have trained construction workers and we have filled critical workforce gaps in the care sector and across clean energy. Particularly pleasing is that nearly 130,000 women have accessed training and the workforce opportunities that flow from it. That is what Labor has done. That is what Labor has delivered. That is what Labor is guaranteeing.

But all of this investment support that Labor has given to and for the TAFE sector and to and for those particularly younger Victorians who want a career that TAFE delivers – all of that – is under threat by the prospect of what the Liberal Party will do if they get the chance to enact the policy agenda we know they have for TAFE in this state. The last time the Liberals secured the government benches they took an axe to TAFE. They cut over $1 billion from our TAFE system. They closed TAFE campuses right across Melbourne and right across Victoria. Twenty-two TAFE campuses were closed by the Liberals the last time they were in government. They sacked TAFE teachers and they removed opportunity for thousands of Victorians to grow in their careers and to get the skills that were going to deliver them the sorts of jobs that increasingly become available in the economy of today and tomorrow.

What we need to do as a Parliament and as a Labor Party and as a government is protect the important role that TAFE, and free TAFE, plays in our community – and that is exactly what this bill does. The bill will guarantee access to Victoria's nation-leading free TAFE system, it will guarantee that TAFE receives a minimum of 70 per cent of vocational education and training funding and it will legislate our TAFE network so that institutions collaborate to benefit students rather than fighting over resources. That is a really important feature of the network of the system that Labor is investing in. It

is not setting up a system where institutions compete with each other but investing in a system that is delivering for the state – delivering the skills to students for the state, delivering the skills for the state's economy and creating jobs. Whether you want to study engineering at Holmesglen, early childhood education at Swinburne or mental health at Melbourne Polytechnic – all brilliant free TAFE providers with campuses in the Southern Metropolitan Region – you know that vocational education and training is protected with Labor. The bill makes a number of legislative changes to enact the securing of the future of free TAFE, its funding and the network. Last year 37,500 students commenced a free TAFE course, the highest figure since its first year in 2019, so it is very clear that the students are valuing it. And the employers respect it: more than 77 per cent of students who completed a free TAFE course reported finding employment after their training, and free TAFE is providing a workforce for Victoria where it needs it most.

One of the things I want to reflect on is if you look more broadly at the state of the Victorian labour market, you see some pretty remarkable things that are happening. Firstly, labour market participation in this state is at exceptionally high levels, at record high levels – labour force participation by Victorians in the labour market. It is seeing our unemployment rate here in Victoria being considerably lower than the long-term averages that existed over the 20 years pre-pandemic. The long-term average unemployment rate in Victoria prior to the pandemic was about 5.5 per cent. It was upwards of 7 per cent when the Liberals were last in government, but the long-term average was about 5.5 per cent. The average is now down at around 4.5 per cent. I think one of the things you can say is that Labor's investment in TAFE has given people the skills to get the jobs that are being created in the economy, and I think our labour market figures show that. High participation, lower unemployment rate – it is very clear the health of the Victorian economy and the health of the labour market in Victoria, and free TAFE is no small part of the mix that is creating that environment.

The government has invested at least 70 per cent of training and skills funding into TAFE since 2019, with the figure rising each year. A change in this bill implements an election commitment to enshrine this minimum threshold in legislation. We are backing TAFE as a public institution. We are backing the institutions that deliver the skills that Victorians need. In contrast, what we inherited in 2014 was a system broken by the Liberals – broken by a very short Liberal government that was exceptionally destructive of our TAFE sector, which was decimated by cuts, with less than half of the state's training budget going into the TAFE network. Since then we have established or upgraded 45 TAFE campuses across the state and rebuilt the training system, providing the sort of certainty and support that the system needs to survive and to thrive. It is the certainty and the support that Labor provides TAFE, knowing that Labor is there to provide the support and funding that is required, that is enabling this sector to thrive and survive, and that is exactly what this bill does by enshrining funding guarantees for the sector in legislation.

The other really important thing it does is reshape the role and vision of TAFE as a network. What the bill does is legislate for the TAFE network objectives, creating a common vision for delivery of TAFE in Victoria. The bill provides the minister with additional powers to establish guidelines for the TAFE network of institutions, and with a new strategic planning framework, the TAFE network statement of priorities, the government will be able to effectively set a strategic direction for TAFE to ensure that the goals and objectives are more clearly defined for a network that works collaboratively, not competitively, with each other, and is absolutely and fundamentally focused on the needs of the Victorian economy and fundamentally focused on the needs of Victorians to get skills to actively participate in the economy through good, well-paying jobs. It provides additional clarity for the allocation of funding. And with TAFEs safe in the knowledge that they will not be asked to compete for funding or market share, they can get on with what they do best: skilling Victorians.

The TAFE network is made up of institutes and participating dual-sector universities, and the bill makes recognition of this in defining what a TAFE network is. By working as a single, unified network of public education and training providers, we can maximise the potential of TAFE, reduce inefficiencies and sector fragmentation and better share resources. What this bill does, and what Labor

has been doing, will futureproof TAFE. We understand the value of TAFE to Victorians. Whether it is switching careers later in life, getting a foot on the ladder of the job market with an apprenticeship, upskilling to maximise your earning potential or realising your dream job, TAFE is there for you, and Labor is there for TAFE. We have been doing it for years, we will continue to do it, and this legislation locks that in.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:54): I am pleased to rise to speak on an important bill today: the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Free TAFE Guarantee) Bill 2026. At the outset I wish to acknowledge the deep and longstanding passion of many on this side but in particular Minister Tierney for her support for this sector and her passion, which we get to see in this place pretty much every single sitting day. Certainly we have come a long way from the dark days of a previous government –

Renee Heath interjected.

Michael GALEA: Dr Heath, since Ms Lovell decided to take us on a bit of a historical journey, I was surprised what she forgot to mention about her long and illustrious parliamentary career. She was very keen to point out that she has been in this place a very long time – we know that – but funnily enough, in her long historical discussion she forgot to mention the four years in which she was in government, the four years in which she was actually a minister in a government in which we saw the TAFE sector in this state completely savaged – cuts galore. Indeed not too far from my own electorate and very close to yours, Mr Welch, we saw the closure of a campus of Swinburne TAFE. Swinburne in Lilydale closed under the Liberals' watch because they had so ruthlessly cut it. I do have a campus of Swinburne – not Lilydale, which has now reopened under this Labor government – down in Wantirna South, which does incredible work, that I was able to visit with the minister not too long ago to see the work they do in training allied health workers.

I spoke earlier this morning to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee report and some of the improvements we are seeing to some of the workforce shortages across Victoria's economy. It is good to see those improvements, but where those shortages are still there, free TAFE and the TAFE system as a whole play such an important role, including in allied healthcare, educational support, nursing and the early childhood education and care sector as well. This is a government that recognises that an economy is not just about the headline figures and numbers, it is about the people. It is about providing those opportunities – as Ms Terpstra said, providing opportunities for tunnel-boring machine pilots and operators. Those are the opportunities that you get through free TAFE. Those are the opportunities that help to drive forward Victoria's economy, and they will no doubt go some way towards seeing Victoria exceeding on those levels when comparing other states with our economic growth. Free TAFE is a fundamental and important part of that.

I would also like to take a moment to do a shout-out to all the educators, support staff and administrators in the TAFE sector who have facilitated this and turned this into actual results for students. I mentioned Wantirna South, but at the complete opposite end of my region as well we have seen a tremendous investment in Chisholm campus in Frankston, with 2000 more students able to study at that campus as a result of the investments that this Labor government has made into the Frankston campus. That includes more than $150 million in funding for two stages of the redevelopment, replacing two of the oldest buildings and creating the Frankston learning and innovation precinct, which is providing the most up-to-date level of training for young people in my region, on the peninsula – Mr McIntosh will be very excited about that – and across the south-east.

These are the investments that we are making. This is what happens when you have a government that is actually invested in the skills and training of young Victorians, as opposed to those who will come and talk to us about what happened in 2009 but cannot tell us about what happened between 2010 and 2014, when they actually had the chance to do something, because we know that when they had the chance to do something, they were ruthless. They cut the sector back. They hammered the sector, so much so that we saw, as I said, that TAFE campus in Lilydale fully shut down as a direct consequence

of the Liberal Party's cuts to TAFE – cuts that were reversed by the incoming Andrews, now Allan, Labor government, which saw the Lilydale campus reopen.

We do see great demand. We do see, as other speakers have gone to as well on both sides, an increased sense of place for TAFE and stature of what TAFE can do. It is in many, many cases life-changing, and that is why it is such an important initiative to see enshrined into this bill today, providing that ongoing certainty of free TAFE. Members opposite have said, 'You're not prescribing how many', perhaps giving away that they plan to cut that list down savagely if they were to come back in – if they do not just try and repeal the bill. I understand that over the weekend there were various other things that kept the Liberal Party members in this place occupied. I will say, Dr Heath, I did greatly admire your hairdressing skills for Mrs McArthur in her valiant re-election bid amongst her own party members, and it was gracious of you to note that you had not actually plugged the hairdryer in. I would say that that is something that TAFE could teach you. I suspect that is probably something more to do with common sense, but it was a very good effort. At least you were doing something. I felt myself –

Renee Heath interjected.

Michael GALEA: Yes, it needs it. You would need a bit of training for that, Dr Heath. But in watching that photo and enjoying the light-heartedness of it, I also found myself wanting to echo the comments of Ms Lovell and Mrs Hermans in this chamber and saying, 'Well, where was my invite? Where was my invite to that?' I mean, I think I could have sharpened Mrs McArthur's nails for her. She did not need it in the end, but she could have done with that. She might have appreciated that too.

We have seen the rolling chaos of the Liberal Party. I do not know if there is a TAFE course in how to manage a preselection and not completely bungle it. Again, it probably comes down to common sense. Maybe there is a TAFE course in food safety that might apply to some of your candidates. There are some people that are maybe beyond help. But even if the Liberal Party is closing off its opportunities for its own MPs or its own candidates, perhaps free TAFE can provide that saving grace for them, perhaps that can provide that second chance. When the Liberal Party closes its doors on its own people, free TAFE is there to help people along. But it is not just Liberal MPs or prospective Liberal MPs or Liberal candidates, it is indeed everybody. All Victorians have the right to free TAFE and to access these courses, because they do make such an important difference for all Victorians. As part of equating the role of TAFE with university or other forms of qualification, it does play that really important role, and it is great to see the investments, whether it is in the allied health services in Wantirna South in my electorate or whether it is in the incredible new facilities down in Frankston that I know the local member Paul Edbrooke has been very active for, both in attaining these improvements for his local campus and also in being very proud to talk about what the new campus offers. We know just from a small couple of examples in my electorate what a difference it can make.

I hope that the Liberal Party will embrace this bill for what it actually does, get on board and, again, rather than glossing over their last disastrous four years in government, focus on rebuilding themselves so if Victorians ever find themselves with the misfortune of another Liberal government in this state, they are run slightly more competently than the last one, perhaps by a party that can actually run the state and can even run its own preselection process.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (16:02): I am absolutely delighted to stand and support this bill today. It is fantastic, and it speaks volumes about the values of the Labor Party. The values of the Labor Party are about making the quality of life and the day-to-day experience of Victorians, of families and of people in this state better. Like Mr Galea, I want to acknowledge the minister, Minister Tierney, for all the work she has done in the TAFE portfolio, because TAFE is something, thanks to the Labor Party, that this state and indeed the nation – imitation is the best form of flattery – can be absolutely proud of. It is so important that as people leave school, at whatever age that is, or when they make transitions through the workforce, they are able to get the skills they need to earn a good income for them to be able to do whatever they want to do in their lives, whether that is to have a family or whether it is to buy a house, and to make positive contributions in their community and to spend money

in their local economies and so that employers are able to find people with the skills they need to make our economy what it is. Employers need to be able to find the people with the right skills, because we have seen what happens historically when you do not invest in workforce skills. Then you do not have the skills to meet the needs of our state, and we saw that when those opposite privatised massive swathes of our state. When they say trainees and apprentices do not matter, what happens? You lose a generation of workers and you lose a generation of the workforce. So I am proud that Labor has upgraded and rebuilt 45 TAFEs. We have invested in our workforce. We have ensured through this legislation today that 70 per cent of funding in this area will go to TAFE. Free TAFE will be something that goes into the future so that we can identify the needs of industry and we can make sure that workers are getting trained up and skilled and out in the workforce, continuing to make Victoria productive.

