Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Tuesday 17 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

CONTENTS

BILLS
Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025 877
Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025 877
Crimes Amendment Bill 2026 877
Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026 877
Royal assent 877
QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE AND MINISTERS STATEMENTS
COVID-19 877
Miners Rest sports facility 878
Ministers statements: illicit tobacco 879
Construction industry 880
Stripsearching 880
Ministers statements: community safety 881
Mental health services 882
Construction industry 883
Ministers statements: Murray–Darling Basin agreement 884
Cultural events 884
Somali Community Inc 886
Ministers statements: maternal and child health services 887
CONSTITUENCY QUESTIONS
Northern Metropolitan Region 888
South-Eastern Metropolitan Region 888
Southern Metropolitan Region 888
Northern Metropolitan Region 888
Western Victoria Region 889
Western Victoria Region 889
Northern Victoria Region 889
Western Metropolitan Region 889
Northern Victoria Region 890
North-Eastern Metropolitan Region 890
Eastern Victoria Region 890
Western Victoria Region 890
Western Metropolitan Region 891
Southern Metropolitan Region 891
Eastern Victoria Region 891
PETITIONS
Shopping centre crime 891
Women's community sport 892
COMMITTEES
Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee 892
Alert Digest No. 4 892
PAPERS
Papers 893
BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE
Notices 894
General business 894
MEMBERS STATEMENTS
Celebrate Mooroolbark Festival 894
Aidan Becker 894
Lachlan Andrew 895
Government performance 895
Waste and recycling management 895
Port Fairy Folk Festival 896
Nippers carnival 896
Middle East conflict 896
Ramadan 896
Community safety 897
Community safety 897
BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE
Notices of motion 897
BILLS
Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Bill 2025 898

CONTENTS

Second reading 898
National Gas (Victoria) Amendment Bill 2025 923
Second reading 923
Committee 950
Third reading 965
ADJOURNMENT
Mortgage Stress Victoria 965
Boroondara crime 965
Medicinal cannabis 966
Workplace deaths 966
Land tax 967
COVID-19 967
Albury Wodonga Health 968
Formula One Australian Grand Prix 969
Clarinda planning 969
Bushfire preparedness 969
Fuel supply and prices 970
Ballarat Greyhound Racing Club 970
Sandhurst Centre site, Bendigo 971
Mernda and Epping police stations 971
COVID-19 972
State Emergency Service Whitehorse unit 973
Responses 973

Tuesday 17 March 2026

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

Bills

Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025

Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025

Crimes Amendment Bill 2026

Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2026

Royal assent

The PRESIDENT (12:03): I have received a message from the Governor, dated 11 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:
>
> **6/2026** Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Act 2026
>
> **7/2026** Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Act 2026
>
> **8/2026** Crimes Amendment Act 2026
>
> **9/2026** Energy and Other Legislation Amendment (Resilience Reforms and Other Matters) Act 2026

Questions without notice and ministers statements

COVID-19

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:04): (1261) My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, it has been reported publicly that the government has settled a class action from thousands of COVID lockdown impacted small businesses for $125 million. Was the $125 million in compensation budgeted for?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:04): I thank Mrs McArthur for her question. At the outset, Mrs McArthur, I do not think you were in the Parliament at the time, but the government took a lot of measures to ensure that the community were protected both from –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: I said it last sitting week: I wonder what point people see in even asking a question if they are just going to start yelling when the minister is trying to answer. Maybe you should listen to her answer. She is not provoking anything, I would have thought.

Jaclyn SYMES: The government stands by the steps we took to protect Victorians in the face of a one-in-100-year pandemic –

Georgie Crozier interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Ms Crozier, you are being very disruptive. It is going to be a really long question time, so I would ask you to rein it in a bit, please.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, the state has reached a settlement to resolve this matter. This is a matter on which we will have further discussions with the court, so I am not in a position to give a lot more detail, except I would point out that your description of $125 million as compensation is not an accurate reflection. This is a court settlement.

Members interjecting.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:07): Well, you have certainly managed to avoid getting on the stand. When asked yesterday about the outcome, transport minister and leadership aspirant Gabrielle Williams said the government had taken a fiscally responsible decision. Treasurer, does the advice you have received from your department confirm the government's action, which includes spending approximately $40 million in legal fees and then the additional $125 million in compensation, as fiscally responsible?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:07): Mrs McArthur, the government has taken a fiscally responsible decision to settle a matter rather than continue with a protracted legal action, in accordance with advice from our legal representatives.

Miners Rest sports facility

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:08): (1262) My question is to the Minister for Regional Development. Minister, following a commitment from the Premier in 2023 for a new community sporting facility at Miners Rest near Ballarat, which included a competition-grade oval, sport pavilion, car parking, amenities and change rooms, can you confirm that this project will still proceed?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:08): I thank Mrs McArthur for her question. I have got some information in relation to Miners Rest. As you would appreciate, many of the projects you have referred to are a matter for the minister for sport –

Members interjecting.

Jaclyn SYMES: I am literally going to provide you quite a detailed answer, because I have got some information here that I can provide you. Obviously, Mrs McArthur, in relation to the commitments facilitated by the money that we have made available for regional Victoria, there are hundreds of local projects and many new homes, which we have heard a lot about from the minister. Many are finished; many are underway. There are sporting facilities being delivered right across the state. Overall budget and total number of homes being delivered is 588 homes already completed.

In relation to your direct question in relation to Miners Rest, my advice is that the necessary assessment and planning processes for the proposed Miners Rest community sports facility are ongoing. These projects represent an opportunity to secure of course generational investment and benefits for regional Victoria, so they have to be done right. We are exploring all options to deliver support for Miners Rest after cultural artefacts were found at the site. It is very important to make sure that we take these matters seriously. The planning is still progressing, as I said, and I will endeavour to provide you with any more updates as they come toward me. I will give it straight to you, Mrs McArthur, so that you can inform your community.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:10): I was actually there at Miners Rest last week. Nothing has happened on this site – absolutely nothing. It is an empty paddock, and after three years of promises, there is no action whatsoever. Minister, this project was supposed to be completed last year. When will the community actually see a shovel in the ground?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:11): Mrs McArthur, I have provided you with the information that I have at hand in relation to planning processes that are underway, exploring all opportunities to deliver support for the Miners Rest community after obviously the cultural artefacts were identified. When I have any further information, whether it is within my portfolio or another minister's –

Bev McArthur interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, it is not appropriate to railroad over culturally significant sites. There are planning processes underway. I have provided you with the information I have at hand, and I have generously offered to provide an update, without further prompting, within question time.

Ministers statements: illicit tobacco

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:11): I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is cracking down on the illicit tobacco trade and keeping Victorians safe. Illicit tobacco fuels organised crime, puts communities at risk and undermines legitimate businesses – many family-owned businesses that are doing the right thing. That is why the Allan Labor government introduced Victoria's first-ever tobacco licensing scheme, and under this scheme anyone who wants to legally sell tobacco in Victoria must hold a licence and be a fit and proper person. The results of –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Reset the clock.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Unless the minister is being provocative, we will just start again and start again and start again if it keeps going. Start again, and you might be starting again soon – see how you go.

Enver ERDOGAN: Today I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is cracking down on the illicit tobacco trade and keeping Victorians safe.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Reset the clock. Start again.

Enver ERDOGAN: I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is cracking down on illicit tobacco and keeping Victorians safe.

A member interjected.

The PRESIDENT: You are going to get booted if you do it again. Start again.

Enver ERDOGAN: I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is cracking down on illicit tobacco and keeping Victorians safe. Illicit tobacco fuels organised crime, puts communities at risk and undermines legitimate retailers, including many family-owned businesses that are doing the right thing. That is why the Allan Labor government introduced Victoria's first-ever tobacco licensing scheme. Under this scheme anyone who wants to sell tobacco legally must hold a licence and pass a fit and proper person test, and it is already delivering results. In the first month alone, Tobacco Licensing Victoria inspectors have been on the ground, and the results themselves speak volumes: $5 million worth of illegal tobacco products off our streets. That includes more than 3 million cigarettes, 2243 cigars, 40 kilograms of loose-leaf tobacco and more than 32 kilograms of shisha tobacco.

But we know that this is a national challenge and it continues to evolve, and that is why we have been clear that if further powers were needed, we would act. That is why Labor will introduce closure powers to allow businesses caught selling illicit tobacco to be shut down, with short-term closure powers of up to 90 days for the regulator and Victoria Police and indefinite closure powers for the courts. These reforms will also hold landlords to account if they knowingly overlook illicit tobacco being sold from their premises, whilst also empowering them to terminate leases and kick out illegal operators. We are ensuring that Victoria continues to have the toughest tobacco laws in the country, making illegal tobacco harder to sell, harder to profit from and easier to shut down, because when new challenges emerge, only Labor delivers the new ideas and policies to protect community safety and back in Victorian small businesses.

Construction industry

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:15): (1263) My question is for the Minister for Industrial Relations. On 4 March in the Assembly, when responding to a question about building industry corruption, the least popular Premier in Australia said:

> As a result of strengthening the Labour Hire Authority, they have cancelled 147 construction licences …

The same number was also cited twice by the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop last sitting week and is detailed on the Labour Hire Authority's website. But isn't it a fact that this number refers to the construction industry licences cancelled since 2018, not since the laws were changed late last year?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:16): Mr Welch, in terms of the specific timing of the 147, I do not have a breakdown for you. But in answer to your question, yes.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:16): Thank you for your answer, Minister. You may or may not have an answer to this then as well. Isn't it a fact that the total number of specified construction industry licence cancellations on the LHA website for the months of November, December and January is only six, not 147?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:16): Mr Welch, as we exchanged last week, this is an independent agency that I do not instruct. You are within your rights to ask them for direct information. But what is very clear, Mr Welch, is that there would be no cancellations of licences under a coalition government.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: I just want to acknowledge in the gallery a previous member of this chamber, Mr Rod Barton. He must miss the place very much.

Members interjecting.

Sonja Terpstra: On a point of order, President, members of this house are entitled to raise a point of order without assistance, but also I note Mr Davis engaged directly with the gallery and caused significant disruption. I ask that you call Mr Davis to order.

David Davis: On the point of order, President, the member is quite correct – I ought not to have directly engaged with the gallery – but he is a provocative individual.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Is it eight sitting weeks left or something like that? Very good.

Stripsearching

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:18): (1264) My question is for the Minister for Corrections. The recently released report *Ending Strip Searching in Australian Prisons*, co-authored by the Human Rights Law Centre, Formerly Incarcerated Girls Justice Advocates Melbourne and Flat Out, calls for an end to strip searches in Australian prisons. This report highlights the dehumanising and largely ineffective nature of strip searches. In one example, in the month of April 2022, 221 recorded strip searches were conducted on women at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre with zero items found. Key findings of the report include that strip searches are often ineffective, less invasive alternatives are available, children are being forced to strip in front of adult prison guards and the harms of stripsearching compound the mass incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. So will the minister read this report and listen to these calls to end strip searches in Victorian prisons?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:19): I thank Ms Payne for her question and

her interest in this matter. Our government is committed to keeping Victorians safe, and that means holding offenders to account while supporting them to find better pathways. That is why we invest in rehabilitation: to reduce the risks of reoffending when people are back out in the community.

Keeping contraband out of prisons is a critical part of maintaining a safe and secure environment not only for staff and prisoners but also for visitors. The integrity of Victoria's corrections system and the safety of all staff, prisoners and the community are of the highest priority. Corrections Victoria employs a range of methods to prevent contraband from entering Victorian prisons. These include the use of advanced technology, such as body scanning and drone detection; intelligence-led physical searches of prisoners, visitors and staff, especially by our specialist team the security and emergency services group; and the use of drug detection dogs. These methods are all alternatives to stripsearching, and strip searches should be used as little as possible. That is what we are aiming for, and that is why we have invested in new technologies across our corrections system. Where we have invested in this technology, we have seen a reduction in strip searches. Dame Phyllis Frost, as Ms Payne pointed out, is an example of a women's prison where we have installed airport-style body scanners, and the number of strip searches has declined. But we need to be very clear here: corrections authorities need a full suite of options available to them to stay ahead of attempts to smuggle dangerous contraband into facilities. We need to understand that strip searches do act as an important deterrent also in the system in a dynamic environment. So at this stage we have no plans to change the law relating to strip searches.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:21): Minister, thank you for your response. My question was in regard to reading the report, so I hope that you do read the report. But by way of supplementary, the *Ending Strip Searching in Australian Prisons* report also recommends law reform to mandate the recording of searches of people in prison, with information to be published quarterly at minimum. This would include the reasons for searches and results of searches, including any items identified; the age, gender, race or ethnicity of a person subject to searches; and who conducted the searches at the prison which they took place in. Will the minister accept this recommendation and expand data collection on searches of people in Victorian prisons?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:21): I thank Ms Payne for her supplementary question. It is a really good question, because we do a really good job in terms of collecting that data in the youth justice system. As I have always said, there are a range of methods to prevent contraband from entering facilities. Strip searches should be used as a last resort, understanding the adult corrections system is a much larger system and the collection and collation of that data is a bit more challenging for our teams. But I am someone that is always focused on getting as much data as possible, and I am happy to take that away and look at what is possible into the long term. What I will say is at the moment strip searches still play an important role and they are necessary at times. We want them to be kept to a minimum; that is why we have invested in new technologies across our prison system to avoid their use. But in terms of the collection and reporting of data, I am happy to take that away and see what is possible.

Ministers statements: community safety

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:22): It was my very great honour to attend and speak at the Victorian government iftar last week to celebrate Ramadan and the important contribution that our Muslim community makes to Victoria. Ramadan is an important time of reflection, generosity and community, and it was truly heartwarming to be surrounded by nearly 800 community members from right across our state. I have had the pleasure of attending many iftar events this Ramadan and sitting down to hear from many Muslim Victorians about what matters to them, including the deep concern they have for the rising levels of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred. This Sunday was the International Day to Combat Islamophobia, a day which marks the anniversary of the horrific Christchurch massacre. The Allan Labor government was the first

jurisdiction in Australia to formally recognise this day, which is a powerful message that anti-Muslim hate has no place in Victoria. On Sunday we released our guide to combat Islamophobia. These resources have been developed in partnership with Victoria's Muslim communities and will help equip Victorians with the tools to recognise and call out hate, whether as a victim or a witness to an act of Islamophobia. While no Muslim should have to deal with the types of incidents we have seen recently, equally no Victorian should have to deal with these levels of hatred alone. We will always stand with our Muslim community, and we will always stand against hate and racism, not just with words but with action.

Mental health services

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:24): (1265) My question is for the Minister for Mental Health. Minister, in response to a recommendation of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, this government committed $38 million in the 2021–22 budget to fund individualised support services and mental health treatment access for 2000 new specialised houses for people living with severe mental illness. In 2023 the housing minister allegedly, according to public reporting, approved the plan to fulfil the housing commitment, but as of last week the support framework remains unapproved. Minister, can you explain why you have not approved the support framework?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:25): Thank you, Dr Mansfield, for your question and your interest in these issues. Of course the Allan Labor government remains very much focused on delivering the royal commission's vision for supported housing for people living with mental health challenges. We know that this can be an often challenging part of our supported housing system. We acknowledge that there is a real importance in ensuring that these homes are not just bricks and mortar but places where people can access the tailored mental health support that they need so that they can continue to live well in the community. The Allan Labor government is delivering 505 purpose-built homes across Victoria for adults who are living with mental health challenges, and that has been backed by $200 million of investment to build these homes. I am grateful for the ongoing work and commitment of the minister for housing in working together with me on ensuring that some of the most marginalised people in the community do not miss out on access to stable housing. These homes that I have just cited are co-designed by people living with mental health challenges. To date there are over 102 new purpose-built homes that have been completed by the Haven Foundation, who are doing incredible work in this area. In addition to Haven, another 183 homes have been completed by other community housing providers.

What I will acknowledge, Dr Mansfield, is that these are complex reforms, and we are absolutely committed to seeing the reforms through. It is why we need to take a phased approach, however, to ensure that people living with mental health challenges get the long-term housing and specialist supports that they need. People identified for this program are provided with a range of dedicated supports, including through area mental health and wellbeing services, the early intervention psychosocial support response or often the NDIS. Consumers in these homes have demonstrated improved recovery outcomes, stronger community connections, often reunification with family and loved ones, and increased independence. We know this is a policy that has enormous merit and one that we are committed to continuing to implement in a phased way.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:28): I thank the minister for that response. While it sounds like there is some progress in some areas, I think the fundamental question has not been answered. There has been no explanation for why the support framework has not been approved. There are also a few extra questions that have come out of that response, including that originally this was announced to be 2000 specialised houses and you have said there are now 505, but we will leave that one perhaps for the housing minister for another time. What has happened to that $38 million that was committed in the 2021–22 budget?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:28): I thank Dr Mansfield for that supplementary question. I think I was giving the number of purpose-built homes as an answer to the overall recommendation of 2000 and giving you, I guess, a progress report on the number of houses that have been delivered under this important program. I acknowledged in a pretty up-front way that this is complex reform and that we are taking a phased approach to this. We are absolutely committed to delivering the 2000 homes for adults living with mental health challenges, as the royal commission recommended, and we are continuing to work with mental health services and housing providers to ensure those individuals that need those supported places have support in place before being allocated to new homes. We acknowledge that linking people with the right supports and the right accommodation can take time.

Construction industry

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:29): (1266) My question is to the Minister for Industrial Relations. On 5 February the Labour Hire Authority announced it had suspended the licence of Labor Party donor BK Labour Hire of 574 Plummer Street, Port Melbourne, almost two months after the arrest of company personnel was reported in the *Age*. Can the minister advise if the authority is investigating the similarly named BK traffic construction, which also operates out of a unit at 574 Plummer Street, which the authority website indicates still holds an active licence?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:30): I thank Mr Welch for his question. Mr Welch, as you would appreciate, I cannot directly provide information in relation to the current, former or prospective investigations of the Labour Hire Authority. I can certainly have a conversation with the Labour Hire Authority, because as you would appreciate, when we made amendments in the last tranche of reforms for the LHA – which you seemed pretty against, actually, in terms of the exchange of information – there is the ability, where it is in the public interest, for us to have greater conversations with the LHA in their role, and the information can come either out to the public or via me as minister. I can certainly seek some more information on your behalf, because I do not have a ready reckoner of all of the investigations of the LHA currently in my folder. Perhaps I can come back to you after making some inquiries. But again, I would point out that there would not be a Labour Hire Authority to make inquiries of if you mob had your way, nor would they be able to provide me with information had you had your way in the most recent amendments to the legislation. I really appreciate your new-found admiration for a body that you did not even want to exist.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:32): Thank you, Minister, for that interesting answer. This is what zero tolerance looks like, the wilful lack of curiosity – the similar number. The Industry Capability Network website has details of an 11 May 2022 SRL industry briefing when a listed attendee representing BK Labour Hire has the exact same name as the current nominated officer for BK traffic construction on the LHA website. Will the minister ensure that the links between BK traffic construction and BK Labour Hire are fully investigated, or does it first need to be reported in the *Age* before your government will act?

The PRESIDENT: The minister can pick one question; there were a couple there.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:32): Mr Welch, the LHA do important work. As you indicated before, you had identified the number of licences that have been cancelled by the Labour Hire Authority. 147 construction licences have been cancelled by the Labour Hire Authority.

Members interjecting.

Jaclyn SYMES: Well, since you asked your question, I have been able to obtain some more information, as I said I would. 147 labour hire licences in the construction industry have been cancelled since the scheme commenced, and 126 construction company licences were cancelled in the last

financial year. That is a lot of different companies and a lot of different licences. As you would appreciate, I do not have a list of all of the names and all of the entities.

Members interjecting.

Jaclyn SYMES: President, I have answered Mr Welch's supplementary question in my substantive answer, and I am more than happy to put anything to the Labour Hire Authority, because they do really important work and only exist because of the government taking – *(Time expired)*

Ministers statements: Murray–Darling Basin agreement

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:34): The Commonwealth Murray–Darling Basin plan review is underway. The Murray–Darling Basin Authority has released its discussion paper, and Victoria is preparing a strong response. Northern Victoria is Australia's food bowl. It is the largest irrigation area in the country, producing more than $3 billion worth of farmgate produce every year and employing over 35,000 people, including flow-on industries. But in the current discussion paper Victoria's regional communities and economies have been overlooked. The basin is not just a river system. It supports people, towns and food production that underpin our regional communities and the national economy.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Minister, I am sorry to have to do this to you, but I think you might have to start from the start. Maybe I am on the wrong plane here, but the minister has not been provocative, and she has got a right to put a statement on the record. Minister, if you would like to start from the start, we will reset.

Gayle TIERNEY: Thank you, President. I would appreciate that, given regional Victorians are very interested in this issue.

The Commonwealth Murray–Darling Basin plan review is underway. The Murray–Darling Basin –

Wendy Lovell interjected.

Gayle TIERNEY: The Commonwealth Murray–Darling Basin plan review is underway. The Murray–Darling Basin Authority has released their discussion paper, and Victoria is preparing a strong response. Northern Victoria is Australia's food bowl. It is the largest irrigation area in the country, producing more than $3 billion worth of farmgate produce every year and employing 35,000 people, including flow-on industries. But in the current discussion paper Victoria's regional communities and economies have been overlooked. The basin is not just a river system; it supports people, towns and food production that underpin our regional communities and the national economy. Our basin communities understand better than anyone: both communities and the environment must be protected. We have made our position clear at every opportunity. Victoria supports a strategic approach that protects both the environment and the communities that rely upon it. The Commonwealth must make best use of environmental water already recovered. There must be no further open tender buybacks. This is our opportunity to reset the Commonwealth's approach to the basin plan implementation for the next decade to ensure sustainable agriculture and thriving regional communities, our core national outcomes, alongside environmental repair. Local knowledge and lived experience of Victorian communities are needed to shape a basin plan that is workable, balanced and enduring. Submissions are open until 1 May. I encourage our regional communities to make their voices heard on the Murray–Darlin Basin plan.

Cultural events

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:37): (1267) My question is to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. The Premier's Lunar New Year gala dinner costs taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars. The opposition received one invitation with no speech. However, you spoke as minister and the Premier also spoke and had a fireside chat segment. Minister, did you or the Premier's

private office expand the invitation list to Labor MPs and the guests of Labor MPs whose electorates contain large Chinese and Vietnamese populations while failing to invite Victoria's only Vietnamese member of Parliament, Trung Luu?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:38): I thank Mr Mulholland for asking me a question in the multicultural affairs portfolio. I want to say from the outset that our government is incredibly proud to celebrate Victoria's cultural diversity and to do that with our multicultural and multifaith communities. Events that we have had recently have really showcased what a fabulous, diverse state we all live in and we are all proud to be a part of. The reality is that successive governments have supported events like these for decades because they matter to the people who we want to engage with and the people that we want to celebrate with in those communities right across the state. They are organised through the normal government processes, with the Department of Premier and Cabinet working with community organisations and relevant offices. This is entirely appropriate. What we will not do is turn community events into political footballs, like those opposite continue to do.

Evan Mulholland: On a point of order, President, on relevance, I was asking the minister about her role and the Premier's private office's role in the invitation list for this event.

The PRESIDENT: I think the minister was being relevant, and she explained the process. Minister, do you want to continue?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you, President. I was about to go on to say that I am incredibly proud to attend many, many, many events in the community – not just the Victorian government iftar we celebrated last week and the Chinese Lunar New Year event, which was a few weeks ago. I attend many, many community events, sometimes with Mr Luu, which is always a great pleasure, I must say. He is a very strong advocate for the Vietnamese community. So I do not think we will be taking lectures from Mr Mulholland about social cohesion, because he continues to demonstrate time and time again that he is more interested in his own political advancement and his own political interests and not the interests of our diverse communities, who I am very proud to stand with, as are my colleagues.

Renee Heath: On a point of order, President, I think if the minister wants to attack a member, she needs to put it in a substantive motion.

The PRESIDENT: I am not too sure if there was an accusation put there, but if there was, your point of order would be valid.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:41): Minister, many community organisations, like the India Society of Victoria, the Federation of Indian Associations of Victoria, the Victorian Lebanese Community Council and El Rahman mosque and charity have publicly said they have been recently vetoed from the invitation list to events like the Premier's Diwali, the Premier's Lunar New Year and the Victorian iftar because they are not sufficiently supportive of the Labor Party. Isn't it a fact that the Premier's private office is vetoing significant community representatives from these taxpayer-funded events?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:41): I thank Mr Mulholland for his supplementary question. I completely reject the assertions that are contained in his supplementary question. So many people have contacted my office and spoken to me at subsequent events to compliment the government on how diverse the crowd was at the iftar dinner last week. Just about every cultural background and different part of the Muslim faith was represented at that dinner. Almost 800 people and community leaders came from far and wide from right across the state, and I am really proud that we were able to stand side by side with the Muslim community to recognise the enormous contribution that they make to this state.

Evan Mulholland: On a point of order, President, on relevance with 15 seconds to go, the question went to whether the Premier's private office was vetoing significant community representatives from these events.

The PRESIDENT: I hate paraphrasing people, but I think she said she completely rejected that assertion as soon as she stood up.

Ingrid STITT: I would remind those opposite that invitations were issued to the opposition and the Greens. In fact Mr McGowan had a fantastic time – he posted on Facebook – and good for him.

Somali Community Inc

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (12:43): (1268) My question is to the minister for housing. Minister, Somali Community Inc has been operating from the Flemington public housing estate for decades, providing a lifeline and a gateway for African refugee families through pathways connected to jobs, education and housing. Now, during the holy month of Ramadan, this organisation faces eviction, and this is despite repeated requests for help to the Premier, the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Homes Victoria and your own office with no resolution. Minister, will you intervene to prevent the eviction of Somali Community Inc and support them to find a suitable location so that they can continue their important work in supporting residents in Flemington?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:44): Thank you very much for that question, Ms Gray-Barberio, and I want to at the outset acknowledge the many organisations that work so hard to provide support to communities who call the towers home and the people who are part of the broader networks of multicultural and multifaith organisations. These organisations provide the most amazing support, outreach services and engagement, contact and opportunity to people, and they do that not because of the towers themselves but despite the conditions in which they work. This is where we have worked really, really closely with communities across a range of settings to make sure that we understand what their needs are and have a bespoke response to the challenges that they face as we redevelop the towers. But again, the alternative in developing the towers is to leave the existing buildings there and require organisations like the Somali community organisation to work in really, really substandard conditions. I am sure that even the Greens would not want that to be the case into the long term, so I have confirmed a grants program to assist community organisations with relocation processes.

This is about making sure that we replicate that engagement that has been happening across broader towers developments as that work goes on. This is really about a person-centred and community-centred approach to towers redevelopments. Across the towers that I have visited since the most recent announcements at the end of January, the key things that have come across as themes relate to connection to community. Whether that is the North Melbourne Language and Learning centre, which we helped to relocate to new premises, or the continuation of programs including Foodbank and community gardens programs, we are determined to make sure that we understand what it is that communities and residents want to continue. Whether they are in the areas to which they move in and around the existing tower sites or to areas further afield, this is –

Anasina Gray-Barberio: On a point of order, President, I am thrilled to hear that the minister is determined to ensure that these community organisations are going to be looked after, but my question was: will the minister help prevent the eviction of this community and help them to find a suitable location so that they can continue their essential work?

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

Harriet SHING: Ms Gray-Barberio, you do not seem very thrilled, and that is a shame because we are delivering a range of supports to community organisations.

Anasina Gray-Barberio interjected.

Harriet SHING: Ms Gray-Barberio, you either want to hear the answer or you do not. I will confirm to you that we are providing grants programs and supports to community organisations. We have done that across a range of other organisations and programs to date.

Anasina Gray-Barberio interjected.

Harriet SHING: We will continue to do that, and we will not be doing that because you stood up and made a pious set of statements. We will be doing that because it is the right thing to do in a person-centred approach, in a community-centred approach and in an approach which is about long-term responsible opportunities for people to thrive.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (12:47): Organisations like Somali Community Inc foster and strengthen social cohesion. Plenty of multicultural communities are expected to foster social cohesion, and yet I am hearing, Minister, that you are not even interested – you really are not. What specific steps have you taken to ensure trusted multicultural community organisations are not displaced and that the social cohesion they provide to these communities is not lost?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:48): I will tell you what I am not interested in, Ms Gray-Barberio, and that is the cheap politicisation of issues relating to large-scale change as we embark upon a multidecade process to ensure that housing which is no longer fit for purpose is developed and delivered for people who deserve homes that are modern, that are energy efficient and that are connected to communities and connected to services. I will continue to engage with organisations, with groups and with households who are providing their input into the things most important to them. I will continue to provide support, including through Homes Victoria, who have been engaging with this organisation and with many other organisations, to understand what it is that they need and what it is that they want. The supports that are provided will vary from organisation to organisation, and despite all of your platitudes, Ms Gray-Barberio, we will continue to do this work with outcomes that are geared toward real-world consequences and not your performative garbage.

Ministers statements: maternal and child health services

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:49): I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is supporting families with new babies right across the state by delivering the baby bundle. It was a delight to join the member for St Albans in the other place to celebrate the delivery of more than 220,000 baby bundles to Victorian children – newborn babies – and first-time parents by visiting the wonderful Joan Kirner Women's and Children's Hospital in St Albans. While at the hospital, we were fortunate to meet with proud parents Suchaya and Les and their beautiful new baby Leo to personally deliver their baby bundle. The baby bundle contains nursery essentials to support the health and development of newborn babies. Each baby bundle contains high-quality items, including a safe sleeping bag, first-aid kit, sunhat, grow suit and picture books by Victorian authors. The bundle also includes essential parenting information, such as emergency contacts, to help parents navigate early parenthood and support their newborns to thrive. By supplying essential items free of charge, the baby bundle reduces the immediate financial burden on families at a time when household costs typically increase. Bringing a new baby home is an enormous joy but a huge change for any family, which is why the Victorian government implemented the baby bundle program to support Victorian families from day one of bringing their new baby home.

At Joan Kirner Women's and Children's Hospital and at other birthing hospitals across Victoria the baby bundle is given to families before they go home. Baby bundles may also be given at MCH appointments by the MCH nurse. The baby bundle is just one of the ways we are supporting families and is delivered from within our nation-leading maternal and child health service. Through this universal service, families are supported with key ages and stages appointments to help families raise happy and healthy kids. Families experiencing challenges such as disability, mental health or domestic violence can be further supported through the enhanced maternal and child health service, and we also

deliver the Aboriginal maternal and child health service via 15 Aboriginal organisations across the state, delivering culturally safe health and development appointments to babies and their families. All of this is in addition to the green book, the 24/7 MCH hotline, the nursery equipment program and much more, all delivered via our incredible MCH service to help babies and families thrive. This is about giving families practical support when it matters most.

Constituency questions

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:52): (2217) My constituency question is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and it concerns the lack of adequate street lighting on Mickleham Road, between Attwood and Barrymore Road, in Greenvale. I have recently been contacted by a local constituent who informed me that the current lighting on this stretch of road is not sufficiently addressing issues related to the rapidly growing population, the increase in young drivers and overall congestion. My constituent also highlighted the growing number of kangaroos that are being maimed and killed along this stretch of road and questioned whether increased visibility, particularly as we enter the darker months, would improve the safety of our national icon. Will the minister please work with their department to investigate what can be done to improve safety and visibility on this stretch of road?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:53): (2218) My constituency question today is for the Minister for Local Government. Last year two municipal monitors were appointed to Kingston council. Despite the minister providing responses to questions in Parliament and referencing the terms of reference for the monitors, it remains unclear to me exactly why the monitors were appointed. It also remains unclear why the term of the monitors was extended last Christmas Eve. According to Cr White, even one of the monitors admitted to councillors that he did not know why he had been appointed. One of the key outcomes listed in the terms of reference for the monitors is to assist council in developing an action plan for improving governance. It is hard to see how they can do this without the interim report that has been provided to the minister. These monitors are costing Kingston ratepayers about $1500 per day, but the advice on governance is seemingly hidden from the council itself. Will the minister provide the interim report to Kingston council?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:54): (2219) My question is to the Minister for Education. Last week I met with parents from St Kilda Park Primary School to hear their concerns about the state of their school, which continues to be neglected by the Allan Labor government. Years of chronic underfunding and a lack of long-term planning has left the school community frustrated and disappointed. The school's toilet facilities are so outdated. There is no indoor space large enough to accommodate the whole school community, which means assemblies are often forced to be held outside, even during the middle of winter. After decades without significant investment, parents and staff are simply asking for a clear plan for the school's future, and they have had no joy out of the local member for Albert Park Nina Taylor. I ask the minister: when will the Allan Labor government finally commit to upgrading St Kilda Park Primary School's facilities so that students and teachers have a fit-for-purpose environment to learn and work in, and certainty for their future?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (12:55): (2220) My question is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport. The Northern Councils Alliance, representing the municipalities of Banyule, Darebin, Hume, Merri-bek, Mitchell, Nillumbik and Whittlesea, has raised serious concerns that current rail planning is not meeting the needs of the Upfield corridor and that local governments have not been meaningfully consulted. The Upfield line has long been a problem for my constituents. It is one of Melbourne's most crowded, unreliable and infrequent train lines. With

the Northern Metro Region expected to reach 1.5 million people in the coming decades, rail capacity will not cope unless we implement a comprehensive corridorwide plan. Minister, will you meet with the Northern Councils Alliance to discuss long-term planning for the Upfield rail corridor?

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:56): (2221) My question to the Minister for Skills and TAFE is on behalf of students at VFA Learning in Geelong – your constituents, Minister, and mine – who were walked into a classroom last month and told, 'It's over.' Many were nursing students training for a profession our state desperately needs. VFA, which operated for over 25 years with government contracts, attributed its closure directly to changes in funding policy, cuts made without notice just before Christmas. Students were told to transfer to the Gordon, but many chose VFA precisely for its flexible timetables that allowed them to work while studying – flexibility TAFE does not offer. Your government's ideological obsession with free TAFE is not just squeezing out providers, it is destroying student choice and now costing them their education. What are you doing to ensure these nurses can complete their qualifications?

Western Victoria Region

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:57): (2222) My question is for the Minister for Health Infrastructure. In light of a tragic murder at the Swanston Centre at Barwon Health, staff working there have raised with me concerns about the role of the centre's outdated and unsafe design, including shared bathrooms. While this incident is, I understand, still being investigated, the concerns are not isolated to this event. For years staff have raised the alarm about the serious dangers to consumers and staff posed by this outdated and totally inadequate facility, including in Barwon Health's own 2019 submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. These concerns have been repeatedly ignored by this government. Minister, will you commit to urgently upgrading Barwon Health's mental health inpatient unit?

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:58): (2223) My question is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. When will the minister release the final designs for the duplication of Donnybrook Road and the bridge over the Hume Freeway? Last year the Minister for Roads and Road Safety informed me that planning work for the Donnybrook Road upgrade would be complete in late 2025. We are now well into 2026, but there is still no sign of any design work being released to the public. Results of a community survey were published in November last year, and the feedback reflects what local residents have been saying for years: fully duplicating Donnybrook Road, including the bridge over the Hume, is an urgent necessity. Yet the Allan Labor government is instead prioritising a new intersection at Mitchell Street that requires ripping up the roundabout they built in 2024 and replacing it with traffic lights. The government promised the final designs would be complete in 2025. Labor must stop the delays, release the designs and reveal how it plans to upgrade Donnybrook Road.

