

PROOF

Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Wednesday 29 October 2025

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Proof

Wednesday 29 October 2025

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

Bills

Summary Offences Amendment (Begging) Bill 2025

Introduction and first reading

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:34): I introduce a bill for an act to amend the Summary Offences Act 1966 to repeal an offence in relation to begging and for other purposes, and I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Rachel PAYNE: I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Papers

Parliamentary departments

Reports 2024–25

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (09:34): I move, by leave:

That the Department of the Legislative Council report 2024–25 and the Department of Parliamentary Services report 2024–25 be tabled.

Motion agreed to.

Papers

Tabled by Clerk:

Auditor-General – Cybersecurity of IT Servers, October 2025 (*Ordered to be published*).

Commission for Children and Young People – Report, 2024–25* (*Ordered to be published*).

Disability Services Commissioner – Report, 2024–25*.

Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission – Report, 2024–25 (*Ordered to be published*).

Integrity Oversight Victoria – Report, 2024–25* (*Ordered to be published*).

Parliamentary Integrity Adviser – Report, 2024–25.

Renewable Energy (Jobs and Investment) Act 2017 – Victorian Renewable Energy Target – 2024–25 Progress Report, under section 8 of the Act.

Social Services Regulator – Report, 2024–25*.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule No. 111.

Surveillance Devices Act 1999 – Report, 2024–25 by the Victorian Fisheries Authority, under section 30L of the Act.

Victorian Disability Worker Commission and Disability Worker Registration Board of Victoria – Report, 2024–25*.

** together with the Minister's reported date of receipt.*

*Business of the house***Notices****Notices of motion given.****Standing and sessional orders**

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (09:45): I move, by leave:

That so much of the Standing and Sessional Orders be suspended to the extent necessary to enable –

- (1) the sitting of the Council on Wednesday, 12 November 2025 to commence at 12.00 noon, and the order of business to be –

Messages

Questions

Formal business

Members' statements (up to 15 members)

Government business

At 6.30 pm Meal break

Government business (continues)

At 10.00 pm Adjournment (up to 20 members)

- (2) the sitting of the Council on Thursday, 13 November 2025 to commence at 9.30 am, and the order of business to be –

Messages

Formal business

Members' statements (up to 15 members)

Private members bills – moving second readings of bills for which precedence has been ordered

Short form documents motion (up to 2 motions)

General business

At 12.00 noon Questions

General business (continues)

At 5.15 pm, or after 300 minutes of general business has elapsed (whichever is later)

Statements on tabled papers and petitions (30 minutes)

Petitions (qualifying for debate) (30 minutes)

Government business (60 minutes)

Adjournment (up to 20 members)

- (3) the sitting of the Council on Friday, 14 November 2025 at 9.30 am, and the order of business to be –

Messages

Formal business

Members' statements (up to 15 members)

Government business

At 12.00 noon Questions

Government business (continues)

At 6.30 pm Meal break

Government business (continues)

At 10.00 pm Adjournment (up to 20 members)

- (4) on Thursday, 13 November 2025, the following time limits for general business to apply –

General business (Standing Order 5.07)

Total time	70 minutes
Mover/Sponsor	20 minutes
Lead speakers	10 minutes
Remaining speakers	10 minutes
Mover/Sponsor, in reply	5 minutes

- (5) any petitions listed for debate on the next sitting Wednesday in ‘Petitions (qualifying for debate)’ to be debated during ‘Petitions (qualifying for debate)’ on Thursday, 13 November 2025; and
- (6) the Chair to interrupt the business before the House at 10.00 pm on Wednesday and Friday and Standing Order 4.08 to apply.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (09:45): Thank you to the Leader of the Government for agreeing to an arrangement for the Thursday, the non-government business day. That is much appreciated.

Motion agreed to.

Members statements

The Torch

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (09:46): The Torch is one of the organisations that provide a service unlike any other. The Torch provides not housing or cost-of-living relief but something deeper. It provides an outlet for expression and creativity through a cultural lens that allows people to connect with a part of themselves that they may have lost. Last week with my colleague Minister Erdogan we opened the *Future Dreaming* exhibit, an annual program that features over 200 different Indigenous artists from around the state. It allows these First Nations artists who have lived experience in the justice system to connect with culture and find their way back to community, all while making an income to help their lives outside. The Torch is more than art; although it represents a deeper connection to country and culture and history, it also shows the disproportionate amount of First Nations Victorians within the justice system. One of the changes I and so many Victorians need to see is for mob to get out of the perpetual cycles in the justice system and reconnect with country and community, and programs led by the Torch help make that dream a reality. Can I finish by acknowledging the new and incredibly energetic leadership of the chair of the Torch, Benson Saulo, and thank him for taking on the chairmanship of this organisation so trusted and so beloved in our community, and I am sure it is now in very good hands. Thank you, Benson.