We know that those opposite have got their 11, 12, 13 – it is probably going to get bigger by the day – billion-dollar black hole and they are going to make cuts. We have seen it in the past when they shut 22 TAFEs, and I think it was 18 in the regions – how cruel, what they did to the regions. We have seen it in transport. We see it in education. We see it in health. Labor invests, builds, backs workforces; the Liberals cut, shut down and decimate. They leave people in the community without opportunities to stay local. I am really proud of things in local communities like public aged care – we are putting that in, and I am so proud about it. I am so proud that our TAFEs are in communities, so as people leave school or as people need to retrain they can get the skills they need to work right there in their community, to provide for their community and provide for their families. But the Liberals do not care about that. They bang on about regional Victoria, but when it comes time to put chips down, they do not deliver, and they have not delivered time and time again across so many areas.

I went to TAFE, and it gave me the opportunity to get out into the workforce. Those opposite – most of them do not even know what a TAFE is. I have offered to them in the past to get them on a bus and we take them around to see one, because when you can touch, see and smell something – understand it – you might be less likely to cut it. I would really, really encourage you to get out in your community and understand a TAFE. But because we cannot trust the Liberals with TAFE, that is exactly why we have brought this legislation today: to ensure that the TAFE that we have rebuilt for Victorians will be here into the future for our kids that are coming through and with whatever workforce transitions that need to occur across various sectors as we go forth and reskill and keep our economy absolutely productive. We will make sure that TAFE is there for Victorians to get the training and skills they need. I will leave my contribution there.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (16:07): I was not going to speak until I heard my good friends but political enemies saying some things that were completely unfounded and, well, untrue – again. Once again Labor have used their opportunity to speak in this place not to talk about the Victorian people but to talk about their favourite topic and their biggest obsession – you got it – the Liberal Party. They used most of the time – I think we should go back and find a percentage and hear how much of it was spent not on talking about the substance of the bill, because you probably do not actually know what it is –

Tom McIntosh: On a point of order, Acting President, my entire contribution was about Victorians and what TAFE does for them. In fact, if you look at the papers –

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Thank you, Mr McIntosh. That is not a point of order.

Renee HEATH: Not even close, but you have got to shoot your shot, haven't you? They have been talking about their latest obsession – well, it is actually probably not the latest – the Liberal Party. Interestingly enough, he spent a lot of time, again, speaking about education and speaking about cuts. Last week I had the opportunity to put some facts that do not stack up to their narrative at all and speak about cuts and talk about the fact that in the last –

Michael Galea: On a point of order, Acting President, last week Dr Heath failed to attend the hearings on public school funding, so I would like to know how she was able to put those points forward.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Thank you, Mr Galea. That is not a point of order.

Renee HEATH: I point out that there have been two points of order called and zero upheld, so I just say that maybe you should have a read. Regardless, he used the opportunity to speak about education and cuts. I was able to set the record straight slightly last week because just as they were calling the Liberal Party the cuts party – talking about how when we got into government we would cut a program that, funnily enough, they have not funded – I pointed out the fact that it is very hard to cut something that is not funded.

But anyway, this time I am going to talk about education. Victoria is called the Education State. I remember the first day I met Mr Galea, and I thought, 'What a lovely guy.' We were in Pakenham. We were both candidates. We had not yet come into this place. I got talking to him, and I said to him, 'You actually seem quite normal and lovely. Why the heck are you a member of the Labor Party?' And he said this: 'Because I believe in equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome.'

Michael Galea interjected.

Renee HEATH: True? And I said, 'What the heck, Mr Galea?' I called him Michael at the time, quite frankly. I said, 'That is a Liberal value.' That is what we believe in on this side of the house. And the best way that you can cause equality of opportunity is if children can read and write. That is the very best thing. It is the pathway for education; it lays the foundation. However, in the state of Victoria under the Labor government one in three children cannot read and write proficiently, and when we go into areas like those that Mr Galea and I represent, that number goes to one in two. Interestingly enough, we know from research that the biggest indicator of whether somebody will be able to reach their potential and get a qualification, like at TAFE, or whether they will not get into a life of crime is whether or not they can read and write. That is what is needed for people to thrive in any higher education, be it TAFE, university or whatever it is. However, under the Labor government we are not getting those outcomes in Victoria, and that is an absolute crying shame. What we know is that children must learn to read properly in the first few years of their education, because if they do not learn how to read properly, you cannot flip it, and then they cannot read to learn.

Michael Galea: I am greatly enjoying this contribution, especially when Dr Heath referred to me as normal. However, on a point of order, Acting President, even by the standards of this debate, I fear that Dr Heath has stretched slightly outside the realm of TAFE.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): I think all the contributions I have heard since I have been in the chair, Mr Galea, have stretched way outside. You may or may not have spent most of your contribution on the Liberal Party. I feel Dr Heath can make the same effort. As you were.

Renee HEATH: That is now three. They have tried three times, with zero upheld, but that is okay. We will keep going. Have another shot; you have got a few minutes.

The other thing I want to say is I believe in TAFE. I love TAFE. I think it is absolutely fantastic that people can come and they can have a choice as to what they want to do in their future. One of the things I absolutely love about this country is that the reality is that education is a universal opportunity. It is education that unlocks the cage, that breaks the cycle. It is something I believe in, and I love free TAFE. I think that is so important. But what we stand for here is that we want people to have choice. We want kids to be able to have the foundation of their learning so that whatever it is those children want to do, they have the ability to achieve their dreams. Recently I caught up with a couple of kids that had come into contact with the justice system. I said to them: 'Guys, what's going on here? Surely this wasn't what you dreamt for your life?' They said, 'No, it wasn't. It absolutely wasn't.' I said, 'Well, what did you want to do?' One of them wanted to be a mechanic; one of them wanted to be a

doctor. I said to both of them, 'Why aren't you doing that?' What they told me was devastating. They said, 'We're not smart enough.' That is so shattering. How is it that a child born in a country like Australia does not have the opportunity to reach their dreams, to go and do a TAFE course or to do these things because they have not learned how to read and write properly? And because of that they cannot flip it; they cannot read to learn. That is a crying shame.

It is something that I am so excited about when I think about the next generation. We have to come back to the science of learning. We have to come back to making sure these kids are being taught the proper ways, using the proper methods, so they can actually achieve whatever it is that they want to achieve. I think it is sad to stand here and hear people talking about how they think that we on this side hate TAFE. No, we do not. If there is a TAFE course that is helping anybody – man, woman, boy, girl – reach their dreams, we absolutely love it.

There is another thing that I want to point out. Mr McIntosh is not in here at the moment. I love Mr McIntosh; he has a bit of spark. But the other thing about him is that he certainly does not let the truth get in the way of a good story, so I am going to have to correct one of his other assertions or judgements, I guess. He said something like 'Those opposite would not even have a clue what TAFE is.' Well, guess what, I am a TAFE graduate, guys. I went to TAFE. I love TAFE. I got two qualifications from TAFE, and I am so proud of it.

I think it is wonderful that people can come, and they can –

Members interjecting.

Renee HEATH: I can see people are getting a little bit excited here; they generally do when they cannot get it on facts; they will try to knock you down in other ways. But that is the reality, and I am sure that I am not the only one. I know many people in the lower house, my colleagues, who have completed TAFE, had amazing careers and have amazing lives. It is an extremely snobbish thing to say that people on this side do not love TAFE – we absolutely do. How on earth has a topic like a bill about free TAFE become a sledge motion, essentially, on the opposition? That is just bizarre to me.

I want to just straighten out a few things and let you know that what you said about all the cuts last week was absolutely ridiculous, because I was able to then stand up and talk about 20 cuts – I did not get through all of them because I ran out of time – that the Allan Labor government had passed through this chamber less than 24 hours before you went on asserting that sort of stuff. Today, when you are talking about education, I just want to set the record straight: we on this side absolutely love education. It is one of the biggest passions of mine. It is the key that unlocks disadvantage, that allows people to break the cycle of whatever it is that has held people bound, and it is something we appreciate, so go TAFE.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (16:17): I join so many before me in making a contribution on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Free TAFE Guarantee) Bill 2026. This bill is simply about making sure that Victorians have the chance to get the skills they need for the jobs they want. By enshrining the free TAFE guarantee into law we are ensuring that this pathway is protected for generations to come. In the Northern Metropolitan Region and across our state, TAFE is a powerful resource for upskilling and for opportunity, and these campuses are where our locals go to transform their lives. This bill amends the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 to safeguard that opportunity, making it a requirement that TAFEs receive a minimum of 70 per cent of vocational education and training funding. Since we introduced free TAFE in 2019, those of us on this side know that the impact has been nothing short of transformative. With over 225,000 students having benefited, they have saved over $700 million worth of tuition fees for 80 qualifications and short courses. We need to make sure that an affordable public education system is something that can be relied on. We have seen in the past how vocational education has been gutted and campuses have been closed when the wrong priorities take hold. This legislation puts a stop to that risk by guaranteeing that the door to

this education remains open, providing the certainty that our students and our TAFE institutions deserve.

To understand why this bill is necessary we have to look at the history of vocational education in the state. For far too long TAFE was treated as a secondary option to university. We remember those opposite and what we inherited, which was a broken training system – thanks to them – and a system where less than half of the state's training budget went to public TAFE. It was a system where we saw funding stripped away, campuses closed down and teachers stood down in their thousands. When we came to government we reimagined fully and with an open heart what the public vocational training system could look like. We understood that if we wanted more skilled workers in our industries, we needed a strong TAFE system. Free TAFE was the cornerstone of that vision. Victoria is the birthplace of free TAFE. It has been so successful that the Albanese Labor government has rolled it out across the country, removing the tuition fees for priority courses. With that we removed the single biggest hurdle for many, many Victorians.

I have visited a range of TAFEs, often with the minister. I visited the Kangan Institute in my electorate, and I saw students who are the future for nursing, construction, education and so much more. At Melbourne Polytechnic careers are being built for hospitality, IT, agriculture and of course Auslan. Can I just say, seeing Auslan students absolutely thriving in that absolutely thriving course at Melbourne Polytechnic – that fills you up. You know that somewhere in the future someone will have access to information that they need in times of desperate need because someone standing out in front of them is giving them the information they need, and they learned it right there at Melbourne Polytechnic. It is an exceptional course that deserves all the spotlight and love everywhere, and to hear that it has been cut, that people did not see the value in ensuring access and equity for people with a disability, well, it just speaks to the values that we hold dear that are clearly so different to those opposite.

Can I just say that the free TAFE guarantee means that pathways are not dependent on the ability to pay thousands of dollars. It means hard work is what counts. It is so good to see that so many of the beneficiaries of free TAFE are women, and there are significant regional student enrolment numbers as well as people living with a disability. Of course what pleases me is seeing massive infrastructure projects across our state, and they need skilled tradespersons trained at these institutes to build them. Removing the financial barriers to these courses enables more Victorians to step into high-demand careers in health care, construction, the clean economy, early childhood education and digital technology. I will just say that a very dear friend's nephew recently started at Holmesglen. A shout-out to Elijah; all the very best with your tunnelling course. I know you are absolutely going to break ground – yes, I said it. It makes life so much easier for him to know that he is supported with his course, and it makes it easier for others like him to participate in affordable training that means that they can reskill, upskill and get home at night at a decent hour from the hospo hours that were causing his mum much distress, because TAFE can lead to a well-paid job that leads to an amazingly rewarding career.

I can talk about the bill and what it does. Of course what it does, with its operation, is allow there to be changes to how TAFE is handled by government, and the fundamental access to training will be in law. I have spoken about it many times before. I actually worked for a group training organisation before I entered Parliament, and I worked with a range of TAFEs across the state to unlock opportunities for young people to participate in apprenticeships in all sorts of things. In fact one of the last apprentices that I ever placed in that role was in the refinery out at Viva in Geelong, and right now they are helping secure Australia's energy future. That young woman, who never saw herself having a job in a refinery, is now securing Australia's energy future, and I could not be prouder. She participated in the training element of her apprenticeship at the TAFE out there – how good are they out there.

Can I just say that this bill ensures the centrality of TAFE at the very heart of our skills system and makes it sustainable by ensuring the TAFE funding guarantee. It is critical protection. We are

amending the act, as I have said, to give that baseline of 70 per cent of training and skills funding. It is not just to the TAFEs but it is also to those dual-sector universities. And having gone out to Swinburne, RMIT and Victoria University – and there is one more in that – I tell you, they are all just so incredible. Did I say VU, Swinburne, RMIT –

Members interjecting.

Sheena WATT: and Federation Uni. Okay, I will be honest: that is one that I have not seen their full dual-sector skills at work, but I know that they are an incredible outfit out there. This fulfils a commitment made in 2022 to give the sector the financial security it needs to plan for the long term. For far too many years they were forced to compete in a broken marketplace that devalues public education, forcing them to compete for scraps of funding and market share, which is enormously challenging. This guarantee of 70 per cent funding ends uncertainty and ensures our public TAFEs have the resources to remain really high-quality, well-respected, deeply loved institutions. It secures a permanent legacy for public vocational education by formally enshrining the TAFE network's value, role and purpose within the act, recognising Victoria's unique TAFE network as a collective of TAFE institutes and participating dual-sector universities.