Western Metropolitan Region

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:59): (2224) My constituency question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. My constituent recently boarded a V/Line service at Deer Park, intentionally choosing a later train to avoid peak-hour congestion. Passengers were packed shoulder to shoulder, with some commuters forced inside toilet cubicles to simply find standing room. Apparently this is a regular occurrence. It beggars belief that the government has money in the coffers for the $1.7 billion operating licence for SRL East a decade in advance while commuters in the west are literally standing in toilet cubicles to get to work. My constituent asks: will the minister give clear timelines for the delivery of the Melton line electrification and Mount Atkinson and Thornhill Park train stations, and what will the government do in the interim to ease commuters' suffering?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (13:00): (2225) My question is to the Minister for Industrial Relations. Bendigo-based charity MADCOW has raised serious concerns about the financial and compliance burden imposed by the Labour Hire Authority. MADCOW is already subject to rigorous regulation and audit by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission at a cost of around $10,000 per year. Despite this, it is also required to comply with the Labour Hire Authority's reporting regime, paying more than $3300 annually and a further licence renewal fee of over $4800 every three years to provide information already given to the ACNC. In effect, charities such as MADCOW are paying to report exactly the same information to two bodies. For charities operating with limited resources, this duplication diverts funds away from frontline community services. I would appreciate a response and ask the minister to review the application of Labour Hire Authority fees to ACNC-audited charities and consider an exemption in these circumstances. I first raised the issue a year ago and, despite repeated follow-up, have received no response from the minister to date.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:01): (2226) My question today is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. The incredibly disruptive night works continue to cause great distress to many residents along the North East Link toll road construction site. People are going for many, many nights without sleep. It is noisy, their houses are vibrating, the lighting is glaring – it is appalling. People are expected to just deal with these massive disruptions and be able to continue on with their everyday lives. They are enduring noise and vibration and light that continue day and night, let alone the dust and the grime. Many of these night works are classed as unavoidable; that is how the project can get away with disturbing residents for weeks and months on end. Minister, what considerations, if any, are made to resident wellbeing when night works are classed as unavoidable? Because surely people's ability to sleep and people's health and wellbeing should be a key consideration in these determinations, and currently I think many residents would say that their wellbeing is not being considered at all.

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (13:02): (2227) My question is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport. Residents in eastern Victoria, and in particular South Gippsland, are still required to rely on paper tickets to access public transport, while other parts of the state are moving beyond the troubled and beleaguered Myki system, if you can believe that, trialling contact payment technology. For several years I have raised the issue on behalf of residents who keep asking why regional Victorians continue to be left behind when it comes to basic ticketing technology. The reliance on paper tickets is inconvenient for locals and confusing for visitors, creating unnecessary barriers to public transport use and regional tourism. Given the minister is trialling a new system after the beleaguered Myki, when will the government actually implement a clear timeline for electronic or paper-free ticketing in my region of Eastern Victoria and particularly in South Gippsland?

Western Victoria Region

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (13:03): (2228) Miners Rest has been forgotten. We should already be enjoying a brand new sporting facility with a new oval and pavilion and new change rooms and amenities, but instead, what has happened? Almost $600 million has been sent to Glasgow to run the Commonwealth Games, and nothing is happening in Miners Rest. Labor ruined the Commonwealth Games with empty promises from a Premier and the irrelevant member for Ripon, an empty paddock which was supposed to fulfil the dreams of locals aspiring to be the next sporting champion and an empty feeling where hope once existed. This is all thanks to Labor – a kick in the guts, a slap in the face, a missed opportunity mismanaged and squandered by a litany of incompetence. My question is for the Premier: will you apologise to the people of Miners Rest for letting them down so badly?

Western Metropolitan Region

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (13:03): (2229) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety regarding the upgrade of the Western Freeway between Melton and Caroline Springs. Due to rapid population growth in Melbourne's west, both federal and state governments have committed to upgrading the Western Freeway, a critical transport corridor. While planning began in 2023, no construction has started three years later. Meanwhile, my constituents are concerned about the lack of progress on this urgent project. Could the minister please update my constituents on when construction will commence for the Western Freeway upgrade between Melton and Caroline Springs in Melbourne's west and what is causing the delay? Residents in Melbourne's west are experiencing increases in congestion, longer commute times and road safety risks due to growing traffic volumes and poor road conditions. For these reasons alone I implore the minister to listen to my constituents.

Southern Metropolitan Region

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:04): (2230) My question today is for the Minister for Community Sport, and I ask that the minister examine the proposals and plans of the Monash Villarreal Football Club and make provision in the forthcoming state budget for a state share of their proposals. They seek to build a gymnasium, offices and, importantly, a synthetic surface at the Argyle Reserve in Kinrade Street, Hughesdale. They are very impressive soccer club. They actually draw from a wide area. The standard of play is very high. They have links into Spain with coaching techniques and player pathways to esteemed Spanish teams. They are a remarkable football club by anyone's approach, and their strategic plan lays out much of this. I ask that the minister look at this and make provision of up to $2 million as part of a $3.6 million spend.

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (13:06): (2231) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. A cafe owner from Rosebud contacted me about the dangerous condition of the Mornington Peninsula Freeway, particularly between the Dromana overpass and the Mount Martha overpass near Martha Cove. A small business in Rosebud relies on the 8 million tourists that travel to the peninsula every year. He is concerned that the road conditions are affecting those numbers. During rainfall, water floods across sections of the freeway, hiding damaging potholes. Grass grows along the edges of the road and it attracts wildlife to the area. My question is: will the minister commit to repairing the damaged areas of road along here that have been caused by flooding and all of the potholes?

Petitions

Shopping centre crime

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) presented a petition bearing 92 signatures:

> The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the need to provide security guards at shopping centres with the legal powers to possess and use extendable batons, OC spray, and handcuffs to disarm and apprehend offenders carrying edged weapons. In the wake of the Northland Shopping Centre incident, it is now time the Victorian Government introduce these powers for unarmed security guards. This is becoming more common, and guards do not have the tools. It is time to make this change. It should be a legal requirement so incidents can be prevented quickly by security guards; disarming, subduing and restraining offenders in these environments.
>
> **The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to introduce legal and reasonable powers for security guards at shopping centres to use non-lethal weapons such as OC spray, extendable batons and handcuffs.**

Women's community sport

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) presented a petition bearing 1801 signatures:

> The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that the Victorian Government has defunded the Office for Women in Sport and Recreation (OWSR) and cut funding to violence prevention programs that address the structural drivers of gender-based violence. As of 17 June 2025, 33 women have been killed by violence in 2025. In 2024, it was 103.
>
> In sport, the consequences of gender inequality are clear. A third of women who play community sport in Victoria have considered leaving their club due to inequitable treatment. Women and girls across all sports continue to speak out about exclusion, silencing, harm, and misogyny. These are not isolated incidents, they are symptoms of embedded cultural problems that demand structural solutions.
>
> The OWSR was the first of its kind in Australia. It played a vital role in embedding gender equality into the fabric of Victorian sport, supporting leadership opportunities for women and girls, implementing policy and funding education and prevention programs to address the issues.
>
> Without this office, these cuts threaten the progress made toward safer, more inclusive sporting spaces.
>
> Defunding the programs and OWSR, which are designed to challenge this imbalance, is disastrous.
>
> **The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to urgently reinstate the Office for Women in Sport and Recreation as a standalone, properly funded body, reverse cuts to gender equality and violence prevention programs, including those run by Sport and Recreation Victoria, and commit to a long-term investment in structural change that supports the participation, leadership, and safety of women and girls in all levels of sport, particularly at grassroots and community levels.**

Committees

Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee

Alert Digest No. 4

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:08): Pursuant to section 35 of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, I table *Alert Digest* No. 4 of 2026, including appendices, from the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee. I move:

> That the report be published.

Motion agreed to.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (13:09): I move:

> That the Council take note of the report.

I would like to make a comment as a member of SARC and encourage people to read this report. It does cover four bills, but of particular interest is the Safe Food Victoria Bill 2026. It is about establishing Safe Food Victoria but in the process abolishes Dairy Food Safety Victoria and also PrimeSafe and amends a number of other bills. In this change there is an expansion of the role of authorised officers, and it seems to be silent on the role of authorised officers and their ability to inspect residential premises. There is an effective paragraph (b) of subclause 101(1), which is that authorised officers may enter any premises used to produce, manufacture or distribute regulated food. The committee will write to the minister to seek further information. The previous acts also do have exemptions carved out, but there are very broad definitions in this bill. The report notes that:

> … equivalent provisions in nearly all other Australian jurisdictions provide that they do 'not authorise entry into any part of premises that is being used solely for residential purposes, except – (a) with the consent of the occupier of the premises, or (b) under the authority of a search warrant, or (c) if that part of the premises is being used for the preparation or service of meals provided with paid accommodation.' Queensland's provision 'does not include a part of the premises where a person resides'.

The committee is writing to the minister to seek further clarification as to what impact that subclause will have on residential premises. But I think it is worth pointing out that, particularly for dairy farms, there are farms that are homes and there are people cooking in their kitchens, so with the expansion to food, what impact is this going to have? The minister's response can take some time to be received

after the SARC report, so I am very keen – with that legislation being debated in the lower house, and certainly before it comes to our upper house – that we have clarity on that point, because rural and regional Victoria have already had rights eroded under this government. This is just a further expansion, and it needs further clarification.

Motion agreed to.

Papers

Papers

Tabled by Clerk:

Financial Management Act 1994 – 2025–26 Mid-Year Financial Report (incorporating Quarterly Financial Report No. 2), March 2026 *(Ordered to be published) (released on 6 March 2026 – a non-sitting day)*.

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

Benalla Planning Scheme – Amendment C45.

Cardinia Planning Scheme – Amendments C271 and C285.

Casey Planning Scheme – Amendment C296.

East Gippsland Planning Scheme – Amendment C171.

Glen Eira Planning Scheme – Amendment C269.

Greater Dandenong Planning Scheme – Amendment C250.

Greater Geelong Planning Scheme – Amendment C483.

Greater Shepparton Planning Scheme – Amendment C250.

Kingston Planning Scheme – Amendment C227.

Knox Planning Scheme – Amendment C194.

Latrobe Planning Scheme – Amendment C153.

Melbourne and Yarra Planning Schemes – Amendment GC287.

Moorabool Planning Scheme – Amendment C108.

Mornington Peninsula Planning Scheme – Amendment C243.

Mount Alexander Planning Scheme – Amendment C101.

Nillumbik Planning Scheme – Amendment C143 (Part 1).

Northern Grampians Planning Scheme – Amendment C64.

Pyrenees Planning Scheme – Amendment C50.

Stonnington Planning Scheme – Amendment C339 (Part 1).

Wellington Planning Scheme – Amendment C130.

Wyndham Planning Scheme – Amendment C282.

Statutory Rules under the following Acts of Parliament –

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – No. 15.

Transport (Compliance and Miscellaneous) Act 1983 – No. 14.

Trustee Companies Act 1984 – No. 16.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule Nos. 14 and 15.

Proclamations of the Governor in Council fixing operative dates for the following acts:

Justice Legislation Amendment (Anti-vilification and Social Cohesion) Act 2025 – Remaining provisions – 15 April 2026 *(Gazette S134, 11 March 2026)*.

Transport Legislation Amendment Act 2025 – Part 4 – 16 March 2026 *(Gazette S134, 11 March 2026)*.

Business of the house

Notices

Notices of motion given.

Sitting suspended 1:21 pm until 1:41 pm.

Further notices given.

General business

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (13:48): I move, by leave:

That the following general business take precedence on Wednesday 18 March 2026:

(1) order of the day 2, second reading of the Equal Opportunity Amendment (Medical Treatment) Bill 2026;

(2) order of the day 1, listed for Wednesday 18 March 2026, resumption of debate on the second reading of the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Follow the Money) Bill 2026;

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

(4) notice of motion 1336 standing in Sarah Mansfield's name on Cohealth funding.

Motion agreed to.

Members statements

Celebrate Mooroolbark Festival

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:49): I rise to speak about the fantastic day I had on Sunday at the Celebrate Mooroolbark Festival. I spent the day connecting with local residents, talking to families and hearing directly from them about what matters to the Mooroolbark community the most. A lot of people were keen to talk about the proposed upgrades to the Maroondah Highway and Yarra Road intersection, where public consultation for the planning phase will open shortly. It will make a real difference for locals who use that area each and every day. The entertainment at the festival kept the whole crowd moving, and we were completely entertained. From Zumba sessions and vibrant dance performances to the incredible live heavy metal bands from our local schools, the music was fantastic. The talent in this community never ceases to amaze me, and we were very privileged to be witness to it. I have to give a special shout-out to all the lovely doggos, the good boys and good girls who stopped by with their humans to say hello and to have a conversation with me. I know everyone who visited our stall left with some Terps merch and a smile and our fabulous shopping bags. It was a wonderful day, and I look forward to being back at the Celebrate Mooroolbark Festival again next year.

Aidan Becker

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (13:50): On Friday 6 March Aidan Becker put aside any thought for his own safety and stepped in to protect a 14-year-old schoolboy who was being attacked by thugs at the Mernda railway station. Aidan's courageous intervention resulted in those thugs stalking him down and callously killing him by stabbing him numerous times with a machete – a truly senseless and tragic act. The death of Aidan Becker is heartbreaking, and I extend my deepest condolences to his mother Natalie, his father Matthias, his sister Siobhan, his extended family and friends and the Mernda community. Natalie and Matthias raised a truly amazing, caring and wonderful son, who has been taken from them, their family and the Mernda community far too young.

Aidan played footy for the Mernda Junior Football Club from the under-10s to under-18s and was also a proud North Melbourne Kangaroos supporter. He worked as a security guard at the Alfred hospital and clearly had a deep instinct to offer protection to the vulnerable. I have been deeply moved to read and hear from people who knew him. They have all praised him as an outstanding young man and a beautiful soul who showed kindness to those around him. Friends say he was a peacemaker, but tragically his life has been cut short by criminals committed to intimidation and violence.

The entire Victorian community is shocked and saddened by this dreadful and senseless crime. Last Friday night, together with Jess Wilson and a number of my parliamentary colleagues, I joined the estimated 3000 people who gathered for a candlelight vigil to pay tribute to Aidan, who was remarkably brave and selfless. Aidan paid the highest price for his heroic act, and we cannot allow his sacrifice to be forgotten. Vale, Aidan Becker.

Lachlan Andrew

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (13:52): Last weekend I attended and judged the Rural Ambassador Award, which was hosted by the Shepparton Agricultural Society. Lachlan Andrew was named the winner, and he will be going on to represent the Goulburn Valley group at the Royal Melbourne Show. Lachlan has a strong background in hospitality and dairy, just like me, and I will be proud to see Lachlan represent the Goulburn Valley in Melbourne. He has big boots to fill, though. Last year the award winner was Harry Lloyd, and he won it overall down in Melbourne. A big congratulations to Lachlan, and we hope to see him successful at the Melbourne show. He is also a very strong ambassador for our local students at Numurkah high school, where he teaches. He is undergoing his studies to become a fully qualified teacher – he is a teacher aide right now – and soon he will be teaching the students there in the hospitality sector.

Government performance

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (13:53): Today Melbourne should be showcasing to the world our beautiful state; instead we are reminded of the con job done by Daniel Andrews and Jacinta Allan – $600 million blown to not hold the Commonwealth Games. Imagine what that money could have done for our struggling health system, fixing the roads, cleaning up the state or providing more police to ensure the safety of the community. But they never had any intention of holding the Commonwealth Games. It was all a con, a lie, and one that has cost the Victorian taxpayer dearly.

Today it has been revealed that Jacinta Allan was warned of the CFMEU corruption. What did she do? She turned a blind eye – did nothing – so effectively she is responsible for the ongoing corruption by not acting. $15 billion lining the pockets of bikies and criminals, allowing the sexual exploitation of women deep in the tunnels, where drug use and drug trafficking thrived – it is like an episode of *Ozark*, where money laundering is a given. Victoria's reputation has been trashed as a result of the Commonwealth Games con, and now we are known as corruption central.

It is the hardworking Victorian taxpayer who has been abused and used by this government. Is it any wonder we are the highest taxed state in the country? Is it any wonder we have the highest debt that generations of Victorians will have to pay for? This government does not deliver for Victorians. They are destroying all hope and decency. They are making a mockery of hardworking taxpayers. Victoria needs an end to the corruption, the lies and the waste and mismanagement. Victoria needs a fresh start.

Waste and recycling management

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (13:55): I am calling on the government to keep up with reforms and extend bans on unnecessary and damaging single-use plastics. Victoria is currently getting left behind. Canberra has already gone further with single-use plastic bans; they have banned a wider range of single-use plastics and are considering more, while here in Victoria we are still allowing far too many throwaway items to be handed out every single day. There is no excuse for Victoria to settle for weaker rules and to require our communities and environment to deal with and pay for more plastic pollution year after year. We know where this waste ends up; it ends up in our streets, in our gutters, our parks, and eventually in our waterways, and it breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces, harming wildlife, clogging drains and leaving communities to clean up the mess. Victoria's current ban covers items like straws, stirrers, plastic plates and cutlery, cotton bud sticks and expanded polystyrene food service items, which is a good first step and one that came after years of Greens and community advocacy. But it is nowhere near enough, and we cannot rest on our laurels given the scale of the plastic pollution crisis we face. The Greens know Victoria needs to catch up. We

need to phase out more unnecessary single-use plastics like coffee cup lids and heavy-duty plastic bags, and we need to support businesses to transition and back reusable alternatives that cut waste at the source. Victorians are ready for this. We are tired of cleaning up unnecessary single-use plastic, and our environment cannot wait. Our laws should reflect that urgency.

Port Fairy Folk Festival

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (13:56): This year's Port Fairy Folk Festival was hugely enjoyable – I did bump into a colleague there – for locals and for tens of thousands of visitors to the south-west. Congratulations to the festival committee and thanks to all the volunteers. There are a lot of community volunteers that participate every single year. I attended one of the future folk sessions, where artists aged between 12 and 25 performed live, some of them for the first time. I am proud that it is our government, through Creative Victoria, that funded these sessions to help support the development of young people in performance, even at an international level.

Nippers carnival

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (13:57): On another matter, it was a busy weekend in the south-west, and I was honoured to be invited to attend the state nippers carnival in Warrnambool. More than 750 young people took part, cheered on by over 2500 supporters, lots of them parents. It was terrific to see young people from across Victoria dedicating themselves to community service, to exercise and healthy sporting activity and of course to the competition and camaraderie involved. Congratulations to the Warrnambool Surf Life Saving Club on their 14th year of hosting that event.

Middle East conflict

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:58): I want today to put on record my strong support for the United States and for Israel in the current fight in the Middle East against what is a terrorist regime in Tehran that has spread attacks across the world, including here in my own electorate in Victoria with their involvement in the Adass bombing – completely unacceptable – and with the Hezbollah, the Houthis and the Hamas groups that have been supported through the last decades by this terrorist regime. I say the United States and Israel are doing the right thing. They are trying to get the nuclear materials, and they are trying to deal with the missiles that are being produced in Iran. I do not pretend that this is an easy task, and I do not pretend that this is straightforward, but this regime has been causing trouble around the world for 40 to 50 years. Let us be clear about the length of time involved and the destruction and the enormous attacks on people who ought not to have been attacked. They are determined to eradicate Israel – that is what they are sworn to do. I cannot but feel, I might say, that Australia would be better supporting the United States in its endeavours openly and directly and with military or naval support as required. I think that we should be doing that. I believe that it is in our interests and it is in the interests of the world overall in the long term.

Ramadan

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:59): This year's Ramadan night market in Dandenong was a resounding success, surpassing last year's inaugural event in every way. With over 140 stalls and more nights, including a debut in Casey, it drew twice as many people, welcoming around 700,000 attendees from across Victoria and beyond over the 16 nights of operation. This event was a testament to the power of community and cultural diversity, bringing together people from every culture and background to showcase the region's inclusive spirit while sharing their traditions, faith and knowledge. The Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and other dignitaries including Premier Jacinta Allan, ministers, the Consul General of India Anish Rajan and local Labor MPs attended the market along with many community and faith leaders, highlighting its significance in promoting unity and social cohesion. The market was a powerful reminder that regardless of our faith, our country of birth or the languages we speak, we all share common values: love of family, the importance of kindness and the resolve to build a more inclusive society.

At a time when division can too often dominate global headlines and conversations impacting our daily lives, events like this remind us that harmony is not only possible, it is already thriving here in Victoria. Organised by the Bright Community Organisation team led by Ahmad Ghowsi alongside Ali Ibrahimi, Hassan Maqsoodi and Ibrahim Hassan, the Ramadan night market embodies the spirit of Ramadan, celebrating the values of generosity, empathy and community, and we thank them for their passion, dedication and vision. As we look to the future, this event serves as a beacon of hope inspiring us to strive for a more inclusive and harmonious society and to do all we can to ensure its enduring legacy. Thank you to the organisers, volunteers, sponsors, traders and all those who attended, making this event the resounding success that it was, and I look forward to supporting this initiative to make it even better next year and in the years to come.

Community safety

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (14:01): I had the pleasure of attending a community iftar put on by Greens of the west, where hundreds of people gathered from multifaith and multicultural communities. It was so lovely to spend an evening with families and people of all ages. Congratulations to the organisers, including Rifai Raheem, and thanks to everyone who came along. While were able to gather in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding, this stood in stark contrast to a recent iftar event in Ballarat, which was stormed by a person hurling racist, Islamophobic vitriol at terrified attendees. The worst part of this was the utter lack of any meaningful response from the police, the media or this state's political leaders. The lack of condemnation – the silence – speaks volumes about the terrifying space that is being created by many people in power, including many politicians and parts of the media who use their platforms to spew the very same disgusting hate speech with growing impunity. They have enabled blatant violence and Islamophobia to go unchecked and become normalised. Everyone in this country should have the right to a life free from violence and hate, regardless of who they are or what they believe. While time and again Muslim leaders and communities respond to events like this with generosity and courage, it should not be on them to be resilient and endure. We need to do better, all of us, starting with the Allan Labor government.

Community safety

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (14:02): In recent times we have seen painful divisions emerge in our communities. Both Jewish and Muslim Australians have faced a disturbing rise in antisemitism and Islamophobia, verbal and physical abuse, threats, property damage and even the tragic loss of life. These are the lives of our fellow Australian citizens. It is 2026, and in a civilised nation like ours there is no place for hatred and no place for violence based on colour, race or religious belief. On 15 March the world marked the United Nations International Day to Combat Islamophobia in remembrance of the Christchurch mosque attack, an act of terror against innocent people simply because they were Muslim. I remember the racism directed to Asian Australians in the 1980s, born from ignorance and misinformation. But through education and understanding, those fears have been proven false and Asian Australians have become a proud part of our national story. Today rising anti-Muslim hatred – including attacks on mosques and abuse directed at Muslim women – threatens not only individuals but also our democracy and social cohesion. Australians are stronger than that. When we stand together, when we choose compassion over fear and unity over division, hatred has no place here.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:04): I move:

> That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 1322, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Bill 2025

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Gayle Tierney:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:05): I am pleased to rise on the Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Bill 2025. I think just to rehash a joke from last sitting week, it could have been named the 'Better Entities Legislation Amendment (Sooner) Bill', as is the naming protocol we seem to adopt for all legislation these days. This bill is presented as a reform – streamlining government, reducing duplication and improving efficiency – and in principle that is entirely reasonable, because the Silver review did identify a public sector that had become overly complex, fragmented and top heavy, with more than 500 entities, thousands of boards and committees and layers of duplicated responsibility that slowed decision-making and inflated administrative costs. The diagnosis is not contested; it is completely true that the government runs the most inefficient, corrupt, tone-deaf, non-consultative, dysfunctional, non-transparent, unaccountable government in Victoria's history. Reform is long overdue; that is a universal truth the entire state agrees with. The question is whether this bill will meaningfully respond to any of that. When we test the bill against those measures, it becomes clear that what is presented as structural reform is in reality something much smaller, something much more modest and something pretty underwhelming, except for that it makes a couple of missteps in the process.

The Silver review identified potential savings of approximately $5 billion over four years alongside the reduction of more than 2000 ongoing roles across the public sector; that is the scale of the problem the government itself accepted in commissioning and setting out and seeking that report from Helen Silver. But the government's cuts and efficiencies embodied in this bill deliver $35.7 million over four years, with ongoing savings of just $9.4 million annually. In any serious financial analysis, that is a million miles from the scale of the issue the government has created – a $5 billion structural inefficiency is being met with a $35 million response over four years. So it is not really a reform in any meaningful economic sense, and it is not really a structural form; broadly it is cuts, sneaky little cuts around the edges while the core financial problem remains untouched. This makes me wonder about the government's entire approach to the debt crisis. There is this little tinkering effort, and then there are things like introducing taxes on cats and dogs, taxing car parks and taxing CFA volunteers, but at the same time it is perfectly happy to allow $15 billion in taxpayer money to march out the door via a government overseeing CFMEU corruption. It is perfectly happy to cancel the Commonwealth Games at a cost of nearly three quarters of a billion dollars, and let us not forget, today is the day when the games should have started in Melbourne.

It seems to be the work of infinitely small imaginations working on ever-shrinking bubbles. This bill arrives when Victoria's net debt is increasing at approximately $1.7 million every hour, projected to reach well over $200 billion. The interest bill alone is $1 million an hour, and that is what Victorians count in terms of missing nurses, health services, police, unfixed roads, uncut grass, uncleaned graffiti, in raised taxes on land, on accommodation, on GPs and on school payrolls – basically everything that affects their cost of living. So if we talk about cuts, remember it is not just what the government cuts from services, it is also what it takes from families too. Every tax rise and every new levy is a cut to a family's income, to their savings and to their goals. I think it is appropriate to point out this week as we face potential economic consequences regarding uncertain oil supply, we also face the fact that the state runs its budgets so close to the precipice that there is no contingency left for the unexpected or for the issues that have been kicked down the road that now come home to roost or for genuine crisis or even for something as recurrent and predictable as unfunded projects and project costs with demonstrably false price tags. No responsible government runs a state like this. It is reckless with the lives of the people it is its first duty to protect. This is the state's working capital being consumed

continuously – money that is not going to police or paramedics or teachers or infrastructure that yields a return but simply to servicing accumulated debt. In that environment the government's sudden pivot to efficiency is not a strategic reform program, it is a response to a genuine fiscal constraint. That is what happens when a system that has expanded for decades reaches the limits of the balance sheet and is forced to contract.

When we turn to the substance of the bill, the pattern becomes clearer. The government has confirmed that this legislation implements seven recommendations of the Silver report. At the same time, it introduces a series of changes – abolishment of the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council, alterations to the Essential Services Commission, changes to mental health governance – that were not recommended by the Silver review at all. What we have is not a disciplined, systematic implementation of an independent review that the government itself asked for, it is the partial adoption of selective recommendations combined with completely unrelated cuts.

At the same time, the response in this bill is not simply consolidation of the finances, it is concentration of authority, power and decision-making. Functions are absorbed, independent bodies are reduced or removed and decision-making authority is drawn closer to the centre. Consolidation can improve clarity, but concentration, if not carefully managed, reduces scrutiny and rigour. Crude reforms that just make a system smaller can be less accountable, less informed and less connected to stakeholders. If managed badly, it can create risk, and the concerns around the number of mental health commissioners is a very good example of both of these first two problems here.

It is also evident in procurement. Under a debt-ridden 'spend as if there is no tomorrow', 'don't update your costs' Labor government, procurement is not a peripheral administrative activity. It is where Victorian financial discipline has been completely lost and as a consequence has become completely corrupted. Yet the bill abolishes the Victorian Government Purchasing Board and transfers its function into ministerial and department control. We are considering this change in the context of highly credible reporting that up to $15 billion, if not $30 billion, has flown from major infrastructure projects via criminal and improper channels. In that environment, removing an independent procurement oversight body is not a neutral act, it is a reduction in control at the point of highest financial exposure. In any commercial organisation that would be unthinkable. Controls are strengthened where risk is the highest, not relaxed. If structural change is required, procurement discipline should be anchored in Treasury, where financial accountability is core, not diluted to broader ministerial discretion.

A similar shift occurs with the Essential Services Commission. The bill removes the requirement for the minister to seek ESC advice on local government rate caps and strips back its role in commercial passenger vehicle pricing and towing charge reviews. These functions were not recommended for removal by the Silver review. The practical effect is that independent economic advice is removed from decisions that directly affect household costs. The argument is that this streamlines decision-making, but the government has no problem in making decisions, it just has a very big problem in making good decisions. What it actually does is remove the last skerrick of rigour and constraint designed to protect Victorians from those bad decisions. It shifts pricing decisions from a framework of independent scrutiny to one of ministerial discretion. In a cost-of-living environment that is not a vague, abstract governance change, it is a transfer of material risk. The government's propensity for bad decisions does not disappear; it is simply going to be managed with fewer checks and balances.

The mental health provisions raise a different but similar concern. The bill reduces the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission from four commissioners to one and alters governance structures in ways that go well beyond the Silver review and cut across, importantly, the intent of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. There are a range of amendments going around on that. Some have been circulated, some have not – we will probably get to the substance of those later in the day – but it would have been helpful to know what those amendments are now as we debate the bill. There will obviously be more discussion of that in committee as well. The multicommissioner model was intended to embed lived experience alongside clinical and systemic oversight, ensuring that we had accessible, involved, engaged real-world decision-making. Reducing that to a single commissioner

really oversimplifies the structure. It narrows perspective and concentrates authority in a system where diversity of insight is essential. The sector's concern at this point is well founded, and they have made their views very clear, because the complexity in human systems is not resolved by centralisation, it is managed through balanced governance and inclusion.

To be fair to the bill, there is legitimate argument that the existing systems across the span of it contain inefficiencies. Oversized boards can slow decisions and in some cases reduce the quality of their decisions. Arms-length bodies can drift from accountability and focus and go off on their own tangents. In other areas consolidation does definitely improve focus, performance and accountability. But efficiency is not the only objective of institutional design; integrity is equally important. When a reform improves efficiency at the expense of independent oversight, the system might operate faster, but it becomes more fragile. The purpose of independent bodies is not to obstruct government but to provide constraint where constraint is necessary. We start to see a pattern here: procurement oversight is reduced, independent pricing advice is diminished, mental health governance is centralised and lived experience is marginalised. Many of these changes were not recommended by the review that ostensibly underpins the bill. What ties them together is the need to make spending cuts and a shift towards centralised, discretionary decision-making.

I think the best sign of an organisation or someone managing something beyond their abilities, under stress or when they are worried they have lost control is when they start to micromanage. That is when they start to pull all controls to themselves. That is where they cut people out of the process, because that is the instinctive reaction of someone who does not feel in control of what they are doing. It is not a nuanced way to solve a problem. It is not really a genuinely sustainable way to manage your problems. But then if you are in the process of a kneejerk reaction to other financial pressures that you have put upon yourselves, this will be the inevitable consequence. When independent scrutiny weakens, cost tends to drift upwards incrementally through rates and fees and charges that compound over time. When procurement controls soften, the probability of waste and fraud and leakage increases, and there is only too much evidence of that to deny it. When governance structures are simplified beyond their functional need, system resilience declines. And when reform departs from its stated foundation, such as a royal commission, confidence in the reform process erodes.

I will return to the biggest bad joke about this bill. The government cannot reasonably claim that this is a response to the Silver review when it delivers just $35 million in savings over four years – that is less than $9 million a year – and apparently it is going to cost $5 million to implement. This is against, currently, a $160 billion debt and while we are careering towards a $200 billion debt. It is against the backdrop of the government's infamous five-step plan to stabilise debt by increasing it indefinitely, as we career from what was about $22 billion of debt eight, nine years ago to $160 billion, then to $200 billion and then in the forwards to $220 billion in no time at all. The government cannot claim alignment with the review when introducing significant measures outside its scope, and it cannot claim to strengthen governance while reducing independent oversight in procurement, pricing and system supervision. We should be clear about what is happening here. This is not a comprehensive reset of the machinery of government. It is a partial consolidation combined with a rebalancing towards central control driven in most part by fiscal pressure, not by a desire for genuine structural reform.

We see the need for reform. We see the need for efficiencies to be gained. We see the bloated state of the state apparatus. We see the opaque nature of a government system, an intricate matrix system, where everyone is responsible but no-one is accountable. We see the plethora of boards, associations and committees stuffed with political appointees being paid for things that other people used to do voluntarily. We see all of that. For that reason we will not stand in the way of the bill. We will not oppose the bill, because some consolidation is warranted and some measures are sensible. If only they were being done in a sensible and systematic way that represented genuine systemic reform, not cherrypicked random items that you flick through here and there. I think the lack of system, the lack of vision around how we are doing this is pretty telling. It is not like anyone has sat down and said, 'Here is a comprehensive reform package.' It is a little bit here; it is a little bit there. And it is borne

out that the quantum is $35 million over four years, versus $160 billion of debt and versus an operating budget that is now in deficit. It may be in surplus by the end of the financial year, but certainly in December it was back in deficit, according to the Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

We think there should be a couple of amendments to this. We think the Essential Services Commission should be retained in pricing decisions. We think that procurement governance should be strengthened, not weakened. We think there should be structural safeguards. We think that there should be three mental health commissioners, not one. We do not want to confuse consolidation and control with reform and efficiency. I will await the clarification on the amendments, and we will have more to ask in committee.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:24): I rise to make a brief contribution on behalf of the Greens with respect to the Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Bill 2025. I will be followed by Dr Sarah Mansfield from our bench as well. This bill before us today is about saving the government money in the lead-up to an election, and the irony is it is actually not even that much money in the scheme of things for this government. It is actually pennies down the back of the couch, really, when you look at the individual bodies set to be abolished under this legislation. But anyway, it is important to remember that every budgetary decision of this Labor government is a choice. It is a choice whether they want to invest in a public school whose students have had to have assemblies outside in the scorching heat or pouring rain because they do not have a hall or if they want to build another giant toll road across our city. It is a choice whether they want to invest in protecting our precious natural places and stop the extinction of our native species or if they want to invest in another gas project that will continue to fuel climate change for decades to come.

This bill is the government's choice to cut back on the public service instead of investing in its vital work so that it can continue to provide those essential services to so many Victorians. The government is spruiking these cuts as streamlining and as efficiency. But let us be clear, it is neoliberalism as usual, another example of the Labor Party losing its way and caving in to conservative ideas of austerity. Budgets are an opportunity for governments to show what they want to prioritise, and this bill shows that Labor is prioritising austerity for the public sector and is instead investing in, I do not know, projects that funnel funds to private construction companies to build more toll roads that Victorians did not ask for.

All Victorians benefit from a well-resourced public service. They provide a vital role in supporting families and supporting communities, workers and businesses right across our state. I am pleased that this bill does not go quite so far as all of the things the Silver review recommended. They have not decided to cut musical instruments from students. They have not decided to cut the doctors in schools program. But these cuts, the ones in this bill, will still have a tangible impact on our communities and particularly on environmental management and, for example, on our mental health system's oversight. The public service was already found by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office to be struggling with chronic under-resourcing and overwork. What do you all expect is going to happen now if you keep cutting things further? It was found that the public service cannot deliver on one-third of its targets because of under-resourcing and overwork. These cuts will only make that worse.

To talk to some of the specifics, though, of this bill, at a time when up to a third of our irreplaceable native plants and animals are threatened to the point of extinction, this bill seeks to dismantle important institutions that protect wildlife and habitats including our very coastline. It weakens our environmental frameworks and our expert knowledge base at a time when protecting ecosystems and mitigating climate impacts could not be more important. The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC), the Victorian Marine and Coastal Council, Recycling Victoria and the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority will all cease to exist. Matt Ruchel, the executive director of the Victorian National Parks Association, has said:

> The benefit of these institutions to nature in Victoria is immeasurable. Nature can't afford these cuts. It's setting up a recipe for short term decisions and thinking, when nature needs long-term care.

This is on top of the staffing cuts that have already occurred in the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, in Parks Victoria and in the Victorian Fisheries Authority over the last few years. It is just devastating. With VEAC gone, who will provide the independent expert advice on vital decisions for the management of public land? With the marine and coastal council gone, who will plan for coastal erosion, for algal blooms like we are seeing just over the border in South Australia, gas decommissioning, oil spills and the climate impacts on Victoria's coasts? The department will not have the resources, the scope or the expertise that these standalone bodies have brought to our state for so many years. It will be a travesty, if this bill passes, that they will be lost.

As well as the cuts to our environmental framework and oversight, the bill does propose some significant changes to the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, which has seen some large funding cuts and a 40 per cent reduction in staffing. I understand there are a range of amendments before the chamber with respect to this, and they all seek to make different changes to these parts of the bill. I know that my colleague Dr Mansfield will speak in more detail to our concerns about the mental health aspects, the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission and its ability to oversee the mental health and wellbeing system here in this state, but I will just briefly cover a few main points.