Gender identity

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (09:47): It was an honour to share a panel discussion recently in Melbourne with my colleague in this place Mr Limbrick and with our guest of honour Dr Helen Joyce, the famous British gender-critical activist, Cambridge and University of London academic, mathematician, journalist, former finance and international editor of the *Economist* and author of the *Sunday Times* bestseller *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality*. Helen has led the way in exposing the nonsense that men can be women and the dangerous and untested practice of medically and surgically transitioning children who may or may not be experiencing gender dysphoria. The outrageous aspect of the Women’s Voices Australia event was that hours before the meeting, scheduled to be held at the State Library venue, someone at Melbourne City Council cancelled the booking. Fortunately another location was quickly provided. But what an insult to an overseas expert advocate and how outrageous that cancelling legitimate conversation has become synonymous with this city, this state and those on the left who label and cancel anyone not singing from their hymn book. However, over 150 women from across the political spectrum, including Labor, Greens, Libertarians and more, welcomed Dr Joyce and enthusiastically engaged in the panel discussion, all present totally committed to ensuring women and girls have safe places in prisons, sport, toilets et cetera.

Wildlife road strike

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (09:49): I often speak in this place about the wildlife road strike crisis. Every year 10 million animals are killed on Australian roads. Numbers are often big, overwhelming and hard to comprehend, but that is 19 animals per minute. Today I want to talk about just one of them – a big, beautiful eastern grey kangaroo boy I drove past in distress, after being hit by a car on the Calder Freeway near Woodend on Monday morning. Despite having two broken back legs he was alert and conscious, swinging his head in fear and in pain. As cars sped past at 110 kilometres per hour, he tried unsuccessfully to pull himself away by his front paws. A call was placed to wildlife rescuers, and soon after he was euthanised – the only option for a macropod with an injury as serious as his. We have all become far too complacent seeing dead animals on the side of the road, myself included, but each and every one of them was an individual with a story, including one of the people trying to help them. As we head into the busiest wildlife rescue period over spring, I send my support and solidarity to our state's overworked and exhausted wildlife rescue volunteers. If you have not done so yet, save the wildlife emergency hotline number in your phone. It could save a life.

Bayside Toy Library

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (09:50): Last Saturday I had the pleasure of joining the Bayside Toy Library to celebrate their 40th anniversary. For four decades this volunteer-supported organisation has given local families access to high-quality educational toys to foster learning and development. It is also a great place for families to come and the kids to play, share and connect. It was wonderful to be there, see the fabulous cake the centre manager had made and join them in celebrating 40 great years.

Chevra Hatzolah Melbourne

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (09:51): I also want to acknowledge the work of Chevra Hatzolah. Hatzolah is a volunteer-based emergency medical service that operates in Caulfield and East St Kilda, providing first response care to members of the community in emergency need before paramedics arrive. They celebrated their 30th anniversary on Monday night, and I had the absolute pleasure of joining the Minister for Ambulance Services Mary-Anne Thomas at their gala dinner. It was a wonderful night of talking to the volunteers and workers and hearing of the positive impact they have had and the lives that they have saved in their community. Recently Hatzolah was accredited as a first aid training provider and a registered training organisation so that they can expand their mission to train more locals in the community to provide first aid and life-saving care. Thirty years of wonderful service to the community in Caulfield, East St Kilda and beyond – congratulations to Hatzolah.

Taxation

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (09:52): The Allan Labor government continues to hammer Victorians with more and more taxes. This week saw the latest new Labor tax, this time a tax on family pets. Labor is squeezing every last cent they can from Victorians to pay for the billions of dollars of cost blowouts and delays on metropolitan megaprojects, and regional Victorians are paying the price.

Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (09:52): One of my constituents contacted me recently to say that he is being charged the big new emergency services tax and has been cruelly denied his right to the rebate for emergency services volunteers. He is a long-serving CFA volunteer with almost 35 years of service to his community and has lived with his partner at the same house for the last 28 years. The property title was in her name when they met, and they have not changed that, but the house is his home and has been his listed address for CFA membership for over two decades. He recently applied for the volunteer rebate from Labor's greedy emergency services tax but was turned down due to bureaucratic red tape. My constituent wondered whether he should send an invoice back to the government for the tens of thousands of hours he has dedicated to his brigade, attending

call-outs, repairing vehicles, improving operations and keeping the financial books in order at night. It is clear that Labor does not recognise or value the hard work that volunteers contribute to our state. I have written to the Treasurer asking her to do the right thing and ensure his rebate is granted.

Invisible Disabilities Week

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (09:54): Many people mistakenly think of disabilities as only being visible – images of someone using a wheelchair or a guide dog – but the reality is 90 per cent of the 4.4 million Australians living with a disability are actually living with an invisible disability. Last week, 19 to 25 October, was Invisible Disabilities Week, an invitation to promote open dialogue on how we can shift the conversation and misrepresentation of invisible disabilities. Invisible disabilities can include things like chronic pain, neurological conditions, autoimmune disorders, mental health challenges and many other health conditions. The barriers people face because of them are very real: difficulty accessing education, workplaces and public services, and even social exclusion. The Victorian Greens understand that the challenges faced by disabled people stem from decades of underfunding, ableist policies and a lack of genuine community consultation. Invisible Disabilities Week serves as a reminder to educate ourselves on how we can all ensure we co-create safe and respectful spaces for all people to share their experiences.

Diwali

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:55): I recently had the great privilege of joining in several Diwali celebrations across both my electorate and Victoria more broadly, each one reflecting Diwali's core values of unity, community and finding light through darkness. In Cranbourne I had the great honour of taking part in the BAPS Kids Diwali. It was an extra special privilege to be able to walk into the event for the opening with the monks and also to meet with many wonderful young people. This is an event that is run by young people for young people, and it was certainly very inspiring to meet with them all and learn about the messages that they are trying to impart from this year's Diwali. I also had the great privilege of attending a celebration with Tamil Pengal in Australia in Rowville, celebrating an event that was particularly focused around empowering young women, and indeed I joined Minister Stitt, Mr Tarlamis and Ms Watt for the Celebrate India function in Federation Square. There are many, many wonderful Diwali events that have been happening and continue to happen across our great state.

Pure Dairy

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:56): President, I am sure, like many of us, you enjoy a tasty burrito, and next time you do go to GYG and get one, the cheese in that burrito will have come from a factory in Dandenong South. Last week along with Minister for Industry and Advanced Manufacturing Colin Brooks, and Mr Limbrick in fact, I was delighted to join for the opening of the new Pure Dairy plant in Dandenong South, the largest new dairy investment in 40 years.

Members interjecting.

Michael GALEA: Mr Hodgett was also there. I am not sure why he did not invite you, Mrs Hermans, but he was there as well. It was great to have some bipartisan support for this event and for a great new local manufacturing site.

Ararat show

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (09:56): I do not know what anyone else was doing on Sunday, but I was at the Ararat show, and despite there being a bit of rain we got through the show, and it was a good day. I want to congratulate the show committee for putting on a great turn, despite the difficult conditions.

Diwali

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (09:57): I also had the great pleasure of attending a Diwali celebration on Saturday night. Mr McIntosh, I am sure you would have enjoyed being there as well, and back in Ballarat. It was a great event that Ballarat Indian Association put on – a beautiful event, inclusive of everyone; everyone was allowed to come along. Of course I pay tribute to those in our Indian community in Ballarat that make such a difference every day, working hard.

Inverleigh Primary School

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (09:57): I had the pleasure of going to Inverleigh Primary School last week as well and talking to the grade 5 and 6 students there – some very smart and bright minds there and some excellent questions. I want to pay tribute to the teachers that do such a good job, as well as the support officers that do such good work in supporting the students.

International Society for Parshuram Consciousness

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (09:58): Lastly, I had the pleasure of helping launch the International Society for Parshuram Consciousness, which is a new foundation many of the members of our Indian community are involved in. It was actually launched last Friday here in Parliament, and I want to congratulate the new president of the chapter Chander Sharma, and his wonderful family that have supported him in his new role to continue to help young people get an education, particularly women actually, so they can support themselves into a better future. Well done to ISPAC, and I wish them all the best in the future.