I have just got to say, I have had the good fortune of working with RMIT quite a lot over the last 5½ years of being in Parliament, and one of the very profound things about RMIT is how much they operate as a unified and strengthened dual-sector university. They really leverage their expertise right across the education system to give hope and opportunity to the students that come through the doors, including the son of one of my electorate officers who just loves and adores his time at RMIT and can now imagine a bigger, brighter future for himself.

I could not make an entire contribution on TAFE without telling one of my favourite stories to the chamber, and that is of the time that I went to visit the absolutely outstanding and unstoppable team at the Automotive Centre of Excellence down in Docklands. I loved it because I was hearing all about their industry partnerships, which are world leading. They have partnerships with car companies from all over the world, so the students that come out of the Automotive Centre of Excellence are trained to work on all sorts of cars – there were Citroens and BMW and Fords and all types of cars coming through there. I also saw some of the work with spray painting that was happening in there to do some of the work around the repairs.

I saw the minister at perhaps her very happiest when she was meeting apprentices at the Automotive Centre of Excellence, meeting young men and many, many women who were getting into careers in automotive excellence. It was an experience that has stuck with me for a long time, Minister, and one that I know we should be amazingly proud of, because whilst we have a technological revolution happening under the hoods of cars coming into this country, we are not meeting that, in other parts of the country, with a real investment in the training and skills required to keep those cars on the road. Other states are sending students down here to Victoria because they know that the very best education is happening here in Victoria. To hear that time and time again from all the leaders and executives there at the TAFE did certainly fill me up, because the truth is those industry partnerships are globally leading and they mean that you can get your car back on the road here if there is an accident or a bingle or you just need a service faster than anywhere else in the country, because of the excellence of TAFE education right here in Victoria.

A whole bunch of people are now thinking about the global fuel crisis and saying, 'Hold up, you know what I want to do? I want to get myself an EV.' I will tell you what, it is here in Victoria, through education down in Docklands, that students will know how to look after those cars and how to keep them on the road. This is something we are uniquely placed for and that other states cannot take credit for. I give some assurance to all those Victorians who are thinking about going out and buying an EV that if your EV has any troubles on the roads, there are TAFE students right now working on educating themselves for long careers in automotive repairs and maintenance that can only be delivered through exceptional industry partnerships like those that exist in Docklands.

There are other technical amendments that I can speak to and the change of the board, but truthfully this bill is a real credit to the minister. It is a true credit to the Labor government, and it is a true credit to the many, many thousands of students right across the state that took up the enormous opportunity of free TAFE. We want to send a clear message that not only will TAFE continue to be valued, particularly by those on this side, we expect our TAFE leadership to offer profound access, excellence and sustainability in what they do, and we are supporting that through legislation before us today. We are providing a system of support to those TAFEs right across the state that need it. It is a framework that allows us to bridge the gap between a classroom qualification and a high-wage career, ensuring that our training delivery is perfectly synced with real-world needs and our growing economy. And how more real world can you get right now than the massive influx of people heading to car yards across the state looking to purchase themselves an EV car and wanting some assurance that when that car needs a service there is going to be someone there to do it. It can only be done here in Victoria because of the excellence of our TAFE system to partner with industry. There is a very real-world experience right there.

This shift is what happens when you have a government that sees the value in vocational education instead of leaving it to rot and gutting it. We have moved past the era of neglect of our TAFEs; that is over. We are into an era of unprecedented building, unprecedented renewal and unprecedented respect. You can see it in every corner of the state, and we are putting the funding where it matters – into the workshops, the labs and the high-tech centres that are defining the future of Victorian industry. This is a government that understands that to get a world-class workforce you need world-class facilities. I am incredibly proud to be a part of the Allan Labor government, and I commend this bill to the chamber.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:32): I rise today to contribute to the debate on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Free TAFE Guarantee) Bill 2026. Since first coming into government in 2014 this government has delivered more than $16 billion in new and base funding for TAFE and training systems. This funding has delivered more campuses, better facilities and a system which is better integrated with industry. In this state, TAFE is all about helping people get the skills they need to have a fulfilling career. Having a strong, accessible and affordable TAFE system is critical to building a society in which people have choice over their own lives. It gives them power to make the big decisions over their own destinies. Choice is important, because not every young person who graduates from high school wants to go to university. Some will have interests, skills and aspirations which lie in other areas. Here in Victoria, we are the state in which we do not need to go to university to get a good job, because our TAFE system can help you gain the skills you need to find meaningful, well-paying work in areas such as trades, the care economy and many others. Giving people choice in what career they want to go into is one of the best ways to allow people to take control of their own lives and take responsibility for making something of themselves.

Back in 2019, when the first students were starting free TAFE courses, the program only covered 30 TAFE courses and 18 pre-apprenticeship courses. Of course this was still a significant number of courses, and it covered some of the most important and in-demand skills we have in our economy. It was a big achievement at the time, but we did not settle there, because we wanted more work to be done to improve the TAFE system. Later reforms expanded on the number of courses covered under free TAFE, so it now totals 80 courses across 90 campuses. Today's free TAFE system means that every Victorian in every part of the state has access to training which can prepare them for jobs which our economy needs to fill. The benefits are being felt right across the state. Obviously, recent school leavers are one major group which benefits from free TAFE – young people looking to set themselves up for a productive career in an industry of their choice. But there are other groups who are benefiting from free TAFE who also deserve to be mentioned. One group of people who have benefited significantly from this have been people already in work who have sought a career change and have used it as a direct pathway from one industry into another. Another group of people who have benefited from it have been university graduates who have struggled to find work in their fields after completing their degrees and who decided to pursue study in another field at TAFE.

Another important aspect of our TAFE system is how it is one of the strongest catalysts for social mobility that we have. One of the reasons why we made a wide range of TAFE courses free was because we knew that the aspirations of young people are not determined by how wealthy their parents are. That is why we follow the principle that opportunities available to young Victorians should not be limited by how wealthy their parents are. Free TAFE means that anybody can afford to start training to get the in-demand skills they need to find work in some of the most important industries, which brings me to another reason why making TAFE free for 80 courses was the right decision and which explains why systems have been so successful. The courses which were made free were in those industries with skill shortages and which desperately needed new skilled workers to enter the industry. Businesses in Victoria rely on highly skilled workers to be able to operate, and when businesses cannot find those highly skilled workers. the economy suffers. This is an area in which it is important that government works closely with business in order to bring about outcomes which benefit everybody. Workers get good-paying jobs, businesses get the skilled workforces they need and everybody benefits from a more productive economy. Nobody would suggest that free TAFE is the only solution we need when dealing with unemployment, skill shortages and economic productivity, but it is an important one which directly helps us to address all three of these issues. We on this side of the chamber know that you do not fix unemployment, skills shortages or economic productivity by cutting TAFE. Previous Victorian governments made the decision to cut funding for TAFE. We all know the results of those policies: making it harder for people to train up and get the skills they need makes it harder to grow the economy. It gives people less choice and less control of their own lives because it closes off pathways and opportunities.

To directly address the provisions contained in this bill, the bill would make amendments to the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 with the purpose of providing for the objectives of the TAFE system; guaranteeing the delivery of certain courses and vocational education and training free of tuition fees, alongside the TAFE funding guarantee; through granting certain powers to the minister responsible in relation to the TAFE system; and establishing a framework for a new strategic planning system for TAFE providers in the context of the TAFE funding guarantee and the delivery of free TAFE courses. To put it simply, this bill will guarantee the continuation of free TAFE for years to come, and I commend the bill to the house.

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (16:37): I would first like to acknowledge the important contributions from members in this chamber on the bill. This bill marks a significant milestone in the Allan Labor government's commitment to put TAFE at the centre of Victoria's vocational education and training system and provide enduring stability and confidence for students, teachers, industry and the community. Through this bill we are delivering a TAFE funding guarantee to secure 70 per cent of VET funding for TAFE and dual-sector universities and a free TAFE guarantee to cement the role of TAFE as a core pillar of our education system, ensuring more Victorians can afford to train for the jobs they want. These reforms strengthen the TAFE network, embed its role in law and provide long-term certainty so we can focus on quality, innovation and consistency right across the system. Together these amendments aim to enable clear purpose and certainty in legislation and provide us with an opportunity to focus collectively on quality, innovation and consistency.

Today the opposition have shown yet again that they cannot be trusted with TAFE. Before this bill, any time a member of the opposition spoke about TAFE, it was a criticism of the program. Their leader Jess Wilson's only reference to TAFE was to call free TAFE 'wasted taxpayers money'.

Renee Heath: On a point of order, Acting President, I just noticed that the minister is reading off a document that was obviously written before we started this debate. I ask if that is the case, that she tables the document.

Gayle TIERNEY: On the point of order, Acting President, that is not a point of order. I believe I understand what the basis of that point of order might be, and I am about to mention your name.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jacinta Ermacora): There is no point of order.

Gayle TIERNEY: Thank you. Their leader Jess Wilson's only reference to TAFE was to call free TAFE 'wasted taxpayers money' and 'not free, because government doesn't have a magic money tree'. There are those who, through gritted teeth, today pretended to support the bill, but all they did was criticise the program, apart from Dr Heath, who talked about her experiences but also was very positive about TAFE. I would encourage others on the opposite benches to have the conversations not just in terms of government members and TAFE but also to have conversations with their local TAFEs and students – their constituents – about all of the things that have been happening in the TAFE system, because most of the contributions I have heard today indicate that that communication and that knowledge and that experience is not there. Victorians do remember the shambles when the Liberals were last in power, how they shut 22 TAFE campuses – 18 of those were in regional areas – and savagely ripped out $1 billion from TAFE. Of course, that is why we are moving this bill: to ensure that that cannot happen again.

Listening to those opposite, it is clear that their understanding of the TAFE network is hopelessly outdated. TAFE is expanding rapidly into IT and digital fields, with strong growth areas like cybersecurity. In March I launched the Victorian skills compact, and I talked about that in my ministers statement earlier today. The compact is backed by real investment, including a new digital and AI centre of excellence at Chisholm TAFE. Beyond digital, the Victorian TAFE network holds the national trades training contract for the Commonwealth defence force, and TAFE is also on the front line in supporting the net zero emissions transition by training wind turbine technicians, solar electricians and power grid operators. This is modern TAFE on the cutting edge, not the TAFE that our grandfathers attended.

We hear the opposition give lip-service to TAFE teachers. Their attacks are absolutely astounding. The last time they were in government, as I said, they sacked over 2000 TAFE teachers. Our genuine commitment to TAFE teachers is affirmed by the recent well-deserved pay rise, and our $9 million investment in TAFE teacher scholarships in the recent budget is a testimony to that. Adding the TAFE teacher qualification to the free TAFE list to ensure a strong pipeline of teachers entering the profession is another contribution, and the bill itself will protect TAFE funding to ensure TAFE can employ a thriving workforce.

I would also urge those opposite to properly engage with the TAFE public provider role. For so many Victorians, TAFE represents an aspirational lifeline to a decent, secure job and a genuine socio-economic equaliser. The doors of TAFE are open to our migrant communities, to those who require wraparound support to complete and to aspiring apprentices who require foundation skills support with literacy and numeracy. TAFE steps in for higher need cohorts in harder-to-reach areas with quality training equipment, in-person training delivery and wraparound support. This government's investment in the Gordon TAFE's Centre of Excellence in Disability Inclusion is a prime example. Promoting access and equity and inclusion may sometimes dampen completion rates. It sometimes requires additional taxpayer investment and additional support for disadvantaged students, and it is absolutely critical that this role is served in our system. It is one that should be understood, acknowledged and protected.

I also hear the opposition talk time and time again about completion rates. Allow me to quote the Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia, the peak body for private providers, in their newsletter dated 30 March, that is, yesterday. ITECA describes the 'almost obsessive focus on completions' as 'probably a bit narrow and often a misleading measure of actual real-world performance'. ITECA encourages a focus on other post-training outcomes like employment, earnings and job satisfaction. That being said, free TAFE continues to support Victorians into employment with strong completion rates. Free TAFE four-year completion rates are 11 points higher than the university equivalent. The way Victoria reports completions also differs from other jurisdictions. By including vocational education and training in schools and in our Victorian prisons – the training that happens there – we are working to resolve this at a national level. Once fixed, we can expect our rates to be, I

am advised, around 8 percentage points higher than the national average. To demonstrate our commitment to transparency on completions our government has committed to publishing the four-year free TAFE completion rate in this year's budget papers and ongoing.