The bill has proposed to remove the lived-experience requirement for commissioners at the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, as well as from the board of the Victorian Collaborative Centre for Mental Health and Wellbeing. I would like to remind the chamber of recommendation 28 from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System:

> Developing system-wide roles for the full and effective participation of people with lived experience of mental illness or psychological distress

'System-wide' is the term used there. That includes these important decision-making bodies, and I hope that with the amendments that are before us today that this vital element can be protected. The royal commission also recommended that the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission be the key body responsible for ensuring that the government is accountable for improving the mental health and wellbeing system and implementing the recommendations of the royal commission. It was recommended as the primary body for oversight of the system, and this bill proposes to narrow the scope of the commission and remove its ability to collect certain information. Again, I am hopeful that we will be able to restore the scope and the data collection ability of the commission, as this is the bare minimum, and actually I would like to see the commission have greater access to data so that they can more effectively do their work.

I think the crux of it is we are keen to see the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission succeed – to do what it was set up to do – and reducing its scope, its powers or its leadership will not in any way achieve this success. Actually, I want to see our entire mental health system succeed, and to do that it needs resources, it needs staffing, it needs funding and it needs good oversight and systems management. However, there is definitely much more work in these spaces to be done. In the words of the Health and Community Services Union, our mental health system is 'widely recognised as underfunded, overstretched and structurally broken'.

These proposed cuts from Labor today are not the solution. The Greens want to see our mental health systems, our environment management bodies and all of the public sector supported, well resourced and enhanced, not cut, not merged, not consolidated into oblivion. So we will be opposing the bill and hoping to salvage what we can through amendments from right across the chamber.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:31): I rise to make a contribution on this bill, the Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Bill 2025, and of course I rise today in support of this bill. The bill sits squarely within the government's priorities of delivering high-quality public services in a financially responsible manner, and it is to ensure that the public sector is appropriately focused on delivering essential services.

The Victorian government commissioned an independent review to focus squarely on any waste and inefficiency that could be found, with a focus on entity consolidation. The review found that there are some entities and boards whose functions are not or are no longer required or whose functions overlap with existing work of core departments. Consolidating functions into departments enables clearer lines of accountability and makes government less complex to navigate. In the 2025–26 budget it included a range of savings and efficiencies which were consistent with the objectives of the Silver review. This included ceasing or scaling back programs where the original aims have been achieved, where the level of investment is no longer required or where programs no longer represent the best value for money. We are making sure our public service is laser focused on Victorians, with good schools, good health care, safe communities and real help with cost of living.

Not only are all of these measures that we are taking fiscally responsible, but it is also about making sure the public service is in the best shape it can be. Also, there is nothing wrong with government making efficiencies where programs are no longer fit for purpose. I know we have been criticised for this, but I just think that it seems the government cannot win either way. Either we are cutting something or we are not. But there has actually been a review that undertook a comprehensive look across services, which was done at arm's length to government, and we are acting on those recommendations. Families are watching every dollar they spend, and they expect the government to do the same. We are reducing waste and inefficiency so we can invest in the things that matter to Victorians the most. We have been clear that we will never make cuts to the frontline services that families rely on. I just want to repeat that, because I think there has been some misinformation spread that we are making cuts to frontline services. We are not. I will repeat my remarks. We have been clear – very clear – that we will never make cuts to frontline services that families rely on.

The changes that are being proposed by the bill are sensible and support the government's plan for responsible fiscal management without frontline cuts that hurt families. Today there are more frontline services for Victorians than before the pandemic. Compared to 2019 there are an extra 671 police and protective services officers, which represents an increase of 4.1 per cent; an extra 3890 teachers in our government school system, which represents an increase of 9 per cent; and an extra 10,282 nurses and midwives, which represents an increase of more than 30 per cent. This is in contrast to what would happen to frontline services under a Liberal–National government, because they have already foreshadowed that they would cut $11 billion out of the budget but they have not told us how and where. What you can see is we are looking for efficiencies and then to reinvest that money back into services. It is pretty clear what the choices are and why we are doing this, and that is to make sure that we have an appropriate way forward to make sure that Victorians get the services they need.

There are a series of house amendments that will be introduced into the Legislative Council in response to sector feedback since the bill was tabled. This is in response to feedback from the sector and other members. These amendments strengthen lived-experience leadership in the commission and the centre and clarify data-sharing obligations to make it easier for the commission to access the information it needs to carry out its work. These amendments are in regard to the mental health portfolio. Specifically in regard to the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission and in regard to the number of commissioners, the house amendments will provide for the appointment of a deputy mental health and wellbeing commissioner, bringing the total number of commissioners to two, and they will require that at least one of the mental health and wellbeing commissioners or deputy mental health and wellbeing commissioners is a person who identifies as having lived experience or living experience or has been a carer.

In regard to data access, the amendments will clarify data-sharing obligations and that the commission will continue to be able to request information from the health secretary that is relevant to its work and that the health secretary is required to provide this information while ensuring that individual identities and personal health information are protected. Also, in regard to the Victorian collaborative centre, the house amendments require that at least two of the five board members will need to have lived experience, including at least one consumer, with the second member being a consumer, a carer or a

supporter. If the board increases to seven members or more in the future, the requirement will increase to a minimum of three members with lived experience. Those amendments will be put to the chamber later today. As you can see, although the bill has been tabled previously, the government has been committed to ongoing discussions with members in this place but also with sectors and listening to their feedback. It is hoped that the amendments will go some way towards satisfying those requests that we have had.

One example of one of the entities that this bill will touch on – and I will say at the outset VicHealth is not included in this bill and is not captured by this bill at all; there are some entities that are, but VicHealth is not one of them – is Recycling Victoria. This is just an example: the Victorian government will integrate Recycling Victoria into the Environment Protection Authority Victoria, or the EPA as it is otherwise known. Recycling Victoria's functions, people and assets will transition to the EPA, creating a single entity: a stronger and clearer regulator for waste recycling and resource recovery in Victoria. So it actually elevates the role that recycling will have and should have in terms of what government sees as its priorities. Putting it in the EPA, as I said, will help reduce any duplication and will result in savings. This means industry, councils and the community will have one primary regulator and program interface rather than navigating separate bodies, so that makes sense. At the moment responsibilities for standards, compliance and circular economy programs are spread across multiple bodies, and that can lead to, as I said, duplication, slower decision-making and confusion about who does what as well as higher administrative costs. So these are all the things that we are targeting to try and reduce. Integrating Recycling Victoria into the EPA will clarify roles, reduce fragmentation and also strengthen end-to-end regulation of waste and resource recovery. These reforms align with the government's *Economic Growth Statement* as well, including our commitment to reducing the number of regulators and making it easier to do business in Victoria while maintaining strong environmental protections.

This is not a retreat from our waste and circular economy ambitions either. Our commitment to diverting waste from landfill, improving recycling, building a circular economy and protecting the environment remains very firm. By bringing together program levers, standards and enforcement within a single well-resourced regulator we are strengthening our ability to deliver those outcomes, not weakening them. Our message is clear: services will continue, ambition remains high and we are modernising how we regulate and support waste and recycling to deliver better results for Victorians and the environment. I might leave my contribution there. I know my colleagues on the government benches will also have lots to contribute to this debate on the bill. I commend the bill to the house.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:41): I am pleased to rise to make a brief contribution on the Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Bill 2025. In doing so I note that this is an omnibus bill. It is a little bit from column A and a bit from column B. It has elements of recommendations from the Silver review and then elements of the government's own thought process. Of course the Silver review found that the Victorian public sector was overly complex, fragmented and top-heavy, comprising more than 500 entities and thousands of boards and committees, leading to duplication, slow decision-making and high indirect costs. You do not have to be Einstein, particularly living in regional Victoria, to know that working with government departments and government bureaucracies – and some of the aforementioned are in the entities bill – can create all sorts of hassles, all sorts of frustrations and all sorts of impediments, and often not good outcomes, not only for regional people but also for the environment, which is one of my interests, and also in terms of mental health and issues related to that.

I just want to put on record today in this house the work that my shadow minister Emma Kealy has done in the mental health space. I know that she has been a fierce advocate for mental health and indeed the recommendations of the royal commission, noting that the government was seeking to reduce the number of mental health commissioners down to one and that we have heard in the other house and in this house that through sector feedback there will be some house amendments. It is an interesting thing that house amendments have come through after this government had consultation

with the sector, but they were not in the initial bill that was produced in 2025 to adopt the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System about lived experience. So in one sense in drafting this bill it disregarded them; it sought to diminish them. The government has then gone out for consultation, not before the bill was introduced but during the bill process between the lower house and the upper house, and it is now looking to do house amendments. Again I put on record Emma Kealy's fierce advocacy in this space. We have amendments that we are bringing from the royal commission's philosophy about lived experience – we have a balanced approach to that – and in a sense the government has walked back on its decision.

That being said, I think that the Liberals and Nationals are predisposed to support anything that supports better mental health while still streamlining bureaucracy in other areas. To go to some of these areas, let me just give you a quick walk-through of the entities bill. It amends the Circular Economy (Waste Reduction and Recycling) Act 2021 to abolish the head of Recycling Victoria – that is a true form of recycling. It repeals the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Act 2001 to abolish VEAC, and I will have plenty more to say on that one. It abolishes the Victorian Marine and Coastal Council, and the government would tell us that that is because much of that work is done. Again there is other commentary around that, which I am happy to explore. It abolishes the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority. That was really established in full in my electorate when we saw the closure of the Hazelwood power station, and people have various views on the mine rehabilitation authority. In one way it can be reabsorbed back into the department; in another way there are some significant issues that need to be of acute focus for government in relation to mine rehabilitation.

I want to put on record my thanks to Professor Rae Mackay, who was the initial mine rehabilitation commissioner. He came here from overseas, from England, to provide his expertise. He has spent a lifetime moving around the world in mine rehabilitation and geology and geography. All of those intricacies are beyond me, but he has taken it upon himself to provide some very good scope and detail. Some of his comments were that there has been a lot of good material prepared by the authority and that that still needs to be available into the future, not only for government and internal department use but also for public transparency, so I will be putting that on the record during committee of the whole. The website, he suggests, also contains material that should be maintained at least for the near future to have that transparency and good information for people.

Part of the whole idea around mine rehabilitation is that it comes back to being safe and sustainable. But also the mine is very close of course to the townships of Morwell and Churchill and Traralgon as well as buffering up against the Loy Yang area. People have an acute interest in this in my electorate, and they want assurance that government not only is doing the right thing but has the right plan for mine rehabilitation. It does not need to be off-the-shelf overall, it needs to be bespoke for our area and our mines. They are very deep mines; they are very big mines. I am just putting on record my thanks to, as I said, Professor Mackay and other associated people that have worked there. But we need to ensure that the good work that is being done is not lost in the traffic.

That said, the abolition of VEAC is something that is of great interest to me. I note that some of the great people who I have had the honour of working with over time – the BUGU, Bush Users Group United; the Prospectors and Miners Association of Victoria; the horse riders; the trail riders; the four-wheel drivers; the list could be long – fought very hard to oppose the position that VEAC recommended to government in relation to the closure of the Wombat State Forest into national park. That is not because we want to pillage and plunder – that is far from the truth – but because we believe that active management of our public estate is the best way to go. VEAC over its course, during operations and looking into the *Central West Investigation*, disregarded over 66 per cent of the responses, the submissions. It ignored them and went in its own direction, and I believe, sadly, over time – VEAC was set up in 2001 – it has become politicised, and we have heard from the Ombudsman that the public sector has been politicised. I am concerned that the planning and recommendations to government were not based on sound science but were based on this ideology, and indeed the closure of this is not something that I will lament. If the government in the last 11 years had been focused on

more boots on the ground, keeping pests and weeds down and ensuring that public access was maintained while also ensuring that they were properly monitoring threatened species and ensuring that bushfire mitigation – and I could go on on that for hours – was adhered to, then we would have been protecting our state parks and national parks far better. So I do not believe that the closure of VEAC will be any great loss.

There are indeed other entities. It is almost a parallel process that has been going on. The Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria provides independent advice, supposedly. I say that because I do not think it has had enough teeth and enough funding directed to it in terms of auditing and monitoring. It certainly has produced a state of the forests report, and if you go down through that state of the forests report there is great concern about what government is not doing. My argument would be that we certainly need good communication, we certainly need good advice and we certainly need more boots on the ground out in our state forests and national parks. We do not need more suits giving ideological advice. With that said, I would always implore the government to put a greater focus on devolving the work of the suits in Melbourne and sending them out to the regions where they can actually look after the forests. This means focusing on doing the work – taking down pests, controlling pests, getting rid of weeds that are choking out and threatening our native flora and fauna. It has been 11 years that this government has been in office, and we are seeing more degraded forests and misused land.

I have given my commentary on the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority and VEAC. Moving on, I just want to spend a little bit of time on the Essential Services Commission. I know my colleague Mr Welch thoroughly interrogated that, but I have had phone calls from Rural Councils Victoria and from the chair of Rural Councils Victoria, who are very concerned about the reduction of the role of the Essential Services Commission and removing the requirement for the ESC to provide advice when setting council rate caps, shifting fare settings and powers to the minister and replacing those reviews with ministerial-directed reviews. These increase that ministerial discretion, and I think they diminish that oversight. The Essential Services Commission does have a role. Rate capping is a blessing and a curse, depending on where you sit. I know it came in in 2015. It provides certainty for councils, but with a state government, an Allan government, that is cost shifting onto our local councils all the time, it is providing a harder and harder arena in which councils do business. But the Essential Services Commission certainly has a role to play, and I think it is warranted. I know we will move those amendments in relation to that, and I thank Mr Welch. Also, as I said, we have amendments in relation to the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission. I am very supportive of those.

What we know is that after 11 years in government we now have a government that is looking to have 'reforms' in relation to about $36 million of savings over four years and about $9 million annual savings. Well, when you look at what this government has spent on budget overruns and allegedly $15 billion on corruption in the CFMEU, this is just, in effect, rats and mice. In this case we think it is better to support some measures of cost cutting. It is a bit from column A, a bit from column B, some from the government's own mindset and some from the Silver review. We are very concerned that this government continues to blow out budgets and create such distress in our communities where vital services – police, teachers, nurses, hospitals, schools – are dilapidated or not developed because of government blowouts.

I am just going to circulate some amendments in the name of my colleague Richard Welch, and I will do that on behalf of him and the Liberals and Nationals now. I have acquitted my role and responsibilities there. Finally, the bill is better than nothing and we will not be opposing it, but we want to see these amendments that we will put get through.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:56): Sooner or later this government, or potentially the opposition if they ever win government, will have to face the reality that Victoria has to live within its means. Either they do that through planning in advance and managing our finances in a responsible way, or they do it through pretending they do not exist until the point that we get to a financial emergency. Lots of people have asked me over the years since I have been elected here,

'How do you actually know if we are really in financial trouble?' Well, there is an easy answer to that, which is: if we start to see ads on social media for state government bonds, that will be the point at which we are in big trouble, because that means that the Treasury Corporation of Victoria can no longer place bonds with institutional investors and is looking for retail investors. We are not quite there yet. We have not got to that point. My understanding is the Treasury corporation can still happily place bonds in institutional markets, so that is a good thing, but we need to make sure that we do not get to that point.

When the previous Treasurer Mr Pallas resigned, I did something a bit wild. I put my hand up and said I would take the job as Treasurer for the sake of Victoria. Yes, I volunteered my services to the Labor Party and to the government, not because I like the Labor Party but because I care about the future of this state. I could be the bad guy. I said, 'I don't mind. You can blame me for all the bad stuff, and the ministers, when they get their budgets cut, can point the finger at me and I will leave Parliament with everyone hating me.' But the good thing would be we might actually get our finances under control in Victoria. Unfortunately, the Labor Party did not take me up on my offer and did not even respond to me. I was pretty disappointed about that. They did not even get me in for an interview. At least give me a chance. They always talk about inclusion and stuff, but anyway, that did not happen. Despite my disappointment, Minister Symes got the gig, and like always, I give everyone a fair chance when they start a new role and have a look at things. So I had an open mind. I know that she was Attorney-General before and it is a big shift into Treasury. Anyway, the Treasurer announced at one point the Silver review, and I thought, 'Well, this sounds like a good idea.' If you come in as a Treasurer, it makes sense that you would want to get finances under control and it makes sense that you would get someone who knows what they are talking about to review things and see what sorts of savings can be made and what they can do. I think all Victorians and even the Labor Party would agree that there is a lot of waste in government and maybe you could get rid of some of it. So we got the output of that Silver review, and that lands us where we are today, where we have the Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Bill 2025.

This bill has been alluded to by others – I think I heard the words 'rats and mice' and 'pennies down the back of the couch' and this sort of thing, and I tend to agree that there are actually not a lot of savings. But what this bill is attempting to do in a very small way is get rid of some government waste through removing commissions and removing agencies and this sort of thing and consolidating them into other departments. I am not going to oppose that. I think that is a good thing. My complaint here is that it is going nowhere near far enough for what needs to be done. I do not know what was originally proposed by the Treasurer to cabinet, but I am sure it was more ambitious than this. But eventually this is what got through cabinet, and it is decidedly less than ambitious, unfortunately. I would like to see a bill that is a lot thicker than this one. Even though this is pretty thick, I would like to see it a lot thicker with agencies that can be removed or replaced.

Some of the things that this bill is doing are entirely sensible. I know I have heard the opposition complain about removing the commissioner that oversees rate rises for councils. Well, my understanding is that the commission basically just does a report every year and says that the cap is going to be equal to CPI. I mean, I could do that; I would do it for free if the government wanted me to. If they want me to write a report, I can do that. I am sure someone in the Treasurer's department can do that also. I do not think it is that controversial. Increasing rates in line with CPI is fine, I guess. It means they are not going up in real terms, so that is a good thing.

What we need to do in Victoria is get away from this idea that cuts are somehow bad. In fact I think that both the government and the opposition underestimate how popular the idea of slashing the public service can be. We only need to look at other countries, and I have mentioned them many times before. In Argentina President Milei got elected on the promise of taking a chainsaw to the size of the state, and indeed he has done that and turned Argentina around. They are on a totally different trajectory now. Their budgets are under control. They are seeing economic growth, foreign investment, all sorts of good things. Housing and rental affordability has increased dramatically. It is wonderful. But also

closer to home, in New Zealand, the Association of Consumers and Taxpayers party have been promising this for years. They are now in a coalition with the government, but they have done some wonderful work on cutting back waste in the New Zealand government. I think that this is something that we should be thinking about here as well. The idea that we cannot remove waste in Victoria is wrong. There is so much waste in Victoria.

The government, to their credit, have actually proposed a few other things, not necessarily in this bill but related, and it just blows me away that the opposition do not support some of these things – for example, defunding VicHealth. The savings from defunding VicHealth would actually be more than what is in this bill. It is about $50 million a year of ongoing funding. I think even supporters of VicHealth would agree that their recent trajectory has been very far removed from their glory days of Life Be In It. But apparently the opposition have promised to keep VicHealth. They want to keep this agency. They promise to not make any cuts. What the opposition are promising is basically a worse proposition, in many ways, to what the government is trying to do, which is pretty depressing for Victoria. I would really like the opposition to come out and say that they are going to make these great big cuts and make everyone in Labor really angry about it so then they could point the finger and say 'You're the razor gang' or 'You're the cuts guys' or whatever. I think that both Labor and the Liberal parties underestimate the potential popularity of this. Maybe that is what Labor are worried about, which is why they are sort of happy that the Liberal Party are not really proposing anything that deviates too far from the current norm. In fact the opposition seem to just be claiming that they are better managers than Labor. I do not know; I would like to see evidence of that. If they want to be better managers, I would like to see what they are going to get rid of, because there is a lot to get rid of. The size of this state is astronomical and the size of our debt is astronomical.

I will tell you something I would get rid of: I would knock the Suburban Rail Loop on the head. I think that given the current and projected debt in this state and the revelations about how much of that construction work is actually being siphoned off to organised crime, and without getting a royal commission into organised crime to figure out where that money is going and what the vectors through which it is going are, to commit to a project that is going to cost hundreds of billions of dollars – and that is best case scenario; of course it will be much worse than that and large proportions of that money are going to get siphoned off to organised crime. I do not know what the contract-break fees are going to be to cancel the SRL, but whatever they are, they are not posing the existential risk that going ahead with the SRL is posing here. I just think that this is a huge problem that we need to solve, and this is one way of dealing with it. We can say we are not going to go ahead with the SRL. I know that the opposition have committed to pausing and reviewing it because they do not want to make a clear statement about whether they want to knock it on the head or not. I know that every time you bring up the SRL the government says, 'What about all these workers that we've got working on the SRL?'

If you talk to anyone in the housing construction sector, they will tell you the biggest problem at the moment is the price of not only materials, which it competes with the government on, especially things like concrete and sand and this sort of thing, but also labour. They compete. I have spoken to so many builders that have had tradies that work for them just disappear and go and work on government projects because they get better pay – of course they do. They work on the government projects because they get these inflated amounts paid out by the government, by taxpayers, by debt, which one day the government hopes will be productive assets. But who knows when that will happen and whether it will actually stack up financially. In the meantime, our construction sector has builders going bankrupt left, right and centre because of costs blowing out, and a large part of that cost is because they are competing with the government. The idea that these guys working on government construction projects would not be able to get jobs somewhere else in the economy is ridiculous. There are shortages all throughout the economy at the moment, and in fact it is one of the things that is pushing up house prices.

The other thing with the SRL that concerns me is that both the government and the opposition seem to have bought into this fantasy that we are going to have these huge high-rise towers of cheap

apartments everywhere. It is problematic for a few reasons. Labor want to believe it because they want to believe that the towers will actually exist and there will be more apartments for people. The opposition want to believe it because they want to run NIMBY campaigns. I do not believe that it is ever going to happen, because if you talk to anyone in the construction sector, they will tell you that the only apartments they can make money on at the moment are large luxury apartments. Small, cheaper apartments simply do not stack up economically. They do not make any sense. People do not want to buy them, they cannot sell them, they cannot make a profit on them; they are not going to get built.

Plus, this government has disincentivised foreign capital. They like taxing people that cannot vote, so they tax foreigners. That is popular both on the Labor side and on the opposition side sometimes, because people say, 'Well, we can tax these foreigners. We don't want foreigners owning things in Australia.' But what it means is that we cannot do things like normal countries do, which is to have large corporations that will invest in large tower blocks and that sort of thing. If you go to other countries – if you go to the United States or Japan or many other countries – what you will see is large multinational corporations building large apartment blocks and managing rentals at large scale, and they do it very efficiently because they are doing it at scale. But in Australia the vast majority of rentals are handled by struggling mum-and-dad investors. It is a wildly inefficient way to do things. They have more and more and more compliance every year. Of course mum-and-dad investors cannot keep up with that, so then they have real estate agents on their behalf to handle all the compliance, and an entire industry has sprung up around it to manage the compliance. You get all these people doing test and tag and all these other compliance activities. I am sure the government think that they are doing good, but what they are really doing is just making everything more expensive for everyone and it is not really helping things, when in effect things could have been very different.

The Libertarian Party will not be opposing this bill because it does some very small, minor good things. As Mr Puglielli said, it is pennies down the back of the couch really. But I would urge the government and the opposition to be straight with Victorians and tell them how it really is and that we are going to have to change what we are doing financially because we are not living within our means. The current debt projections are terrifying, and that is even if things are on track – and they are clearly not on track, especially with large government projects. We certainly have not got organised crime and corruption under control in Victoria, and the government does not seem very interested in taking drastic action to fix that. They do not want to investigate it. They do not want to tackle the root causes and the incentives of organised crime – it is a huge problem – and committing to going ahead with something like the SRL, with that backdrop, just seems totally irresponsible to me. Therefore I urge the government and the opposition to come up with something a bit more ambitious.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (15:10): I rise to make a contribution on the Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Bill 2025. This piece of legislation will aim to reduce duplication across government, clarify roles and responsibilities with the broader public sector, and help streamline reporting requirements to ensure effective and efficient governance in Victoria. By tackling any inadvertent duplication or duplicate spending in the public sector or otherwise inefficient spending, we can be sure that the public sector is fit, modern and working in the best interests of Victoria.

The Allan Labor government has a commitment to deliver the highest standards of government service in a fiscally responsible manner. These commitments set out in the 2025–26 state budget reflect an important part of our five-step fiscal strategy. Enhancing effectiveness of government and improving the standard of governance is key to delivering better outcomes for Victorians and ensuring the better execution of government policy.

In order to achieve these aims, the bill will make a series of reforms. This includes a move to abolish, reform and consolidate a number of public entities and boards. It will clarify, streamline and remove regulatory and administrative reporting and compliance requirements. A number of other measures will also be taken in order to ensure this restructuring of the public sector can be allowed to take place.

First, the Circular Economy (Waste Reduction and Recycling) Act 2021 will be amended to abolish the head, Recycling Victoria. It will confer the relevant functions of the Environment Protection Authority and reduce other related regulatory burdens. It will repeal the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Act 2001 to abolish the VEAC, or Victorian Environment Assessment Council, and similarly will abolish the Victorian Marine and Coastal Council by repealing its 2018 principal act too. It will also amend the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Act 2003 to confer the functions to the VEAC onto the commission. The Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) Act 1990 will be amended to abolish the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority, with its remaining residual functions and powers subsumed back into the state government. The Public Administration Act 2004 will be amended to abolish the Victorian Public Sector Commission Advisory Board. It will change the date by which the VPSC must submit a draft annual plan to the Premier each year. The Financial Management Act 1994 will be amended to abolish the Victorian Government Purchasing Board and to make further provisions for the procurement of goods and services by departments and other entities in the state government. The bill will repeal the Road Safety Camera Commissioner Act 2011 and it will amend the Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022 to change the constitution of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission. In response to feedback from the sector and other members, new amendments to this bill will strengthen lived-experience leadership in the commission and at the centre and clarify data-sharing obligations to make it easier for the commission to access the information it needs to carry out its work.

Next, the bill will amend the Local Government Act 1989 and the Essential Services Commission Act 2001 to limit the ESC's advisory and reporting role around local government and council rate caps. The Commercial Passenger Vehicle Industry Act 2017 and the 2001 ESC act will also be further amended to set maximum charges for applicable unbooked services and non-cash payment surcharges. The Accident Towing Services Act 2007 will be amended in relation to the determination of charges and indexation of said charges. The Parliamentary Workplace Standards and Integrity Act 2024 will be amended in relation to reporting requirements of the parliamentary adviser. The Great Ocean Road and Environs Protection Act 2020 will be amended to provide for the transfer of staff from Parks Victoria to the Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority. Finally, there are some consequential amendments to the act as well.

The amendments brought forward under this bill are substantial, and they work towards building a more efficient public sector focused on delivering the outcomes Victorians expect. Where duplication exists, this bill is striking it down and merging bodies where necessary to ensure policy outcomes are delivered. It realigns policy and program functions to ensure that the state government's priorities are delivered to the highest possible standards. These public bodies have served our state and our communities well, but greater efficiency could be found by transferring the remaining duties to relevant departments or to another public body which covers a broader remit. They ensure that the remaining responsibilities will continue to be fulfilled by another part of the public sector, allowing us to achieve the same outcomes while saving the taxpayer money. This includes a greater concentration of responsibility so that each function of government is not spread out as far and thin across different public bodies and different public entities. They allow for government to continue to deliver services and better public policy outcomes in a way that is more affordable and more sustainable going into the future. Therefore I commend the bill to the house.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (15:15): It gives me great pleasure in this place today to read part 3, 'Abolition of environment advisory bodies', and division 1, 'Abolition of Victorian Environmental Assessment Council'. I have no problems with a good environment – I like a good sustainable environment – but in my time here, I have got to say, I feel I have been fighting VEAC because VEAC, at least from my people's perspective – which is me as well as everyone else – has been rubberstamping the creation of new national parks. National parks sound great, except they just boot a whole lot of users out. Ms Bath went through a whole lot of stuff which I am not going to repeat, but I understand that the functions will still be there but they will go into the department. But it has

been a long time coming. If they had been probably a little more centred and understood that public land is for public use, then they may not have gone down this path.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (15:16): I got into politics to get big government and big bureaucracy out of our lives – out of the bedroom, out of the lounge room, out of the classroom and out of the boardroom. Why? Because I believe that governments often create more problems than they solve, and the *Independent Review of the Victorian Public Service*, conducted by Helen Silver AO and commissioned by the Treasurer Jaclyn Symes MP, has proven my thinking right. The review acknowledges that Victoria's public sector has become excessively complex, administratively layered and, in many cases, duplicative. Over time new bodies were created without sufficient discipline or consideration of whether existing structures could perform those functions. The result was fragmentation, blurred accountability and avoidable cost, all carried by the taxpayer in the form of increased taxes, tightened regulation, reduced core services and a debt burden seemingly beyond repair. The review identified nearly $5 billion in potential cost savings, and that does not even account for the billions of dollars already wasted under 12 years of Labor. I am not sure either that it includes the $15 billion that somehow disappeared down the gurgler to the CFMEU.

While none of the second-reading speech, the bill or the explanatory memorandum makes any mention of the Silver review, it is clear to all that the Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Bill 2025 is the government's response to the review. Reform in that context is appropriate. Consolidation where functions overlap is sensible. Streamlining governance arrangements can improve clarity and reduce administrative overhead. The opposition does not oppose sensible structural changes, but this change must be guided by principle. It must increase accountability, improve transparency and strengthen confidence in public administration. That is why the opposition will move and support amendments to make this bill better.

While our lead opposition speakers Richard Welch and Jess Wilson in the other place have gone into considerable detail about the various aspects of this legislation, I would like to focus my attention on its impact on local government. Clauses 143 and 144 of the bill amend two principal acts, being the Local Government Act 1989 and the Essential Services Commission Act 2001. These amendments remove the requirement for the minister to obtain advice from the Essential Services Commission (ESC) when setting the annual rate cap. They also removed the commission's role in assessing the outcomes of the rate-capping system and its obligation to prepare and publish biennial reports which identify emerging trends in the sector. In practical terms, this reduces the independent advisory and analytical function that currently informs the rate-setting framework.

The rate cap is an important bulwark against the raiding of ratepayers' wallets, but like CPI, the rate cap is also a blunt instrument directly shaping the financial capacity of councils to deliver services and maintain infrastructure. When the state limits the revenue base of a council, it assumes the responsibility to ensure that those limits are grounded in evidence and subject to independent scrutiny. I have great suspicion of some of Victoria's commissions, particularly those which pander to activists or the government of the day at the expense of the taxpayer, but I cannot say the same for the Essential Services Commission, which plays a significant role in ensuring fair utility prices and council rates in this state. Its work has provided sector-wide data, financial sustainability analysis and transparent reporting that allows both councils and ratepayers to understand the basis upon which rate decisions are made. Removing that advisory requirement alters the balance of the framework, shifting the process more into the heart of the executive sphere without a mandated independent input.

Local government is the tier of government most directly connected to communities. At their core, councils are responsible for local roads, waste collection and community infrastructure, with many more taking on cost-shifted responsibilities for state-created services. Councils are already operating in an environment of sustained cost pressure. The level of cost shifting keeps mounting. The minister installs more monitors and extends their terms at the ratepayers' expense, and workforce constraints within the areas of planning and engineering persist, particularly in our rural areas. At the same time,

regulatory expectations continue to expand and councils' access to untied funding falls. That context makes transparency in the rate-setting process more important.

As the ratepayers' best friend, I am determined that the principle of rate capping remains. I acknowledge that some councils believe that the rate-capping system has struggled to reflect structural cost pressures, and many councils face growing difficulty maintaining service levels while remaining within the prescribed limits. In this environment, the process of rate capping must be defensible on the basis of published evidence, so that ratepayers know that ministerial decisions reflect genuine economic conditions. This bill removes the obligation to seek that independent advice and fails to clearly articulate what alternative evidence framework will be publicly available in its place. And for what? The entire bill is projected to save $35 million – a drop in the ocean against the $5 billion the Silver review identified. Yet for that modest saving, the government is prepared to abolish a safeguard on council rate caps and shift the process from independent oversight to ministerial discretion. That is not streamlining – that is making rate capping more political.

Unlike the Minister for Local Government, I have consulted the sector. I engaged the Municipal Association of Victoria, Greater South East Melbourne, Outer Melbourne Councils, Rural Councils Victoria and representatives from other councils. They represent the interests of virtually every council in this state across regional, rural, interface and metropolitan areas. Words like 'concerned', 'unfortunate', 'bad' and 'disappointing' featured throughout the responses I received. Sadly, every single one of them confirmed that consultation was limited or non-existent at every stage of this process. No surprise: this government hates consultation – talks about it, never practises it. They also universally believe that removal of the ESC's advisory role would diminish transparency and increase uncertainty in financial planning from a revenue perspective. Councils seek predictability, evidence and clarity rather than unfettered revenue growth. Legislative change that directly affects councils' financial architecture should involve structured and meaningful engagement. Sadly, that is never the case with this government.

The Silver review was concerned with duplication and administrative inefficiency across the Victorian public sector. Its objective was to rationalise structures and clarify accountability. That objective should not be interpreted as a justification for reducing independent oversight where it performs a valuable function. Of course, where advisory bodies are redundant, they should be abolished. Where reporting requirements are excessive, they should be rationalised. But where independent scrutiny contributes to public understanding and financial discipline, its removal should be stopped in its tracks.

As Shadow Minister for Local Government, I want all levels of government to operate within their proper lanes. I want their roles and responsibilities to be clearly defined so that no-one is trespassing into areas that they are not equipped to handle. While councils could always do better in terms of their expenditure, the state holds significant sway over their revenue-raising capacity while continually shifting costs onto a sector which they never should be handling. So when the state constrains local government through mechanisms such as rate caps, it must do so transparently and based on evidence that is open to public scrutiny.

The broader objective of streamlining public entities is legitimate. Where this bill abolishes duplication and clarifies responsibility, it may well contribute to a more coherent administrative structure. However, removing the requirement for independent advice from the Essential Services Commission without clearly setting out what will replace that function is simply unacceptable. For that reason, amongst several other very reasonable, very considered amendments, we are seeking to omit clauses 143 and 144, and I call on the house to support this. Councils as well as their ratepayers, be they home owners, farmers or small business operators, deserve to know that the rates they pay are fair and reasonable and based on facts rather than the whim of the minister.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (15:29): I am pleased to rise today to make a contribution on the Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other

Matters) Bill 2025. In doing so I will outline a number of amendments to the entities bill that the government will propose. Can I just take a moment to thank all members for their engagement with me and my office in relation to those aspects of the bill that deal with mental health entities in Victoria. I am grateful for that engagement, including with the opposition spokesperson for mental health Emma Kealy. These house amendments have been developed following extensive consultation and close discussion with lived-experience peak bodies, specifically VMIAC, Tandem and Self Help Addiction Resource Centre (SHARC). I want to acknowledge their advocacy, their expertise.

Members interjecting.

Ingrid STITT: On a point of order, Acting President, it is a bit hard to hear.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Quite right too. I ask members to keep all noise in the chamber to a minimum as a mark of respect to the speaker.

Ingrid STITT: I was just talking about my discussions with the lived-experience peak bodies VMIAC, Tandem and SHARC. I want to acknowledge their advocacy, their expertise and the constructive way in which they have engaged with the government throughout this process. Their message to me has been clear: lived experience must remain central to the governance and leadership of Victoria's mental health entities. And I have listened carefully to those concerns.

In relation to the governance of the Victorian Collaborative Centre for Mental Health and Wellbeing, some stakeholders expressed concerns that the bill, as originally drafted, removed the explicit requirement for lived-experience representation on the collaborative centre board, and I understand why this concern has been raised. At the same time it is also important to ensure that the board is structured in a way that ensures the appropriate diversity of skills and expertise required to govern effectively. In order to balance these objectives the government will be proposing to amend the bill so that two of the five collaborative centre board members must be individuals with lived experience, with one of those members being a consumer with lived experience of mental illness or psychological distress, and the second member being a consumer with lived experience or a person with experience caring for or supporting a person experiencing mental illness or psychological distress. This will ensure that lived experience remains embedded in the governance of the collaborative centre, while allowing the board to maintain the breadth of skills necessary to guide the organisation. I am also conscious that the size of the board may change in the future, and for that reason the government is proposing an additional safeguard with the legislation: if the board expands beyond seven members, there will be a requirement that at least three members have lived experience. Together these amendments will ensure that lived-experience representation is clearly enshrined in legislation and remains a strong and enduring feature of the collaborative centre's governance. I believe this strikes the right balance and responds directly to the concerns raised by Victoria's lived-experience community.