West of Melbourne Economic Development Alliance

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (09:58): Last Thursday I had the pleasure of attending the West of Melbourne Economic Development Alliance conference. I would like to congratulate WOMEDA and Victoria University for convening this group of some 150 stakeholders. It was also lovely to see a number of my colleagues in the chamber attending and participating in the process. I would also like to express my appreciation to the *Age*, who were the co-sponsors. Apart from their great contribution on the day, I think across the western suburbs folks have been delighted to see the focus they brought to bear on a range of big issues in the west leading up to the conference. By way of example, the *Age* covered the Synergetics report demonstrating that the West Gate Tunnel vent stacks would not disperse emissions but would rather drop them over surrounding houses and businesses. We posted a link on Reddit for both the article and their subsequent rebuttal of the Minister for Roads and Road Safety's error-riddled condemnation of the original story. The former was read 65,000 times and the latter 70,000 times. It was brilliant to have so many fine minds sharing thoughts on how we realise the enormous potential of the west – if only we could get the prerequisite alignment on investment, environment and policy. The major bummer of the conference – and every conference has one – was the statement from Jeroen Weimar that the electrification works of the Melton and Wyndham Vale lines would not commence until after the Sunbury station redevelopment is completed. In short – and in a best case – those communities will get their line electrified a decade after it was first promised.

Warrnambool kindergartens

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (10:00): My members statement today is about two kinders that I visited last week in Warrnambool. Goodstart Early Learning in Dennington has received a Building Blocks grant to upgrade outdoor areas and some indoor fit-outs. Two of the staff, Amanda Parnell and Megan Robertson, are now degree-qualified due to our contribution from the early childhood scholarships program. The program inspired Amanda to fulfil her ambition of becoming an educator and enabled Megan to reduce her working hours to focus on her studies. At Warrnambool city kinder the Building Blocks grant was used to create a new accessible entry with a ramp for prams and wheelchairs and an area for the children to hang up their bags and belongings. It is a lovely light and quiet space. Apparently in the first week it opened the children enjoyed their space so much that

they spent most of their day there. Congratulations to Goodstart Early Learning in Dennington, Warrnambool City Council kinder and also Bolden Constructions for making such a great use of the available space. It was truly fantastic to see the benefits of the Allan Labor government's Building Blocks grants and the early childhood scholarship program.

Mirboo North schools

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (10:01): It was great to be back at Mirboo North Secondary College and Mirboo North Primary School, and I had a surprise guest. I had the Premier with me, which was fantastic. Thank you to principals Melissa and Matt and the whole school for putting on an absolutely great show. We were met by the secondary school student leaders and by the primary school captains. We were joined by teachers and staff, and we even had a special guest appearance from local basketball champion Belinda Snell, so we shot some hoops. The Premier hit her first shot. I missed every shot I made, just to make everybody else look really good. Belinda obviously hit them, but the star of the show was young Patrick, Belinda's son, who with about 100 people watching on got the ball through it. Everyone gave him a round of applause, and his face lit up. It was a beautiful moment. We then went to look at results of the Landcare grants that the school has been using to propagate plants for around the school and around the town.

South Gippsland Landcare Network

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (10:02): Talking of Landcare, I was absolutely honoured to join the South Gippsland Landcare Network event at Fleet Wines on Sunday. We had the shed; it was absolutely packed. It was a great atmosphere. It poured rain, but we had a super event inside, which was launching their book, *Our Quiet Achievers*, which is about the 16 dedicated Landcare and 'friends of' groups across South Gippsland. They have been dedicated for decades, working on their farms and on public land spaces, contributing to their local environment. This book celebrates them. One of the reasons I started Parliamentary Friends of Landcare with my colleagues in here was so that – (*Time expired*)

Bills

Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment (Ending Political Corruption) Bill 2024

Statement of compatibility

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (10:04): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

The primary objective of the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) is to identify, investigate and expose corrupt conduct.

Clause 4 of the Bill removes the requirement in section 4 of the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Act 2011 (the IBAC Act), for 'corrupt conduct' to be "conduct that would constitute a relevant offence", where a relevant offence is effectively a criminal offence (i.e. an indictable offence or various common law offences).

The effect of clause 4 of the Bill is that IBAC may identify, investigate and expose non-criminal corrupt conduct.

The right to privacy and reputation is provided by section 13 of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (the Charter), which states a person has the right not to have their privacy, family, home or correspondence unlawfully or arbitrarily interfered with, and not to have their reputation unlawfully attacked.