Beyond completions, TAFE is truly trusted by the community. The evidence could not be clearer: Victorians trust our public TAFE network when it comes to reskilling, upskilling and entering vocational education for the first time. The findings of the McCrindle 2024 research, commissioned by the Victorian TAFE Association, show that TAFE remains one of Australia's most trusted names for practical, industry-ready skills that communities and employers rely on; 86 per cent of Victorian parents agree that TAFE is a beneficial educational pathway for their children; and the majority of Victorian parents would encourage their children to explore a TAFE pathway compared to only 29 per cent for private registered training organisations. In respect to Aboriginal-controlled organisations, it is on this point of public provision that I want to acknowledge the important and unique role of our First Nations RTOs, known as Aboriginal community controlled RTOs, or ACCRTOs. They provide culturally safe training to First Nations learners, supporting stronger employment outcomes and enhancing the workforces of Aboriginal community controlled organisations and other Victorian employers. I am fully supportive and have been advocating at a national level for the Aboriginal community controlled RTOs to have a formal, unique classification that distinguishes them from other RTO types in the national VET system. At the national level I have secured agreement with other states to work on this classification. I did that at the recent national skills ministers meeting. I am proud that our government has already unlocked $11.85 million in Commonwealth funding for the National Skills Agreement Closing the Gap initiatives, with each ACCRTO receiving $3 million over the four years of the agreement. I take this opportunity to thank the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc for their engagement right through this process.

Back to TAFE funding, we are certainly investing in TAFE. The Labor government has invested more than $5 billion in new funding and over $16 billion in new and base funding into our TAFE and training systems since 2014. We have invested more than $660 million in 45 new and upgraded TAFE campuses, and this includes more than $237 million in TAFE facilities in regional Victoria. Victorian growth in VET expenditure per hour has outpaced the national average since 2014. It is only Labor that we can absolutely trust to properly fund TAFE. There are claims by the opposition that there is some sort of power grab going on here. That is simply fanciful and contradictory. We are criticised for doing nothing to change the status quo, and then they are also saying that there is a power grab, so nothing could be further from the truth. The point in fact is that we are legislating a minimum funding guarantee to TAFE, and it is only right and proper that this carry with it higher standards, obligations and reserve powers for intervention. The public provider must set the benchmark for the rest of the sector. TAFE is and should remain the gold standard for quality provision. TAFEs are the recipients of taxpayers money, and we will ensure that the money is spent responsibly.

In terms of the section on the TAFE network, I can clearly say that all TAFEs, including the dual-sector universities, not only were briefed in terms of those clauses but were instrumental in the discussions and the deep consultation in relation to them. It was a case where not only were they happy, but they understood the need to have these to be accountable in the important roles that they play as trusted public providers. You can say what you like, but there has been intensive consultation on this bill. In fact all of the TAFE institutes support this, as well as the dual sectors. I know there are people in the gallery today, and I have conferred again, and they were absolutely consulted to death in relation to that fairly large section that is contained in the bill.

In terms of private RTOs, the opposition has claimed that we are prioritising TAFEs over private RTOs, and all I can say is: yes, we are. It is a government policy to put TAFE at the centre of our training system to ensure that Victorian families can access quality public education they can rely on. The government will still fund other providers according to the needs of students, the labour market and the economy. This bill does not limit private RTO delivery in the market. Industry or employers

are free to contract directly with private RTOs or TAFEs, provided they are willing to invest in that training. Students are also free to train with private community or industry RTOs or TAFEs of their choice. We know students are increasingly choosing TAFE as the trusted public provider of world-class training. Free TAFE is not 'window-dressing', as it was described by Brad Rowswell in the other house. The more than 229,000 students who have saved an average of $3300 would absolutely contest that it is not window-dressing. Free TAFE makes students' dreams become real. It fills skills gaps, and it contributes to the economy. It is only an Allan Labor government that will protect and extend TAFE.

Can I also say that what this government is doing is building a system that connects post-secondary education, whether it be community education, TAFE, universities or our private RTOs, and that system is about making sure that everyone is playing their part in terms of dealing with the skills shortages that we face in the labour market. But what we are also doing is making sure that we elevate the importance and the excellence of TAFE by setting up the centres of excellence but also talking up the need for skilled workers that are hands-on. We are also making sure that career education is uplifted so that people that do not have a tradie in their family or a tradie background get to understand and know what their pathways are. Of course we have also made sure that foundation skills are and will continue to be a very strong driver in opening up doors for many, many people, and that is why we have also introduced free TAFE skill sets connected to the apprenticeship system, so that more apprentices can complete their apprenticeships.

Can I take this opportunity to thank everyone that has been involved in this very long journey. It has been arduous, but I think what we have done has really turned training and education around, and not only in this state – it is the forerunner of all of the reform that is taking place in this country. We are very proud as a Labor team, and I thank everyone that has been involved in it, whether it has been in policy development or on the ground in the TAFEs.

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Committed.

Committee

Clause 1 (16:54)

Aiv PUGLIELLI: While the minister is getting ready, I would like to say thank you from the outset for the constructive conversations between her office and mine with respect to this bill as well as the community more broadly – a number of groups who have been closely interested in the matters pertaining to this bill that is before the Parliament today.

My questions are further to some of the remarks that were included in the minister's summing-up speech just now, and I will go through them. There are just a handful. My first one, Minister, is that the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Free TAFE Guarantee) Bill 2026, ensures that:

> Of the total amount of training and skills funding paid by the Secretary to TAFE institutes, dual sector universities and any other RTO that provides vocational education and training in a target year, at least 70% must be paid to TAFE institutes and dual sector universities.

My question is: can the minister outline why this bill specifies TAFE and dual-sector universities as the target of the guarantee and not public training providers more generally?

Gayle TIERNEY: This is in relation to Aboriginal community controlled registered organisations in particular? Yes. I want to acknowledge, as I have already put on the record, the unique and valuable role that the Aboriginal community controlled registered organisations play in providing culturally safe training to First Nations learners, supporting stronger employment outcomes and enhancing the workforces of Aboriginal organisations and other Victorian employers. To your question, the free

TAFE guarantee bill legislates our government's commitment at the last election to protect and preserve TAFE. The bill reflects the current role of public providers in the VET system, in that TAFEs and dual-sector universities are the public providers in Victoria. TAFEs and dual-sectors are established under state acts of Parliament, with boards appointed through cabinet and with other clearly defined roles, responsibilities, duties and powers expressed in legislation. The Aboriginal community controlled registered training organisations are by definition independent of government. They are not-for-profit bodies governed by First Nations people. Over time the definition of 'public provision' and the definition of 'community non-profit provision' as it relates to public provision I think will definitely evolve. Obviously in my view it should evolve over time. That is why I got that agreement with the skills ministers fairly recently to pick up the pace in relation to discussions around that. But it is our view that those conversations definitely do need to happen at a national level to ensure that we continue to close the gap.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: My next question I think would be an expansion of what you have just provided to the chamber. I understand a version of the 70 per cent funding guarantee can be found in the National Skills Agreement, in which the Commonwealth requires jurisdictions to invest at least 70 per cent of VET funding from the Commonwealth to TAFE and public training providers at clause A42(b). Minister, can you just expand on why the National Skills Agreement includes public training providers while this bill specifically does not?

Gayle TIERNEY: Again, the National Skills Agreement uses – quite correctly, as you have mentioned – 'public provider' to accommodate jurisdictions that do not have a TAFE system. For example, there are no TAFEs in the Northern Territory. Charles Darwin University is the public provider of VET in that jurisdiction. In Victoria dual-sectors are included in the Victorian network. Over time the definition of 'public provision' and the definition of 'community not-for-profit provision' as it relates to public provision, as I said, may evolve, and of course I believe it should evolve.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It has been raised with me and views have been put that stating specific entities as the target for a guaranteed threshold funding in this bill precludes future training providers from accessing funding if and when they become classified as public training providers. So further to what you have just provided to the chamber, Minister, are you able to state if the possibility of training providers becoming public training providers has been considered in the drafting of this bill?

Gayle TIERNEY: As I said, I have successfully advocated nationally for a policy process to continue the appropriate RTO classification for Aboriginal community controlled RTOs that reflects their unique and distinct status. I have instructed Victorian officials to work with and use this process to propose RTO classification change to appropriately acknowledge Aboriginal community controlled RTOs as a pathway to National Skills Agreement funding. But let me be clear: nothing in this bill will constrain state or Commonwealth funding to Aboriginal community controlled RTOs – quite the contrary. I am proud of our joint work with Aboriginal community controlled RTOs to already enhance outcomes for First Nations learners through the NSA, unlocking $11.85 million in Commonwealth funding for NSA Closing the Gap initiatives. Each Victorian ACCRTO will also, as I mentioned in my summing-up, receive $3 million over four years of the agreement, and I note that Aboriginal community controlled RTOs received $1.835 million in subsidy payments through Skills First in 2025 and $5.692 million under the Skills First Aboriginal access fee waiver for 4685 enrolments since 2024.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I think you have in part gone potentially into my next question, which is helpful. The Jobs and Skills Australia 2024 *RTO Typology Methodology Paper* I understand explores alternative ways of grouping and classifying training providers. Specifically the JSA RTO typology states that future typology reports will investigate how the different business models and funding sources of training providers could impact how they are defined. I understand JSA has considerable influence over how training providers are classified. Minister, can you provide some information to

the house: if the federal government bodies decide to include more training providers as public training providers, will this legislation be amended to accommodate them, and if not, why?

Gayle TIERNEY: Well, the first thing I would say is I think everyone would be in agreement that a good old typology report is the essence of everything, really. But leaving that to one side, the fact of the matter is that this question does go to the heart of the matter, which is that the national process needs to determine the inclusion of more training providers as public training providers. We need a nationally consistent definition and approach to resolve these questions around public versus community provision and funding associated, and Victoria will continue to advocate for a unique and distinct status for Aboriginal community controlled RTOs as a pathway to additional National Skills Agreement funding.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: This one really goes over that same ground, but just for the abundance of clarity, Minister, as you know, Aboriginal community controlled RTOs are currently trying to create their own classification that would group them as one cohort and also see them come under the tent of public providers. Given you have specified TAFE and dual-sector universities rather than public providers in this legislation, will you commit to amending this bill in the future to include Aboriginal community controlled RTOs in the 70 per cent guarantee when they get their specific classification?

Gayle TIERNEY: Look, we will stay current with the national process and review our policies and definitions of providers as they evolve. Victoria will continue, as I have said, to advocate for the unique and distinct recognition and funding for Aboriginal community controlled RTOs. It is a very, very interesting area of public policy. It is obviously interesting in terms of our relationship with First Nations people in this state, but I think it is important that we do try and get as much national consistency as possible. I think most people know my trajectory on this matter and that we will continue to push and to make sure that that evolution is pushed along the way.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: On a different topic, being completion rates, which came up somewhat throughout the debate this afternoon: Minister, can you share with the chamber what work the government is undertaking in relation to improving completion rates at our TAFEs?

Gayle TIERNEY: Before I go into that important work, can I also just mention a couple of things about the completion rates, because I think that the completion rates need to be placed into context. The first thing is that in terms of the four-year completion rate for students at standalone TAFEs, it is 54.9 per cent compared to 53.3 per cent of students who studied at a private training provider. We also in Victoria have this anomaly where students in schools that are undertaking vocational education and training, and those who are in prison undertaking vocational education and training, are captured up into the completion data for Victoria; unfortunately Victoria is the only one that does that. I had face-to-face discussions as recently as Friday week ago with the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), which is the major data provider and collector in this country; they understand the issue and they are working on that. We believe that once those two areas, the schools and the prisons, are taken out of the completion rates, the advice I am receiving is that that will significantly improve the completion rates of those in TAFEs. Indeed I should also mention that in terms of even the completion rate that Victoria has at the moment, with prisoners and with VET, we are still 11 points ahead of the completion rates of domestic students at university. So I just need to rule a line under those facts, because it is forgotten about, the important context in which people just grab hold of completion rates. The other thing that I would say is that completion rates, for those that have not really engaged with the sector and have not necessarily tracked completion rates, might come as a bit of a surprise. But I remember when I was an undergraduate at university a long time ago that completion rates and indeed retention rates in the first year were really, really low. So I think a lot of work needs to be done generally in the education system across all of the post-school sector right across the country to lift completion rates.

One of the things that we have been doing, to answer the original question, is we have now got free TAFE literacy and numeracy that go hand in glove with the apprenticeship system. We have trialled

it to see how it would go. It was a situation where we found that young kids were finding out towards the end of their first year that maybe their numeracy was not where it needed to be. So we have devised a number of ways to pilot it, and I can say that the retention rates have been amazing. In Wodonga, their retention rate is around 98, 99 per cent now, and we also then had that pilot go to the Bendigo Kangan Institute (BKI) and South West TAFE, and other TAFEs have done it too. Because it is working so well, we have now made it a free TAFE component of the apprenticeship system. That is just one example of what we are doing, in terms of it.