I also want to address amendments relating to the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission. The changes proposed to the commission were designed to strengthen and simplify its governance, allowing it to focus more effectively on supporting consumers and carers and holding government and health services to account. My view remains that the current structure has not enabled the commission to fully deliver on its statutory functions or meet the expectations of the community. However, stakeholders have also raised an important concern that the commission must continue to include strong lived-experience leadership to inform its priorities and direction. In response to that feedback the government is proposing a further amendment to retain two commissioner positions. Under this model there would be a designated commissioner and a deputy commissioner. There would be a requirement that one of the two commissioners, either the commissioner or the deputy commissioner, be a person with lived experience of mental illness, and this will ensure that lived experience continues to inform the leadership and oversight of the commission. This model enables collaboration and shared leadership while preserving clear lines of accountability and decision-making, addressing the governance challenges that have been identified under the previous arrangements. The minister's statement of expectations provides guidance to support the effective functioning of the commission.

This will include reporting against the statement of expectations in the commission's annual report so that members of the public can have a clear understanding of the commission's activities, including the processing and resolving of consumer complaints.

Finally, I want to address concerns that have been raised regarding the proposed changes to data-sharing arrangements involving the commission. Several stakeholders in the sector expressed concern that the bill would unintentionally limit the commission's ability to access information necessary to perform its oversight functions. I want to be very clear that this was not the intention of those provisions. The proposed amendments were developed to address ambiguity in the existing legislation regarding the respective roles of the commission and the Department of Health in overseeing health service performance and to strengthen protections around confidentiality when it comes to access to consumer records and personal data. However, I acknowledge that these proposed changes have not been well understood and have generated significant concern across the sector. In considering that feedback the government is proposing an amendment to clarify data-sharing obligations. The commission continues to be able to request information from the health secretary that is relevant to its work. The health secretary will be required to provide this information while ensuring that individual identities and personal health information are protected and consistent with the Health Records Act 2001.

These house amendments demonstrate that the government will always listen carefully to Victoria's lived-experience community, peak bodies and mental health sector organisations. They reflect a genuine effort to respond constructively to that feedback while still maintaining the objectives of the bill. Importantly, these changes being proposed today have been developed in close collaboration with and are supported by the lived-experience peak bodies, VMIAC, Tandem and SHARC, and I want to thank them for their engagement and for their leadership.

The Labor government remains committed to strengthening governance across Victoria's mental health system entities, ensuring that people with lived experience remain at the heart of decision-making and have a genuine, meaningful role in shaping the future of our state's mental health and wellbeing system. I am looking forward to working constructively with members across the Parliament to secure support for the amendments and to progress this important work.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:37): I rise on behalf of Legalise Cannabis Victoria to speak on the Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Bill 2025. To begin, I would like to be clear that we do believe that there is value in reducing unnecessary waste and we are not opposed to all of the changes in this bill. That being said, we do not believe that reducing waste should come at the cost of proper oversight and lived-experience representation. While in the short term retaining these safeguards may create added costs and inefficiencies, their value must be understood in the long term – the costs that they save over time by reducing risks and improving outcomes. With this in mind, our main concerns in this bill are twofold. We are deeply concerned about the changes that will reduce oversight as it relates to the environment and mental health sector and changes that remove lived-experience leadership.

When it comes to lived-experience representation, this bill removes requirements related to the appointment of commissioners of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission and replaces them with a general requirement to understand specific matters. The current arrangements require lived-experience representation for commissioners, both those with experience of mental health or psychological distress and those with experiences caring for or supporting a person experiencing mental illness or psychological distress. It also removes lived-experience requirements relating to the leadership positions at the Victorian Collaborative Centre for Mental Health and Wellbeing. No longer will there be specific requirements for directors; instead they will just need to have relevant experience, skills and knowledge, and requirements related to board members are completely removed. The Victorian Collaborative Centre for Mental Health and Wellbeing is responsible for connecting lived and living experience leadership, innovative service delivery and research to drive change to Victoria's mental health and wellbeing system. Lived experience is central to this role.

We want to acknowledge that the government has worked in good faith to try and improve the changes to the mental health sector in this bill, but you do have to stop and ask why it took so long for this work to take place. From what we understand there was limited or minimal consultation on these changes before they were announced. It is really therefore no surprise that we are now having to discuss walking back some of these changes. I will be putting forward questions on this and several other concerns during the committee-of-the-whole stage.

The mental health sector and public at large remain sceptical that this government is making genuine progress to improve mental health outcomes for Victorians and to make effective use of the funds generated by the mental health and wellbeing levy. It is in this environment that the government chooses to progress legislation that removes lived-experience representation from the sector, both of those who have experienced or are experiencing mental illness or psychological distress and of their carers. Lived experience is all too often the last group of people to get a seat at the table. It has taken sector failures across decades for lived experience to finally be valued for what it can do and get the promise from this government that lived experience will always be central to the mental health workforce. When the time has come to cut costs, the idea that it will be lived experience on the chopping block all but confirms the sector's worst fears that lived-experience inclusion was tokenistic and that when times are tough it is the first thing to go.

The royal commission was clear: people with lived experience must be involved in the leadership and design of the mental health system, not merely consulted. The reason for this is not that lived experience is a feel-good thing we do; it is something we do because it actually works. It keeps the system accountable, it secures better outcomes and it makes sure it is human centred. We strongly oppose these changes and will support any amendment that will prevent the loss of lived-experience voices in these roles.

I would like to again touch on the changes to the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, because they go far beyond just the removal of the lived-experience requirement. These changes also go to the very role of the commission. The Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission is an independent statutory authority that is responsible for holding the government to account for the performance, quality and safeguards of Victoria's mental health and wellbeing system. The changes in this bill include reducing the number of commissioners from four to one. While a reduction was recommended, we understand that a specific number was never specified.

Further, this bill removes information sharing agreement powers and enables the minister to issue an annual statement of expectations that specifies strategic priorities, opportunities for improvement in the performance of the commission and any emerging risks to the mental health and wellbeing system. It will also limit the monitoring and reporting functions of the commission to performance, quality and safety of the mental health and wellbeing system in the course of their dealing with complaints or conducting investigations, inquiries or complaint data review. It also limits functions to monitoring and reporting on progress to improve outcomes of the mental health and wellbeing system, rather than to improve mental health and wellbeing outcomes.

The changes to the commission share a very clear theme: restricting its ability to provide independent oversight and to identify systemic failures. For any oversight body this would be troubling, but for one that is only two years old there is a particularly disturbing quality to these changes. A range of stakeholders have contacted us to express their concerns about these changes. While I understand the government is responding to these concerns in the form of several amendments, there is no reason that it should have gotten to this point to begin with. Sector consultation could have prevented all of this and avoided unnecessary uncertainty and distrust brewing in the sector.

We know that this is by no means the end of the government's cost-cutting exercise, with more legislation to come to enact the recommendations in the Silver review. With that in mind, we hope that the government learns something with this tranche of changes. When you are looking to abolish, absorb or reduce the size of an organisation, that can be when consultation is most frightening, but it

is also when it is most important. We hope that the next time we do not have to make these kinds of last-minute changes, but we can assure you that if it comes down to it, we will be there to call it out and secure changes.

With respect to changes to environment bodies, we are deeply concerned about the decision to abolish Recycling Victoria and confer its responsibilities, functions and duties to the Environment Protection Authority Victoria. This will undermine environmental oversight at a time when the Victorian Auditor-General's Office has warned that Victoria is not on track to meet its target of diverting 80 per cent of waste away from landfill by 2030. These changes include extending the requirement for a responsible entity to prepare and submit a responsible entity risk, consequence and contingency plan from annually to every three years. In simple terms this means responsible entities like large thermal waste-to-energy services will no longer have to regularly report on risks of serious failures to the provision of their services and the actions that they are taking to minimise or prevent such risks. As I have spoken about many times in this place before, Victoria is set to become the waste energy capital of Australia. To reduce environmental oversight at this time beggars belief.

We are also deeply concerned about the change in this bill to abolish the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council and the Victorian Marine and Coastal Council. The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council is responsible for scientifically assessing environmental biodiversity and other values and threats in the immediate protection areas and state forests of eastern Victoria. While the functions of the commissioner for environmental sustainability are set to be expanded to capture some of the investigation and assessment functions being abolished, expertise will be lost and oversight weakened through reduced reporting obligations. The Victorian Marine and Coastal Council is the state's peak advisory body on coastal and marine issues, providing expert stakeholder-informed independent advice on marine and coastal issues to the Minister for Environment. Disappointingly, unlike the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council, this bill does not make provisions for these functions to be done elsewhere. Again we see a cloak-and-dagger approach where cost cutting gets used as an excuse to remove or reduce government oversight, and it will be the mental health and environment sectors that suffer the most. For these reasons Legalise Cannabis Victoria cannot support this bill.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (15:47): I rise to speak to the Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Bill 2025. As others have said, this bill does various things, but essentially it amends several pieces of legislation to implement part of the government's response to the *Independent Review of the Victorian Public Service*, also known as the Silver review. That review was undertaken, and there were a number of recommendations made. This bill goes part way to looking at some of those recommendations. There are only a few areas that it is looking at, making savings of around $34 million, and that is over four years; that is an absolute drop in the ocean compared to the $15 billion of corruption that has lined the pockets of bikies and criminals with the cost blowouts of infrastructure projects in the Big Build. That has been highlighted for many weeks now. In fact it has been raised for many years what has been going on, yet the government has turned a blind eye. In particular the Premier has turned a blind eye to the corruption, and she has been caught out. She has been caught out even today, with Kevin Devlin calling her out, saying they were warned. I watched question time. She refused to answer those questions – 'When were you first told? When did you know about it?' She would not answer and sat down. It is an extraordinary disgrace. As I said, this bill only goes to $34 million of savings. That is two days of interest repayments – two days.

Richard Welch interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: As Mr Welch says, by the end of this week it will be over. That is all this bill delivers. This government, if they were fair dinkum, would actually look at what they were doing, stop the waste and mismanagement and hold a royal commission so we could get to the bottom of what has gone on so it does not happen again. It is the same with COVID. We should have had a royal commission into that, yet they are paying out $125 million to businesses that were affected. We were asking at the time in this house, when they shut down the other place, the Assembly, about support

and the damage they were doing. We have had so many implications because of bad government decision-making, whether it is COVID or whether it is the Big Build. This government has been warned by the rating agencies 'You are taking this state off a financial cliff', and it is future generations that will be paying for that incredible debt. We are known as corruption central. We are known as the highest taxed state in the country, and people are really hurting. The government will use any excuse that they can, but this bill is a drop in the ocean.

Others have said, and Mr Welch very clearly pointed it out, exactly what the bill will do: streamline certain entities and look at residual functions and the like. I want to just address a couple of concerns around the mental health component that my colleague Emma Kealy highlighted in the other place. I just listened to the minister, and she does concede that they are listening and they are actually talking to people – finally – and amending the bill because they know they got it wrong. Well, they should have got it right in the first place. But no – they come in here and pretend all is well. Well, it is not well, it is not right, and they are really stuffing things up left, right and centre. What this bill does in relation to the mental health component is diminish the importance of lived experience, that being – for those of us that know – the mental illness and psychological distress of being a family member or carer responding to important mental health challenges, and it reverses the relationship between the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission and the government. So really now the government will be sitting in judgement of the commission. That is what this bill is doing, amongst other things, and there are many issues around that. My colleague Emma Kealy in the other place raised the concerns of various stakeholders who have not been very complimentary of the government's consultation or what they are doing in relation to the Mental Health Commissioner component. As we know, we had a royal commission into mental health, and this bill is effectively undermining some of those recommendations. I know that there will be questions in the committee, and I will ask those when we finally get to committee. I believe we are not going to committee today because the government has to adjourn it off because they are putting their own amendments because they did not get this bill right. Well, surprise, surprise – they are not getting much right at the moment, but by God, I am just hoping that Victorians get it right in November and vote this government out.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (15:52): I rise to speak on the Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Bill 2025 and wish to indicate from the outset, like many others on the crossbench, that I will not be supporting this piece of legislation. This bill is the first part of the many legislative changes required for the government to acquit what they accepted from the Silver review into the Victorian public service. It is incredibly telling to see what this government will or will not do in relation to budget repair and the Silver review and reading those recommendations. I want to begin by recognising something really important that we need to remember as this bill surely passes the Parliament with the support of the opposition: people are going to lose their jobs because of this piece of legislation. There are going to be real-life impacts and repercussions, and it is really important that we all reflect on that and remember it.

Throughout this process, the government has repeatedly referred to many of these agencies – and, in doing so, public servants – as waste. That is incorrect. These are hardworking people who have dedicated their time and their energy to the public service, who will be profoundly impacted. I am a proud CPSU member myself, and I have engaged with a number of representatives of the union in the past, and workers that will be impacted by this legislation.

Let me be blunt: the only reason that these jobs are on the chopping block is because the government cannot balance its budget and has indeed misplaced its priorities. Everyone in this place knows that Victoria, compared to the rest of the country, is in an incredibly precarious budget position. What is evident here is that when the budget is tight, we know that agencies are hit first, and it is always those responsible for protecting our wildlife and habitat, it seems. We have already seen massive cuts to nature staff across the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, Parks Victoria and the Victorian Fisheries Authority, and this is exactly what we see in this bill as well, particularly with the abolition of the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) and the Victorian Marine

and Coast Council. Abolishing the Marine and Coast Council leaves no independent body holding the government accountable on critical issues like coastal erosion, algal blooms and climate impacts on Victoria's coasts. The council was also responsible for developing the marine and coastal strategy, with the next one being due next year.

For over 50 years VEAC has played a central role in our state's environmental and land management framework as the agency responsible for the assessment of public land. Yes, those responsibilities will be moved over to the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability, but it is still incredibly unclear how the tasks of a council of diverse experts are going to now be accomplished by one public servant. On that note, I will be supporting the Greens amendment to ensure the expertise of the council is not lost and that they can serve as an advisory body to that commissioner.

The abolition of the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council was not a recommendation of the review. The government are abolishing it because they no longer have an interest in expanding protected land in this state. Despite its well-respected status in history, we have seen the government unwind VEAC's work several times in the last few years, so for many the move was not unexpected. This is also at a time when our biodiversity needs more protection and more oversight, not less. The latest Victorian state of the environment report found that our threatened species are in dire condition and are deteriorating. Of the 40 biodiversity indicators, over 80 per cent were assessed as poor or unknown. The inquiry into ecosystem decline in Victoria also found an alarming situation for our flora and fauna and major gaps in government policy. This is an inquiry which the government, in the last year of this term, still has not responded to, and it was an inquiry done in the last term of Parliament.

Let us not forget about the long-awaited legislation that we are also yet to see. While this legislation has been rushed into this place abolishing important environmental measures, the government has only just responded to the independent review into the Wildlife Act 1975 – also announced in the last term of Parliament – more than four years after that report was delivered, with its most significant recommendations rejected. We are yet to even see a copy of the proposed bill with the amendments to the Wildlife Act, and I can guarantee you that it will not come in this Parliament – but we can rush through the abolition of important environmental protections and councils. We also know that the Animal Care and Protection Bill, which was committed to a decade ago and was said to be a priority of this government, and the public land act – two pieces of legislation that are ready to go – are wasting away on the Premier's desk. Sitting week after sitting week, they do not make their way into this Parliament. It is perfectly clear that the bodies included in this bill are not being abolished because of budget concerns; they are hardly a drop in the ocean. They being abolished because this government just does not give a damn about our natural environment, and this should concern each and every Victorian because it affects each and every one of us.

What was a recommendation of Ms Silver, which the government is apparently not interested in pursuing, is a separation of regulatory and commercial functions of state racing bodies. I just want to make it really clear that Ms Silver recommended abolishing Greyhound Racing Victoria, which they chose not to do, but they have chosen to abolish a body that Ms Silver did not recommend that they abolish. If the government are looking for more ways to raise revenue and reduce costs, I can assure them that we on the crossbench, including my colleagues in the chamber right now, can give them plenty of ideas to do that. A wonderful place to start, which I have spoken about many times before, would be to end the subsidies that prop up the flailing greyhound racing industry, a move that would save over half a billion dollars over 10 years – half a billion dollars of taxpayers money. That is exactly why the Liberal government in Tasmania has chosen to end greyhound racing. They actually did not say they were going to ban greyhound racing; they said they would pull away taxpayer subsidies, and the industry said they cannot exist then. If that is not telling, I do not know what is. The Victorian government could pull taxpayer subsidies from the flailing greyhound racing industry. They could also stop giving money to the deadly jumps racing industry. We are the only state – the so-called progressive state – in the country that continues that activity.

I have not spoken about the eye-watering costs associated with allowing people to kill ducks in the name of recreation in our state, which I would note commences at 8 am tomorrow. On top of the associated costs of running the season, the government committed $14 million to ignore their own parliamentary inquiry, which recommended they ban it, and that select committee cost taxpayer money as well. I know that my colleague Ms Payne in the Legalise Cannabis Party has also offered up some good, commonsense solutions that would save the government money and also raise some revenue instead of abolishing these important environmental bodies, which we will go through in this bill today.

As many others have mentioned, this bill initially included changes to the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, reducing it from four commissioners to just one, with none of the leadership positions to be filled by people who have been affected by mental health challenges. We all know how important lived experience is when it comes to mental health management and reform and policy. The commission itself has taken the rare step to publicly call this out, describing the government's proposal as 'at odds with the recommendations of the royal commission'. Advocates and those working within the mental health sector have described things as only getting worse since the royal commission. This is at a time where our mental health system is under more pressure than ever, and those working within it feel unheard and they feel unsupported.

I want to congratulate the government for managing to unite the rest of the entire Parliament against these changes, and I want to thank the opposition and the Greens in particular for their work on ensuring not only that the commission will not be weakened but that we may finally see real powers to request data and information.

Obviously the government has come to the table today and produced some house amendments that land in a place where these reforms that were initially incredibly concerning will no longer take place, and I am really pleased to see that happen. But it is another really important reminder of having us in here listen to those advocates, those communities and those stakeholders to ensure that we get it right, because we should absolutely be getting it right when it comes to our mental health system and our mental health commission. In saying that, while I am pleased about those changes I will ultimately not be supporting this piece of legislation, and I want to send my solidarity and support to the many public service workers across Victoria who will ultimately be impacted by the passage of this bill today.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (16:02): I rise to speak on the Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Bill 2025, and I just want to start by endorsing the words of my colleague Mr Puglielli. I obviously agree with the position he has put, and he has made it very clear that we will not be supporting this bill. However, despite that, I do want to make some particular mention of areas in this bill that we have concerns about, starting with mental health. I know my colleagues here that we have just heard from across all sides have flagged some of the serious problems in this bill with the changes to the mental health entities. I really want to thank all of those who reached out to us with respect to the changes this bill as proposed was to make, from people with lived experience and their representative groups, to current and former members of the affected entities, health professionals and unions. A whole range of concerns have been raised by those who reached out, and despite this being a space where there are often very different views, their concerns were remarkably consistent.

Firstly, the loss of legislated lived-experience requirements in these entities was of serious concern. One of the key outcomes of the royal commission was a recognition of the need for lived-experience representation through the whole mental health system from the front lines to leadership roles, and the immediate steps taken by this government were really significant in this respect. There should be recognition for that, but we know that there was a lot more work to do to embed lived experience in our system. There still is a huge amount of work to go to ensure that this workforce is well supported and genuinely included. The signal that this bill sends in its current form, unamended, is that the government is walking back on that commitment at the very time we need to be building on what has been started.

A reduction in the number of commissioners and the functions of the commission was also something of significant concern to a number of the people who have reached out to us. A commission with real teeth would be able to provide robust oversight of the system and make recommendations to the government about how these issues could be addressed. This was one of the key reasons that the commission was established in the first place. The changes that are potentially being made by this bill, again, unamended, would really walk back on that mission.

Even prior to the changes that were raised in this bill we had received consistent feedback from the sector that the commission was being hampered in their ability to undertake their legislated role due to a lack of resourcing and access to the data they need to do their job properly. So with respect to some of these concerns about mental health, we have proposed a number of amendments, which we will be reviewing in light of other amendments that have been put out, including the government's house amendments. But I would ask if our amendments could be circulated now, please. Firstly, we have amendments that are seeking to reintroduce a legislated requirement for some of the board positions on the collaborative centre to be filled by people with lived experience or carers of those with lived experience, which is again going back to that recognition of the importance of this finding of the royal commission around the need for lived-experience representation and leadership. While I appreciate that there is always the potential for lived experience to be included in some of these roles, I think it is really important that we signal the need for that by legislating it to make sure that there are dedicated places for people with lived experience on these bodies. Secondly, we have amendments that retain the data collection provisions of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission in the Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022 and strengthen the requirements for data sharing, which again go to addressing that concern around the potentially diminished role of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission that has occurred through the changes made in this entities bill but also seek to strengthen its ability to oversee the health system by being able to obtain the data it needs to do its job well, which, as I said, is something that has long been raised as a real restriction on their ability to do their job properly.

We understand that there are amendments from the opposition and house amendments from the government, and we will look over those closely before deciding our final position on them. I welcome the fact that the government have engaged on this constructively and have seen that they need to make some changes to this bill. Ultimately our objective here is to ensure that our mental health system is being left stronger by any changes, not weaker. If this is not the case, it is more evidence that this government are walking back from their commitment to reforms following that landmark royal commission. There have been promises around jobs, housing support, reforms to ensure a health-led response by emergency services, infrastructure, the mental health hubs, regional boards and lived experience, and so many of these things have failed to materialise – great promises and great intentions that were not realised or backed with the resourcing or commitment to reform that so many had hoped would occur. There was real momentum and hope in the mental health sector immediately following the royal commission, and this government gave every indication at the time that they were committed to reform.

I understand that COVID then happened and it was a huge disruption to our health system, but whether that was a legitimate diversion of resources or a convenient distraction, the reforms essentially stopped. We hear time and again concerns that things like the mental health levy, which is meant to be supporting the reform program, are just being used to keep acute services barely running and are often swallowed up by broader area health services. The reforms are needed more than ever. This is a system under significant strain and workforce concerns are growing. In our acute settings consumers and workers are in increasingly dangerous, outdated and unsuitable facilities. There is increasing complexity in the workload, there is lack of investment in drug and alcohol rehabilitation units, there is lack of appropriate housing and support for people with complex needs and there is ever-growing demand due to failure to invest in community-based supports, which means wards are overcrowded and inadequately staffed. Recruitment and retention of staff in these circumstances then becomes increasingly difficult, and we have a vicious cycle.

Reform is never done, but we should at least be making progress. Sadly, none of the issues that led to the royal commission in the first place have gone away. Unless there is a renewed commitment by the government to resume reform efforts, we risk this becoming yet another royal commission report that joins the ranks of those becoming dusty on a shelf and that we pull out intermittently to remind whoever is in power that they knew what needed to change but have not acted.

I move now to the environmental cuts. Ms Purcell and Ms Payne have touched on these, but I just want to add to what they have said. With respect to a lot of the changes in this bill, we have requested to meet with the Minister for Environment on multiple occasions, but we did not get a response to that. We have significant concerns about the changes to a range of environmental entities. This bill is going to abolish the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council, or VEAC; the independent Victorian Marine and Coastal Council, VMCC; the independent Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority, MLRA; and Recycling Victoria, with some select functions from VEAC and MLRA to be rolled into the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria and the Environment Protection Authority Victoria. This comes as the government seeks to cut another 350 jobs from the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) and dismantle other government bodies, such as Sustainability Victoria and the Victorian Fisheries Authority. This is at a time of accelerating climate and biodiversity loss in Victoria.

We share major stakeholder concerns that this bill will irreparably weaken environmental protections and strip expert, frank and fearless voices from our governance framework. The Victorian National Parks Association, the Wilderness Society, Environmental Justice Australia and the Victorian Protected Areas Council have warned that dismantling VEAC and VMCC will leave Victoria without the expert guidance and community input it desperately needs, making it easier for short-term political pressure to override long-term protection. We are concerned that VEAC's work delivering independent, science-based advice on the protection and management of public land cannot be replicated by the office of the commissioner in the same way. The bill also creates logistical issues by removing a mandatory duty for departments to act in accordance with government-accepted recommendations, leaving hundreds of areas identified by VEAC for investigation in limbo.

Removing the VMCC will leave Victoria with no dedicated voice to hold the government accountable on things like coastal erosion, algal blooms, gas decommissioning, oil spills and climate impacts on Victoria's coasts. We understand it would create logistical issues. To quote Dr Geoff Wescott, spokesperson for the Victorian Protected Areas Council:

> A new Marine and Coastal Strategy is due next year and the very body that has historically had carriage of this critical implementation report has just been removed. Its disappearance risks gutting the entire *Marine and Coastal Act*.

Abolishing the MLRA would remove an independent, trusted local voice before the Latrobe Valley even begins the long process of rehabilitating the three declared brown coal mines. By rolling Recycling Victoria into the EPA, the government risks stretching the EPA even thinner while enfeebling Recycling Victoria's core purpose to oversee the waste, recycling and resource recovery sector while supporting the development of a circular economy. The government plans to cut another 350 jobs from DEECA, which will reportedly target Solar Victoria, Agriculture Victoria, the First Peoples group and bushfire and forest services. They also plan to abolish Sustainability Victoria, as I have mentioned, which we understand does not require legislation. There have also been a long series of cuts and restructures across DEECA over the past three years, specifically to Parks Victoria, the Victorian Fisheries Authority and biodiversity, bushfire and forest services. There are plans to merge the VFA and the Game Management Authority into a single regulator. Their investigations into abolishing the National Parks Advisory Council, the Scientific Advisory Committee, the Gippsland Lakes Coordinating Committee and the Reference Areas Advisory Committee are underway, as far as we understand. There are a whole host of other entities with key roles in overseeing the management and protection of the environment in Victoria that are facing either complete abolition or severe cuts.

Then finally, Labor also plans to transfer 22 positions from Parks Victoria to the Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority.

We are seriously concerned about what this says about this government's priorities when it comes to the environment. It is clear once again that the Labor government does not prioritise or value environmental protection in this state. While we are opposing all of the changes that are before us here, we have put forward an amendment with respect to VEAC. The reason we have done this is, given that this bill is likely to pass with or without our support, we feel that this is a sensible amendment that everyone in this chamber should be able to get behind. I would ask the Clerks to please circulate that amendment now, if it has not already been. I will speak in more detail to this amendment during the committee stage of the bill, but once again I just want to say that for weeks the Greens have tried and failed to meet with the environment minister to discuss these concerns and discuss this amendment that we have put forward. We have gone out and met with stakeholders about what changes, if any, could be made to salvage this attack on environmental agencies. Specifically, we would like to thank Matt Ruchel and Felicity Brooke at the Victorian National Parks Authority as well as Dr Geoff Wescott at the Victorian Protected Areas Council. To be clear, those groups and the Greens oppose this bill entirely, and we believe that a biodiversity crisis demands these agencies be grown, not abolished.

I will leave my contribution there, and as I said, I will speak in more detail to what our amendments do with respect to VEAC. I would encourage all members to have a look at those amendments and really ask that you consider supporting them; I think they are very straightforward amendments that will actually, in all likelihood, save the government money, if that is indeed their objective with the changes that they are making in this bill, but we also believe that they will deliver some positive outcomes for our environment.

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:16): I would just like to echo the sentiments in the chamber today of members Ms Purcell, Ms Payne and Dr Mansfield. We have just heard from Dr Mansfield a list of concerns that not only the Greens but any number of members of this place have with respect to this – what would you call it? – smorgasbord of changes to different pieces of legislation. It is representative of a government in its final throes. I predict that is exactly what it is, because it is not orderly and in very many respects it is ad hoc, knee jerk, ill conceived and poorly thought through. Nonetheless we will continue to observe this government do what it does. It will have the public believe one of two things: either they have a recipe for success that they have now stumbled upon – it has taken them some time, but that is what they have got – or, as has already been said today by members Purcell and Payne and Dr Mansfield, all these organisations and bodies simply were failing the job they had. Now, if that was the case, then who was administering those functions? Who was administering those bodies, and why didn't they act sooner? The truth is there is a great deal of work to do here, and the truth is also, as has been said and pointed out quite plainly, that at precisely the time that our environment needs support the most, this government seems to be putting its tail between its legs and running at a great pace. That is a very sad thing for the state of Victoria, I would propose to those opposite.

Nonetheless we will see with the passage of time where they land on this. But it is disappointing, to say the least, that the approach by this government has been to largely ignore the views of the experts and consider themselves the experts. We have seen this recently, as has been said, in terms of the marine officers. It is just one small example where the solution of those opposite is simply to withdraw services entirely and hope that somehow the whole industry will regulate itself and the environment will be self-protected and so forth. This is simply a fairy tale, and if those opposite think that those in the sector who are concerned about environmental issues and also those who are active in the environmental space are not watching and noticing, they certainly are. In this case, the government and their credentials appear in tatters because of the steps they are now making.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:19): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned until later this day.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned until later this day.

National Gas (Victoria) Amendment Bill 2025

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Gayle Tierney:

That the bill be now read a second time.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (16:19): The National Gas (Victoria) Amendment Bill 2025 is a bill that I am happy to make a contribution on, indicating that the opposition will not oppose this bill but will seek to amend it and ask some questions of the minister during the committee stage in this chamber. It is a bill that points to weaknesses in the government's approach. We have seen 12 years of this government, and we have a shortage of gas. What has happened here in this state is Lily D'Ambrosio's war on gas has had a real-world outcome. The government decided that it would not do anything to facilitate new gas infrastructure or new gas exploration. In fact the last exploration licences granted were in 2013 – three of them then – and the government's war on gas has seen us now in a position where the state is in a lot of trouble. We have a situation where the gas that the state has relied on for a significant part of its heating, a significant part of its cooking, a significant part of its hot water and a significant part of its industry activity is higher priced, in shorter supply and a challenge for the state. In government, after November, we will be very clear that we need more gas. There needs to be more exploration, and we need onshore conventional gas brought forward. We need to make sure that that gas that is offshore is also tapped thoughtfully and that we bring forward new supplies.

That is not what this bill immediately deals with. This bill is a desperate attempt to clean up the government's own mess. The government has got a problem now because of its failure to support the gas sector over so long, because of its declared war on gas, its declared war on the gas sector and its declared war on anyone who wants gas, uses gas or needs gas. They know that this government is after them. They know that if they invest, this government will penalise them and this government will punish them in any way it can. We have had gas connections banned on new estates. We have had gas connections banned where a planning permit is required on a city property or a property in a regional centre. That is the level we have got to. We have seen bills go through this chamber to give the government a head of power to ban gas appliance replacements, and that is what they are going to do from March 2027. That is what they have said they will do. They wanted to pull back from saying, 'We're going to ban cookers,' but when confronted with an amendment in this chamber which took away their power to ban cooking appliances, they actually voted that down. You can take from that that cooking is on the agenda. It is on the menu for this government. If it is re-elected in November, by March next year, 2027, cookers will be banned, heating will be banned –

John Berger interjected.

David DAVIS: Yes, cookers – as in gas cookers. Gas cookers will be banned. That is exactly right, Mr Berger. You down there at Teesdale, if your gas cooker were to run out, it would become illegal to replace it with a gas cooker. And the same with your gas heater – if your gas heater were to die a natural death after 15 or 20 years, it would become illegal to replace it with a gas cooker. That is where this government is going, let us be quite clear. It is a punishing approach focused on denying consumers choice and the opportunity to have heating and cooling of their own choosing. That is where they are going.

There is a consequence of this with industry. Industry is being punished too. We have seen a real deskilling of our industry. We have seen a loss of much manufacturing. We used to manufacture plastics here. Qenos has now gone. It is gone forever. It had a gas input. It had an ethane input as a feedstock, and it used gas as the mechanism for producing the plastics that were required. That is gone;

it has disappeared. Glass manufacturing here – that is gone too. I could go on with a long, long list of industries that have been rubbed out by this government – by its taxes, by its regulations, by its charges – and been rubbed out by its approach to gas, its war on gas. That is Lily D'Ambrosio, it is Daniel Andrews, it is Jacinta Allan, it is the ministry.

Enver Erdogan interjected.

David DAVIS: Yes, you, Mr Erdogan. You should have stood up and said, 'No, we don't agree with this war on gas. I believe in the choice of people and businesses to actually choose the energy of their choosing.'

Enver Erdogan interjected.

David DAVIS: No, you. I tell you what, you have supported it all the way. You have never once spoken out against it publicly, and you could have. You could have actually drawn a line and said, 'This is too much.'

This bill tries to clean up a few of the problems. The minister wants to clean up these problems because she has realised there is a problem with the south-west pipeline, let us be clear – the pipeline coming from the south-west out around the edge of Geelong, not far from Teesdale, and then looping up towards the city. That is a very important set of pipelines, I have to say. It is a very important piece of infrastructure. If there is new gas down that way, and there is no doubt new gas that can be brought on –

Members interjecting.

David DAVIS: G-A-S, gas, yes. If you want to maximise the movement out of the storage in that corner of the state – and Iona is down there, and that is very important storage for this state. Iona is pumped up during the summer months, and then in those winter months, when we need the gas, it is withdrawn. But there is a constraint point, and that constraint point is that pipeline. The minister is also actively investigating import terminals, and there are a number of these. There is one in South Australia that is pushing forward, there is Squadron in New South Wales and there are a couple of alternatives here in Victoria. The question is: can those terminals all come on and –

Tom McIntosh interjected.

David DAVIS: I tell you what, you are a supporter of closing off options on gas too. And nobody down your way –

Tom McIntosh interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Order! Mr McIntosh, if you are going to interject, do so from your spot, please.

David DAVIS: I have not heard a word out of you on compressed natural gas and the loss of the network. You have been silent as a church mouse as people in your electorate have lost their gas. You have not fought for them. You have not stood up for them. You have been quiet as a church mouse because, you know what, it does not directly affect you because you live in a nice city location and you have the gas if you need it at the moment. But you will not stand up for your local area, will you?

Members interjecting.

Tom McIntosh: On a point of order, Acting President, my location is not nice.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Sorry, I did not hear that. I will not uphold the point of order because I did not hear it.

David DAVIS: I will try to avoid the interjections and not take the bait. It is difficult, but I will make a real endeavour to avoid the interjections. The point here is there is a problem with that pipeline and its capacity. You do not have to be a rocket scientist to have realised some of these issues. And

where has the minister been over the last almost 12 years? Where has she been on this? And now she wants to bring in a big stick of ministerial direction powers so that she can ride around and direct these firms as to what they will do. But why didn't the minister work with these firms over a longer period of time? I am informed that the pipeline group have actually got applications to the energy regulator currently in there. The minister's people say that they are not quite strong enough – well, that is a debate. But this came as an issue, and the minister needs to clean up the mess that she has made over the last 12 years, and to do that, she has got to take these powerful regulatory steps.

I note that the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee hoed in, and SARC is a very weak body, as we all know. It speaks very softly usually. But this matter of declared transmission systems enables the expansion of the minister's declared gas transmission system capacity to be expedited by ministerial order – that is the short description – and supports the improvement of declared transmission systems in Victoria. They list the note from the second reading. But SARC does point to the fact that this set of powers is significant. It does point to the forced work provision in the charter provisions:

> The effect of clause 3 may be that the Supreme Court may order any person concerned in a service provider's contravention of a requirement to carry out a specified improvement to a transmission pipeline to take any specified action that the Court deems appropriate. The Committee will write to the Minister seeking further information.

I will come to the minister's letter in a moment.

> The Committee observes that the effect of clause 3 may be that the Supreme Court may order any person …

and so forth – that is their conclusion.

> The Committee will write to Minister seeking further information as to … the compatibility of clause 3 with individuals' Charter right not to be made to perform forced or compulsory labour.