Widening the jurisdiction of IBAC to expose non-criminal conduct as corrupt conduct will likely lead to greater exposure of corrupt conduct, that in turn may adversely impact on the reputations of individuals identified.

However, all similar anti-corruption agencies across other Australian jurisdictions, bar South Australia, may investigate non-criminal corrupt conduct using powers similar to those provided to Victoria's IBAC. Notably, the jurisdiction of the new National Anti-Corruption Commission opened by the Australian government

earlier this year was purposefully legislated to ensure that the Commission could investigate non-criminal corruption.

These other jurisdictions' anti-corruption agencies reflect contemporary understandings that not all corrupt conduct is necessarily criminal, and so an effective anti-corruption agency must have sufficient powers to investigate and expose this conduct to drive higher standards by public officers and office holders.

Therefore, the effective prohibition on IBAC investigating non-criminal corrupt conduct under the IBAC Act, does not align with public expectations and falls below the minimum integrity standards in other jurisdictions. The Bill seeks to correct this.

Furthermore, there are, in my opinion, sufficient protections in the IBAC Act to guard against arbitrary and unfair attacks on an individual's reputation. Section 8aa provides for IBAC to prioritise the investigation and exposure of serious or systemic corrupt conduct, and section 117 provides a general presumption against public examinations, that can only occur where they will not cause unreasonable damage to a person's reputation, safety or wellbeing.

Therefore, in my opinion the proposed powers afforded under clause 4 impose reasonable limitations on Charter rights with respect to privacy, and there are no less restrictive means of achieving a sufficiently empowered and effective anti-corruption commission in Victoria.

Second reading

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (10:04): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

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

For too long Victorians have been asked to accept poorer standards of behaviour from the people elected to serve them than those in other states.

This corruption, misconduct and general dodginess by public office holders costs Victoria, both financially as taxpayers and indirectly in terms of poor public policy outcomes.

Indeed, the true cost of corruption – its insidiousness – is not just the corrupt act itself but the poor policy that invariably results from it.

Whether it is houses getting built where they shouldn't and not getting built where they should.

Whether it is marginal electorates being allocated infrastructure and services they do not need while the ones that sorely do miss out.

Whether it is the projects that are mismanaged because those who received contracts can't deliver them or boards of management that don't properly manage risks because members are not appointed on merit.

It does not matter whether the corruption involved is so-called 'soft' corruption or hard corruption, whether the corruption is coloured black and white or grey or whether it involved the committing of a criminal offence, such as a direct bribe, or something else.

The policy costs of all forms of corruption are the same. It negatively impacts on the lives and livelihoods of Victorians, and it diminishes the trust in our leaders and institutions equally, whether it technically involves a criminal offence or not.

But Victoria is almost unique in Australia in that it limits its anti-corruption agency, IBAC, to only investigate and expose one form of corruption, that which involves corrupt conduct that is a criminal offence.

Across the rest of Australia, anti-corruption agencies reflect the contemporary understanding that not all corrupt conduct is necessarily criminal, and so an effective anti-corruption agency must have sufficient powers to investigate and expose non-criminal corruption if it is to drive higher standards by public officers and office holders.

The bill itself is straightforward.

It seeks to expand the jurisdiction of IBAC by abolishing the requirement that corrupt conduct must involve conduct that would constitute a relevant offence, where 'relevant offence' is defined as an indictable criminal offence as well as certain common-law offences.

This would mean IBAC can identify, investigate and expose corrupt conduct of public officers that does not constitute a criminal offence – things such as serious breaches of codes of conduct of MPs and ministers, egregious pork-barrelling and the awarding of non-competitive tenders and appointments to public positions.

The transitional arrangements in the bill provide that this broadened jurisdiction can be applied retrospectively to conduct that occurred before commencement, as well as allowing IBAC to re-examine matters that it has previously dismissed or referred to another agency.

The bill will align the jurisdiction of IBAC with that of most other anti-corruption agencies across the nation, including the new National Anti-Corruption Commission, that very deliberately broadened its jurisdiction to capture non-criminal conduct as a key feature.

To conclude, there have been a number of integrity bills that have been introduced into this place in this term, reflecting the inadequacy of the current Victorian integrity regime and the paucity of government action on the issue.

Without wishing to denigrate those bills it is no exaggeration to say that the small legislative amendment proposed in today's bill is by far and away the most critical single reform to combat corruption in Victoria.