The other thing of course is that at the TAFEs they have student services, and they have got welfare officers and a range of people that are there to do the wraparound. As I mentioned in my contribution, free TAFE obviously attracts cohorts that do not necessarily have the money to really think about a dream like going to TAFE, and with that, they often carry a number of other matters that are causing difficulties in their lives. That is why it is so important that we do have those support services there. You can see that it works and how tempting it is by the fact that around 60 per cent of enrolments are women and there is a very high proportion – and I can give you the accurate figures later – of people from CALD communities and of course First Nations and people with disabilities. So in many ways this is a social and economic driver of change for a whole range of people right across Victoria, and we are very proud of it. You only need to talk to any of those graduates or those that are still continuing, to get an idea of what free TAFE has meant to them and to their families and of course to getting those jobs.

The other thing is that we have also built up very good relationships with industry and employers, to the point where they ring our TAFEs now waiting for the next round of graduates to work at hospitals, health centres – you name it. I think it was Sheena Watt who mentioned BKI and the automotive industry. That connection with industry that is real is also a measure by which we encourage completions. I could go on. Can I say that in terms of cert III carpentry there has been a 23 per cent increase. There has been a 13 per cent increase in engineering and mechanical trades, a 12 per cent increase in cert III plumbing and 11 per cent in cert III electrotechnology just from providing that literacy and numeracy support in those apprenticeship areas. So it is good and it is working.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Minister, for a very fulsome answer. This I think should be my last question, but cutting to the chase, with one of the amendments before the house, which I understand is purported to be trying to achieve transparency with respect to completion rates in our TAFE sector, further to the remarks you have already provided to the house this afternoon, how are you planning to ensure that we have better transparency of completion rates in our TAFEs?

Gayle TIERNEY: The Victorian government has accepted the recommendation of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (PAEC) and will introduce two new free TAFE performance measures through the budget papers commencing in May 2026. The national VET data body NCVER is also looking at introducing free TAFE–specific data, reporting nationally. It is appropriate for more granular free TAFE program reporting to occur through the national VET data agency to promote the ability to compare across the jurisdictions. I am happy to talk about that more when the amendment is before us.

Clause agreed to; clauses 2 to 18 agreed to.

Clause 19 (17:14)

Richard WELCH: I move:

1. Clause 19, after line 19 insert –

"(3A) The Minister must include in a report of the operations of the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions that is prepared under section 45 of the **Financial Management Act 1994** the number of students (expressed as a percentage and in whole numbers) who, in the previous calendar year, completed each course of vocational education and training that the Minister determined under subsection (1) was to be provided free of tuition fee.".

To speak briefly on it, we do not think it is a complicated task. Simply having outcome metrics around a policy of this nature is I think fundamental. It would be de rigueur in any other policy area to have a measurable outcome published. We do not think it will cause any impediment to the implementation of the bill. It is in part 3; it would not come into effect until 2027. So from our point of view – and we have advocated for this for a long time – this is very straightforward and it should not be controversial.

Gayle TIERNEY: The government will be opposing this amendment, and we do so for the following reasons. We believe that it does propose a non-standard one-year completion rate in its methodology. The industry standard applied consistently by NCVER, the national body responsible for VET research and statistics, is to report four-year completion rates to account for varying course durations and to ensure comprehensive data reporting. The Victorian government, as I have just said, has accepted the recommendation of PAEC and will introduce the following two new free TAFE performance measures through the budget papers commencing in May 2026: a four-year Australian Qualifications Framework qualification completion rate for commencements in free TAFE and the proportion of VET completers with an improved employment status after training in free TAFE. These two performance measures are in addition to the existing free TAFE budget measure on the yearly number of enrolments in free TAFE. Reporting completions in the budget papers alongside another meaningful indicator of achievement, namely that of post-training employment outcomes, aligns with the position of NCVER and the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions (DJSIR) that there should be a focus on broader and complementary measures of success, not exclusively completions. Reporting annually in the budget on free TAFE completions delivers on the intent of the opposition's proposed amendment, with additional transparency and scrutiny through the budget papers, rather than a departmental document.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: In part further to the remarks made by the minister, I think I understand the intent with which the amendment has been brought, but there are, as has been outlined, a number of measures the government is, I understand, adopting with respect to this particular indicator that is seeking to be tracked. I think it is important that we are getting that transparency. I would hope we all agree on that. I think, speaking for myself and my colleagues, it comes down to whether that then warrants legislation if that measurement is going to be provided from May this year onwards, whereas I understand the provision proposed would not come until 2027 anyway, even if legislated. Then that is also begging the question of what other indicators would we also considering legislating if we are putting things into the legislation. In this instance we are not supportive of the amendment, but we appreciate the intent with which it was brought.

Gayle TIERNEY: Can I just add one other thing that might be helpful too, Mr Welch, in that DJSIR has provided some advice around the implementation issues of what you are proposing. They say the free TAFE course list is changed annually to align with industry demand – can I let you know that in terms of the list, it is a list that is provided by the Victorian Skills Authority that does labour market testing where all of the industry bodies, the industry advisory groups, sit under that umbrella and they advise the VSA in terms of where the shortages are and propose free TAFE and VET courses as well as what should be on the list. The fact of the matter is that they believe that the DJSIR annual report is not practical and the utility of the data for each course will vary significantly. This is particularly true of women with family responsibilities, who are some of the most prolific users of free TAFE – they are in and out of the system.

The second implementation issue is that whole numbers of students who in previous calendar years completed free TAFE courses is not a useful measure because (1) free TAFE courses can be longer than one year in duration, even when studied full time, and (2) many students complete free TAFE part time to allow them to continue to work or support their families, which extends the time to complete a free TAFE course. The department has confirmed that NCVER is currently considering the introduction of free TAFE–specific data reporting nationally, and it is appropriate for a more granular free TAFE program reporting regime to occur through the national VET data agency to promote, as I said, comparisons across the states.

Richard WELCH: I cannot understand that. Actual completion rates, regardless of the duration of the course, would be the absolute mathematical, fundamental building block of all the other stats. Reporting on these figures would not create any other workload. You have to do that analysis anyway to create the other stats which you aggregate up from. It would be absolutely extraordinary if the department was saying, 'We wouldn't even have to hand the total completions in any one year.' None of the other measurements that you have mentioned are mutually exclusive to providing this very fundamental building block layer of data.

Gayle TIERNEY: We simply will be opposing the amendment. There are two areas that will now be included in the budget papers, and we are not supportive of a different and new type of methodology when we have got NCVER, which is highly regarded across the political spectrum, Mr Welch.

Richard Welch interjected.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Mr Welch, the minister has the call.

Gayle TIERNEY: We believe that the methodology that is used by NCVER is the correct one and that it serves a purpose to have uniformity across the country.

Council divided on amendment:

Ayes (14): Melina Bath, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Renee Heath, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

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

Amendment negatived.

Clause agreed to; clauses 20 to 24 agreed to.

Reported to house without amendment.

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (17:28): I move:

> That the report be now adopted.

Motion agreed to.

Report adopted.

Third reading

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (17:29): I move:

> That the bill be now read a third time.

Motion agreed to.

Read third time.

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

Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2026

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Harriet Shing:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (17:29): I rise to speak on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2026 this afternoon. This bill seeks to make changes to various acts which will lead to many positives, such as better productivity benefits and much more. However, the government feels further amendment is necessary due to ongoing international events and the global fuel situation. As this chamber knows, the war in Iran has caused widespread concern about the availability and price of fuel across the country. Overall, the supply situation remains stable, with sufficient quantities of fuel being produced locally or arriving to meet normal demand. However, we are seeing shortages at some retail sites, particularly in regional areas of Victoria, and we must prepare should the situation worsen. To prepare, we must have access to reliable information that helps us understand how much fuel is available and where it is going. The Minister for Energy and Resources has significant powers under the Fuel Emergency Act 1977, including the power to direct fuel companies to provide necessary information. However, those powers are dependent on an emergency being formally declared. There are no interim powers that can help with contingency planning.

The proposed house amendments to the Fuel Emergency Act 1977 via the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill will allow the Minister for Energy and Resources to compel the provision of critical information regarding Victorian liquid fuel stocks and movements before we reach an emergency situation. The amendments will improve access to accurate, comprehensive, consistent and up-to-date information from businesses that are involved in the supply and distribution of fuel. This will enable greater visibility of the current situation and improve planning and preparedness for any fuel emergency. The amendments have been designed with appropriate safeguards, including setting out specific circumstances in which information can be requested, how that information will be used and penalties for noncompliance. The amendment will bring Victoria into line with other jurisdictions, including New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania. The proposed reforms will place Victoria in a better position to manage current and future fuel supply issues while continuing to work with the Commonwealth and other states on the national response. I now ask that the amendments in Minister Symes's name be circulated.

To conclude, I commend the amendments to the chamber, and I ask all members to support their passage when we deal with the bill forthwith. I commend the bill to the house.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:33): I rise to speak on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2026. I will just acquit the new segment added to the bill on the fuel reporting. As you would know, this amendment change or addition only came through at 5 o'clock last night. We had a very brief bill briefing on it – not a great amount of time to scrutinise the purpose, intent and action of it. We understand that we are in a potentially serious situation, and we will be supporting those changes, but it has to be said that the case for it, at least in the extent of the bill briefing, was not fully made. It is not absolutely clear why these are required. Now, there was some sort of dissonance between 'This is not urgent, but it is urgent; we probably won't use it now, but we may need to use it now.' In addition to being simply rushed, I do not think the case for it was clearly articulated, but we are not going to stand in the way of it. We understand that there may be reasons we are not aware of that this needs to happen as quickly as it does, and I think it is important that we support that.

In terms of the broader omnibus bill that it is, it has got 'reform' in the title, which begs the obvious question: what is being reformed? I have read the bill, I have read the second-reading speech and I

attended the bill briefing, and what I have found is that when you strip away the framing this is actually a statute revision exercise correcting cross-references, updating language and aligning processes and things that have already changed at a Commonwealth or agency level. That work is real and it needs to be done, but you would not classify it as reform; it is maintenance. Calling maintenance 'reform' is the kind of misnomer that this government have developed – to the point where I am not sure even they notice anymore the difference between maintenance and actual reform or what reform looks like, because you are hard-pressed to find a single genuine reform in a bill with 'Reform' in the title, which is part of the growing trend of casual misdirection becoming normalised. It is bad practice, it is lowering our standards and it should stop.

The coalition is not opposing this bill. There are things that are worth supporting – the spent conviction changes in particular are quite worthy – but we should not pretend the bill is something it is not. I will spend a little bit more time on some of those things. We do need reform, but we do not need branding exercises. In regard to spent convictions those amendments are genuinely useful. At the moment if you want to apply to have an old conviction spent, you have to first get a sealed copy of your application from the Magistrates' Court and then separately email it to both the Attorney-General and the Chief Commissioner of Police, and that is a very convoluted process that is very likely to trip people up. Applications are routinely lodged incorrectly, and court registries have developed workarounds just to process them. The amendment formalises largely what apparently everyone is already doing informally and removes procedural obstacles for people who are trying to navigate this without a lawyer. For anyone trying to clear a historical conviction so that they can get a job or find a rental, that really matters, so we do support it.

The payment technology update replacing 'cheque' references with technology-neutral language is commonsense housekeeping, given the Commonwealth's cheque phase-out. The Competition Policy Reform (Victoria) Act 1995 alignment with the 2024 intergovernmental agreement needs doing. Fixing the cross-referencing error in the Local Government Act 2020 needed to happen eventually, and updating 'chairman' to gender-neutral language is reasonable and long overdue. As to the reintroduction of a two-year cooling-off period preventing a former councillor from being appointed CEO of their own council – that was apparently lost somewhere in the transition from the 1989 act to the 2020 act; it should not have been – it is good that it is going back in. None of that is controversial and none of that requires wider debate, in our view. We think that is good work; we support it.

But there are other elements. As to the Circular Economy (Waste Reduction and Recycling) Act 2021 amendment, this bill marks the 13th time the circular economy act has been amended – 13 times in four years; that is roughly once every three and a half months. It is a circular economy in and of itself. I shudder to think how much money has been spent on administering 13 different changes in that time. No-one can pretend that every legislative act emerges perfectly from the drafting process, which would not be realistic, but 13 amendments in four years tells you that something more structural than normal bedding-in processes is at work here. It suggests that the act was never fully ready and has been in a state of rolling correction ever since. Every time the regulated entities think they understand their obligations, something or someone comes back in to revise them. Businesses, particularly, plan around regulatory frameworks and need – and rightfully expect – certainty. When the law keeps shifting under their feet, even for minor reasons, it adds friction, it adds legal review time, it adds caution and it adds distraction.