The minister in her response – which for the background of the house is in *Alert Digest* No. 3 of March 2026 – dismisses this matter:

> For completeness, if a natural person were appointed as a declared transmission system service provider, the works and activities required by the Ministerial Orders, and its enforcement by a Court order, would fall within the scope of the exception to the prohibition from forced or compulsory work in section 11(3) of the Charter. The Court order is a civil order which is protective, not punitive, in nature –

But the point that the minister misses is actually it is an order to perform forced work. That is what it is; let us be clear. It is a firm. It is a firm that has got a business case for its own development and own expansion from time to time, but it is a firm where the minister is seeking special powers to roll over the firm and just direct them to do this. It may well be in the public interest and I understand that, and for that reason we will not stand in the way of the bill. But we do think that these extraordinary, draconian powers that the minister is taking, she is taking to clean up the mess that she has left. That is the truth of the matter. Let us be clear: if the minister had worked sensibly with the industry over the last decade or so, we would be in a much better position. If the minister had worked to make sure that proper supply was coming on, to make sure that the infrastructure was maintained and to make sure that the infrastructure was upgraded where potential new additions to capacity were appropriate, we would be in a much better position. This panicked decision – 'I'm going to take the big stick, bring in the bazookas and force the industry to do the following' – that is really what is going on here.

The bill provides that a ministerial order may specify the scope of augmentation, including timeframes, conditions or requirements. Before making the ministerial order, the minister may have regard to specified factors, including the impact of the proposed augmentation on the operation of the declared transmission system, the interests of gas consumers and the consistency with the objectives of the national gas regulatory framework. The minister must consult with the Premier, the Treasurer, AEMO and the relevant declared transmission system providers, except where consultation is impractical or where urgency or the public interest requires otherwise, and ministerial orders may be revoked by the minister. I notice that the minister does not have to consult with the energy regulator. The energy

regulator is important because expansions of networks of this type often have cost structures that are sheeted home to consumers, and those orders to allow the costs to be sent to consumers indirectly of course are overseen by the energy regulator. We see that the consultation should be expanded. It might be an appropriate time to circulate our amendments. The issues with the bill are significant. As I said, the ministerial order powers granted to the relevant minister have the capacity to force private operators to invest in capital investment expansion where there is no clear business case and without certainty that costs can be efficiently recovered. That is one of the reasons we think there needs to be consultation with the energy regulator.

Consultation with industry participants and pipeline owners can be bypassed under certain circumstances where consultation is considered impractical. This raises legitimate concerns that these exceptions are broadly framed and could result in orders being made without thorough consultation with key industry and market participants. So a minister – and this one, this current minister, would be such a minister – could go off on a frolic, ready to use their powers, almost excited in using their powers, because they are attacking the gas industry, and that is the reality of this particular minister and the particular approach that is adopted. We are nervous about giving these wide and extraordinary powers to the minister, especially without some of the transparency checks that we have proposed. I should just explain, in short, what that does, and I will do that in a moment.

There is also a risk that works will be compelled where recovery of costs is unable to occur. Such cost recovery requires energy regulator decisions, as I said. There is concern that Victorian gas consumers could be paying higher prices and costs for the expedited improvements without the application being based on well-understood principles reflecting the long-term interests of the gas regulatory system.

Yes, we see there will be problems. The amendments distributed fall into a couple of orders, a couple of sections: the amendment of 58E to require consultation with the Australian Energy Regulator, and then the number of transparency measures in 58F, which will insert in clause 3 after page 8:

> the AER; and
>
> any customer advocacy body prescribed for the purposes of this section or, if no body is prescribed, any body that the Minister reasonably considers represents the interests of customers …

We think consumers should be in this. We think it is a reasonable thing that some of the consumer groups will have a view. I imagine someone like Gavin Dufty at St Vincent's would have a view on the impact on a range of consumers, both small businesses and others and some of the more vulnerable members of the community.

> any gas retailer that the Minister reasonably considers has customers that are likely to be materially affected;
>
> any other person or body (other than a small customer) that the Minister reasonably considers is likely to be materially affected …

by the making of the order.

We want to see the minister's matters published, the minister's reasons published, and that must include, we say:

> the potential costs to end users of the improvement or improvement services specified in the Order; and
>
> any alternatives to the improvement or improvement services specified … that were considered and assessed before making the Order …

One of the problems here is the minister has the power to make the order without looking at options and looking at the alternatives, and we think that the minister should look at the alternatives and then should publish that. Again, it is a very mild requirement; it is a requirement for transparency.

> the potential costs to end users of any alternatives referred to in paragraph (b); and
>
> details of any advice received from AEMO and the AER …

If they have given advice, we think the public should know that too. We think it is very reasonable. We do not think the minister should be able to use this big stick without explaining, we do not think the minister should be allowed to use this big stick without actually looking at alternatives, and if the minister has advice, which she should have or he should have, from the relevant authorities there – AEMO and the Australian Energy Regulator – the consumer, the community, should be able to see that advice too. We do not think that is unreasonable.

I do want to just go forward and say a couple of other points here. We need more supply, and that is one of the reasons we will not stand in the way of this bill, because it is about the capacity and the expansion of that trunk pipeline to accommodate additional gas supply. We are confident that their supply will come from the south-west. We know the importance of Iona. We saw the difficulties encountered a couple of years ago in June in that very cold period, and the pipelines coming from the north were at 108 per cent of capacity. They were over capacity and pumping as hard as they could, and we were drawing down on Iona and our other suppliers at the fastest rate possible. You can see that there is a real set of capacity issues here. As I said, this is an admission of Labor failure – their ideological approach over 12 years – and I do think this bill carries a significant sovereign risk for Victoria. This is off the back of a series of bills that take more and more ministerial power, and I do not have a lot of confidence that the current government will use these powers responsibly.

There is no doubt that when firms are considering investing in energy infrastructure in Victoria they will be aware of the increasingly authoritarian approach adopted by the Allan Labor government. We do not like bills that impose these obligations without proper process – that do it willy-nilly, without the transparency of options, without the transparency and accountability. But we are aware of the challenge that the state now faces, and in that sense, the state is in a very difficult position. We will ask a number of questions in the committee stage, and these powers should be subject, at a minimum, to some sort of code of practice or some set of steps that would provide better transparency and oversight.

This is the situation that the state faces. I saw what I took to be an important article the other day from Perry Williams about the minister threatening to break up a three-way fight over the gas pipeline. Again, this does not fill you with confidence that the minister has a good understanding of what is required here. It sort of points to the minister's desperate position. The question is what will happen with some of these import terminals. Will they get off the mark or not? It is not clear. What is clear is that import terminals would be more costly for consumers.

We are just concerned about the position the state has been left in. I think one thing that is important is, if you look at the broad context, whilst there is a broad acceptance of the need for transition, most of us were relatively chilled when we read the auditor's report in December that looked at the challenge of transition and, frankly, a botched transition. We know that the government's transition is in trouble when it comes to offshore wind. We have been generally supportive of offshore wind. We see it potentially has a very significant role. We did not oppose the bill that went through the chamber. I met with offshore wind people last week. I met with offshore wind people in the UK.

There is potentially a very important way forward there, but this government, true to form, cannot actually properly deliver a project. You think offshore wind, and then the government says, 'No, you all have to go through the Port of Hastings.' But blind Freddy could have seen that there were a number of problems with the Port of Hastings. This very government, in the form of Richard Wynne, had not allowed terminals to go ahead at the Port of Hastings on the basis of environmental factors, and yet when the state government applied to Tanya Plibersek for approvals under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, Tanya Plibersek knocked it over because of the biosphere in Western Port, because of the Ramsar wetlands and because the government's proposal had not taken sufficient account of all those. This is the truth of the matter, and it is the incompetence of this government that has now put us in a deeply troubling position.

The Auditor-General blew the whistle on it in December. He said those targets for offshore wind will not be met, and yet we are moving like a freight train in a certain direction without the necessary work coming in to support it. This is not ideology, this is just basic sense and competence and actually getting your ducks in line. In this case the government has not, and that is a big problem. The Auditor I think did us a favour. He looked at the risk of a failed transition. He looked at the state's risk register. It is not a public document – it probably should be – but it explicitly highlights the failure to transition properly as a major risk for the state. The Auditor has done us a favour in pointing to those issues.

This bill, as I have said, is a subset of this government's general incompetence. It just cannot get things right. It has declared war on gas for 12 years and then: 'Oops – oh no, we've got a problem with the capacity of the pipeline, so we're going to have to take extraordinary and authoritarian powers to order the pipeline groups to increase the capacity.' That is the short story. It is a sorry story, but we are not going to, in this circumstance, stand in the way of the bill.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (16:48): I rise to speak on the National Gas (Victoria) Amendment Bill 2025. As we have heard today, this bill creates a new power for the minister to direct pipeline owners, service providers and the Australian Energy Market Operator, or AEMO, to upgrade Victoria's regulated gas transmission pipeline network in order to maintain gas supply and gas quality. My colleague in the Assembly Ms Sandell has previously outlined the Greens position on the bill as well as three amendments we have developed in consultation with the Victorian Energy Future Network, who I would like to sincerely thank for their expertise and advocacy on this.

The Greens support more public control over private energy assets, especially as Victoria begins the long road to getting off gas entirely. We know that private companies will only prioritise their bottom line, regardless of what it means for the public or the planet. However, we have three main concerns with this bill. Firstly, it prioritises new gas assets regardless of whether there are cheaper demand reduction options or if new infrastructure contradicts our own 2045 net zero laws. Secondly, the bill does nothing to plan for the inevitable retirement of the gas transmission network, something we know companies will have to do over the next 20 years or so, whether or not the government plans for it, as more Victorians get off gas and on to cheaper, cleaner electrical products. Thirdly, the bill does nothing to bring transparency to these issues, which, as towns getting off Solstice Energy's isolated gas networks know now, are often kept under wraps by private companies to the detriment of both the government and the public. We have a number of amendments that speak to these concerns, and I would ask that those amendments be circulated.

I will go into a little bit more detail about how these amendments specifically align the bill with the government's existing climate laws and policies. None of these force the government to do anything it is not already doing. In fact they are designed to proactively help the government and the public throughout this transition. Our first reform would be to add a climate guardrail to this new power. These are spoken to in amendments 4 to 8. As I said, the Greens are concerned that the power is only geared towards new gas infrastructure as an emergency power for periods of deep supply issues. This power creates a legislative risk for the minister. I speak of future ministers as I do not believe the current minister would do this, but it risks a future minister prioritising new gas assets at a time of increased electrification, because without having to consider long-term demand reduction solutions, a minister could theoretically order assets that simply become stranded in five to 10 years. For example, they could force a pipeline expansion that will not be paid off before 2045 when our own laws say Victoria needs to hit net zero by then. Our climate guardrail reform would simply require that orders have regard to two things, both of which are existing laws and policies under this government. Firstly, Victoria's climate change targets and the climate change strategy under the Climate Change Act 2017. Secondly, whether the objective of the order could be achieved through demand-side measures – which include electrification or energy efficiency – more efficiently than through the specified availability or improvement. This is a minor but important reform that ensures a future minister cannot use this bill to gold plate the network in a way that contradicts the government's own net zero target.

It would mean that the minister formally considers if electrification or demand reduction would be a cheaper way to fix a supply gap compared to building a new pipe.

Our second proposed reform is to resolve this bill's asymmetrical focus on new gas infrastructure by creating a symmetrical power to require companies to provide gas transition plans, and this is covered in amendments 1 to 3. Currently the bill only gives the minister the power to order improvements to the gas network. That is not an equal power when Victoria is required to hit net zero emissions by 2045 or when companies are already starting to retire stranded assets. The government know this. It is why, to their credit, they have started planning with the gas transition road map. But we believe the minister needs to be able to understand and manage the retirement of assets as network providers inevitably prepare for a death spiral in the 2030s. With this symmetrical power the minister would be able to begin pre-planning by requiring gas transition plans from companies for a specified part of the declared transmission system or distribution network. Gas transition plans would simply require companies to identify timelines for the decommissioning of specified gas infrastructure, strategies to manage the costs of stranded assets, coordination with electricity network distributors to facilitate electrification of specific zones, and/or how a specified improvement will reduce greenhouse gas emissions for the purpose of consistency with Victoria's long-term emissions reduction targets.

These transition plans have been designed deliberately to be flexible and collaborative. They do not force companies to switch off the network overnight, but they do enable the minister to begin pre-planning for a transition those companies are planning regardless. The impact of an uncoordinated plan and a sudden switch-off – this so-called death spiral – is that ultimately the poorest customers in Victoria will be left vulnerable. While those who can electrify will get off gas, others will be left without any option other than to pay for very expensive gas supply unless we plan for an orderly transition.

Our third and final amendment would create a transparency clause. These are amendments 9 to 10, and I would really hope that everyone in this place could get behind these amendments. Currently, monopoly gas companies do not proactively share key network data – for example, the location of pipes, capacity, congestion, age et cetera. The SEC and communities cannot plan electrification effectively without knowing where the gas network is weakest and if or when a company is getting ready to retire an asset anyway. The government's bill would enable orders to demand this kind of information for the purpose of network improvements; however, the minister herself has said such orders will only be made as a last resort. The minister, the SEC and the general public should have this information well before that point.

Our transparency clause would explicitly allow the minister to demand geospatial data as part of their deliberations ahead of making an order and proactively share it with the SEC and communities. Our proposed section 58K would enable the minister to demand the location, capacity, age and/or use of assets such as declared transmission systems, pipeline equipment and/or facilities for storing liquefied natural gas. Information not deemed confidential by the minister could then be shared publicly. This clause would cost the budget nothing. It would cost us absolutely nothing to do this. It would also support the SEC by giving them maps they need to plan better, and it would also empower community groups to identify zonal pilots, which are areas with old pipes and low demand, without needing to beg gas companies for data directly. We believe that these amendments, the three sets of amendments that we have proposed, really are sensible improvements to this bill. We know that they reflect the intentions of this government, whether it is in this legislation or in other pieces of legislation, but they actually make it clear. They also futureproof those intentions against the actions of future governments who may not share the same ambitions and intentions that this government does. So I would urge all members to take a look at our amendments and support them as a means to strengthen the provisions in this bill.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (16:57): I rise today to speak on this bill, which amends the National Gas (Victoria) Act 2008 to empower the Minister for Energy and Resources with directive powers for urgently needed augmentations to expand the flexibility and capacity of the regulated Victorian transmission gas pipeline network. The proposed National Gas (Victoria)

Act 2008 amendments will introduce the power for the minister to make orders to direct the pipeline owner, service provider and AEMO, the Australian Energy Market Operator, to augment Victoria's regulated transmission pipeline network to maintain gas supply and gas quality. The proposed NGVA amendments are necessary to protect the Victorian economy and industry and the wellbeing of Victorians during the transition to renewable energy and to avoid or ameliorate impacts of gas shortfalls.

It is important to note that Victoria is getting on with the transition to net zero. We are absolutely smashing our renewable energy targets. We are continuing to shift our energy usage away from old and expensive fossil fuels into cheap, reliable and renewable energies. There are projects right across the state supported by the SEC, including the Delburn wind farm in the Latrobe Valley. There is the Horsham solar farm in Victoria's west and the Melbourne renewable energy hub in Plumpton, and they demonstrate so clearly for all to see how Victoria's renewable energy future is taking shape. I have had the good fortune of seeing some of these projects, and they are truly remarkable.

This transition to renewables and away from fossil fuels is rapid, but it is not overnight, and we know that gas must play a role in taking us to our renewable energy future. Part of that future is inevitably the closure of the coal-fired power stations. Hazelwood has already closed, Yallourn is closing in just a few years and Loy Yang is scheduled to close within the decade. The fact of the matter is that these closures mean that there will be demand spikes for gas, and we will make sure we remain on track as we meet our legislated renewable electricity and emissions reduction targets. That is why this bill before us is so important. It ensures that Victorians will have enough gas to transition to renewables and it shores up our supply to address AEMO's projected 2029 shortfall, and I have certainly talked about that in this chamber before.

Right now Victoria's gas supply moves across the state using the declared transmission system, or the DTS. This DTS consists of 2000 kilometres of pipelines that move, on average, 200 petajoules of gas right across the state. But that in fact began construction way back in the 1950s, so inevitably it does not always have the capacity required for a modern Victoria. I am trying to imagine how many people in fact lived in Victoria when that pipeline was initially constructed. That is why this bill grants the minister powers so that she can directly address some of the issues around gas shortfalls and challenges with gas transmission, and that certainly is the preference of this government. But we cannot allow Victorians in the meantime to be hung out to dry because some of these companies are not taking the proper steps to secure enough supply for customers. The minister will, with this bill before us, have the power to order these improvements for these declared transmission systems as well as set a hard deadline for when these improvements must be completed by the system owner. Orders from the minister could also extend to AEMO to provide advice covering the need for system improvements and solutions or to provide improvements like changes to the declared transmission pipelines.

I am certainly happy to talk through the important aspects of this bill. It grants the minister the ability to disapply or modify provisions of the National Gas Law and National Gas Rules as they apply to specific improvements related to the guarantee of gas supply in the state, protecting Victoria's gas supply, ensuring gas transmission capacity is as up to date as possible and securing Victoria's renewable energy future. At its core this bill holds those unreliable gas companies to account and ensures reliable electricity for years to come. As I have mentioned, this government's preferred solution is to protect our households from these shortfalls, but as we have seen, sometimes these gas companies just cannot be trusted. This bill strips away the power from the gas companies, if they cannot find a timely market solution to shortfalls, and places it back in the hands of the people, allowing the minister to step in when these companies fail.

It is important to say that before making an order the minister must consult with the Premier, the Treasurer, AEMO and the DTS owner. That means that when decisions are made to rein in the gas companies, it is done in an informed and careful manner. It does not preclude broader consultation with entities such as the Australian Energy Regulator. If the minister must use these powers, they will be used of course in the best interest of Victoria, Victoria's people and Victoria's industry and business.

It is important to understand that these powers are just one piece of the puzzle and this legislation before us is an addition to the rest of the decisive action our government has taken to guarantee reliable and secure supplies of gas for Victorian industry while slashing working families' energy bills. Of course Victoria has, without doubt, led the advocacy to give AEMO greater powers to intervene and avoid these 2029 shortfalls. We have invested in finding new gas supplies across our state, and we have previously passed legislation to ensure that offshore gas storage can be made available when it is needed most. All of these measures are about working together to ensure Victoria has the requisite gas supplies into the future and ultimately to secure our transition to net zero emissions.

There is so much that we do. I have spoken on a number of occasions about the suite of programs offered by this government to reduce our emissions, including household programs that reduce household gas usage and slash household energy bills – programs like Solar Homes Victoria, which gets more solar on rooftops, and already that is producing 2 gigawatts for hardworking families. That is more, it is important to note, than the soon-to-be decommissioned Yallourn power station. Solar Homes has allowed 435,000 households to get off gas and of course run some really energy-efficient appliances in their homes, including solar-powered dishwashers, washing machines, cooktops, heat pumps and other things, reducing Victoria's reliance on gas through the power of the sun. There are certainly options, and the Allan Labor government are certainly leading the nation with our new energy efficiency standards. We know that old, expensive appliances and badly insulated homes mean more gas usage for heating and for hot water. They also mean higher energy bills, and that is why our government has got the energy efficiency standards fixed so that we can again see families slash their gas usage and their energy bills.

This is about getting the balance right, and I am really proud to have the opportunity to speak. I know that there are others that are very keen to speak on this bill, and I look forward to their contributions. But as I have said, this bill gets it right. It is a market solution to the forecast gas shortfall, and working families need to know that this government indeed has their backs. I am hoping that the Victorian people will feel assured that we are taking decisive action when it comes to securing our gas supplies right here in Victoria as we continue our bold and decisive steps to embrace our renewable energy future. I commend this bill to the chamber.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (17:05): To begin here we cannot look past the elephant in the room, the frankly amazing irony at the heart of this bill: a government that has waged a relentless ideological war on natural gas now comes to this Parliament asking for new powers to upgrade gas transmission infrastructure. Who would have thought? A government that has demonised gas at every turn, banned it from new homes, refused to issue new exploration licences and allowed its Greens allies to treat gas as the enemy of civilisation now needs to legislate to keep the gas system working. Why? Because gas is essential. It always has been, and no amount of ideological posturing can change that fact. The coalition will not oppose this bill. We support enabling targeted upgrades to the declared transmission system. Gas transmission reliability matters, particularly as coal-fired generators close and the need for gas firming of intermittent renewables grows. But we have serious concerns about how this bill proposes to get there, and we will be moving amendments.

The bill grants the minister broad powers to bypass the National Gas Rules by ministerial order. The minister can direct the expansion of pipelines, new equipment connections and upgrades to LNG storage facilities. The bill designates expenditure under these orders as 'conforming capital expenditure', meaning transmission providers can fold those costs into their regulatory capital base and so recover them from Victorian gas users. This is remarkable. In summary, this bill allows the costs of ministerially directed upgrades to be passed straight through to consumers – amazing. Just as with the botched electrical transmission transition, the cost is worn by Victorian bill payers and the government gets to blame the energy companies – who would have thought. The enforcement regime goes further still. The minister can specify provisions of an order as civil penalty provisions and apply to the Supreme Court for injunctions, even where there is no imminent danger of substantial damage. This is a remarkable level of coercive power over private enterprise. Perhaps most striking, section 58J

provides that nothing in the Environment Effects Act 1978 prevents the minister from making an order, even if the required environment effects statement has not been prepared. A government that wraps every policy in environmental justification is now legislating to skip its own processes when it suits them. This is the second time in two sitting weeks we have seen the EES process trashed for political convenience.

This is why the amendments Mr Davis has proposed are essential. They would require the minister to undertake a specified process of consultation before making orders and to publish detailed reasons for these orders. If we are going to require private industry to spend its own capital, face civil penalties for noncompliance and have no recourse to environmental safeguards, then we had better have proper reasons, and those reasons should be well publicised. This is not obstruction but basic fairness. This bill is also an admission that the government's broader approach to gas has been a failure. They have demonised it, banned new residential connections, refused exploration licences and allowed their *Gas Substitution Roadmap* to signal to every manufacturer and farmer in this state that gas has no future in Victoria. They have told the market in every way possible that gas is the enemy, and when they bring us a bill to keep the gas transmission system running – you cannot have it both ways.

I want to come to the environmental case, because here two things are far from straightforward. As I have said before in this place, carbon intensity matters. Using electricity in Victoria is currently many times more carbon intensive than using gas in homes, potentially up to five times, according to the definitive *Australian National Greenhouse Accounts Factors*. Victoria's electricity is still substantially generated by burning brown coal. The lives of those coal-fired stations are being extended, not shortened, because the renewables rollout is behind schedule, offshore wind is failing to deliver and the transmission network is nowhere near ready. This government bans gas in new homes in the name of reducing emissions, while the electricity those homes will use instead comes from brown coal – who would have thought? That is not a climate policy; it is a contradiction. In a world of sensible progress, gas could be a solution for transitioning to a lower carbon future, not the enemy. In the United States the replacement of coal with natural gas has been the single largest driver of emissions reductions over the past 15 years. In the UK coal-fired electricity has now disappeared, with gas providing the stability that has allowed renewables to grow. These are not radical energy policies. They are the pragmatic reality of how successful transitions actually work. Victoria is doing the opposite. We are banning gas in media releases yet enabling it in legislation. Labor has spent years trashing gas and only belatedly notices that cheap political promises do not make for good long-term energy or economic policy.

The consequences for our economy are devastating. Victoria's manufacturing sector is worth $31 billion and employs approximately 260,000 people. For many of these industries, gas is the only viable energy source for high-heat processes that cannot be electrified. You cannot make glass without gas. You cannot process milk powder without gas. You cannot kiln-dry timber without gas. In 2024 Victoria recorded 223 manufacturing closures, the highest in Australia. Oceania Glass in Dandenong – 261 jobs gone. Qenos, Australia's sole plastics manufacturer – gone. Keppel Prince in Portland, which made wind turbine towers for projects trumpeted by this government – gone. Gas prices rose 22 to 25 per cent in a single year, electricity by 28 per cent. This is the reason factories are closing, workers are losing jobs and regional communities are suffering. The so-called Minister for Industry and Advanced Manufacturing in Victoria continues to preside over the destruction of manufacturing. If domestic gas is phased out entirely, the increased cost burden on the remaining gas infrastructure for commercial users will make it economically unviable. The slippery slope toward total prohibition is not fanciful; it is already underway.

This is a cost-of-living issue, and it hits hardest in the communities we represent. Residential electricity is more than two times as expensive as gas on a per-unit-of-energy basis. Forcing households off gas means new appliances, upgraded wiring and higher bills. For families already under pressure that is not a transition, it is a punishment. I have a constituent in my electorate who, building a modest home in a country town, was told by Powercor that the cost to upgrade the local connection for an all-electric

dwelling would be nearly $100,000. The house itself cost about $300,000. That is the all-electric reality shock. The distribution lines and local transformers are not built for the total abandonment of gas. A standard Victorian home draws around 40 amps. Remove gas and add an electric vehicle and you will need 80 amps or more. That is a near doubling of household demand. At least 150,000 of Victoria's streets need transformer upgrades before this policy can take effect. Each costs $50,000 to $70,000 plus labour. That is billions of dollars not planned, not funded and not in an energy company's capital program.

We are not even at the start. The government says it will transition off gas, says it will get there, but offers no explanation of how. All we definitely know is that the people who will pay are Victorian families and businesses. More than four out of five Victorian homes are connected to gas. Gas networks deliver more energy to Victorian households than electricity networks. People choose gas for cooking, heating and hot water because it works and because it is affordable. This government has decided Victorians cannot be trusted to make that choice. It has banned gas in new homes while we export Australian gas to the world. There is something remarkable – not in a good way, though – about a country that sells a resource globally while punishing its own citizens for wanting to use it. Gas is a strategic asset. Victoria has seven active gas-fired facilities, including peaking plants at Mortlake, Newport and Laverton North. When the sun does not shine and the wind does not blow, these keep the lights on. You cannot fire up a coal turbine at a moment's notice. You cannot store enough battery power for a prolonged calm overcast week in winter. Gas peakers are the firming capacity that makes the renewable transition possible. As Mr Guy put it in the other place, you do not replace something with nothing.

Energy Networks Australia has warned of winter peak demand overwhelming the grid. The Australian Gas Infrastructure Group and others argue through the *Gas Vision 2050* plan that decarbonising the existing 34,000-kilometre gas network with renewable gases is a lower cost alternative to tearing it up and starting again. But this government is not interested in pragmatic alternatives. It wants to destroy gas, not decarbonise it. This mismanagement of the gas transition mirrors the failures on electrical transmission: the Western Renewables Link's VNI West compulsory acquisition of farmland easements without proper scrutiny. On gas, this government froze onshore exploration for a decade while our Bass Strait supplies declined and now mandates households off gas before replacements are ready. It designs top-down economically self-harming solutions instead of supporting practical incentivised development.

The coalition does not oppose this bill because we know gas is needed, but we insist on transparency, consultation and proper justification when the government uses executive power to direct private investment, enforce compliance through civil penalties and bypass its own environmental laws. This bill should be a wake-up call. Labor cannot spend years demonising gas and driving manufacturers out of the state then quietly legislate to keep the gas system running as though nothing has happened. That is just incoherent flailing, not serious government. We need pragmatic energy policy – one built on practical reality, not ideological fantasy. Gas is not the enemy. It is a high-density, reliable, low-carbon energy source that is vital for industry, essential for firming renewables and critical for the cost of living. The 34,000-kilometre gas network that serves this state is an asset, not a liability. Without gas, Victoria stops. The government knows it.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (17:20): I am pleased to speak on the National Gas (Victoria) Amendment Bill 2025. It is a bill that is about making sure Victorians have the energy they need when they need it. Energy security is important as we do the hard work of transitioning to a renewable future. If I focus on some examples from my own electorate in the dairying industry, for instance, the importance of a reliable energy supply is something that I grew up with. Cows need to be milked twice a day, and milk vats cannot turn off either, or the milk simply goes off and cannot be used. Of course families rely on these 'all day, every day' scenarios in farming communities. It is not just farming communities that rely on reliable energy, but it is always nice to tell that story sometimes because it is a different story to the lived experience in inner urban lifestyles.

Farm operations do not get a day off because the supply is tight or because it is too expensive. I think the current energy shock – I suppose we will look back and call it the same as in the 1970s – with the Strait of Hormuz and the war is showing just how conflict is not only damaging for women and children and damaging for young men and women who are sent to fronts in different locations around the world, it does not matter what nationality you are, but how terrible those things are and the price, often the ultimate price, that these communities pay. But in the case of this current war the energy impacts are also relevant, and Victorians are feeling that at the moment. In daily life when we have this sort of energy concern it makes us realise how important reliable energy is. A domestic gas supply that is well managed, well invested in and protected from the worst of global price shocks is one of the most important buffers that we have for thousands of households, whether they are in Footscray, Warrnambool or anywhere else.

This bill makes some critical changes. It amends the National Gas (Victoria) Act 2008 (NGVA) to give the Minister for Energy and Resources directive powers – powers of last resort to order urgent upgrades to Victoria's regulated gas transmission pipeline network where the market has not moved quickly enough. It empowers the Australian Energy Market Operator to provide advice and services supporting those upgrades. These are carefully bounded, transparently exercised and consultative powers which are firmly in the public interest. The broader context matters. We are in a transition to renewable energy and we are in the middle – not the end – of it. Gas is not our destination, but it remains a bridge to providing firming capacity as coal generators close. Hazelwood is gone. Yallourn closes in 2028, and Loy Yang in 2035. As each exits, reliable backup capacity is essential while our renewables scale up. The Australian Energy Market Operator has projected annual gas supply shortages on the east coast from 2029. That is a risk for all Victorians and one that falls with particular weight on communities and industries where there is simply less capacity to absorb disruption.

Victoria's declared transmission system, DTS – over 2000 kilometres of pipelines – was built in the 1950s. This was an era when most of our gas came from the state's east. It needs upgrading to handle supply from different parts of the network – sounds familiar. That is what this bill helps provide. We have already supported key investments to strengthen the DTS, including rigorous oversight of delivery of the Western Outer Ring Main. This was completed in 2023, with supporting compression upgrades to increase the capacity of the south-west pipeline from my own community. These upgrades have contributed to an increase in system capacity so it can better serve Victoria's peak demands. The government have also consulted widely on the proposed NGVA changes. These have been developed in consultation with the Australian Energy Market Operator, AEMO; the Australian Energy Regulator; the Australian Energy Market Commission; Energy Safe Victoria; APA; and other industry representatives.

Strengthening our gas transmission network is in part strengthening the energy resilience of Victoria's agricultural economy and, by extension, the food security of every Victorian who buys food at the supermarket. These powers will sit alongside everything this government has already done. For instance, more than 2.4 million Victorian households have accessed the Victorian energy upgrades program. This cut emissions by 69 million tonnes in 2025 alone and delivered over $590 million in discounts. Extended to 2045, it is here to stay. Our $1.3 billion Solar Homes program has supported 435,000 installations.

I know I have just come off the 66-cent feed-in tariff. As an early adopter of the solar panel program quite a few years ago, I am sure that the solar panels on our roof are out of date and nowhere near as productive and efficient as the ones being installed now, but I have not received an energy bill for a very long time thanks to the 66-cent feed-in tariff. I think I am getting a bill in the next couple of months. Some of us play a role of taking on things early – I do not always do that, but in this case my household did – and others have reaped the benefits of the consolidation of a particular scenario. When I put solar panels in, it possibly was not sustainable without the subsidy and without the 66-cent feed-in tariff. Now it is certainly worth running a business where you are selling solar panels, and that is thanks to the subsidies that got it going. Again, that is an example of government working in the market space

to stimulate the formation of a private marketplace for a product that will contribute to a strong and sustainable future in Victoria – in this case solar panels.

The largest household renewable energy program in the country now exceeds 2 gigawatts of capacity – that is how many Victorians have signed up to free solar energy. Across Victoria, solar means real money back in pockets and genuine insulation from the price volatility we are currently living through. From 1 January 2024, gas was phased out in new homes. From March 2027, minimum energy efficiency standards apply to rental properties. That will mean up to $1040 a year in savings for renters, who have been waiting far too long for their homes to be made fit for purpose. Victoria's emissions have fallen by more than 30 per cent. We are decarbonising faster than any other state. We are heading towards net zero by 2045. The SEC is coming back, and the profits of government energy investments are returning to Victorians. During this transition, however, we must remain realistic and responsible. Despite all the reforms and work that the Allan Labor government has made and is continuing to make, gas remains a national problem. That is why this government has been calling for a domestic reserve for nearly a decade.

Victorian gas has done the heavy lifting for decades, and Victoria remains a net exporter to the east coast gas market, yet those opposite want to cut every program delivering this relief – the Victorian energy upgrades, Solar Homes and household electrification reforms – all while sitting on an $11 billion black hole in their own costings, and they cannot agree on whether to support the bipartisan ban on fracking, with David Davis describing it as 'chaotic and difficult'. When fuel prices are spiking and families across the state are under pressure, Victorians deserve security, and we know that unfettered market failure to ensure energy for some communities would be costly. If we think of the communities and the use of diesel and petrol – mostly diesel fuel – in agricultural spaces, it is a huge exercise. Dairy enterprises use diesel for machinery, for harvesting and for backup power. Then you have got cropping businesses who use diesel engines to plough, fertilise and harvest paddocks. Then you have got of course heating and cooling requiring energy consumption as well.

I am pleased to see how many people are taking up the concession card assistance with the power saving bonus of $100 through the Labor government's power saving bonus. Again, that is smoothing out –

A member interjected.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Right. Because energy security is everyone's issue. Every Victorian needs a reliable, affordable, secure energy system to live their life and run their business. This bill is a part of that, and I absolutely support the bill. I know that we cannot rely on an unfettered market to deliver reliably and equitably across the geography and landscape of our state but also across the social strata and the different occupations in our state. It is the perfect place for government to be. Government should be there to smooth out the rough bumps, and that is exactly what this bill will do.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (17:34): I rise to speak on this bill, and I thank my colleague Mr Davis for his contribution, where he very largely and comprehensively outlined our position. As was noted, we have serious concerns about this bill and will be moving amendments. But there is one particular issue that I want to speak about that I am particularly fired up about, and it is making sure that people have choice in their energy sources.

The government has continued their reckless and ideological attack on gas in Victorian homes and will be ripping out gas stovetops from March 2027. They have already been blocking gas to new homes, which discriminates against people living in growth areas – largely migrant families. We know that there have been several news reports. The ABC noted that several ministers knew that this was a step too far and expressed concern, because what they know is what all Victorians know, particularly migrant families: those in established suburbs want choice and the options available to them, not more state-sanctioned discrimination against our multicultural communities and people that live in growth areas. I can tell you countless examples from local real estate agents where people have almost been able to sign their signature away on a sale until they realise that that particular home was built after the

government changed the rules and is no longer allowing a gas connection to that home. They have then not signed, packed up and gone elsewhere. It is limiting choice for emerging communities and growing families in terms of their energy use. Those from South-East Asian communities are particularly animated by the government's discrimination against people on the type of home they want to live in. That is what this government has done. They have now done this huge backflip and are now wanting to see an expansion of gas, despite the minister very immaturely describing gas as 'fossil gas' for a period of time. I note she has been vetoed from those kinds of terms these days. But this is the kind of state-sanctioned discrimination we are seeing against people that decide, that choose, to live in our growth areas.

We all saw the headlines that the government backflipped, supposedly, on banning gas in existing homes once a stovetop or a heater breaks down. They have not backflipped; they have only moved that date to March 2027. I want to send the message to all Victorians that the government did not backflip, which means from March 2027 if your stove breaks down, the government will be forcing you to rip that out and put in an electric stove, which means if you vote for the Labor Party in November, that is a vote to ban gas in existing homes. That is a vote for the Labor Party to rip your gas stovetop or your gas heater out of your kitchen or your garage forever. That is what the government wants to do. The media spinners in the Premier's private office want to brief out that this is a backflip – that they have listened and ministers have acknowledged that this was an issue. That is not the case.

David Davis interjected.

Evan MULHOLLAND: We moved an amendment and they had a chance on that, and they still wanted the power to be able to do it. My community knows – and it is important to keep stating this, because we will be making people very aware of this in the lead-up to November – that a vote for the Labor Party is a vote to ban gas in existing homes. It is an absolute disgrace. It is denying people the choice that they deserve over their energy sources and what kind of energy sources they want to use.

We know that for many of our multicultural communities their number one preference is gas. I would say, though, a lot of people in the northern suburbs, particularly around Greenvale and Craigieburn, love a charcoal barbecue. But in the home, gas is the number one preferred energy source for our multicultural communities, particularly our Indian communities and Chinese communities. This government wants to say to a new Indian family moving into an area like Kalkallo – it already has said – 'You can't have gas.' Now, if that Indian family in Kalkallo's gas stovetop or heater breaks down, Jacinta Allan is going to dictate that they have to rip that out and replace that with an electric oven at massive cost to that family. After we have seen interest rate rises, after we have seen massive cost-of-living increases and in turn tax increases from this government hitting families the hardest, Jacinta Allan is wanting to come into your home and say you cannot replace your stove with another gas stovetop, and that is an absolute disgrace. It is discrimination against our multicultural communities, and the Liberals and Nationals will not stand for it. We will back our multicultural communities and back their choice of energy source. If they want a gas stovetop, they should be able to have a gas stovetop. This government has already banned that opportunity for my communities that want to buy a new house in our growth areas in places like Beveridge, in places like Wallan, in places like Wollert, in places like Craigieburn. They have already said to those families, 'You are not to have gas.'

So you have got this two-pronged message. You have got the government saying, on one hand, 'We want to expand gas exploration.' Gas is now a good thing according to this government. You never know whether they are Arthur or Martha on that side of the house on gas. And then they want to, from March 2027, ban gas in existing homes. As I said, if you vote for the Labor Party or are considering voting for the Labor Party, consider that from March 2027 Lily D'Ambrosio and Jacinta Allan's rule will kick in so that if your gas stovetop breaks you have to replace that with electric. You will be denied energy choices because of this government. Vote Labor to ban gas, or vote Liberals and Nationals to keep choice.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (17:42): Well, we are certainly hearing it all from the other side. We do need gas for industry and manufacturing, and we do need diesel for our farmers and for their tractors, but the Liberal–Nationals will always be anti tech and anti cost saving. They told us that solar panels are a fairy tale; now 40 per cent of us have solar panels on our roofs. They scoffed at electric buses, which are now commonplace, saving 38,000 litres of diesel a year that can be used to fuel our farmers' tractors. They tell new home builders to connect gas appliances, even as costs surge and we should save that gas for industry and manufacturing. Do not listen to the Liberal–Nationals if you are looking for economic advice, because the Liberal–Nationals will come after gas any way they can, by fracking farms or whatever means they need, to fill their ideological objectives.

We do not hear the Liberals talk about generating electricity much at the moment, do we, because what happened to the nuclear pipedream? For two years straight they sat opposite us and they talked about small modular nuclear reactors. The Liberal–Nationals told us small modular nuclear reactors were the answer. Unfortunately for them, they do not exist anywhere in the Western developed world. Now they sit there quietly and just forget that their whole plan was for nuclear reactors. They do not mention those words anymore, but there are still some – actually, I take that back. One of our colleagues on the other side in the electric car charging infrastructure committee the other day raised nuclear. It is good that some of you still have the internal fortitude to stand up and put your commitment to nuclear on the table. I will not mention who the member was, but I think they know as they smile, actually, in the chamber. You talked about nuclear. Now you are nowhere on that. You are the party that want to frack farms – pristine agricultural land in this state, the basket that enables us to export agricultural products around the world. You want to get in there and frack them.

I mentioned the oil and gas decommissioning project. The wells in Bass Strait that have provided this state with abundant, affordable gas for decades are running out. We have had companies presenting to us saying that the oil wells and platforms have run dry and are being decommissioned and removed and the gas wells and platforms are going through the last of their supplies. This is why it is important to have a pragmatic, realistic approach where we ensure that we have the supplies that industry need. There is no point unnecessarily having homes connected when that can be used to support our industry, to support jobs and to support the items that we manufacture to either use here or send abroad to support our state's economy and indeed that of the nation.

I mentioned electric buses before. I am sure those opposite would have laughed and laughed about electric buses. Well, I will tell you what, right now that means being able to save 38,000 litres of diesel per year for farmers and their tractors and other equipment they have. We can have our buses electrified with all of that electricity being produced by workers in this state. The generation, the transmission and the connection are all right here, rather than sending money off to foreign economies. Forty billion dollars on our national trade deficit is what we send overseas to import fuel, and there is simply no need to do that, so what we are doing is ensuring the resilience of our own economy. You only have to look at the situation right now, but no-one on that side will mention that because they are technophobes. If they could still be harpooning blue whales, they would be. If they could still be using a horse and cart, leaving droppings all down the street, they would be. That is the way that the Liberal–Nationals operate. I could go on, but I will leave my contribution there. I thank you for the time allotted.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:47): I rise to talk on the National Gas (Victoria) Amendment Bill 2025 as well. As Mr McIntosh went off topic, I think I will go off topic. Certainly if those on the benches opposite could still be rorting money to give to the CFMEU, they would be. They have been for the last 12 years, and they certainly would like to continue doing that, but they have been caught out and they have had to rein that in. But if they could still be rorting taxpayers money for red shirts, they would be, because rorting is in their DNA. They are absolutely incompetent when it comes to running this state and they are incompetent when it comes to running finances, but they are very competent when it comes to rorting money from the public purse for the benefit of the ALP.

Back to the bill, this bill will give the minister sweeping powers to force private companies to invest in capital works where there is no positive business case and no certainty of recovering costs. It also enables consultation with industry participants to be bypassed in certain circumstances. This is despite a report that was tabled only last week by the Environment and Planning Committee that said there should always be meaningful consultation. Mr Batchelor chairs that committee. He knows what we heard from people in Victoria about meaningful consultation, and yet here he is about to vote for a bill that takes away the right for meaningful consultation.

It will mean that Victorian gas consumers will be paying higher costs for expedited improvements. This is happening because the government have been in for 12 years and they have not done the work to make sure we have got a reliable and affordable energy system. There has been a haphazard approach to gas policy. Labor has been demonising gas for years, saying they want to see the end of fossil gas use, and now they have changed their tune and suddenly they want to expand gas pipelines. Policy uncertainty is sending confused signals to the industry participants and making investment decisions difficult.

Labor's anti-gas obsession has had an enormous impact in my electorate. Their anti-gas obsession has created enormous volatility in the demand for gas appliances, with a direct impact on a business that employed over 125 people in the Albury–Wodonga area. In March 2024 Seeley International, Australia's largest gas heater manufacturer, announced that it would close its Albury manufacturing plant. It had operated in the area for 35 years, but it said it would cut 125 jobs at the site and consolidate its operations in Adelaide instead, where the Labor government there is more friendly to business and industry – and to gas, obviously. This means the loss of jobs for people who live in Albury–Wodonga that were employed by both Seeley and by secondary suppliers and services that depended on that manufacturer. So how did we get to this point? Well, instead of formulating a clear and coherent gas policy to guide private pipeline investment, Labor has instead chosen the brute force option and introduced new laws that allow the minister to simply order pipeline companies to expand their pipelines, make pipeline connections or upgrade gas storage facilities or services.

In 2015 there was an agreement entered into with Solstice Energy. This is another thing that has really impacted towns in my electorate in recent months. In 2015 the state government entered into a contract with Solstice Energy to supply gas to regional towns. There was a 20-year agreement put in place for the long-term supply of compressed natural gas to regional towns in Victoria. Many of those towns are in my Northern Victoria electorate – Nathalia, Kerang, Swan Hill, Robinvale, Heathcote, Maldon and Marong. The government entered into this 20-year contract and people made decisions based on that long-term contract, and in 2015 Daniel Andrews issued a statement saying the Andrews Labor government will proceed with the Energy for the Regions program. This is the program I am talking about – a 20-year program. But that agreement was cancelled last year, only halfway through, with 10 years of that agreement still to go, after the Labor government did a deal to allow the commercial gas provider to stop supplying gas to those towns. This has left residents in the lurch and facing significant costs. Many people relied on the expectation of long-term supply – 20 years of long-term supply – when they invested thousands of dollars into gas appliances for their homes and businesses. Some even paid over $2000 for a new gas connection just months before Solstice announced they were going to cut off the gas supply. There was no warning and once again no consultation with the community, just a decision handed down with the approval of the Minister for Regional Development. Now residents in these towns are out of pocket – some are tens of thousands of dollars out of pocket – because the full cost of converting to electricity will not be covered by the government or Solstice Energy. This is a despicable predicament that the government have put these people in. It is a dreadful thing that they have done to them to cut off their gas supply halfway through a contract and expect those residents, some of whom are extremely elderly, to cover the cost of conversion to electricity.

Victoria is the state that has the highest percentage of population using natural gas. It is actually 80 per cent of households in Victoria that use natural gas. Gas is also vital for industry and electricity generation to cover shortfalls in wind and solar power. It is especially important for industrial users in

my electorate, like food processors, who need access to that reliable energy source that gas provides to them. It is also crucial for industries that need constant high heat at very high temperatures, firms like Furphy Engineering in Shepparton, who are saying they need access to gas to continue their operations at the levels that they are at now. Victoria will need gas as a transition fuel for a number of decades to come because we cannot depend on wind and solar to provide reliable power and we need gas for peaking. There are many possibilities for using renewable biogas in Victoria, but this government is oblivious to this. The government is dragging its feet on implementing regulatory changes and improving the investment climate for biogas in Victoria, and the government could and should do a lot more in this space for biogas. They also should look at hydrogen. We have investment in a hydrogen plant in Wodonga, but the gas that is going to be produced at that facility will not be able to be used in Victoria. It will have to be sent interstate. We are producing it here in Victoria; we should be looking at how we can use it here in Victoria.

The amendments that have been put up by the Liberals and Nationals will ensure that if we are going to require the industry to expand and upgrade pipelines and facilities at its own cost and if we are going to require industry to spend its private capital where there may not be a commercial business case for that investment, then the minister must have a good reason for issuing an order and that reason should be well publicised. There should be genuine consultation, Mr Batchelor, as the report from the Environment and Planning Committee that you chair outlines. I commend those amendments to the house, and I suggest that all members vote for them.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (17:57): I am very pleased to rise to speak on the National Gas (Victoria) Amendment Bill 2025. It is always a pleasure to engage in a debate about energy policy in the state of Victoria, and there are always some very passionate contributions on this side of the chamber about the need to ensure that we have got an energy transition in Victoria that is grounded in the realities of climate change and the need to be taking climate action, the opportunity that presents from having the cheapest and most abundant source of energy generation that is coming from renewables, but also an understanding that as part of the transition that we are making here in Victoria to renewable energy, gas continues to play an important role as part of the energy mix in that transition period. Certainly the objectives of this government, and the objectives of the minister and the objectives of this bill, are to ensure that Victoria and Victorians have the energy that meets our needs as we make a transition away from fossil fuel-based energy generation, which simply cannot be renewed by the nature of its inputs, to renewable energy that is cleaner and that is cheaper. That is exactly the fundamental basis of the energy policy of this state. At the basis of this bill is ensuring that as part of that energy transition, we have got access and availability of the necessary supply of gas as part of the energy mix.

We have, as a government, legislated some of the most ambitious targets for net zero and renewable energy anywhere in the world: net zero by 2045, 95 per cent of renewable energy by 2035. Not only have we set targets, we are on target. Last year 42.5 per cent of Victoria's energy was sourced from renewables, beating our 2025 target of 40 per cent. So our target was 40 per cent, and last year we got 42.5 per cent of Victoria's energy over the course of the year sourced through renewables. Victoria is decarbonising our energy sector faster than any other state in the country. Through this, this government is taking a responsible, achievable but ambitious approach to our energy transition. Ms Lovell in her contribution did reference the role of the Environment and Planning Committee, and we have done a lot of really important work on that committee over the course of this Parliament, particularly looking at the impact of natural disasters on our community and looking at the way that our built environment needs to be adapted to deal with climate change. What has been a recurring feature through a lot of the work the Environment and Planning Committee has done over the course of this Parliament is looking at the impact that increasingly extreme weather events are having on our community, whether that is bushfire conditions or flood conditions. All the evidence that we receive as part of that committee shows us quite clearly that those extremes are being driven by climate change. What we need to do as a responsible government and as responsible custodians of a future for this

state is take action to reduce our emissions and take action on climate change, and that is exactly what the Labor government is delivering.

As we move towards a renewable energy future through the transition, we need to make sure that things like gas can play a role as a firming source of energy, and that is exactly what this bill is designed to do. The Victorian declared transmission system is the key infrastructure for how gas moves around the state, ensuring Victorians get the supply where and when it is needed. It was designed in the 1950s for that time and it needs to be updated, and that is what this bill is doing – making upgrades to the system capacity so it can better serve Victoria's peak demand for energy. This bill allows for further flexibility and adjustments to the system to meet demand and secure our energy provision. The bill will amend the principal act to give the power to the minister to make orders to pipeline owners and service providers and the Australian Energy Market Operator to augment Victoria's regulated transmission pipeline network to maintain gas supply and gas quality. The measures are designed to be a last resort, enabling us to act where the market has not, protecting Victorians to ensure a reliable supply of energy should shortages arise. Having the right infrastructure in place, the right policy settings in place and the right regulatory settings in place will make sure that Victorians continue to have the energy that they need when they need it.

This is an important policy space. I think my colleague Mr McIntosh, who spends a lot of his time thinking and talking about the importance of electrification and the need to move to sustainable and renewable energy sources, laid it out pretty clearly when he said that what we have got to do is to make sure that the electrification process that we need to undertake in this state means that our gas supply, because it is diminishing – off the coast of Bass Strait, for example – is there for the industries that need it most. Those who can get off and move away from gas, particularly in the residential sector, will be given the support to do so, so that the gas supply and gas infrastructure that we have can go towards meeting the needs of industry. This is one element of the approach this government is taking to make sure that Victoria has got the energy that we need for our future. Fundamentally, under Labor, that is a renewable future – a future that believes the science of climate change and is taking action to make sure that we are meeting our goals for a renewable energy future here in Victoria.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (18:04): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak about the National Gas (Victoria) Amendment Bill 2025. We will not oppose this bill, but we certainly do seek to amend it. I thank David Davis for his extensive work on this bill. It is clear that the management of energy policy in this state has fallen well short of our energy needs, and we know that demand for energy is going to continue to rise. We have significant population growth, we have data centres that use a lot of energy and we have heard from experts in recent parliamentary inquiries about households and their energy usage being much higher. We want businesses to grow, and as they grow we can expect they will increase the need for energy as well, but I trust there will be further innovations to gain some efficiencies, because that is something that we need to focus on as well.

Today in Victoria we have a shortage of gas, and the government did not support any new gas exploration or infrastructure. The last licences, as David Davis referred to, were issued in 2013. Now, 13 years is a long time, so the government put a brake on gas, but as I speak to people in the industry, they do give assurances that there is the supply available. To think that it was not that many years ago that the Premier, amongst other Labor members, was promoting gas, and in fact at one point Labor's Speaker of the house wanted every MP in this Parliament to run their Parliament car on gas. At the time there was not gas at every rural petrol station. Nationals MPs certainly highlighted that, because we travel at all hours of the day and night and it was not always available. It is funny how things can turn.

Heating, cooking, hot water: residents and industry rely on gas. I have spoken to many large manufacturers in Bendigo, and we are fortunate to still have them, because we have lost a number of manufacturing businesses that have since closed that relied on gas. What I have been told is that they do rely on gas for those high temperatures for food and fibre manufacturing. For some manufacturing businesses electricity cannot deliver what gas can, and they do rely on it and need it. But gas, as we have heard Mr Mulholland reference as well, has been banned on new estates by this government, and

they are certainly making it challenging to get gas. I think of that industrial site that the City of Greater Bendigo wants to see proposed at Marong near Bendigo. But if you are not providing gas to households or housing estates in the region, it is going to make it very challenging to afford the infrastructure investment, because there is usually a cost-to-benefit ratio in getting services to surrounding towns. But that is Labor's approach: they like to take away choice, they like to control the decisions that your family makes, and the only problem is that they do change their minds: one minute they are hosting the Commonwealth Games, then the next they are not; one minute they are promoting gas, and the next they are not.

It does remind me about what is happening in Marong, which I have referenced in this chamber before. Solstice and the state government, through Regional Development Victoria, had a contract in place to supply compressed natural gas for 20 years to that town – not just that town, but there are a number of other towns, 10 towns across regional Victoria, that have been impacted by this. But that contract has been cut in half, and it is an absolute mess right now. We have got nearly 1200 customers – families, households – told about it out of the blue. In fact they found out about it via the media – not from the government, not from the service itself – that their gas is being cut off.

David Davis interjected.

Gaelle BROAD: It is true, Mr Davis. That is correct: the government, to date, has not provided the documentation that has been sought by this chamber to provide more of the background as to some of that decision-making, because we have certainly been left in the dark. The residents have raised concerns; I have been contacted by residents of Marong, Swan Hill and Nathalia. There are residents impacted in Heathcote as well. I know Marong has over 300 households impacted, Heathcote over 100, and actually the City of Greater Bendigo, to quote their media release, recognise that the transition has been overwhelming. They talked about the impact on families there. They have sought to offer some support guiding people, but it is an absolute mess. I was speaking to one lady who had to take $30,000 out of her superannuation fund to make the changes. Other families are impacted by $22,000 out of pocket, $12,000 out of pocket – it varies, and it is incredible, the pressure this is placing on them. One family was talking about their mortgage being so tight to pay their current bills they simply cannot afford it; they are relying on a wood heater. And the government rebates that are being offered for those that transition to the electric appliances are an absolute mess. It has been very confusing.

I will reference an answer from the minister, which talks about customers having the option to self-manage their energy conversion and in doing so being entitled to receive an equivalent conversion payment from Solstice. It goes on to say:

> Households can receive $4,200 in upfront support through a $1,400 rebate for both rooftop solar PV and Australian made hot water units, plus the option of a $1,400 solar PV interest-free loan.
>
> …
>
> Through the VEU households can get a discount of up to $560 and save up to $330 on their energy bills annually …

It goes on to say:

> Eligible households can save up to $1,630 off the cost of installing an energy-efficient hot water system …

Anyway, it goes on. It is very complicated and it is very messy. I have had professionals tell me they cannot get their head around it, but this is what we are expecting of people who are working full-time, who are taking their kids to sport, who suddenly find out they have got to make a decision by March because come August their gas supply is being cut off. For one resident, the pipe was simply cut off, leaving exposed copper pipe in the ground. They made representations to Solstice, who then sent out people to try and rectify that situation. But this is the situation that families and businesses are being placed in. I spoke to a business that – just think – seven years ago were offered a $5000 incentive to change from LPG to CNG. They were still in the process of making all those changes, and now they face $150,000 to convert back. It is just extraordinary that we are in this situation at the moment.

Given the financial and practical impacts on affected households, residents are seeking transparency and clarity regarding the responsibilities of both the state government and Solstice Energy in this matter. They have raised three important points that they would like clarification on. The first is whether the state government received any financial compensation or settlement in relation to the cancellation of the development agreement with Solstice Energy, two, why full compensation for impacted householders was not included as part of the agreement to terminate the development agreement, and three, why residents are being required to sign waivers against future claims as part of the transition process.

This bill does seem to be heavy-handed, with a further expansion of powers to the minister. I thank David Davis, the Shadow Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction, for highlighting the issues and progressing more detailed questions in the committee stage, because we do on this side of the house certainly recognise that we need sustainable, affordable and reliable power in Victoria. We used to export power to other states, and now we need to import it. But anyone who opens up their power bill knows that under Labor power prices have continued to skyrocket. They like to put all their eggs in one basket, and as the Victorian Auditor-General pointed out in a report to Parliament last December, little consideration has been given to the risks. When it comes to energy, this is critically important. To quote what they concluded:

> Victoria is on track to meet its renewable energy target in 2025, but meeting future targets will be more difficult.
>
> In the Australian Energy Market Operator's 'committed and anticipated developments' reliability assessment, Victoria has enough energy supply to meet its needs out to 2030.

I know Mr Batchelor in his contribution talked with great pride about meeting the targets to date. Well, that is the easy part, because certainly the Victorian Auditor-General has highlighted concerns about what is next. 2030 is certainly not that far away. The report goes on to say:

> But this depends on key projects being completed on time. While new projects will increase energy generation and storage capacity, many projects face delays. This also does not allow for demand that is higher than forecast or incorporate other known risks. This includes gas shortages, which are expected from 2026, as well as planned power plant maintenance and adverse weather conditions.
>
> If these risks are not successfully managed, Victoria would be more likely to face electricity shortfalls after the Yallourn coal-fired power station closes in mid-2028.

It goes on to say:

> The Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (the department) has not fully considered risks in its planning, nor has it factored in contingencies should risks arise.
>
> To meet Victoria's future targets and make sure electricity supply meets demand, the department should develop contingency plans to address known risks.

I know Ms Ermacora in her contribution said we need to be realistic and responsible. Well, that sounds like excellent advice to tell the Labor cabinet. It would be very good for the government to heed that advice and certainly helpful to listen to the advice of the Victorian Auditor-General. I will also reference Tom McIntosh, who said that our side is 'anti cost saving'. I thought that was quite extraordinary, because that is how I view the Premier's response at the minute. We certainly on this side of the house are very interested in cost savings, and I wish that the Premier was more interested in cost savings. It would be good to examine what is happening with the CFMEU corruption on government worksites, because there are $15 billion of cost savings that could be made there.

2030 is not far away, as the Auditor-General pointed out. It is less than four years away. We are talking about the state's energy needs. This report should set off alarm bells for families and for businesses, but more importantly, it highlights the need for a change of government this November.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:15): I will rise and make a short contribution on the National Gas (Victoria) Amendment Bill 2025. It has been very illuminating listening to various contributions today, and I thank Mrs Broad for her very wise contribution. The purpose of the bill is to enable

expansion of the gas declared transmission system, so the actual pipes, and the capacity to expedite this by ministerial order and indeed deliver more capacity and expand on the capacity in the south-west pipeline, enabling greater carriage of gas at times of high demand. Also, I note Mr David Davis's very wise amendments that of course the Nationals will be supporting. It seems to me that there has been a lot of gas, actually, flying around this hall this afternoon, and some of it is from the government benches. It feels like the speaking notes were on spin and fabrication. We have had all things from fracking, to nuclear, to horse and cart and to animal faeces delivered, so I figure I could just about get on any horse I want to at the end of this debate and I should be allowed to have a roam because, my goodness, that was a wide range of debate there.

I want to talk about the role that gas has played in Gippsland, in my electorate. For over 50 years it has been an exemplar industry. It has not only created wealth, jobs, communities and community benefits, but certainly it has been the force that has kept many homes, in fact almost 80 per cent of Victorian homes, burning. That is in their lounge rooms with their heaters on and at their kitchen stoves with their woks going and pots boiling – a very important fuel source for our homes. It has been an industry that has been stable and has provided an enormous amount of stability in our electric system as well over the course of those 50 years. Indeed some of the Bass Strait gas deposits were some of the sweetest and most productive of our nation. When I came in 10 years ago the Liberals and Nationals had just provided for a refining plant, we will say, within Longford to actually extract some of the hydrogen sulphide and some of those impurities that we were starting to get in our gas extraction off Bass coast. We do have newer fields, such as Kipper and Tuna and Turrum, and they still have gas for the foreseeable future, but it is true that Victoria is certainly in the transition phase. Like others, I am on the Environment and Planning Committee inquiry into the decommissioning of our gas and oil rigs, and it is a very important one at that. It is a very important one also for creating jobs through that transition in my region of Gippsland.

The other thing that we know is the very important role that gas plays in industry. It is a feedstock. We have certainly heard about its importance as a plastics industry feedstock for the medical industry and our hospital system. We used to create a lot of our own plastics and medical-grade plastics. That is certainly going by the wayside. We know the importance it plays in fertiliser – in ammonia and urea. I have come off a dairy farm, and I know the importance of keeping that fertilising going in the cycle of grass to cow to milk production. In hydrogen production it also can be used, and in various other chemicals that are indispensable in the agricultural sector. These are important not only domestically but in the global industry supply chains.

We have also heard about heavy industries, and we have one in Gippsland, in Latrobe Valley, in Morwell. It is called Australian Paper, and it has been an industry exemplar for the past 80-something years. Because of the closure of the timber industry, it now does not produce white paper but it produces packaging. Now everybody seems to be getting Uber, and it comes in a package. We do not go into stores anymore – call me old fashioned – but we all get it delivered. It is wrapped in brown packaging, and that is made, overwhelmingly, by Opal Australian Paper. It is a very important industry that uses gas. But in a changing environment it is also trying to move to energy from waste – energy from your red-bin waste that can no longer be recycled. They are trying to get that off the ground. They have been doing it for, I think, about 10 years. And we hear again the demonising of energy from waste. When there is no other use for that substance, that red-bin waste, then put it through the system in a highly evolved energy-from-waste facility and let that turn. What would that do? That would actually cut the gas for some of those plants – indeed Opal paper manufacturing – and provide more gas into the system. It would be all systems go for Opal if the Nationals certainly had their way.

The other very important thing that gas does is provide peaking energy. In a fluctuating energy environment, that means that when there is not sufficient wind turning those wind turbines, when there is not sufficient sunshine, when there is a cloudy day and a quiet day – and we do get them, even in Gippsland, in Eastern Victoria Region – and you have got high demand, because either it is peak summer or, potentially more likely, it is peak winter and it is cold and dark and overcast, you need

peaking. You need instant energy, which gas provides. This is so incredibly important in order to support our coal-fired power stations that are in a transitional state. Hazelwood has closed. Yallourn will close by 2028. The government has got some sort of arrangement with Yallourn power station, but we are not sure exactly what it is. But that is ageing equipment, and it is getting to the point where it cannot turn back. These are some of the key things that have been uppermost in the minds of people in my electorate.

The other thing about natural gas is it has about half the CO_2 emissions in terms of coal and about 70 per cent in terms of oil. I heard before those on the government benches talk about carbon emissions, and we all want to reduce carbon emissions. One of the major, major producers of carbon emissions is out-of-control bushfires. I am going to say this just once: 1.8 million hectares of forest was burnt. Think about how many carbon dioxide molecules went up into the atmosphere then. This government has been appalling in its focus on reducing those bushfires. If climate change is something that is there, what is the lever that the government can pull? The government can reduce fuel, and it has done it appallingly.

Back on track with respect to this, we heard from the government, and they talked about the Liberals and Nationals. Let me put some things on the record. When the government first came in in about 2015–16, it put out its own investigation into conventional gas. It gave terms of reference to the scientists that were so narrow that they actually reduced the capacity of that investigation to provide a thorough analysis of onshore conventional gas deposits and indeed the quantum of petajoules that sit under our gas reserves either in the Gippsland Basin or in the Otways onshore. I think the government has been obtuse from that time.

Then some things that the government has failed in are technology-driven areas. The Premier came out a few years ago, in 2017 or 2018, and said, 'SEA Electric – we will be the electric car manufacturers of the nation.' Well, it got 14 headlines, and no cars ever rolled out of Latrobe Valley. That is a fail. We had the Commonwealth Games, and we have spoken about that ad nauseam. These were con games from the start. We have also got the hydrogen supply chain – very, very important. We had the Japanese government and consortia willing to put $3 billion in. They already did a supply chain project, which was a success, and they came to the government and said, 'We will be supportive. We will supply $1.5 billion of jobs and infrastructure.' And what has this government done? It is called ringbarking. If you just do not give it any attention, it ends up going away, and I am very concerned that the Japanese government has seen the signs from this Labor government. Then we have also seen carbon capture and storage. It was federally funded. It was state funded. This is about reducing carbon emissions from the atmosphere. That is something we all agree on. But this government now has withdrawn all funding, and the only funding carbon capture and storage gets in my patch is from the feds. That is another fail in the technology sphere.

Finally, we did hear from Mr Mulholland and my other colleagues who spoke very eloquently about choices about homes. This government has had a war on gas, there is no doubt about it. It has equivocated. It has moved from one side to the other. It has read the polls. It has tried to outgreen the Greens on many, many occasions. It went too far and must have read the polling in terms of stopping people from having choices in their homes. They know it is going to be stopped come March 2027. There will be a gas ban on your homes.

The Nationals certainly support energy choice. We back affordability and we back common sense, and we certainly want to see no blackouts and no higher bills. I support the amendments moved by Mr Davis, and we do not oppose this bill as it stands.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) incorporated the following:

Thank you, President, I rise today to speak on the National Gas (Victoria) Amendment Bill 2025.

This bill is all about ensuring that Victoria will go forward with a strong and stable energy grid providing households and businesses with energy which is affordable and reliable.

Gas has an important role to play in our economy even as we meet our emissions reduction targets and bring more clean energy online.

Gas provides firming capacity for the grid, ensuring stability and reliability for consumers.

Further, while renewables are an ideal source of energy in certain situations, such as in servicing households, because of factors such as affordability and how they enable homeowners to generate their own electricity, there are other situations where gas can do a better job.

For example, much of the manufacturing sector relies on gas for its power generation.

Keeping the manufacturing sector strong is important to Victoria's interests as a state and to Australia's national interest more broadly.

This is recognised in government policy at both the state and federal levels.

Unfortunately, by 2029, Victoria is projected to face a shortfall of gas supply; this is the problem which this bill, currently before the chamber, seeks to address.

The fact is: Victoria's current gas transmission infrastructure is old and outdated.

The Victorian Declared Transmission System is a crucial part of this state's energy infrastructure, but it was built for a time when most of the state's gas resources were sourced from certain areas.

This bill recognises that the existing infrastructure requires upgrades in order to adapt so that our transmission infrastructure will be able to bring in supply from other parts of the network to ensure that the energy system in this state remains strong and reliable for decades to come.

In recent years, the government has facilitated the development of upgrades to the transmission capacity of our infrastructure.

This has included supporting the delivery of Western Outer Ring Main and compression upgrades to the South West Pipeline.

Complementing these recent developments, this bill will introduce new powers to enable the minister to better oversee and manage the Declared Transmission System to deliver greater capacity and meet consumer demand.

This bill gives the Minister the ability to make orders to direct regulated pipeline owners to, when there is a clear need, make specific augmentations to the Declared Transmission System.

In doing so, this bill will ensure that our gas transmission infrastructure network will continue to work in the best interests of Victorians.

This bill empowers the Minister to hand down ministerial orders to modify or disapply certain aspects of the National Gas Law and National Gas Rules in order to better facilitate upgrades and service delivery in the Declared Transmission System.

For example, an order might direct a network asset owner to pursue upgrades to their asset to ensure and improve the capacity, reliability, and longevity of the transmission system

An order may also ask the Australian Energy Market Operator to identify potential risks to the integrity of the system and solutions to managing these risks.

Under this proposed law, the Minister would be required to consult with the Declared Transmission System asset owner themselves, with the AEMO, with the Premier, and with the Treasurer.

This is to ensure that ministerial orders are made based on genuine need for intervention and are suited and proportionate to the circumstances, and that orders are always made in pursuit of serving the best interests of the Victorian public.

These orders are intended, under the proposed legislation, to be a last resort rather than an everyday function of governance and operation.

When the energy market cannot find solutions and run the transmission system according to the long-term public interest, the Minister will have the ability to intervene and issue ministerial orders.

For the most part, existing market structures can be trusted to deliver a reliable supply of gas to consumers and businesses on a day-to-day basis.

But there are circumstances when a ministerial intervention would be warranted if the market is failing.

The reliable and consistent supply of gas is too important to allow for the sorts of unmanaged risk which are inherent to unregulated markets.

Securing Victoria's gas supply and transmission for generations to come is a critical part of the transition towards clean energy.

While renewables will be the driving force, making up the critical mass of our energy grid and ensuring that our state's energy consumption leaves as little negative impact on the environment as possible, it cannot be the only part.

Renewables are the cheapest form of new energy generation, but they are not always the most appropriate form of energy generation in every single situation.

As I have mentioned already, parts of our manufacturing sector require gas supply, and if they can't find it here then they would be forced to shut down or move to another state.

This is one of the reasons it is so important that the government take measures to ensure that gas supply in this state is reliable, given the challenges which we are facing with potential supply shortfalls by the end of the decade.

Last year's Gas Security Statement handed down by the Minister outlined the challenges which this state is facing in terms of gas supply.

Our traditional sources of gas in the Bass Strait are facing depletion and, as a result, the AEMO has warned that without action being taken to increase supply or reduce demand, the state could be facing a structural shortfall by 2029.

The Gas Security Statement outlined this state's approach to ensuring a reliable and affordable supply of gas for Victorian businesses and consumers.

Reducing demand is an important aspect of this: when demand falls, it puts downward pressure on prices and frees up supply for essential use.

We are seeking to reduce demand by helping Victorian households to transition from gas appliances to cheaper-to-run, more energy efficient electrical appliances.

The popular Victorian Energy Upgrades program has benefited more than 2.4 million households in this state since 2009.

This is helping households to save money and helping the state to meet our carbon emissions obligations.

When we demonstrate to people that by switching to an electric water heating system they can save $330 dollars each year, and we will help them with the upfront cost, we save them money, we reduce emissions, and we keep our gas supply secure for essential use.

The Solar for Apartments program is another important part of our energy policy here in Victoria.

More and more Victorians, especially in Melbourne, are living in apartments.

Certain eligible owners corporations for buildings whose residents share a common rooftop will be able to benefit from assistance to install solar energy systems for the collective benefit of residents.

This program is a collaboration between the state and federal governments.

Since 2023, the Victorian Energy Upgrades and Solar Victoria programs have facilitated more than 156,000 upgrades from old gas appliances to efficient, modern electric appliances.

Further, more than 327,000 households have installed solar panels on their rooftops through the Solar Homes program.

By helping households install solar and switch to efficient electric appliances, we are reducing demand for gas and ensuring that our supply of gas remains stable going into the future.

These programs do not just help households; they also support our businesses.

For many businesses, the cost of energy is a significant expense and burden to their bottom line.

At the same time, for many of them, smart investments in energy efficient technology can make a serious long-term impact on the costs they face associated with energy.

Through Victorian Energy Upgrades, more than 180,000 have been supported to purchase modern, efficient appliances.

These investments help them to save money which can be reinvested into the business, helping them to do their bit to create jobs and grow the economy.

Victoria's gas conservation strategy, which includes supporting households and businesses to upgrade from gas to electric, will save up to 19.2 petajoules by 2029 and by 2035 it will be saving 44 petajoules each year.

This means that by 2035, the amount of gas our policies will be saving each year will be enough to meet 85% of the state's forecast industrial demand.

This is good news for Victorian business, good news for Victorian workers, and good news for Victorian consumers.

It means the supply of gas to parts of the economy where the use of gas is mandatory and necessary, not optional, will be more secure and more reliable.

Reducing and managing demand is important, but so too is shoring up supply.

With existing, legacy sources of gas dwindling, it is appropriate that we find new sources from which we can draw the energy that our state needs.

What is important is that when we unlock new supply, we do so through conventional means and not through fracking.

Fracking is dangerous, expensive, and environmentally damaging.

It pollutes our water, harms our natural environment, and releases dangerous chemicals into the atmosphere and soil.

It also damages farmland, with fracking wells in the past being built on farmers' fields, often causing damage not just to the property where it is located but also to nearby properties as well.

This is why when the then Andrews Government banned fracking a number of years ago, it was supported and welcomed by the Victorian Farmers Federation.

Because Victorian farmers know that taking care of their land is difficult work at the best of times, and coal seam gas projects can do damage to a piece of land which may be expensive to reverse, or may just be irreversible.

Not only that, but in the state of Victoria it is unconstitutional and rightly so.

Meeting our state's energy needs and following our very high environmental standards at the same time is an important task which all Victorian governments face during their time.

It is not necessarily easy, but we on this side of the chamber in the Allan Labor Government did not come into politics to take the easy options, we came here to make the decisions and investments which are in the best long-term interests of the Victorian people.

This is why our government has advocated for the a federally implemented domestic gas reservation since 2017, long before I entered parliament.