We talk about reducing red tape. There are a lot of conversations about the need to reduce red tape, but this is exactly how red tape accumulates – through the constant churn of getting things wrong and then fixing them over and over again. I will also note the EPA exemption application change. During the briefing the officials repeatedly described this as a 'stop-the-clock mechanism', with the idea being that if the EPA needs more information within the 28-day determination window, it can pause and resume rather than be forced into a premature refusal. Maybe, but some might say, 'Well, maybe the EPA should just hit the deadline.' I do not see many in the private sector getting this kind of flexibility when dealing with their customers or regulatory bodies. But in any case, the bill does not actually

include the words ‘stop the clock’. What it does is remove the 28-day deadline and replace it with an indefinite longer period. How much longer? Not specified – there is no upper limit. There is no deadline at all. What that means in practice is that exemption applicants – we are talking about businesses seeking exemptions, for instance, from landfill fees – move from a clear statutory expectation of 28 days to an open-ended wait while the EPA takes as long as it determines to be reasonable. From an applicant’s perspective, a business’s perspective or anyone else’s, that is a pretty meaningful change and a great detriment to their ability to manage these processes, because you used to know when you would get an answer; now you do not, and in fact it is indefinite. I understand that an arbitrary deadline was producing perverse outcomes, but the solution was a structured extension mechanism with clear timeframes, not the removal of the deadline framework altogether. That is a ridiculous cop-out by both the government and the managers. Whoever approved this as a solution should be pulled up on this. This is not just bad procedurally, this is bad culturally, because it is going to induce its own bad practices. When you remove the deadline you remove accountability that comes with it. This matters particularly because it feeds into something I have raised in this house before – a pattern of statutory agencies quietly accumulating discretion at the expense of the people and the voters that they regulate.

We are going to move two amendments, and I ask that they be distributed now. The first amendment we will move is about clause 20, which removes the requirement that a notice be displayed on land subject to a land management cooperative agreement. The minister’s justification was this was causing landowners stress, safety and wellbeing issues. At the bill briefing the shadow minister asked for examples. One was provided – just one example – for why this would be necessary. When you understand what that example actually was, the justification starts to look a bit different. A landholder had entered into agreement with the government where they received financial compensation in exchange for allowing their land to be used as native vegetation offset to facilitate a wind farm nearby. The local community, by seeing the notice displayed on the land, worked out that this arrangement existed, which is probably what you would think was the purpose of the sign. That is the whole story. The community found out that there was a financial deal done to facilitate a wind farm near their homes, and the government’s response to that episode is to remove the mechanism that told them.

I will also tell the chamber what happened when the shadow minister tried to obtain a copy of that very agreement. She has a right to it under section 80 of the act. She was told to attend the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action’s offices, and then told a copy could not be provided because linking the agreement to a specific project might exacerbate community sentiment. A government department declined to perform its own statutory duty on the grounds that if it did, the community might find out something the community had a legal right to know. Eventually this was addressed by obtaining access moments before Parliament sat, with departmental officials and a ministerial representative present. I will leave it to members to draw their own conclusions about what that says about this government’s relationship with transparency.

The government argues that the information will still be available in the *Government Gazette* and on its website. But I would ask any member in this chamber: how many of your constituents monitor the government gazettes for updates on land management agreements in their neighbourhood? The gazette is a legitimate instrument of public record, but it is not how most Victorians find out what is happening on the land next to them. The notice on the land works because it is visible. People who live nearby see it without having to know where to look. Replace it with a website entry that people have to know exists in order to search for it in the first place, and you have the appearance of public availability without the substance. That is basically the distinction between formal transparency and actual transparency operating in practice. So the coalition will move an amendment to retain the notice requirement.

The second amendment goes to clause 34, which removes the mandatory obligation on arbiters to refer serious misconduct matters involving local councillors to the chief municipal inspector. No reason has been given for this change – not in the second reading speech and not in the bill briefing. It just

appeared in the bill. An accountability safeguard covering things like substantial fines, suspension and disqualification from elections has been made discretionary, with no explanation provided. When we cannot establish why a change is being made – and it is a little bit like the fuel issue – and when what is being changed is a mandatory referral for serious misconduct matters, the default position has to be that we should probably leave it alone until we do know and until there is a proper explanation. That would be the judicious thing to do. We will move to retain the mandatory obligation, and we leave it to the government to explain why it is not necessary.

I want to address something broader, because I think in the real world, 'reform' in this bill's title is worth pushing back on. In business you learn that language that does not correspond to reality is dangerous, not purely because of abstract principles but because decisions get made on the basis of what things are called. If your books say you are profitable when you are not, and you make investments you cannot afford, and you do not see the wall until you hit it – the same logic applies here. If the government calls this regulatory reform and the broader public conversation accepts that framing, then there is no political pressure to do the actual work that is required – the actual, genuine reform. The box gets ticked and the harder problems stay unaddressed, and the harder problems are quite serious. Gross state product is currently at a negative 0.1 per cent growth per capita. The Property Council has recorded a 53 per cent reduction in global institutional investment in Victoria since 2022. The Business Council of Australia has consistently rated Victoria as the worst jurisdiction in the country to do business. Our per capita state product is shrinking, not growing. The net state debt is currently at $160.9 billion, and under the government's debt management process it is going to go up to $190 billion and further. It has increased by $10 billion in the last six months alone. Interest repayments are running at close to a million dollars an hour and will be running in a couple of years at $10 billion a year.

I am not raising those figures for effect; I am raising them because they explain why naming this bill matters. A state with those numbers needs reform that actually shifts regulatory costs, actually restores investment incentives and confidence and actually grows our productive base so commercial and industrial land tax is not draining the working capital from businesses that they need to invest and hire. Payroll tax remains a structural tax on employment, planning approvals move at a pace that adds cost to every housing development and then the government of course adds taxes on top of those planning requirements and makes housing development uneconomic. None of this is in the bill, but I point it out because it is conspicuous by its absence, particularly in a bill labelled 'reform'. I understand why this bill was never meant to address any of that. It is a compilation of statute corrections, and that is fine. But a government that titles it as 'reform' and then promotes it as a contribution to economic productivity when its own officials cannot provide any evidence of that has either stopped believing in the distinction between language and reality or has decided that the public will not notice. I guess both possibilities are there.

The coalition supports the spent convictions amendments. We support the routine corrections this bill makes, and we will not oppose it. We have moved two amendments, but what I would ask the government to consider, as we are in an election year, is whether Victoria's business men and women, tradies, young people looking for work and families trying to stay in the state need a government that talks about reform or one that actually does it. The differences are profound. You can feel it in the business forecasts. You can feel it if you talk to any business owner and operator. You can feel it in the investment figures. You can feel it in the fact that we are not creating businesses that employ people. The other day we mentioned in this place that the only category of business growth is the category of businesses that employ no people; every other category of employing businesses has shrunk in the last year according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Victoria used to be a capital of competing hard for capital and talent, and we can be that again, but not by calling maintenance 'reform' and hoping no-one notices.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:51): I move:

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

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

Adjournment

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (17:51): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Public transport fares

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:51): (2441) My matter is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport in the other place, and the action I seek is for the minister to provide an update on the free public transport initiative made possible by the Allan Labor government. Over the weekend I was out across the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region at local festivals and markets speaking with community members, and one message came through loud and clear: rising fuel prices are putting real pressure on household budgets, and that is why people are genuinely pleased to hear about the introduction of free public transport throughout the month of April. While this is a temporary measure and it will not solve every cost-of-living challenge, free public transport is an immediate and practical step that will make a real difference for many people. It helps ease pressure on family budgets at a time when every dollar counts, and it also gives people who may not usually take public transport the opportunity to see just how fast, reliable and convenient it can be. Initiatives like this show that the Allan Labor government is listening and responding in practical ways to what communities are telling us, making it easier and cheaper to get around, and that supports families, encourages greater use of public transport and helps take pressure off our roads. I want to thank the minister for her ongoing commitment to supporting our community and for her passion and dedication to strengthening Victoria's public transport system. I look forward to receiving her response.

Avalon Australian International Airshow

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:53): (2442) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events, and it is regarding the Avalon air show and the lack of ongoing funding for that event, which as we all know, is a global event that attracts nearly a thousand exhibitors and many hundreds of people and delegations from overseas and is an amazing opportunity for our advanced manufacturing sector to put their best foot forward and compress months and months of business development into a trade show. It is a world-class event equal to any in the world, but it is an event that does not have its own infrastructure. If you compare it to somewhere like the Paris air show, the Paris air show is a permanent event with its own infrastructure; it does not have to set up and pack up each year. There are ongoing operational costs that we have in Melbourne that other events do not have, and therefore a bit of modest subsidy against it versus the return on investment of $250 million back into the Victorian economy is a no-brainer of economic policy, innovation policy and manufacturing policy to support.

You can only contrast that with the support for three National Football League games coming to the MCG. The New South Wales government considered this deal with the NFL but said at $15 million a game it is too expensive, they do not see the return on it. I would not mind going to an NFL game – it is pretty good – but the return on $45 million for three one-off events at the MCG is in no way comparable to the long-term productivity and economic growth benefits that we derive from the Avalon air show. So to be putting $15 million into that and not some figure that is considerably less than that, which we would have to commit to every two years, into the Avalon air show is frankly economic vandalism and a ludicrous decision that sends the worst kind of mixed signals to our manufacturing sector and the worst kind of market signals to our investment sector. It basically compounds Victoria's problem not in inventing IP and developing IP but in commercialising IP; that is really where we have got to improve, and events like the Avalon air show do just that. The action I

seek from the minister is to please reinstate the funding to the Avalon air show long term, but do not just reinstate it; also include a capital component so that the infrastructure can be built up event to event and the operating costs themselves can reduce over time.

Family violence

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (17:56): (2443) My adjournment matter is for the Attorney-General, and the action that I seek is for the government to urgently amend the Equal Opportunity Act 2010 to include 'subject to family and domestic violence' as a protected attribute. In December 2023 the federal Labor government introduced landmark reforms to the Fair Work Act 2009 to safeguard workers from family and domestic violence discrimination. However, these protections do not currently extend to Victorian workers, because the EOA does not offer the same protections. The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission have identified this loophole and publicly called for change too. Potential discrimination can limit a person's ability to leave a violent relationship, and its effects on their employment can significantly increase their likelihood of experiencing homelessness. The ACT, the Northern Territory, Queensland and South Australia all recognise this in their discrimination laws, yet here in Victoria you can legally be sacked by an employer for disclosing experiences of domestic and family violence. Community legal centres have reported that family and domestic violence discrimination is actually rampant in Victorian workplaces, particularly for already marginalised workers. One story shared with my office is that of K, whose name has been changed for safety reasons. K worked at a company where her previous partner was also employed. K was a survivor of serious and persistent domestic violence by her previous partner. K depended on her employment as her primary source of income and an economic lifeline for herself and her children, but when K disclosed to her employer her experience of domestic violence with her previous partner and requested that adjustments be made in the workplace, K was told by her manager that it would just be best if she found somewhere else to work. K eventually had her employment terminated because of her disclosure of family violence and requests for safety measures to be put in place. K was unable to enforce protections against family violence discrimination introduced by the federal Labor government because Victoria's discrimination laws remain silent on family and domestic violence as a protected attribute.

We know that the government will already be amending the Equal Opportunity Act to enshrine the right to work from home. The inclusion of discrimination protections for those subjected to domestic and family violence is a straightforward change that will significantly enhance legal protections for survivors across all areas of life. The government is already committed to opening up the piece of legislation to make this vital change happen, and I urge them to make this one too, alongside enshrining the right to work from home.

Cost of living

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (17:58): (2444) My adjournment matter is for the Treasurer, Jaclyn Symes. Labor is delivering cost-of-living relief in Victoria: free public transport for kids, the $100 power saving bonus and capped fuel prices through that 24-hour cycle under the Servo Saver app. I cannot resist going on with the list: free TAFE, breakfast clubs, food relief, free public transport in the face of the war and the uncertainty that we all face in relation to that and the Get Active Kids vouchers. The Smile Squad has been extended, and there are 3 hours of free power in the middle of the day between 12 and 3. And that is not an exhaustive list. My request is for an update on how Labor's cost-of-living measures are helping families in Western Victoria right now.

Renewable energy

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (18:00): (2445) My matter is for the Minister for Energy and Resources regarding the significant barriers preventing residents living in apartments from accessing affordable and renewable energy. The action I seek is for the minister to outline the steps the government will take to ensure there is reform in owners corporation law and that access to solar rebates is expanded so that apartment residents are not locked out of accessing cheaper energy. During

the cost-of-living crisis one of the main responsibilities of the government is to ensure that citizens have equal access to affordable energy. However, in Victoria we have thousands of residents living in apartment complexes who are being left behind due to outdated governance structures and policy gaps. In certain circumstances Victorians are expected to meet impossible thresholds – that is, residents must secure up to 75 per cent approval from other owners to proceed with sustainability upgrades. It does not seem to be better for those living in retirement villages or caravans with embedded energy networks.

We are looking at approximately 190,000 Victorians who are excluded from Victoria's rebate scheme, which leaves them paying more for energy and having fewer options to reduce their costs. The Allan Labor government cannot chalk this up to just technical issues; this is profoundly a policy failure. It is clear that the technology for electrifying apartments exists. However, governance and regulation setting by the Allan government have not kept pace with modern energy needs. This is a real barrier the Allan government must recognise. Only 12 per cent of Victorians live in apartments, so I am particularly concerned that 12 per cent of Victorians are facing rising energy bills, reduced control over their living conditions and an inability to make simple upgrades to their living spaces – some things home owners take for granted. At a time of economic downturn it is unacceptable that apartment residents are locked out of opportunities to reduce their energy costs and improve efficiency. I ask the minister to provide a clear plan of reform of the current system so that Victorians can be assured that, regardless of where they live, they are able to access affordable, sustainable energy.

Western Metropolitan Region bus services

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (18:02): (2446) Westerners waiting for public transport improvements rejoice, for there are extra Sunday train services from Laverton to Altona. Imagine travelling along a scenic return journey through Melbourne's inner west and along Port Phillip Bay at Altona. Alas, last Sunday was the last day when western residents could experience a time when public transport was a source of pride and a well-run metropolis was judged on its regular train services. Steamrail Victoria ran a series of one-way steam locomotive trips, with return shuttles on a schedule that would make a local commuter weep. Nostalgia is delightful but gives cold comfort to those parts of the west so lacking in public transport options. Similarly, the government's announcement of free public transport is poor consolation for the same reasons. What is the benefit of travelling free on public transport if it does not exist in the first place?

We know that buses are the cheapest, easiest and most flexible option for addressing the gaps in our transport infrastructure. Victoria's bus plan, released by then Minister for Public Transport Ben Carroll back in 2023, recognised that too. The key objective of the 2023 bus plan was to work with industry to develop a bus reform implementation plan to transform the bus network and align it to meet growing demand. Splendid! Ambitious! It was the sort of aspiration we would expect from a Labor government. Sadly, Victoria's bus plan was rejected by cabinet in 2023. This was particularly disastrous for the outer west, one of the fastest growing regions in Australia, which is still left with a patchwork of badly underserviced public transport deserts. People need accessible, cheap transport.

We are in the midst of a fuel crisis that will not be resolved any time soon. Families in the outer west, deprived of accessible public transport and thus already spending a fortune on petrol, will have no choice but to absorb the fuel hikes. Meanwhile communities in wealthier leafier suburbs, well serviced by public transport, will reap the benefits of this taxpayer-funded public transport largesse. Now more than ever we need a bus plan. The action I am seeking is that the Minister for Public and Active Transport provide an update on when the government intends to release a revised bus reform implementation plan to provide some public transport relief to the outer western suburbs.

Sentencing reform

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (18:05): (2447) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Attorney-General, and the action that I seek is an update on the government's plan to introduce laws to ban good character references as a mitigating factor in sentencing. Labor believes it is not right

that perpetrators of serious crimes have access to good character references to be considered as a mitigation in sentencing – that is why we are going to ban them and put victims first. Crimes for which courts have considered good character references in the past have included rape, other violent crimes and child sex offences. For victims of crime to have to sit, listen to and endure statements in court about how the perpetrator who harmed them is a good character, a good person, can be a traumatic moment, one that diminishes their experience. Those who commit horrific crimes such as these must be held accountable without excuses. We believe that good character references to reduce a convicted criminal's sentence are wrong. They do nothing for anyone else involved in the process except further traumatise victims. We should not forget Labor's proposed legislation is the result of vocal campaigning from child sex abuse survivors and their Your Reference Ain't Relevant campaign. Labor stands with them. We believe that they and other victims of crime should be put first, rather than offenders.

Planning policy

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:06): (2448) My matter is for the Minister for Planning, and it relates to the so-called community reference groups, specifically one that met on a recent weekend, the Riversdale, Willison, Ashburton so-called high-rise, high-density zones and the activity centre group as it were. The community reference group met on the weekend of 21 and 22 March. This was coordinated by MosaicLab, which has been given a $713,660 payment for all of these reference groups. But I have had now three people come to me in some detail, who have been members of these community reference groups, and they believe they are a sham. It is for that reason that I am calling on the minister to go back to the start and to redo these consultation sessions, which do appear to be a complete and utter sham. For example, the work of Mr James Sattler and his detailed summary of the process suggests that it is not consistent with the public engagement framework that the government says it adheres to, the six principles. These were not adhered to. He makes a point that he is a first-time participant in public consultation via this community reference group.

Understand what is going on here: Willison, Riversdale and Ashburton, three of these high-rise, high-density centres, are each quite different. They are not one and the same. They should not have been thrown in together in the first instance. Ashburton is going to have a very high-rise at eight storeys through a lot of it and then a four-storey height limit beyond that. The Willison and Riversdale ones are not the same. There is no obvious heart, in the case of Willison, for the high-rise, high-density development to go in there. But it is also clear from the screenshots taken by a number of the participants. For example, 'How comfortable do you feel with the boundary catchment in Ashburton?' Thirty-eight per cent loathe it, 38 per cent lament it, 8 per cent would live with it, only 15 per cent like it, and yet these strong views that are being expressed in the reference groups are not being represented by the group that is running this process. The minister is going to have to go back to basics and redo the consultation because she has botched it. They even tried to use ChatGPT to write the report, and the community pushed back very hard at that. They said no.

Birth trauma

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (18:09): (2449) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, and the action I am seeking is for urgent action on the issue of birth trauma in Victoria. Research indicates that one in three birthing people experience birth trauma. Nationally the cost to the health system and affected individuals reached $877 million in a single year, according to a report by PwC. Between 500 and 1000 submissions to the New South Wales birth trauma inquiry were from Victorian residents alone, yet Victoria is one of the only states to have made no substantive response to this. The following examples are drawn from a constituent, illustrating the concrete ways in which failure of informed consent, continuity of care and transparency of birthing options can lead to lasting harm. The person who has reached out experienced coerced consent and lack of information, including being given only one clinical option and no diagnostic test to confirm the stated reason for that option. They were denied time to consider alternatives and told the procedure would happen regardless when they requested time to consider other options. Their request for pain relief, birthing

aids and change of position during labour were denied, with repeated pressure towards specific interventions without disclosure of their risks. They were also asked to sign a consent form that included procedures that they were not aware at the time that they were signing off on. They were denied bodily autonomy during labour, including physical and invasive care performed without consent, multiple unknown staff entering the room without introducing themselves and a shift handover conducted in the room while they were in active labour. Following birth, they experienced a perineal injury, symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder and thoughts of self-harm. They reported that a specialist they saw implied that the injury was their own fault and that they received no referral to a pelvic floor specialist, leaving them to seek out costly private care.

These experiences are of just one person, but they reflect stories I hear frequently. They have also been borne out in various inquiries, including the previously referenced New South Wales birth trauma inquiry and the Victorian women's pain inquiry. They reflect systemic failures of how Victoria's maternity system treats birthing people. And while this issue requires a comprehensive response, there are three priority areas for reform: universal public access to continuity-of-carer models, which evidence demonstrates come with significant benefits; full and clear mandated informed consent processes for birth options and procedures – it is critical that all birthing people are presented with all of the available options – and full, impartial, evidence-based information about the risks and benefits; and there needs to be genuine consumer engagement and co-design in any reforms. The experiences of those who have bravely spoken up should not go unheeded, and it is time the Victorian government listened.

Affordable school uniforms program

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:12): (2450) My adjournment matter today is directed to the Minister for Education in the other place, Minister Carroll. Half a million families have received cost-of-living relief through this Labor government's affordable school uniform program since 2024. This program provides important cost-of-living relief for eligible families. This program is delivered with Victoria's State Schools' Relief, which has been providing free uniforms and other essential school items to students in public schools who need them. Through this Labor government's $75 million investment into State Schools' Relief, we are ensuring working families get a fair deal, ensuring that parents do not have to worry about where the money will come from just so their kids can attend school. The action that I seek is for the Minister for Education to inform me how much families in Southern Metro can collectively expect to save each year under this cost-of-living program.

Paynesville coastguard

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:13): (2451) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Environment, and the action I seek is for the minister to work with the community and find and approve the allocation of an appropriate parcel of Crown land in Paynesville for the establishment of a purpose-built marine rescue facility for the Paynesville coastguard. These people are some of the most amazing people. As you can understand, they volunteer their time, they certainly protect and support human life in emergency situations and they do a wonderful job. The coastguard is an accredited marine search and rescue provider for the Gippsland Lakes, covering a vast area – very busy waterways, both the sea and the lakes, from Metung to Sale. Their volunteers operate around the clock, and they respond to life-threatening emergencies, assisting distressed vehicles and supporting Victoria Police in critical situations. Despite this essential role, the Paynesville coastguard is operating in an inadequate and fragmented arrangement in terms of facilities, and this significantly impacts their capability. Their office – and I have been to their office and had some tuition on all things coastguard – is certainly separate, some 500 metres from their rescue vessels, and their equipment is spread across three different sites, which is clearly not ideal when you have got an emergency response organisation. It compromises volunteer safety, it restricts training capability and it makes coordination during time-critical call-outs unnecessarily challenging.

What do they do and what have they been searching for? Well, there are a number of different sites. What they need is a small parcel of land within 50 metres of the water's edge, and they need to have an around 150-square-metre facility to set up two berthing spaces for their vessels. There are three potential sites, and one is preferred. It is on a fantastic slip-road down there in Paynesville, south of the fuel storage adjacent to the Gippsland Ports land. This makes it possible to access both Lake King and Lake Victoria, as well as coming out into the ocean. It is a fantastic organisation, as I said. They have been seeking this for such a long time, and I call on the minister to work with this group, prioritise the request and approve suitable Crown land so that they can begin the long process of getting a new home.

Plastics manufacturing

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:16): (2452) My adjournment is for the Minister for Industry and Advanced Manufacturing in the other place. I have an urgent issue that was brought to my attention by a local manufacturer. Among the many things they make in south-east Melbourne, which is Australia's largest manufacturing region, are plastic containers and their closures. Many plastic containers are not imported, they are actually made in Australia, and they are used for everything that you might see in the shops, ranging from milk bottles to cleaning products and bottles for medicines. These containers often use intricate and sophisticated designs that make supply efficient and keep consumers safe. But the supply of resins for these bottles has been disrupted by the war in Iran. Without the containers or their closures many items will disappear from the shelves. This could lead to job losses along the supply chain and could cause panic amongst consumers and enormous problems with the distribution of medicine in particular. I am informed that we may only have two or three months supply for the raw materials used in blow moulds, including polyethylene. My office is happy to assist with contacts, but my request to the minister is to work with the federal government to make whatever diplomatic efforts are necessary to arrange for polymer resin shipments from the United States as soon as possible.

Power saving bonus

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (18:17): (2453) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Energy and Resources. The action I seek is for the minister to provide information on the number of households in the Northern Metro Region that claimed the power saving bonus in this round. This week marks the conclusion –in fact, tonight marks the conclusion – of the latest round of the power saving bonus for concession card households, a program that has been a fantastic example of the Allan Labor government's commitment to providing real cost-of-living relief for Victorians. This initiative has been incredibly successful, particularly for those across the region who are doing it tough with the rising cost of living. Throughout this round my office has been contacted by many, many constituents who are eager to access this $100 payment that goes directly to their power bills, but we know that the pressure on household budgets does not stop with the utility bill. For parents in the north we have made it easier to keep kids healthy and engaged with the Get Active Kids voucher program. We have also seen a significant increase in the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund to now $400 for both primary and secondary students. But perhaps most importantly for the month ahead, throughout the entire month of April, public transport will be completely free across our state. Whether you are commuting to work from Rezza or taking the family into the city from Broady, this is real money staying in your pocket every single day. These are not just one-off announcements. They are a suite of practical measures designed to provide relief for our community during a difficult economic time. Providing genuine cost-of-living relief is at the very heart of what the Allan Labor government does. We know that many Victorians are doing it tough right now – there is no doubting it – and that is why we are taking action to put money back in the pockets of those who need it most.