Because Australian consumers and businesses deserve to be the beneficiaries of our continent's energy abundance.

It is why we have made all new gas projects eligible for fast tracking.

It is why we passed legislation to facilitate offshore gas storage projects.

It is also why we are seeking to pass this bill as well.

This bill would strengthen our state's Declared Transmission System, ensuring that it is fit for the future.

By giving the Minister the power to hand down ministerial orders to network asset owners to make a specific change or improvement to their asset, we are ensuring that Victorian consumers and businesses will be safe in the knowledge that the gas distribution system will be dependable for decades to come.

This bill also gives provisions which allow the Minister to work with the Australian Energy Market Operator to identify areas which may need an intervention from the Minister.

It also gives powers to the Australian Energy Regulator so that it can help to enforce any orders which are made.

These orders are not intended to be handed down on a regular basis; they are intended to be a last resort, something which will not be used at times when everything is going well.

Nevertheless, they remain an important power to be used in certain, last resort situations.

Further, as an important check and balance, the bill requires that the Minister not make orders completely unilaterally, it requires consultation with a range of other decision makers and stakeholders, including the Premier, the Treasurer, AEMO, and asset owner themselves.

Consultation is an important principle because these ministerial orders are not about working against asset owners; they are about working with them to deliver better outcomes.

In situations when a ministerial order would be necessary, the best outcomes would come from consulting with the asset owners themselves who know best what might have gone wrong with their projects or what might be obstructing progress.

It also pays to remember, as we are emphasising with this bill, these orders are for last resort situations when the Minister needs to put the public interest above all other considerations.

While ideally these powers would only have to be used very rarely, responsible governments, such as those of us who sit on this side of the chamber in the Allan Labor Government, recognise that keeping our declared gas transmission system strong is too important to leave to chance.

Many households still depend on gas appliances in their everyday lives, many manufacturing businesses require gas to power production, and gas has an important role to play in the energy transition in helping to firm up supply.

Victoria has ambitious renewable energy targets, and ambitious renewable energy policies to ensure that we don't just talk about clean energy, but that we actually deliver clean energy.

Clean energy isn't just a nice idea that makes us all feel good about ourselves; it is about creating jobs, producing the cheapest form of new energy, and demonstrating greater responsibility towards our duty to protect the environment.

One part of rolling out an energy transition is ensuring that it is reliable and can be depended on by Victorians in their day-to-day lives, but also in a crisis.

In this way, gas has an important role to play in helping to facilitate the transition towards renewables.

The Victorian government is acting to keep our energy system strong and reliable, to keep our transition to renewables going, and to keep our gas supply flowing for the households and businesses who need it.

This is across a range of policies, a range of initiatives, and a range of pieces of legislation.

This bill is only a small part of our broader energy agenda.

It is neither the beginning nor the end of that agenda, but remains a small but important part nevertheless.

I commend the bill to the house.

Sitting suspended 6:28 pm until 7:32 pm.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (19:32): I do thank everybody for their contributions on the National Gas (Victoria) Amendment Bill 2025, and I will make some remarks about the bill. The purpose of this bill is to amend the National Gas (Victoria) Act 2008 to empower the Minister for Energy and Resources with directive powers for urgently needed augmentations to expand the flexibility and capacity of the regulated Victorian transmission gas pipeline network. The proposed National Gas (Victoria) Act amendments will introduce the power for the minister to make orders to direct the pipeline owner, the service provider and the Australian Energy Market Operator, AEMO, to augment Victoria's regulated transmission pipeline network to maintain gas supply and gas quality.

The proposed amendments are necessary to protect the Victorian economy and industry and the wellbeing of Victorians during the transition to renewable energy and to avoid or ameliorate impacts from gas shortfalls. We are getting on with the transition to net zero and continuing to shift our energy usage away from fossil fuels and to renewable energy. However, we are in a transition to renewable energy. It cannot happen overnight, and gas will continue to play a role in the economy as we meet our legislated renewable electricity and emission reduction targets, particularly as we see demand spikes as coal-fired generators close. Therefore we must ensure that the system continues to be fit for purpose to allow available and projected supply to come in from other parts of the network, ensuring ongoing secure and reliable energy.

There have been numerous contributions on this bill, and I do want to thank members for those contributions. There are also a number of amendments that I would like to address, beginning with the amendments from the opposition. To begin with it should be noted that the bill already includes these matters as considerations for the minister and nothing precludes the minister from consulting more widely and publishing further reasons for making an order when relevant. The issue at hand is that these amendments are coming at this from the view that every order will be the same and therefore have the same considerations, and this is not true. An order may, for example, be to request information from AEMO on forecasting or may be to direct maintenance upgrades, and these would all have different agencies and groups that should be consulted with and would have different reasonings that should be published. Nothing in the bill prevents further consultation and broader reasonings being

published when relevant. These amendments will have the effect of forcing everyone into a one-size-fits-all approach, whereas the legislation aims to be more balanced.

On amendment 1, the government does not support this amendment. New section 58D provides a non-exhaustive list of matters which the minister may consider when making an order. None of the matters or anything else which may have a bearing on the minister taking an informed decision to make an order are precluded by this section. The orders are a measure which will only be used if the market fails to provide a timely solution to securing the capacity and flexibility of the declared transmission network in the best interests of Victorians. Under section 58E, the orders will also be informed by mandatory consultation with the Australian Energy Market Operator and the declared transmission network service provider. In this way the order will align with and strengthen the standing review processes and scrutiny under the regulatory framework for gas, including robust considerations of costs and benefits and system needs. There is nothing in this bill that would prevent the minister from conducting further consultation where warranted and not covered by existing expert advice and assessments. It should be noted that this drafting is consistent with amendments to the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 for ministerial orders for augmentations to the electricity transmission network.

The government does not support amendments 2 and 3. The 58E consultation requirements to include AER advocacy groups and energy retailers are already covered under paragraph (g) of new section 58D:

> any other matter that the Minister considers relevant.

And they are under standing processes under the National Gas Law (NGL).

The government does not support including mandatory consultation with the Australian Energy Regulator at this point, as further work would need to be done in consulting very closely with them about including them so as to preserve their independence. It may also have the unintended effects of hampering the flexibility and speed of orders by possibly linking orders to standing consultation timelines under the NGL and National Gas Rules. The bill does not prevent the minister from consulting with other relevant parties as part of the process. It should be noted that the consultation requirements for similar orders for the electricity transmission network in the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 are the same as outlined here – that is, by the Premier, the Treasurer and VicGrid, which is the same as the APA Group but for the electricity transmission network, the planner of the network – that is, the AER or other bodies are not included as required consultees. In doing so, we can ensure consistency while not preventing the minister from consulting more widely when necessary.

On amendment 4, the government does not support this amendment. Costs to consumers are already covered in 58D(c) as factors the minister may have reference to in alternatives already covered under 58D(b). There is nothing in drafting preventing the minister from providing relevant information for making an order; however, some information provided by AEMO and the Australian Energy Regulator will be protected information which cannot be released to a party that is not competitively neutral or to the public more generally, and the independent positions of both regulators would need to be protected. Non-sensitive information from AEMO is already published in public submissions and the *Victorian Gas Planning Report*. It should be noted the drafting is consistent, again, with the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005. It notes relevant factors that the minister may have reference to in making a decision and requires the minister to outline her reasons in a statement of reasons but does not dictate what must be included in the statement of reasons.

I would like to now move to the amendments from the Greens. At the outset we would like to thank the Greens for these amendments, even though the government will not be supporting them. This is due to the fact that these amendments deal with matters that are already being addressed through broader national gas policy or other government work which is ongoing. In relation to amendments 1 to 3, the government does not support these as there are already initiatives underway which will provide what this amendment seeks. The Australian Energy Market Commission is currently

consulting on rule change requests to the National Gas Rules to ensure that the economic regulatory framework that applies to gas distribution networks supports the long-term interests of consumers in the context of the energy transition. The proposed rule changes cover capital expenditure criteria, depreciation, accelerated depreciation and redundancy, and planning requirements. The AEMC is also considering the use of data and planned investments for broader gas network planning, with a directions paper due to be released in April.

On amendments 4 to 8, the government does not support these as the bill already provides a number of factors that the minister may give consideration to in making the order. These include, but are not limited to, potential costs to end users and options available under the National Gas Law and the National Gas Rules to address any crucial national or Victorian gas system need. These options may include alternatives to an extension or expansion of a declared transmission system in Victoria. This bill and orders which may be made under it will also be consistent with the national gas objective, which is focused on the long-term needs of consumers while considering a range of factors and achieving an appropriate balance between price, reliability, safety and security. Crucially, the national gas objective has regard to emissions reductions as a consideration, including contributing to jurisdictional emissions reduction targets.

Finally, on amendments 9 and 10, in February the Minister for Energy and Resources wrote to gas distribution businesses in Victoria notifying them of her intent to impose new licence conditions on the gas distribution licences. The government is currently consulting with industry on this change. Consultation will be ending later this month. The proposed licence conditions will require these businesses to publish relevant data on how gas use is changing across its network. Some of the data required under these new licence conditions will assist in reporting, both internally and externally, on emissions and energy climate goals and in understanding how gas use is changing in Victoria over time and across regions to understand trends, track the transition and to inform government policy and how we can allow customers, stakeholders and government to understand where cost-effective alternatives to gas network expenditure may exist.

Again, a ministerial licence condition which covers the gas data transparency requirements to government is currently out for consultation with gas distribution businesses. The government's intention here is very clear. The intent of the Victorian government is to make gas consumption data publicly available, with the Essential Services Commission to oversee that. Given that this work is already underway, it is unnecessary to further amend the bill.

To finish, the most important aspect of these new powers will be that they act as a measure of last resort. The government would prefer that the market provides a solution to the forecast shortfalls. However, if the market fails to find a timely solution, then government must be empowered to act in the best interests of all Victorians. That is why the government is introducing powers to shore up supply and ensure the system has the flexibility and capacity to meet demand, especially as we continue with the energy transition. Again I thank all members for their contribution, and I commend the bill to the house.

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Committed.

Committee

Clause 1 (19:44)

David DAVIS: Obviously there have been some amendments circulated – Dr Mansfield's and mine. The minister has given some commentary about those amendments. I just want to put on record in response that I think the minister's response was trite and did not understand that requiring certain consultations does not exclude other consultations and that by requiring additional consultations we

provide more guarantees rather than leaving it open to a minister. Let us be clear about this: ministers vary in their knowledge and capacities from time to time. Without being critical of this minister, I will put it in the abstract and say ministers vary, but some of the purposes of the additional requirements that the opposition and indeed, I might add, the Greens have added into their amendments are to make sure that certain consultations occur, because we think the bill was deficient in requiring those. The minister's idea that requiring certain consultations means the minister will be prevented in some way from making further consultations is flatly wrong and disingenuous. I just think it is worth me immediately putting those points on the record in response to the minister's third-reading sum-up of sorts. I think that we are with this bill putting a series of extraordinary powers into the hands of a minister, and to circumscribe those by requirements about consultation is a very modest set of steps, and to circumscribe those by requirements for greater transparency and explanation is also a very modest step. Before we get into further points, I just want to say those points in response to the minister's contribution in the third reading.

Ingrid STITT: I guess to contextualise things, it is important to note that the bill does require the minister to consult with the affected declared transmission asset owner, the Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO), the Premier and the Treasurer, and upon making an order, the order itself and the reasons for making it will be published in the *Government Gazette* and on the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) website.

David DAVIS: That just adds to the triteness of the response. I want to say something here, and perhaps with the committee's leave we might discuss most of this in the first clause. The minister may make certain orders, and it may be that the operator will seek additional financial support for implementing those orders. I just want to understand from the minister: is it possible conceptually that the minister will make orders and the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) will not support additional financial support for the implementation of those orders?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you, Mr Davis, for your patience. Obviously the Australian Energy Regulator are an independent regulator, so that is the first important point to note. But the orders are not intended to curtail market independence or interference with the standing role of either AEMO or the AER, and where the market appropriately responds to the projected supply shortfalls facing Victoria, orders will not be needed. They will only be used when the market has failed to provide an adequate and timely solution and there is a need to intervene on the basis of the public interest. Of course it is the case that before any order is made, the minister may take advice on technical solutions which best meet and balance the current and future demands and uses of the declared transmission system (DTS) and provide the greatest benefit for Victorians.

David DAVIS: I think that means yes. I wonder if the minister might point to anywhere in the bill where the minister, in making the decisions for which the bill is giving new powers, is required to consult with consumers or the representatives of consumers.

Ingrid STITT: I think in answering that question I want to again just take the opportunity to remind the house that the changes that are being introduced in this bill will provide a pretty prudent measure. We have also indicated on the record that it is a last resort when the market fails to provide a timely and effective solution to maintain energy supply security and reliability so that at the heart of it it is all about making sure that consumers are not adversely impacted by any energy supply security or reliability issues in the network.

David DAVIS: If I can ask the minister directly – I take that not in a favourable sense. But if I move to a different point –

Ingrid STITT: I can answer that, if you do not mind, Mr Davis. We are also obviously bound by the national gas objective, which does require consumers to be considered.

David DAVIS: But nothing specific. If I ask another simple question there, the bill seems to be squarely aimed at the pipeline in the south-west. Has the minister considered or begun considering steps to implement requirements for that pipeline?

Ingrid STITT: This bill is about the declared transmission system, which of course the pipeline you cite is part of, but this bill is not specifically about any one part of the network.

David DAVIS: But my question is: has the minister considered or is the minister considering now, concurrently with this bill, matters around the South West Pipeline?

Ingrid STITT: I do not have any advice on that. I will have to take that question on notice.

David DAVIS: Perhaps the minister might seek some advice from the box.

Ingrid STITT: I am just getting that advice, so I will give it to you as soon as I get it, Mr Davis.

David DAVIS: We have not had a lot of success on this mode where we seek advice to be provided to the chamber at a later point. In recent times when you have said you will provide things it has not been forthcoming at a later point, so I am not warmed by that approach.

Ingrid STITT: The advisers are hearing your question. We are seeking some advice on that, and as soon as I have something I will let you know in committee.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Minister, orders under this bill can only be used to create new gas assets. Can the government provide any updates or assurances that orders made under this bill will not be used to ignore cheaper demand reduction options like electrification, bypass Victoria's own 2045 net zero laws or gold-plate the network or create stranded assets?

Ingrid STITT: The government has clear and ambitious renewable energy and emission reduction targets, and we have been clear on our commitment to the energy transition for a long time now. These targets are written into law, and they cannot be overridden by a ministerial order. In Victoria our emissions have fallen by 31.4 per cent. We are decarbonising much faster than the rest of the country, cutting our emissions intensity by 50 per cent more than the national average since 2014, and we are committed to the energy transition. This bill is about ensuring that energy supply is provided where and when it is needed while we transition to renewable energy, and the bill already provides a number of factors that the minister may give consideration to in making the order. This includes but is not limited to potential costs to end users and options available under the National Gas Law (NGL) and the National Gas Rules (NGR) to address any crucial national or Victorian gas system need, and these options may include alternatives to extension or expansion of a declared transmission system in Victoria. The amendments and orders are also consistent with the national gas objective, which is focused on the long-term needs of consumers while considering a range of factors and achieving an appropriate balance between price, reliability, safety and security. These already include emission reductions as a consideration, including contributing to jurisdictional emission target reductions.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Orders can only be made for upgrades to assets, not transition off gas. The bill does nothing to plan for the inevitable retirement of the gas transmission network, something we know companies will do over the next 20 years or so whether or not the government plans for it, as more and more Victorians get off gas and onto cheaper, cleaner electrical products. Can the government provide any updates or assurances that Victoria is planning to demand companies provide something akin to gas transition plans so we do not see a repeat of what Solstice Energy just did to 10 regional Victorian towns and private gas companies leaving communities scrambling?

Ingrid STITT: There are already initiatives underway in this space. The Australian Energy Market Commission is currently consulting on rule change requests to the National Gas Rules to ensure that the economic regulatory framework that applies to gas distribution networks supports the long-term interests of consumers in the context of the energy transition. The proposed rule changes cover capital expenditure criteria, depreciation, accelerated depreciation and redundancy, and planning

requirements, and the AEMC is also considering the use of data and planned investment for broader gas network planning, with a directions paper due to be released in April this year.

Sarah MANSFIELD: What work is the government undertaking to address the long-term socio-economic risks of the gas network death spiral, which I mentioned in my second-reading speech, where operator fees increase as more people leave the network and go all electric and those fees fall to fewer and fewer customers, who are not able to make the transition easily, which will typically be poorer homes, renters, people living in apartments et cetera?

Ingrid STITT: Again, it goes to the issues that I have just outlined, Dr Mansfield, that the Australian Energy Market Commission is currently consulting on the rule change request, which ensures that we are making sure that the network supports the long-term interests of consumers in the context of the energy transition. That is a key focus of that work that is underway.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Does the government agree that to genuinely manage this gas spiral, the network will ultimately have to be bought by the government wholesale and require new federal rules to remove the obligation for network owners to make a profit?

Ingrid STITT: Whilst it is slightly outside the scope of the bill, this is work that I have currently described in terms of the National Gas Rules and the work that will be undertaken to ensure there is proper planning for the gas network and for the transition.

Sarah MANSFIELD: The bill will enable orders to demand geospatial information for the purpose of network improvements. However, the minister herself said that such orders will only be made as a last resort. If we want to avoid a repeat of Solstice, the minister, the SEC and the general public should have this information well before that point. Is the government doing anything to ensure Victorians do not have to go begging to monopoly gas companies for key network data?

Ingrid STITT: In February the Minister for Energy and Resources wrote to gas distribution businesses in Victoria notifying them of her intent to impose new licence conditions on their gas distribution licences. I think I touched on this in my second-reading contribution. The government is currently consulting with the industry on this change, as is required around such changes, and consultation will be ending later this month. The government will have further updates following the end of this consultation period. The proposed licence conditions will require these businesses to provide relevant data on how gas use is changing across its network. Some of the data required under these new licence conditions will assist in reporting, both internally and externally, on emissions and energy climate goals and in understanding how gas use is changing in Victoria over time and across regions to understand trends, track the transition and inform government policy and how we can allow customers, stakeholders and government to understand where cost-effective alternatives to gas network expenditure may exist. Again, a ministerial licence condition which covers the gas data transparency requirements to government is currently being worked on by the Minister for Energy and Resources, and the government's intention here is very clear. The Victorian government also intends to make this gas consumption data publicly available, with the Essential Services Commission to oversee that. Given that this work is already underway, they are the key factors around why the government does not consider it necessary to further amend the bill in this way.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I just want to confirm that, based on the answer you provided, the SEC and communities will be able to access this information even if network holders lobby hard to try and keep that information private.

Ingrid STITT: As I indicated, we intend to make this gas consumption data publicly available, with the Essential Services Commission being responsible for overseeing that data release.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Are you able to provide any possible timeframes as to when licences will be updated to require that sort of information sharing?

Ingrid STITT: I will have to check that specifically, but as I indicated in my previous answer around these issues, the consultation will be ending later this month, and the government will have further updates following the end of that consultation process. I will just check with my trusty advisers as to whether there is anything further I can add.

Consultation closes on 25 March, and then there is further consultation with the Premier and the Treasurer to come after that, and it is likely to be before the end of the financial year.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Just following on from some of Mr Davis's questions, we understand that the government has an issue with mandating greater consultation in a blanket sort of way, because there might be some situations where it is less relevant and mandated consultation might be a bit too prescriptive. But why couldn't the government update the bill to mandate those greater consultations where relevant? Can the government confirm the bill has been designed with the intent to consult with bodies where relevant?

Ingrid STITT: There is a bit of information to provide you here, Dr Mansfield. Proposed new section 58D provides a non-exhaustive list of matters which the minister may consider when making an order, and it is the clear expectation that when a matter is relevant to the reasons for making an order, they should be published with all the other reasonings. It is the expectation that when particular consultation is relevant, it should be done. Legislation should strike the right balance between flexibility and being overly prescriptive, and this bill as written does strike that balance. None of the matters or anything else which may have a bearing on the minister taking an informed decision to make an order are precluded by this bill, and again, there is nothing in the bill which would prevent the minister from conducting further consultation where warranted and not covered by existing expert advice and assessments.

Further, it should be noted that this drafting is consistent – and I think I covered this in my second-reading contribution – with amendments to the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 for ministerial orders for augmentations to the electricity transmission network. In practical terms and in relation specifically to the proposed new section 58B(3)(d), some information provided by AEMO and the AER will be protected information which cannot be released to a party that is not competitively neutral or to the public more generally, and the independent positions of both market bodies would need to be protected. Non-sensitive information from AEMO is already published in public submissions and the *Victorian Gas Planning Report*. So again, Dr Mansfield, in practical terms, if the minister were required to consult everyone, as the opposition proposes, on every order and publish their selected reasonings for every order, this would cause issues when they are not required. In the event the minister used the order to request information from AEMO or the APA, the minister would not be able to comply with the requirement to outline costs to end users, as there would not be any costs to users. This would put the minister in a position of contravening the law further, and again AEMO, the AER or APA may provide information that is sensitive that would not be able to be outlined in a public statement of reasons.

Another example could be where in an existing process – for example, the current rule 80 Australian Energy Regulator process – orders could be used to require delivery to certain timelines and the rule 80 process has already undertaken consultation with information from AEMO already in the public domain and mandatory consultation requirements would duplicate this. So again, I kind of labour the point a bit, I know, but the bill does not prevent the minister from consulting with other relevant parties as part of the process or publishing those reasons as outlined in these amendments. It is expected and it is the expectation that if it was relevant, then details such as cost to the user should be part of the published list of reasonings, just by way of another example.

David DAVIS: I have a number of further questions here, and I will ask the minister: why is the government bypassing the national gas access framework and introducing a unilateral directions power when Victoria is a signatory to the Australian Energy Market Agreement, which explicitly commits to national consistency?

Ingrid STITT: That is a bit of a weird question because it is already a separate regulatory framework that we are operating in.

David DAVIS: With respect, I do not think it is a weird question; but let me ask another question: what evidence does the government have that the existing national gas access regime is failing consumers, given it has not been demonstrated publicly or to the industry?

Ingrid STITT: I think the way that I will deal with your question, Mr Davis, is to point you to why the new powers for the minister to make orders are necessary. The proposed orders, as we have said a number of times on the record, are a tool of last resort to ensure that our regulated gas transmission pipeline network has the capacity and the flexibility it needs to maintain secure and reliable energy supply, something I know the opposition is not opposed to, in terms of the passage of this bill. It both meets the gas demand and gas power generation of electricity to provide firming capacity, and these changes are intended to protect Victoria against projected annual gas shortfalls, ensuring that industry, business and households have access to gas during the important and complex transition to renewable energy. That is all outlined in Victoria's *Gas Security Statement*.

David DAVIS: I will ask the minister: can the minister explain why no public consultation, exposure draft or industry review was undertaken before introducing this bill that fundamentally alters Victoria's gas regulatory framework?

Ingrid STITT: The answer is the consultation will take place if an order is required. We have gone through this, and the minister makes no apology for bringing forward legislative change which is about protecting Victorians as we transition to renewable energy.

David DAVIS: My reading of the bill suggests that it allows ministerial orders to be made without them being tabled in Parliament or subject to disallowance, despite the major economic impacts, and I ask: is that correct? Can decisions be made without them being tabled in Parliament? And is it a fact that they are not subject to disallowance?

Ingrid STITT: Yes.

David DAVIS: I just record my concern on that matter. Can the minister guarantee that orders will not be used to circumvent proper planning, environmental regulation or economic assessment processes?

Ingrid STITT: As I have indicated on the record a number of times, these are pretty prudent measures, and they are ones that will be used as a last resort when the market fails to provide that timely and effective solution to maintain energy security and reliability.

David DAVIS: I ask the minister: what mechanisms ensure that the minister cannot compel expenditures that lack technical justification or industry support?

Ingrid STITT: Mr Davis, it is important to ensure that new orders do not distort the market. The orders are not intended to curtail market independence or to interfere with the standing roles of various bodies, including the Australian Energy Market Operator or the Australian Energy Regulator. Where the market appropriately responds to the projected supply shortfalls facing Victoria, orders will not be needed. I would add that the APA, as the pipeline owner, will always be consulted, as I think I indicated in my second-reading contribution.

David DAVIS: Does the bill allow the minister to deem expenditure conforming capital expenditure, overriding NGR 79, without AER involvement or independent assessment of prudency and efficiency?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you for your patience, Mr Davis. The answer is yes, the bill does allow that; the Australian Energy Regulator plays a role in assessing that capital expenditure and ensuring that it is prudent and efficient.

David DAVIS: Minister, I thereby ask: will the minister commit to AER oversight of any cost recovery arrangements, including prudency, efficiency and consistency with the national gas objective?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you for the question, and I am not being churlish, but I am not the minister, so I will seek some advice about that; I am representing the minister.

The bill will enable the Australian Energy Regulator to independently monitor and enforce compliance with the orders. The Australian Energy Regulator has enforcement powers relating to laws under the National Gas (Victoria) Law. The bill provides for an order to be read as a law under the National Gas (Victoria) Law, and the bill also provides for the Australian Energy Regulator to apply civil penalties for noncompliance with an order. The Australian Energy Regulator will also undertake its usual economic role in ensuring the consequential capital expenditure costs from works and infrastructure that are made under the orders and rolled into the declared transmission systems owners' regulated asset base are efficient and prudent, and in this way cost to consumers will be minimised.

David DAVIS: Minister, I also ask: how will ministerial orders interact with existing access arrangements, particularly where orders conflict with NGL, NGR and AER processes or existing contractual rights?

Ingrid STITT: Again, I think it is important to reiterate that this is a last resort mechanism and it is only used where the market has failed to provide a timely and effective solution, in particular when it comes to energy supply, security and reliability. In considering the making of those orders, all of these matters would be taken into consideration. But I just go back to that point that this is a last resort measure that only would operate in the event that there is a failure on the part of the market to provide an effective solution to maintain security of supply.

David DAVIS: The minister says it is a last resort, but I am asking here because there is nothing in the act to require that. I ask: what assurance can the government provide that these powers will be used only as a last resort and not as a substitute for proper planning or regulatory processes? How can you give that commitment when it is not there in black and white?

Ingrid STITT: Again, Mr Davis, the intent of the government is pretty clear in the minister's second-reading speech, which I am sure you have perused. We do not make any apology for coming with legislative change that gives the ability for the minister, in a circumstance where the market has failed to provide a solution, to ensure that there is energy supply, security and reliability, and that is the intent of this bill. I also point you to the minister's second reading.

David DAVIS: So the only assurance, effectively, is the second reading. All right, we will move on. Let me ask here: given the complexity of interactions with the access arrangement, why is there no requirement to share a draft order with particular stakeholders, perhaps APA or others?

Ingrid STITT: The answer is pretty simple. The orders would be consulted on, and they would form the basis of the consultation that is undertaken.

David DAVIS: But not necessarily the draft order?

Ingrid STITT: Just to be clear about what you are asking me, Mr Davis – you are asking whether the government will release draft orders as opposed to final orders. I think the consultation that is required to be undertaken will be able to garner what issues are required to be dealt with in the terms of the order. The bill sets out clearly how orders are to be made by the minister and published.

David DAVIS: I am just troubled –

Ingrid STITT: Gazetted, I should say. I misspoke.

David DAVIS: I do not want to labour the point, but I am still troubled by it. Let us just move on. I am asking: how will the minister commit to a transparent consultation process before making any direction under the bill? How can you show that that consultation process will actually be transparent?

Ingrid STITT: In terms of how new orders will be made, they are dealt with under new sections 58D, 58E and 58F. Before any order is made the responsible minister may seek expert advice on the rationale for using an order and optimal technical and staging solutions to respond. The minister may have regard to a number of matters before making an order, including but not limited to the security and reliability of the declared gas system, immediate, medium- and long-term needs of the declared wholesale gas market or a declared transmission system in Victoria or other jurisdictions, system capacity, gas production, the costs to end users, the costs of upgrades and any other matter the minister considers relevant. The minister may also consider other options available under the National Gas (Victoria) Law and the rules as alternatives to making an order. The bill requires the minister to consult with the affected declared transmission asset owner, the Australian Energy Market Operator, and the Premier and the Treasurer. Upon making an order, the order itself and the reasons for making it will be published in the *Government Gazette* and on the DEECA website. These are matters that I went to in my second-reading speech, but I am not sure, Mr Davis, whether you were in the chamber at that time.

David DAVIS: Will the government ensure full capital and operating cost recovery for mandated augmentations, given it seems to me the bill does not guarantee this, especially where the government seems intent on destroying demand for gas in Victoria?

Ingrid STITT: Mr Davis, I do not accept your little flourish at the end there, but of course I have gone into, whilst we have been in committee, how the government will ensure that the new orders do not distort the market. The orders are not intended to curtail – we have gone through these issues – market independence and so on.

David DAVIS: All operating costs – capital and operating costs?

Ingrid STITT: The regulatory framework has rules to cater for asset stranding while ensuring costs to consumers are best managed and minimised. There are provisions providing flexibility around conforming capex and depreciation. For example, proponents have flexibility to negotiate depreciation of assets within their capital base with the AER as part of their access arrangement. Any ministerial order would seek to include similar considerations of these matters.

David DAVIS: A further question to the minister: will you guarantee that cost recovery will be given in an order?

Ingrid STITT: I have already indicated that in making the order there is that flexibility and any ministerial order would seek to include similar considerations of these matters.

David DAVIS: I am not sure whether that was a yes or a no. A further question: what would happen if a minister-directed augmentation became unused or underused due to declining gas demand or if an alternative supply emerges? That is exactly the sort of situation Dr Mansfield pointed to in one of her points earlier on. What would happen at that point?

Ingrid STITT: Any network expansions or upgrades under the orders will be properly targeted so only necessary upgrades that support an appropriate balance between energy security, reliability, safety, efficiency and affordability while also supporting the energy transition are made to benefit all consumers and are futureproofed against changing asset use. Again, I think it is relevant to reiterate that the orders would be informed by expert advice on which declared transmission system augmentations could be delivered in a timely manner and at the most efficient cost. Fundamentally, these issues are around having those proper considerations and only using the orders as a last resort when the market is not able to achieve that balance in relation to energy security and reliability.

David DAVIS: I have a further question for the minister. Will the minister commit to disapplying NGR 85(1) – that is a rule about capital redundancy – to ensure assets mandated by government cannot later be removed from the regulated asset base?

Ingrid STITT: The minister does have discretion when it comes to which provisions of the National Gas Law she disallows. However, I want to reassure you that these will be consulted on when drafting the order. I think we have gone to those issues a number of times already in committee and in our second-reading debate.

David DAVIS: I am not sure that will give the assurance that I would have hoped. Nonetheless I move on. What recourse exists for affected parties if the minister issues an unreasonable, technically flawed or economically harmful order? Not necessarily this minister – a different minister at a later point. What recourse?

Ingrid STITT: There is the opportunity for judicial review.

David DAVIS: Administrative law at the Supreme Court I think is what you are saying.

Ingrid STITT: Judicial review is an option to review ministerial orders.

David DAVIS: I will take it as what I have just said. I will ask another question. Does the minister agree that giving the government the power to override independent economic regulatory processes risks higher tariffs for Victorian gas consumers?

Ingrid STITT: You are asking for an opinion, and I suppose you are putting your spin on what you believe to be the case. In terms of the cost for consumers, that will depend on the specific work required, and it will be subject to rigorous scrutiny. A staged approach can ensure that any costs incurred are proportionate to need and to reduce the risk of future stranding. The orders will seek to ensure any works are as efficient as possible and that they are completed in a timely fashion.

We have gone over a number of times that before making an order the minister must first consult a range of organisations and individuals, including the Premier, the Treasurer, the Australian Energy Market Operator and of course the impacted declared transmission pipeline owner. This process ensures that any potential ministerial orders deliver those timely and needed improvements while striking a reasonable balance between reliability and affordability.

David DAVIS: What modelling has been done to understand the cost impacts on households and businesses if the minister directs unnecessary or uneconomic augmentations?

Ingrid STITT: Again, you are asserting that that would be the case, and I think we have indicated on a number of occasions that the process that needs to be undertaken, including the consultation, is to avoid that very instance. There is no forecasting because no orders have been made.

David DAVIS: I think 'no forecasting' means there is no modelling or attempt to understand what might occur. Is that where it is?

Ingrid STITT: No, that is putting words in my mouth. You are asking me about whether or not there has been modelling done on the impacts to consumers and costs.

David Davis interjected.

Ingrid STITT: I was in the process of outlining and have on a number of occasions outlined the process the minister must go through before making an order, and I have ad nauseam spoken about this being a last resort and a prudent measure to avoid a market failure when it comes to the energy supply, security and reliability that Victorians rely on as part of our transition planning. Given that you have indicated, Mr Davis, that you intend to support the bill, you now are asking me a series of questions which would suggest otherwise.

David DAVIS: I need to respond to that and say, yes, I have indicated we will not oppose the bill, but I have also indicated serious reservations about the bill and the risks that the bill imposes. What we have said is whilst we will not oppose the bill, there is a significant opportunity to improve and deal with some of the deeply rough edges around this bill and improve some aspects of it. So that is what we are seeking to do. But what I take from what the minister has said, and she may wish to confirm this, is that it is a fact, isn't it, that there is no modelling on this bill?

Ingrid STITT: The purpose of the bill is to ensure that the minister of the day has a mechanism available to them to ensure the security of Victoria's energy supply. The process that we have gone around and around the mulberry bush about in terms of how orders are made and who is required to be consulted ensures that any potential ministerial order delivers that timely and needed improvement. I want to reiterate that this is about proper planning and will only be triggered in circumstances where the market has been unable to guarantee that supply and security.

David DAVIS: I can only conclude that there is no modelling, but I will ask a further question on a different matter. How will Victoria manage the risk of market participants and investors shifting capital away from the state due to this unpredictable regulatory intervention? This is the sovereign risk aspect I spoke about in my second-reading speech. How does Victoria propose to manage this aspect?

Ingrid STITT: As I have said a few times now, the orders are not intended to curtail or interfere with the market and the role of AEMO and the Australian Energy Regulator. What we are dealing with here is that AEMO have forecast gas shortfalls on the east coast from 2029, and our government is taking action to ensure that Victorians have access to energy supplies that they need and doing so in a timely way and getting ahead of these issues. The DTS is a regulated asset with a regulated return.

David DAVIS: I will just note that I do not believe the minister has dealt with the sovereign risk issues, and we remain concerned on those.

Clause agreed to; clause 2 agreed to.

Clause 3 (20:50)

Sarah MANSFIELD: I move:

1. Clause 3, page 5, after line 31 insert –

"(g) require a declared transmission system service provider or prospective declared transmission service provider to submit a gas transition plan for the specified improvement to the Minister;".

2. Clause 3, page 5, line 32, omit "(g)" and insert "(h)".

3. Clause 3, page 6, after line 26 insert –

"(4) In this section –

electricity distribution company has the same meaning as ***distribution company*** has in the **Electricity Industry Act 2000**;

electricity retailer has the same meaning as ***retailer*** has in the **Electricity Industry Act 2000**;

gas transition plan, in relation to a specified improvement, means a written plan setting out –

(a) any actions proposed to be taken by a declared transmission system service provider or prospective declared transmission service provider to dismantle, decommission or remove the following –

(i) any part of a declared transmission system that is to be extended, or the capacity of which is to be expanded, in the carrying out of the specified improvement;

(ii) a pipeline or pipeline equipment that is to be improved, upgraded or connected in the carrying out of the specified improvement;

(ii) a facility for storing liquified natural gas that is to be improved or upgraded in the carrying out of the specified improvement; and

(b) details of the proposed timing of, or the circumstances required for, the carrying out of the actions described in paragraph (a); and

(c) how the specified improvement will reduce greenhouse gas emissions for the purposes of consistency with the long-term emissions reduction target; and

(d) any consultation the declared transmission system service provider or prospective declared transmission service provider proposes to take before carrying out of the actions described in paragraph (a), including but not limited to consultation with an electricity distribution company or an electricity retailer; and

(e) proposed strategies for managing economic loss resulting from any decrease in the value of any part of a declared transmission system, pipeline, pipeline equipment or facility described in paragraph (a);

long-term emissions reduction target has the same meaning as in the **Climate Action Act 2017**.".