Donnybrook Road level crossing

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (18:19): (2454) My adjournment matter is for the Premier, and the action that I seek is for the Premier to work with the Minister for Transport Infrastructure to

immediately upgrade the boom gates at the Donnybrook Road level crossing and to work with the Minister for Roads and Road Safety to connect existing sections of Cameron Street and also extend it to Merriang Road to provide an alternative entry and exit point to the estates along Donnybrook Road. Donnybrook residents were thrown into chaos yesterday afternoon when the boom gates at the Donnybrook station level crossing failed at about 3:30 pm. Right in the middle of the school pick-up rush the boom gate stopped working, forcing traffic to back up in both directions all the way back onto the Hume Freeway on the west side and all the way to the Epping Road roundabout on the east side. There was havoc at local schools as children were let out of class but parents were not there to pick up the kids because they were stuck in the traffic. One student who caught the bus to a local stop where she usually meets her mother was frightened and worried when her mother was nowhere in sight and did not know what to do. This was incredibly stressful for parents and kids, and teachers had to set up temporary waiting areas to oversee the children and keep them calm.

This was not the first time the boom gates failed this month. It was not the second or third or even fifth time. Residents tell me this is a regular occurrence and the 10th time in the past couple of weeks alone that these boom gates have failed. Donnybrook Road is already notorious for terrible traffic congestion every morning and every evening. The traffic traps commuters in their cars for an extra 45 minutes or an hour and robs them of time that should be spent with their families. Official advice was given that residents should avoid Donnybrook Road and use alternate routes, but for people who live in the estates along Donnybrook Road or send their kids to Donnybrook Primary School, there is only one road in and out of the estates. This means that every time the boom gates fail or there is a vehicle breakdown or a collision blocking the road, no-one can get into their estate and back home. Yesterday the boom gates were locked in their lowered position blocking traffic for about 2 hours after they failed, which residents tell me is the average repair time. This is not just some minor inconvenience. People are thinking about selling their homes and getting out of Donnybrook because the local road network is so bad it is destroying their quality of life.

Upgrading the boom gates at the level crossing should have been done long ago, but it is an easy fix and can be done immediately. More concerning is the urgent need for an alternative road into and out of the estates at Cameron Street or Gunns Gully Road. There are many sections of Cameron Street that already exist, but they need to be joined up to provide a link to Merriang Road and to the Hume Freeway. This is not an impossible task and would provide a relatively quick solution to the road problem. Unfortunately, the Labor government has ignored all calls by me and Mr Mulholland to provide alternate entry and exit points that would provide both safety and convenience to the residents of Donnybrook estates.

Victims legal service

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (18:22): (2455) My adjournment tonight is for the Attorney-General. The victims legal service is due to lose its state funding on 30 June 2026, and the action I seek is for the government to commit in this year's budget to ongoing and properly indexed funding for the victims legal service, including the staffing uplift needed to meet demand and to stop victim-survivors being turned away. Established in 2023, the victims legal service is Victoria's first dedicated statewide specialist legal service for victims of crime. It was created because inquiry after inquiry found that victim-survivors were too often left to navigate a complex justice system without independent legal help, even where the outcome was going to affect their safety, their recovery, their finances or their participation in court processes. It is a statewide partnership involving Victoria Legal Aid, the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, Djirra, Women's Legal Service Victoria and seven community legal centres. It provides legal advice and ongoing assistance to people who have suffered injury or loss because of violent crime, including family violence and sexual violence. That includes help to access financial assistance, to pursue compensation and, under a Commonwealth-funded pilot, to protect confidential counselling and medical records in court proceedings.

This is a frontline service already delivering real outcomes. From March 2023 to 31 January 2026 it provided 12,097 services to victim-survivors in Victoria. Its helpline responded to 10,513 inquiries.

More than 2000 victim-survivors received legal advice or ongoing assistance, and in just one sample of 25 finalised financial assistance scheme matters, the service secured more than $380,000 supporting safety upgrades, counselling, health care, housing, support for children and other recovery needs. But demand for this service has outstripped its capacity from the beginning. Some services reached full capacity within three months, and more than 727 victim-survivors have already been turned away because partner services lacked the capacity to take referrals. Many clients also have highly complex needs, including disability, mental health issues, experiences of family violence, regional disadvantage and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status. This is a service that is working and it fills a clear gap. It is backed by evidence, it is needed across the state and it is needed more than current funding levels were meeting. Victim-survivors should not face losing access to trauma-informed legal help because the government continues to fund this work one year at a time. Letting this service lapse would not just undermine a successful model but leave some of the people most in need of support to navigate our justice system alone.

Housing affordability

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (18:25): (2456) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Housing, and the action that I seek is an update on the affordability of housing in Victoria. Housing affordability is key to quality of life, and we are building more homes in Victoria than any other state. We have more first home buyers buying homes than any other state. We are the most affordable place in Australia to rent or buy a home. However, there is more to do, and unlike the Liberals, Labor have a clear plan to build more homes and make housing more affordable.

Diabetes

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (18:26): (2457) My adjournment is to the Minister for Health on the need to support people living with diabetes in the upcoming state budget. Through the tireless work of many different groups and individuals, we are continuing to see an improvement in the quality of and access to care for people living with diabetes across Victoria. The Victorian Virtual Emergency Department now has a team of specialist diabetes nurse practitioners available during peak times, as well as emergency physicians, GPs and nurses available 24 hours a day to assist with diabetes-related incidents. Through this service, people living with diabetes anywhere in Victoria can access timely and cost-free urgent care via a video call at vved.org.au. Ambulance Victoria can also respond to call-outs made through the Victorian Virtual Emergency Department. With ambulances equipped with blood ketone level testing kits to check for diabetic ketoacidosis, paramedics can now assess whether care is best managed at home or in hospital. Up until recently most cases of hypoglycaemia were transported to hospital. With new tests and the VVED diabetes program, over 800 patients have been able to avoid hospital and manage their care at home.

As a co-convener of the Parliamentary Friends of People Affected by Diabetes, I commend the work of the Australian Centre for Accelerating Diabetes Innovations, ACADI, particularly their director Professor Elif Ekinci, for this initiative, along with Diabetes Victoria, Ambulance Victoria, Northern Health and the Royal Flying Doctor Service for making this service a reality. While there is progress being made, there is still much work to do, especially in supporting people with diabetes in rural and regional Victoria. In light of the upcoming state budget, I urge the minister to consider the recent submission made by ACADI focusing on reducing the impact of diabetes and its complications.

Access to insulin pumps also remains an area of concern for many. Through removing the need for multiple daily insulin injections, pumps lead to improved diabetes control, allowing people to better incorporate their diabetes management into their daily lives. While some high-tier private health insurance providers cover an insulin pump, the cost of such a device is too expensive for many – upwards of $10,000. Cost is not the only barrier. I have heard from diabetes educators that delays of between 12 to 18 months to receive a pump are common in regional Victoria. Pump start education support remains stubbornly slow in our stretched healthcare system, and people with diabetes in Northern Victoria as well as the rest of regional Victoria still do not have the same level of support as

our metropolitan counterparts. I urge the minister to support the excellent and ongoing work of our diabetes professionals and to address these issues by including funding for priorities to assist people living with diabetes in the state budget.

Rental reform

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (18:29): (2458) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Consumer Affairs, and the action I seek is for the government to stop rent increases from exceeding wage growth. Victoria is in the middle of a rental crisis, and it is pushing people to breaking point. Rents have risen 2.5 times faster than wages over the past five years. I have heard from constituents who are skipping meals, putting off doctors visits or going into debt just to pay the rent. Others are being priced out of their communities, forced to relocate away from their workplace, their families and their support networks, or worse, pushed into homelessness, sleeping in cars, couch surfing or staying in temporary accommodation. For single mothers, this often means making impossible choices between rent, child care and putting food on the table. For people with disabilities, it means being forced into housing that is unsafe, inaccessible or unsuitable. For people from multicultural backgrounds, this crisis is compounded by discrimination, being overlooked or refused housing because of their name, accent or background. Other renters are accepting terrible rental conditions – mould, leaks, overcrowding – because they have no other choice. As Tenants Victoria has made clear, the government must intervene. Tinkering around the edges is not enough. The rental crisis did not happen by accident; it is the result of political choices. Whether someone has a roof over their head or not, whether that home is safe and livable or not or whether they are forced to move because of skyrocketing rents, these are all shaped by decisions this government makes. Right now the gap between rents and wage increases keeps widening, and renters are falling further behind every single year. This is a system that is failing renters, and we need to put guardrails on a system that currently has none. Minister, all Victorians deserve a home they can afford.

Fuel supply and prices

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:31): (2459) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Energy and Resources. The action I seek is that she outline precisely what the Victorian government is doing to support regional Victorian families, farmers and businesses through the worst fuel crisis in a generation. Even after tomorrow's federal excise cut, diesel will remain close to $3 – an unthinkable level two months ago. Service stations across regional Victoria have run dry. Farmers in my electorate are waiting a fortnight for an on-farm diesel delivery at the very time winter crop sowing should be starting. Our economy runs on diesel. It powers every truck, every refrigerated vehicle and all the machinery on building sites and farms across the state. When diesel hits $3 a litre, those costs cascade through the entire supply chain, into freight rates, food prices and the cost of every essential on supermarket shelves. It is an inflationary shock that will continue to hurt Victorian families at the check-out long after prices on the forecourt have dropped back.

Yesterday the Commonwealth put $2.55 billion on the table to halve the fuel excise – a measure the coalition called for and the government was dragged to. We picked up the phone; Jacinta could not. The Premier's response was free public transport in Melbourne for the month of April. That is of little or no use to regional Victorians, who have no trams and barely a bus or a train to catch. They just pay more and get nothing. What is Victoria's plan for 1 July, when this temporary excise relief expires and families and businesses face an overnight 26.3 cent increase on top of prices that may still be at record levels? Meanwhile the Treasurer confirmed this morning that the government is only looking at the GST windfall flowing to Victoria from record fuel prices. Even after the excise cut and business tax credits, Victoria is conservatively receiving an additional $17 million a month in windfall GST revenue from this crisis – money taken directly from the pockets of struggling families. The government is not looking at a windfall; it is banking one. Victoria has real powers under the Fuel Emergency Act 1977. The government should investigate them. It has a windfall; it should return it. It owes regional Victorians more than commentary, apps and free trams they cannot catch.

Medical research

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:34): (2460) My adjournment is for the Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs. Today the Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes, AAMRI, gathered in the Parliament Gardens as part of their 100 Lab Coats campaign to highlight the critical importance of this sector to our health system and to the state's economy. The message was clear: more funding is needed to support the ongoing viability of research with a far-reaching impact that saves lives. Victoria has a long list of achievements and discoveries that have led to new treatments and diagnostic tools. Victorian researchers at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research were pivotal in developing cancer wonder drug venetoclax. Victorian researchers at the Hudson Institute of Medical Research were the first to identify stem cells in the endometrium. Victorian researchers at the Bionics Institute developed an implanted device that eliminates the need for further surgery for people with Crohn's disease. Victorian researchers at the Baker Institute are undertaking pioneering research to develop a treatment to heal heart attack damage by reducing scarring and regrowing heart muscle. Victorian researchers at St Vincent's Institute of Medical Research have demonstrated that a once-daily tablet could safely slow or halt early progression of type 1 diabetes, and there are other institutes like the Centre for Eye Research Australia, the Olivia Newton-John Cancer Research Institute and Orygen – all of these fantastic medical research facilities that are doing extraordinary work and that are changing people's lives and saving people's lives. I cannot stress enough how important the work that they are doing is and the flow-on effects to the economy and the jobs that they generate.

The independent medical research institutes contribute $600 million to the economy, as I have mentioned, and there is a $3.90 return on investment for every $1 the government spends on medical research. The operational infrastructure support program to support the hidden costs of research, such as IT, cybersecurity, data storage and modern facilities, has been underfunded by this government for years. The Victorian government contributes the lowest level of funding for the full cost of research compared with all other states. What a disgrace that this state does that. It just is extraordinary. Current funding in Victoria equates to 17 cents for every dollar in grant funding; in New South Wales the government contributes 55 cents, and in Queensland it is 80 cents. AAMRI estimates that hundreds of jobs are being lost and at least 10 scientific labs closed last year due to insufficient funding. They estimate 500 jobs were lost last year alone. This is because this government has provided insufficient funding for years. The action I seek is for the government to provide ongoing, sustainable OIS funding to ensure the future of our world-renowned medical research sector, support those jobs and drive the Victorian economy in this sector further.

Responses

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (18:36): There were 20 adjournment matters this evening. They will be referred to the relevant and appropriate ministers.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 6:37 pm.