As I spoke to my amendments at length during my second-reading debate contribution, I will take them as read.

David DAVIS: We understand why the Greens political party would move this on this occasion. We will not support it.

Ingrid STITT: The government will not be supporting this amendment. I think we have gone into the reasons why already, but in summary, there are already initiatives underway which will provide what this amendment seeks to do.

Council divided on amendments:

Ayes (7): Katherine Copsey, David Ettershank, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Sarah Mansfield, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell

Noes (29): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

Amendments negatived.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I move:

4. Clause 3, page 7, line 3, before "In" insert "(1)".

6. Clause 3, page 7, after line 32 insert –

"(g) the long-term emissions reduction target and the interim emissions reduction targets;

(h) any reasonable alternative options for achieving the Order's objective, including but not limited to measures designed to reduce customer demand for gas;".

7. Clause 3, page 7, line 33, omit "(g)" and insert "(i)".

8. Clause 3, page 7, after line 34 insert –

"(2) In this section –

interim emissions reduction target has the same meaning as in the **Climate Action Act 2017**;

long-term emissions reduction target has the same meaning as in the **Climate Action Act 2017**.".

Once again, I spoke to these in my second-reading contribution, so I will take them as read.

David DAVIS: On this occasion the Liberals and Nationals will not support these amendments.

Ingrid STITT: The government will not be supporting these amendments. The bill already provides a number of factors that the minister may have consideration of in making these orders.

Council divided on amendments:

Ayes (7): Katherine Copsey, David Ettershank, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Sarah Mansfield, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell

Noes (29): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

Amendments negatived.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Mr Davis, I invite you to move your amendment 1 on new section 58D.

David DAVIS: Yes. The running sheet is wrong in its number there – it is 58D. It seeks to replace the word 'may' with 'must.' I might just prior to moving it ask the minister why the government chose to use the word 'may' in 58D, but use the word 'must' in 58E? We heard earlier in the discussions that 'may' guarantees all these things happen, but the common word 'may' does not compel in any way, whereas in 58E the government has used the word 'must'.

Ingrid STITT: New section 58D provides a non-exhaustive list of matters which the minister may consider when making an order. None of the matters or anything else which may have a bearing on the minister taking an informed decision to make an order are precluded by this section. Again, and I think we have touched on this on numerous occasions in committee, the orders are a measure which will only be used if the market fails to provide a timely solution to securing the capacity and flexibility of the declared transmission network in the best interests of Victorians. Under section 58E the orders will also be informed by mandatory consultation with AEMO and the declared transmission network service provider. In this way, the order will align with and strengthen the standing review processes and scrutiny under the regulatory framework for gas, including robust consideration of costs and benefits and system needs.

David DAVIS: Well, that does not elucidate any more. 'May' means may, and it also means the minister 'may not'. For that reason we will persist with the attempt to amend this word to ensure 'must'. I move:

1. Clause 3, page 7, line 4, omit "may" and insert "must".

The 'must' would be the security and reliability of the operation of, and the supply of, gas; options available under the National Gas (Victoria) Law and rules to address any crucial national or Victorian need and so on down (c), (d), (e), (f) and (g) in the government's own list.

Ingrid STITT: For the reasons I have just gone through, the government does not support this amendment.

Sarah MANSFIELD: We had similar concerns to Mr Davis, but having been provided with the response that the government has given now and also in response to questions during the clause 1 discussion in the committee stage we are satisfied and we will not be supporting this amendment.

Council divided on amendment:

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

Noes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Sarah Mansfield,

Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Amendment negatived.

David DAVIS: I move:

2. Clause 3, page 8, line 9, omit "provider." and insert "provider; and".
3. Clause 3, page 8, after line 9 insert –

"(e) the AER; and

(f) any customer advocacy body prescribed for the purposes of this section or, if no body is prescribed, any body that the Minister reasonably considers represents the interests of customers or a class of customer; and

(g) any gas retailer that the Minister reasonably considers has customers that are likely to be materially affected by the making of the proposed Order; and

(h) any other person or body (other than a small customer) that the Minister reasonably considers is likely to be materially affected by the making of the proposed Order.".

Again, on the running sheet, 58E is the section involved. This would be inserted into 58E, where the government has chosen to use the word 'must'. It reads:

(1) Before making an Order … the Minister must consult with –

(a) the Premier; and

(b) the Treasurer; and

(c) AEMO; and

(d) the declared transmission system service provider.

But it makes no provision for the minister to consult with consumer and customer advocacy bodies, gas retailers or any other person or body other than a small customer that the minister reasonably considers likely to be affected. We say it should include advocacy bodies and retailers and the AER; we believe the AER should be on that list. That is the body that has overall decision-making as to whether costs are sheeted home to the consumers, and that is not a body that must be consulted. It is not even on the list here. So we have moved those amendments.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Again, we have sympathy for the Liberals' amendments on these, but we accept the explanation that they are too prescriptive and in that sense may not I think probably serve the full intent that Mr Davis has outlined here. We think that there needs to be some greater discretion allowed. As we outlined, I think there was opportunity to have regard to some of these things where reasonable, and there could have been language tweaks to deal with some of these concerns. But as it stands, we will not be supporting this amendment, and we hope that the government come good on all the assurances that they provided during the committee stage in response to questions about this.

Ingrid STITT: The government does not support this amendment. We went through the details of why in the committee stage, but in summary the 58E consultation requirements to include AER advocacy groups and energy retailers are already covered under paragraph (g) of new section 58D:

any other matter that the Minister considers relevant.

Understanding processes under the National Gas Law, we do not support the inclusion of mandatory consultation with the Australian Energy Regulator at this point, as further work would need to be done in consulting very closely with them about including them so as to preserve their independence. It also may have unintended effects of hampering the flexibility and speed of orders by possibly linking orders to standing consultation timelines under the NGL and NGR. The bill does not prevent the minister from consulting with other relevant parties as part of the process.

Council divided on amendments:

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

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

Amendments negatived.

David DAVIS: I move:

4. Clause 3, page 9, after line 5 insert –

"(3) Without limiting this section, the Minister's reasons published under subsection (1) or (2) must include –

(a) the potential costs to end users of the improvement or improvement services specified in the Order; and

(b) any alternatives to the improvement or improvement services specified in the Order that were considered and assessed before the making of the Order; and

(c) the potential costs to end users of any alternatives referred to in paragraph (b); and

(d) details of any advice received from AEMO and the AER under section 58E(1) before the making of the Order.".

Again, the running sheet has got the wrong point on it. It is clause 58F, just so that people know. It would insert a new subsection (3) in 58F and this publication of reasons for making an order. This makes it more transparent, and it forces the minister to consider the costs to consumers.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Once again, while we have sympathy for this amendment, in this instance we will not be supporting the Liberals amendment.

Ingrid STITT: The government does not support this amendment. We have gone through the reasons for that in detail in the committee stage, but it also should be noted that the drafting of this bill is consistent with the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005. It notes the relevant factors that the minister may have reference to in making a decision and requires the minister to outline her reasons in a statement of reasons but does not dictate what she must include in the statement of reasons, and that is what is consistent with the provisions in the bill before the house.

Council divided on amendment:

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

Noes (21): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Amendment negatived.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I move:

9. Clause 3, page 12, line 24, omit "58B.'." and insert "58B.".

10. Clause 3, page 12, after line 24 insert –

"**58K Minister may require gas network data to be provided**

(1) For the purposes of making an Order under section 58B, the Minister, by notice in writing, may require AEMO, a declared transmission system service provider or a prospective declared transmission system service provider to provide to the Minister details of the location, capacity, age or use of one or more of the following –

(a) a declared transmission system;

(b) pipeline equipment;

(b) a facility for storing liquified natural gas.

(2) A notice under subsection (1) must –

(a) specify or describe the information that AEMO, the declared transmission system service provider or prospective declared transmission system service provider must provide to the Minister; and

(b) specify the date by which the information must be provided to the Minister;

(c) specify the manner in which the information must be provided to the Minister.

(3) AEMO, the declared transmission system service provider or the prospective declared transmission system service provider must comply with the notice under subsection (1).

(4) Subject to subsection (5), the Minister, as soon as reasonably practicable after receiving information under this section, must ensure that a copy of the information is published on the Department's internet site.

(5) If the Minister considers that any information received under this section is confidential, the Minister must omit that information from the copy of the information published under subsection (4).".

Ingrid STITT: The government will not be supporting the amendments. We have given some assurances in the committee stage around these issues. In February the Minister for Energy and Resources wrote to gas distribution businesses in Victoria, notifying them of her intent to impose new licence conditions on their gas distribution licences. The government is currently consulting with industry on this change, and consultation will be ending later this month. The proposed licence conditions will require these businesses to publish relevant data on how gas use is changing across their networks. Some of the data required under these new licence conditions will assist in reporting, both internally and externally, on emissions and energy and climate goals and in understanding how gas use is changing in Victoria over time and across regions to understand trends, track the transition and inform government policy and how we can allow customers, stakeholders and government to understand where cost-effective alternatives to gas network expenditure may exist. Again, a ministerial licence condition which covers the gas data transparency requirements to government is currently out for consultation with gas distribution businesses. The government's intention has been made very clear. The intent of the Victorian government is to make gas consumption data publicly available, with the Essential Services Commission to oversee that. Given that this work is already underway, it is unnecessary to further amend the bill.

Council divided on amendments:

Ayes (7): Katherine Copsey, David Ettershank, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Sarah Mansfield, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell

Noes (29): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

Amendments negatived.

Clause agreed to; clauses 4 to 6 agreed to.

Reported to house without amendment.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (21:23): I move:

That the report be now adopted.

Motion agreed to.

Report adopted.

Third reading

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (21:23): I move:

That the bill be now read a third time.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (21:23): I want to make a simple comment here that this is a bill that gives extraordinary powers to a minister, whoever that may be, and there needs to be some way to ensure that those extraordinary powers are used fairly. We believe that, at a minimum, a memorandum of understanding should be signed and worked through to ensure that the bill is not used capriciously or arbitrarily by a minister, including the current minister.

Motion agreed to.

Read third time.

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

Adjournment

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (21:24): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Mortgage Stress Victoria

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (21:25): (2401) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Consumer Affairs, Nick Staikos. Rising interest rates are increasing pressure on families, today more than ever. The action I seek is an update on how the expanded Mortgage Stress Victoria service is helping more Victorians to access support and remain in secure housing.

Boroondara crime

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (21:25): (2402) My matter for the adjournment tonight is for the attention of the Minister for Police, and it concerns Sunhill Road in Glen Iris in part of my electorate. I met on Friday with 12 residents who live in Sunhill Road in Glen Iris. Ten months ago they got the street's first break-in where a youth offender held a knife to someone and stole a car, only to come back several days later to harass the owner. Since then, in the last week in particular, there have been three break-ins and another break-in a few days after that. They are concerned that the street is turning very violent. They have received very little information about whether the offenders have been caught. The street is now looking at options with council. Indeed they are looking at putting security of their own on the street. The street is now very worried. They have a WhatsApp group to try and control what is happening in the street. There have been nine incidents in the past few months, and this has now become something that is out of control. People are very concerned. Reported crime in the City of Boroondara, I might add, is up 21.8 per cent per cent in the last 12 months. The number of police officers in the City of Boroondara has fallen by 5.34 in the last year. So there has been a fall

in policing and a rise in crime, and we now have streets like Sunhill Road that are facing real threats and intense numbers of break-ins, carjackings and other clearly violent crime.

It is time that people made a real stand on this. It is time that we actually saw some action. What I want from the police minister is that he look at this matter and potentially come down and visit Sunhill Road in Glen Iris with me so that he understands what is occurring. This is completely and utterly unacceptable, and it is time that there was action on it. I just want to be clear: Labor has closed the nearby Ashburton police station. It is shameful, and there are less police consequently in the nearby area. Overall police numbers have fallen in Boroondara, crime is up almost 21 per cent and now we have a spate of crime, a flurry of crime, in this one street, and people are sick of it. The minister should come and learn what is going on under his watch.

Medicinal cannabis

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (21:29): (2403) My adjournment is to the Minister for Veterans and concerns the federal Department of Veterans' Affairs' updated medicinal cannabis framework introduced last month. While the DVA claims these resources are intended to safeguard the health and wellbeing of veterans and ensure treatments are safe and effective, the reality is quite different. The new framework severely restricts access to care for many veterans who rely on DVA-funded medicinal cannabis to manage chronic pain, service-related injuries and other conditions. A major barrier is the requirement for in-person consultations. Restricting telehealth is a huge obstacle for veterans in regional and rural areas, where specialist prescribers may be hours away. Veterans managing PTSD, traumatic brain injury, mobility challenges or severe anxiety cannot access treatment due to the travel requirements. We heard of one veteran who has a total impairment and is the sole carer of three children under 12. He cannot physically get to the nearest face-to-face clinic with a medicinal cannabis prescriber as it is over 400 kilometres away. Access is further reduced by limiting prescribing to clinicians with specialist Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency registration, significantly reducing the pool of prescribers. While prescribers may exist on paper, many have closed books, have long wait times or require restrictive referrals. Rather than improving care, the framework cripples access to it at a time when demand among veterans is increasing and clinical evidence supporting medicinal cannabis continues to grow.

The opioid crisis within veteran communities is well documented, yet veterans who have finally found relief through medicinal cannabis are now being pushed back towards the higher risk opioids as access to a safer alternative has been removed – how ironic. The DVA cites safety concerns while collecting no data on whether safety issues actually exist. These restrictions are being imposed based on hypothetical risks, not evidence of harm. Although the framework is federal, the Victorian government can still help by improving regional specialist access, expanding patient travel assistance for veterans and increasing clinician education around emerging treatments. The action I seek is for the minister to urgently lobby her federal counterpart to reinstate the previous model and undertake genuine consultation with veterans, clinics, advocates and prescribers to develop a revised framework grounded in real clinical outcomes, not administrative expectations.

Workplace deaths

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (21:31): (2404) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC. Last Monday our state celebrated Labour Day, a day that serves as a reminder of why the labour movement and the achievement of workers is integral to our state. My electorate holds a particularly rich and proud history in the trade union movement. It was in Parkville in 1856 that stonemasons working at the University of Melbourne walked off the job, marching to the city to demand and successfully win the 8-hour day. This historic win for workers rights is commemorated with the 8-hour day monument right across the road from the mighty Victorian Trades Hall in Carlton, the oldest trade union building in the world. However, the movement for workers rights is not just about hours and wages; it is fundamentally about safety and the right to come home at the end of the shift. Every worker deserves to return home to their loved ones, yet we

know that far too many families are left with an empty chair at the dining room table. That is why our government announced that it is establishing a permanent memorial for workers who have lost their lives on the job. This memorial will be a dedicated space for families, friends and colleagues to reflect, mourn and honour those who did not come home. It is an important step in ensuring that their lives are never forgotten. The Victorian Trades Hall Council has been a longstanding advocate for this, and I am so proud that our government is delivering on this project. Just a personal note to say the truck drivers memorial up in Alexandra is a site that is especially important to me, as it is a memorial to a very much loved family member. To know that there is going to be a memorial closer to home is something that I am very much looking forward to. The action that I seek is for the minister to join me in visiting this profound memorial once it is completed.

Land tax

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (21:33): (2405) My matter is for the Treasurer. It is regarding the significant and unjust land tax bill imposed on Wyndham City Council for a parcel of land that exists for the benefit of the community. The action I seek is for the Treasurer to intervene and review the State Revenue Office assessment of council-owned land and ensure that land used for a public purpose with no revenue is exempt from inappropriate taxation so that the vital local services are not deprived of necessary funding. The situation came to light when Wyndham was charged more than $70,000 in land tax over three years for the 18-square-metre garden bed on Watton Street down from my electorate office. It houses nothing more than a small strip of shrubs, a gum tree and an electrical box. The piece of land is one of more than 200 council-owned sites hit with land tax between 2021 and 2023, totalling $5.359 million. The impact on the community is significant. Every dollar diverted to pay these unexpected land tax bills is a dollar taken away from the maintenance of sporting ovals and parks, running early childhood programs and investing in fast-growing neighbourhoods. Wyndham is one of Victoria's largest and fastest growing municipalities, and its ability to deliver services is already strained by a rapidly growing population. These tax liabilities ultimately fall back on local ratepayers – residents who are effectively being double taxed. They are paying rates to fund essential community services only to have those funds redirected to cover a state-imposed land tax bill for, again, essential services.

In an area growing as rapidly as Wyndham where every dollar is critical for maintaining livability, these represent devastating hits on communities and local families. At a time when communities need more support, not less, they are being forced to absorb millions in land tax on community facilities. Not only is it counterproductive, but it is unfair. These tax bills undermine the council's ability to maintain local infrastructure, support new families and keep pace with the needs of this high-growth area. So I ask the Treasurer: will the government commit to reviewing these assessments, refunding any improper land tax charges to councils and safeguarding the community's land against future inappropriate taxation? Local communities deserve better than having essential services undermined by the state government's overreaching.

COVID-19

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (21:36): (2406) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, and the action I am seeking is for her to commit to investing more into long COVID research and prevention and publicly funded clinics. While the acute phase of the pandemic may feel like a bad dream for many, the long-term health consequences of COVID-19 remain a significant and ongoing challenge for individuals, their families and our health system. Long COVID continues to affect many Victorians who for months or even years after their initial infection are still experiencing debilitating symptoms. Last week was Long COVID Awareness Week. It provided an important opportunity to acknowledge the lived experience of those who continue to struggle with the condition and to raise awareness about the need for greater understanding, support and research.

There are over 200 long COVID symptoms, including persistent fatigue, cognitive difficulties, shortness of breath, heart palpitations and a range of other complex and fluctuating health issues that

are different for every individual. Each individual living with long COVID experiences the condition, as I said, differently, but for some, these symptoms significantly impact their capacity to work, study or engage fully in their lives. Often patients feel the need to mask these symptoms in order to get through daily life, resulting in further exhaustion and exacerbation of symptoms in a more private moment. For patients and their families, the experience of long COVID can be deeply frustrating and isolating. Because the condition itself is still being studied and understood, many patients report difficulty in accessing a clear diagnosis, appropriate treatment pathways or coordinated care, and health professionals themselves are often navigating emerging evidence.

The best way to stop long COVID is to prevent COVID infection in the first place, and a good place to start would be stronger requirements around indoor air quality in public places like workplaces and schools. This would prevent not just COVID but many airborne illnesses that contribute significantly to morbidity and mortality in our community. Continued research and investment are also incredibly important in expanding our understanding of long COVID, its causes, risk factors, effective treatments and long-term outcomes, and it is essential to providing better care to those who are affected and preventing more people from getting it. Access to publicly funded, dedicated services is equally important for recovery and improving quality of life. Long COVID patients often require multidisciplinary care involving general practitioners, specialists, allied health professionals and rehabilitation services, but care is currently hard to navigate and can be incredibly costly. Long COVID has broader implications for the workforce and for community wellbeing. Many patients are of working age and would love nothing more than to return to their previous routines. I urge the minister to do more to address long COVID in Victoria through prevention, research and publicly funded care pathways to support Victorians living with the condition in their ongoing journey to recovery.

Albury Wodonga Health

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (21:39): (2407) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health. The action I seek is for the minister to consider appointing an administrator at Albury Wodonga Health. Last Thursday Safer Care Victoria released its abridged findings into its investigation into the nation's only border health service, saying it speaks to cultural and behavioural challenges that have existed for some time. For those that have been following this saga, that is a staggering understatement. This health service is in turmoil. Staff confidence has collapsed, and I understand the chief medical officer has now resigned. The full Safer Care Victoria report remains under lock and key; no-one has seen it. Labor's spin piece used to sell the report was tone-deaf. It is another cover-up. Just the night before, more than 100 clinicians had unanimously backed a vote of no confidence in the executive. In October there was a similar vote of no confidence. At that time there were some still loyal to management; last Wednesday night there were none.

Where has the minister been? Who is she listening to? The community do not want more reports, further surveys and vague promises of action in some bureaucratic mumbo jumbo. The Safer Care investigation is claimed to be independent, but Albury Wodonga Health's executive was the overseer. It is the same executive that has presided over a health service where staff morale was rated the worst of any hospital in Victoria's public health system, where the AMA has publicly raised concerns about transparency, governance, staff distress and trust in leadership, that the New South Wales health minister asked the Victorian government to investigate and where the chair refuses to meet medical staff without the CEO present. This is a complete mess. Safer Care says this executive will be integral to a steering committee overseeing their recommendations. This is not the way to restore trust. The toxic culture that has been recognised by both New South Wales and Victoria includes the executive and the board. They must stand aside from this committee.

Section 61 of the Health Services Act 1988 is crystal clear: when a hospital board loses the confidence of its staff and community, the act provides a remedy – appoint an administrator. They must stand aside if this process is to restore the faith of the 300,000 people who rely on Albury Wodonga Health and improve the wellbeing of more than 3000 staff. They deserve nothing less. Six weeks ago in this place I said this is how health systems fail: not suddenly, but through neglect, denial and refusal to act

when there is still time. There is still time, but only the appointment of an administrator can restore the trust so that these changes will make a difference.

Formula One Australian Grand Prix

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (21:42): (2408) My adjournment matter is directed to the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events in the other place. Major events are important to our state's visitor economy. They create an economy which supports approximately 300,000 jobs. One of the significant major events this year was the 2026 Formula One Grand Prix. Last year we had an incredible record-breaking attendance of over 465,000 at this event, and we appear to have broken that record this year. We have had well-known and loved international artists such as Rita Ora and Basement Jaxx perform adjacent to this massive event. The Formula One Grand Prix is a significant event in Victoria and one that we will be hosting every year until at least 2037. Events like these are significant economic boosts to the Victorian economy. The action I seek is for the sports and major events minister to provide my office with information on how the Formula One Grand Prix has benefited the local economy.

Clarinda planning

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (21:43): (2409) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for Planning. Last week the housing advocacy group YIMBY Melbourne hosted an event with an international planning expert, Alain Bertaud. Among the things that he spoke about that are impacting the availability of housing in Melbourne were the green wedge zones. The result of locking up so much land in these green wedges is to push housing further and further towards the fringes of the city. I understand that people in Melbourne are very fond of our green open spaces. While I am not advocating for repealing all of them, it is simply common sense to recognise that not all green spaces are equal. Some have important environmental features worthy of protection, and others have important social and cultural uses. Some, however, are simply paddocks full of weeds.

Last week I had the pleasure of meeting Norman Dennis at his property in Leslie Road, Clarinda. While maintaining a sharp wit and a great sense of humour, Norman is in his later years and is keen to sell this property and provide more housing for people who want to live in the area. I have seen the property, and it is basically just an old paddock with plenty of loosened trees, blackberries and introduced grasses – hardly a high-quality environmental asset. It would be hard to imagine that even the most enthusiastic environmentalist would prioritise this as needing protection. It is also a great place to build more housing. There is a massive park right across the road for kids to play in, and just at the end of the street there is a bus that will take you to Southland or Clayton station. Not everyone wants to live in apartments, but many people want a home in a great location. This is a perfect site for sensible development. My request to the minister is to rezone this land and allow more homes in Clarinda.

Bushfire preparedness

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (21:45): (2410) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Education, and it relates to an issue that affects fire-prone communities, regional communities and hilly communities. My case study is Emerald Secondary College, but it also applies to Cockatoo Primary School and Beaconsfield Upper Primary School. These schools are forced to close on high fire danger days. Note that these are high fire danger days, they are not catastrophic days, as per the new system of signifying bushfire risk. I call on the minister to fund fire resistance upgrades needed to keep these schools open during these high fire danger days.

Under the national fire danger rating system a high fire danger day signals elevated risk but is nowhere near a catastrophic day, when advice is – which should be heeded – to leave bushfire risk areas entirely and the Department of Education shuts schools down. But it shuts these schools down on both high fire danger days and catastrophic days. What happens there is that high fire danger days are those with

a fire behaviour index between 24 and 49, and they occur far more often in summer, especially in regions and hilly communities like Emerald and the other places that I have mentioned. A Gembrook parent reports that his children at Emerald Secondary College have already missed five days of face-to-face learning this year due to high fire danger day closures, around 14 per cent of their class time, well above the government's chronic absentee benchmark. Remote learning on these days is limited and really inconsistent. The policy is deepening the divide between city and regional students. City schools are rarely affected, while country schools are missing work, children remain unsupervised and parents have to scramble.

Emerald Secondary College sits as bushfire at-risk register category 2, one of the highest bushfire risk classifications. The department reassesses these categories every year, and schools can move to a lower risk category if their safety profile improves. This requires upgrades, including vegetation clearing, fire-resistant buildings, increased defensible space and strengthening shelter-in-place facilities. This can materially reduce the risk and therefore reduce the need for high fire danger day closures. The action I ask for is for the minister to commit to a fire resilience upgrade program for these schools so that they can remain open during high fire danger days, protect student learning and ensure regional families receive the same educational continuity as metropolitan ones, where possible.

Fuel supply and prices

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (21:48): (2411) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Consumer Affairs, and the action that I seek is for the minister to provide an update on the compliance of petrol stations with the requirements to report fuel prices through Servo Saver. At a time when many families are feeling the pressure of rising costs all round, today's interest rate rise is just going to add to that burden. Petrol prices, we know, are being affected by global events. Victorians deserve the confidence that they are not being taken advantage of by opportunistic fuel retailers when they fill up their car. That is why the Allan Labor government has introduced anti-price-gouging laws, backed by practical tools like Servo Saver, to help all motorists find the best fuel prices. In the last week more than 119,000 Victorians accessed the Servo Saver app to find the cheapest fuel near them. That is more than a 200 per cent increase compared to the previous week. But that is not all that we are doing. Consumer Affairs Victoria is out in the field making sure that retailers are complying with the law, carrying out hundreds of inspections to make sure that petrol stations are registered and accurately reporting their prices. It is about fairness, it is about transparency and it is about giving all Victorians access to the information they need to make informed decisions about filling up their car. It is a little thing we can do to help, but it is important to families.

Ballarat Greyhound Racing Club

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (21:49): (2412) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Racing, and the action I seek is for an immediate investigation into the deadly Ballarat greyhound racing track. Ballarat has become synonymous with injury and death in Victoria's greyhound racing industry. In 2025 the track recorded seven on-track deaths, equalling the highest number in the state and making it the deadliest venue for greyhound racing in Victoria. Alarmingly, it also recorded the highest number of injuries, with 391 dogs injured due to racing at this track. Data compiled by the Coalition for the Protection of Greyhounds shows that Victoria was the deadliest state in Australia for greyhound racing in 2025, with 46 greyhound deaths. That figure far exceeded other racing states, including Queensland with 30 deaths and Western Australia with 21 – and keep in mind these are only the deaths on the track.

This year is no less disturbing when all racing-related deaths and injuries are considered. Ballarat has recorded 81 injuries so far in 2026, including the highest number of serious injuries requiring standdowns of more than 28 days. With 22 major injuries already recorded, Ballarat remains the most dangerous track in the state for a greyhound to be raced at. Behind these numbers are individual dogs whose lives ended in avoidable suffering. Sweet Tonight suffered a wrist fracture at the Ballarat track and was killed the following day. Another dog, Delicious, collapsed and died in the wash-down bay

after racing at Ballarat earlier this year. And in a separate matter, considered by the Victorian Racing Tribunal, a trainer was alleged to have mistreated Borroloola Lad during trials at the Ballarat track, punching, kneeing and loudly threatening to kill him.

Despite this troubling record, the Allan government has continued to invest taxpayer money into greyhound racing infrastructure. The Ballarat facility at Morshead Park received a $3.3 million upgrade, including $1.6 million in government funding, with assurances that the investment would improve safety and racing conditions. Yet the outcomes tell a very, very different story to that commitment. Since those upgrades were completed in 2024, deaths at this track have not declined. In fact the number of fatalities recorded in 2025 was the highest at Ballarat since 2020. When questions have been raised publicly about the spike in injuries and deaths at Ballarat and what measures have been taken to address this issue, the racing minister has failed to provide us with answers. For these reasons I urge the minister to initiate an investigation into the safety of the Ballarat greyhound racing track, including where the current track design, racing practices or oversight arrangements are placing greyhounds at unacceptable risk.

Sandhurst Centre site, Bendigo

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (21:52): (2413) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts regarding the old Sandhurst Centre site in Bendigo. The action I seek is that the minister urgently provide a clear plan and a timeline for what is happening with the site, which has now sat idle for 10 years. Ongoing antisocial behaviour has now escalated to the stage of repeated fires being lit at the site. Local residents are seriously concerned about what has been happening. Originally the Sandhurst Boys' Home, the centre was established in 1956 to cater for adolescent boys with intellectual disabilities. It was managed by the then Department of Health and closed in 2016, when 29 residents were moved to purpose-built residential homes. The property has sat idle and deteriorating for 10 years since then. The buildings are now dilapidated, vandalised and covered in graffiti. Police have been called to investigate drug deals at the site, and I understand squatters have been in the buildings. Locals are increasingly concerned as fires are repeatedly being lit in the abandoned structures, which is a safety risk and is also wasting the resources of our emergency services. I first raised this issue in the house two years ago. In August last year I received a letter from the minister, which said:

> I acknowledge the concerns about the Site. I am advised that the Department of Transport and Planning (DTP) is working with stakeholders towards selling or developing this Site as soon as practical, so that it can make a positive contribution to the community of Bendigo and White Hill.
>
> In the meantime, DTP will consult with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing on the current condition of the Site, the community's concerns and whether removal of the building is a feasible solution to address the concerns.

I urge the minister to provide further clarity on these commitments and to see to the removal of the dilapidated buildings, which would help reduce antisocial behaviour at the site and help address the concerns raised by local residents. The Finn Street site is a sizeable piece of land that is centrally located. It could be sold to help reduce the state's massive debt and developed for much-needed housing close to Bendigo. Local residents have been left in limbo for a decade, and I urge the minister to provide a clear action plan as a matter of urgency.

Mernda and Epping police stations

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (21:55): (2414) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Police. The action I seek is for the minister to return the Mernda and Epping police stations to being open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and ensure the stations are fully staffed. Under Premier Jacinta Allan crime is up but policing is down. Mernda train station was recently the site of a fatal stabbing when good Samaritan Aidan Becker stepped up to help someone and paid the highest price for his brave intervention. This tragic murder is sadly part of a larger pattern in which crime has exploded by 54 per cent in the Whittlesea police service area since 2022. But instead of increasing

police activity and availability the Allan Labor government has reduced the opening hours at police stations in the area and is operating stations at 50 per cent or less of their designated staffing levels.

Mernda police station opened in 2017 with the promise that it would be a 24/7 station with extra staff ready to serve a rapidly growing area, but Mernda station has instead had numerous unplanned closures, even during the middle of the day, because the Labor government cannot adequately staff the station. Instead of increasing police resources to address rising crime in the area, the Allan Labor government has reduced the opening hours of both Mernda and Epping police stations, closing them completely on weekends and weekday evenings after 6 pm. I have frequently raised this issue in Parliament, and the minister replied to one of my questions to say that members of the public seeking assistance can attend either the Mill Park police station or the Mernda police station, which both continue to operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week. But we know this is a misleading statement. It is not true that members of the public can attend Mernda police station 24/7. The station remains closed on weekends and evenings after 6 pm because the Allan Labor government is totally failing in its responsibility to recruit the staff that Victoria's police force needs.

I raised my concerns directly with the local police command at the Whittlesea neighbourhood policing forum in February, stressing how important it was for women fleeing domestic violence to be able to seek refuge and find safety at the police station at night. Officers explained that they want to be available to the public, but with the resources stretched thin they are forced to choose between being on the road and being available at the station counter. With nearly 2000 vacancies on police rosters and more than 40 stations closed or operating on reduced hours, the Allan Labor government is failing Victorians, who pay the price when they are the victims of rising crime. It is vital for community safety that the minister return the Mernda and Epping police stations to 24/7 stations and fully staff both stations.

COVID-19

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (21:58): (2415) My adjournment tonight is for the Premier, and it concerns yesterday's revelation that the Victorian government has settled the small business COVID lockdown class action for $125 million. Let us be honest about what this $125 million represents: it is not the government fixing a problem, it is not the government helping businesses, it is the government paying to make a political liability disappear in an election year.

Yesterday at the Supreme Court barrister Adam Hochroth SC announced that the parties had reached a settlement of $125 million inclusive of costs and interest. The settlement means that former health minister Jenny Mikakos, former jobs minister Martin Pakula and former department heads Kim Pike and Simon Phemister will not have to give evidence. How convenient. Consider the total cost to Victorian taxpayers. The government was prepared to spend up to $40 million in legal fees fighting this case, including $2.8 million to a California-based economist at US$950 an hour to argue that mum-and-dad businesses should have bought pandemic insurance that did not exist. Now taxpayers will pay $125 million in settlement, potentially on top of whatever legal costs have already been incurred. The 16,000 businesses who registered will receive a fraction of their losses after approximately 30 per cent is deducted for legal costs and litigation funding.

In Parliament this government still defends the lockdowns, but in court it pays $125 million to avoid defending them. The statement made yesterday was remarkable. It stated:

> The … Government stands by the steps it took during the pandemic to keep Victorians safe.

If that is so, why settle? Why pay $125 million rather than make that case? We know why. Because the case could not possibly be made this year, not with ministers in the witness box and an election on the horizon.

The real comparison is with other states. They managed to protect both lives and livelihoods. Victoria trashed its businesses through a quarantine failure that killed 768 people, locked the state down for 112 days and now expects taxpayers to foot the bill twice, once for the lockdown and again to settle the consequences. The action I seek from the Premier is a full public accounting of the total legal costs

incurred by the state in this class action, including all fees paid to interstate and overseas consultants. Victorians deserve to know – *(Time expired)*

State Emergency Service Whitehorse unit

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (22:01): (2416) My adjournment debate for tonight relates to the SES and in particular the SES Whitehorse unit. I had the good fortune of visiting the SES Whitehorse unit last night in fact, although it seems some time ago because my days are long. It was my good fortune because for some time I have been wanting to see their facilities. The SES Whitehorse unit is based, or co-located you could say, with Whitehorse City Council. They provide those facilities for a peppercorn rent to the Whitehorse SES, who have been stationed there for many years. Sadly, however, those facilities are not fit for purpose. That is absolutely clear. Part of the opportunity last night was to go on a tour of the facility. To begin with, the facility is on a slope and that slope is in the order of a differential from one end to the other of something like 6 feet – that is right, 6 feet. You can imagine what it is like to have two appliances or more there – in this case up to four appliances in the bay itself and then another two trailers outside. That is absolutely not fit for purpose. Some of the steel is showing signs of decay and rust. In addition to that, they have no toilet facilities whatsoever.

There is no transition room for the crew, the volunteers, the men and women who turn up to respond to emergencies day in, day out. There is no place for them to get changed, would you believe. Nor is there a place, as I have said, to go to the toilet – not even a bathroom. There is not a sink for them to wash their hands in after they have been out to a rescue or a job, which can include assisting our firefighters – both our professional firefighters and our CFA volunteer firefighters – Ambulance Victoria and Victoria Police. It occurred to me after the visit last night that our wonderful volunteers for the SES, in my area at least, Whitehorse and Maroondah, are continually and consistently being called upon to do the work that perhaps, for example, the police force are under-resourced for and cannot do at the moment through no fault of their own; therefore the service the SES provide is even more vital. It is somewhat stunning that the Whitehorse SES are continuing to do this when they do not have, as I have said, a facility that is fit for purpose. They need desperately to find land.

Therefore my adjournment debate tonight is for the Minister for Emergency Services in the other place, and it is for her to urgently assist in finding land that is appropriate for this SES unit to relocate to. As the President would well know, the current site that they are looking at in Vermont is just one of the many sites and options. It is owned by FRV currently. It is not appropriate. There are many access and other issues related to that site. The SES Maroondah unit desperately need appropriate land to be found so that they can begin constructing a new home for our wonderful SES volunteers in Whitehorse.

Responses

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (22:04): I want to thank members for their contributions – the 16 adjournment matters raised. I will make sure they are referred to the appropriate ministers for response in line with the standing orders.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 10:04 pm.