This bill is what giving IBAC the powers it needs looks like.

This is certainly the opinion of the esteemed former Court of Appeal judge and Commissioner of IBAC the Honourable Robert Redlich AO KC.

Former Commissioner Redlich has said that the reform proposed in this bill is the 'most important' anti-corruption reform needed in Victoria.

Commissioner Redlich pointed to the recent report on Operation Daintree, which made countless serious findings of misconduct and a lack of integrity in government decisions – but because these findings could not be called corrupt conduct under the IBAC act, they were able to be spun, misrepresented and downplayed cynically by the Premier, using excuses that everything was okay because no crime was committed.

The former Premier went further to say that ordinary Victorians weren't concerned about this lack of integrity because he gets things done.

So when corruption gets easily ignored and brushed aside, when politicians effectively say, 'Who cares if I'm corrupt, look at my big infrastructure,' we have a serious problem.

But as former Commissioner Redlich, who is probably the least partisan person in Victoria, also said, while Daintree is a good example of why reform is needed, this isn't about former Premier Daniel Andrews or any one government or individual.

Soft corruption is rife across the country and we could point to any number of politicians, political parties and jurisdictions over the last 40 years illustrating this point.

But Victoria is, with the exception of South Australia, unique in that it has integrity laws that do not empower the anti-corruption agency to properly investigate and expose all forms of political corruption.

Victoria must not have lower standards than the rest of the country when it comes to political integrity.

And this is why I commend this important bill to the house.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:04): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for two weeks.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for two weeks.

Production of documents

Container deposit scheme

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (10:04): I move:

That this house:

(1) notes that:

- (a) the state government's container deposit scheme (CDS) was introduced to encourage recycling and reduce litter across Victoria;
- (b) concerns have been raised by councils, community members, retailers and beverage suppliers regarding government-imposed charges within the CDS framework;
- (c) questions remain about how charges are calculated and applied, including in relation to containers that are not ultimately returned via the CDS but are placed into the yellow recycling bins;

- (2) in accordance with standing order 10.01, requires the Leader of the Government to table in the Council, within four weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution:
 - (a) all documents detailing the methodology used to determine government charges and handling fees under the CDS;
 - (b) all correspondence and briefings to or from the Minister for Environment and the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action concerning charges applied to containers that are not returned via the CDS but are placed into the yellow recycling bins;
 - (c) all cost–benefit analyses, modelling or financial projections underpinning the CDS fee structure; and
 - (d) all reports or reviews assessing the impact of the CDS charges on consumers, beverage producers and local councils.

I am pleased to move the motion standing in my name seeking the production of documents relating to the state government’s container deposit scheme. This is a modest and reasonable request. The motion simply asks the government to table the documents which explain how the fees and charges under the scheme are calculated, what correspondence has taken place between the minister and the department and what cost–benefit analysis or financial modelling underpins the scheme’s design. It is a matter of transparency and accountability, not ideology. Recycling is important – no-one disputes that; but good intentions do not excuse poor administration, and this scheme raises a series of legitimate questions which the government has so far failed to answer.

The container deposit scheme was introduced to encourage recycling and reduce litter; that is the headline purpose and sounds straightforward enough, but in practice what has emerged is an extraordinarily complex system involving multiple layers of fees, agreements, reporting obligations and penalties imposed on manufacturers, distributors, retailers and councils alike. Local government in particular has flagged serious concerns, as the shadow minister has raised with me repeatedly. Councils are required to introduce a fourth bin for glass, to manage new collection streams and to communicate new rules to ratepayers, all at a cost borne locally through higher waste charges. At the same time, beverage suppliers are paying new government-imposed charges under the CDS framework, a structure which remains opaque. I want to give particular credit to Cr Jim Grivas of Manningham City Council, who has discussed this matter in detail with me. He explained a system that places new administrative burdens on businesses and ratepayers while enriching the state and its contractors. Under the scheme, every bottle or can sold in Victoria must be registered. The manufacturer or importer must pay a per-container charge to the scheme coordinator VicReturn and must report quarterly on the number of containers sold. Even a failure to report zero activity can attract penalties. Invoices must be paid within five days. Labels must be redesigned, and each product line must be separately registered not just in Victoria but in every participating state and territory.

The administrative cost is substantial, but more concerning to me is the question of where the money actually goes. For each container sold, the supplier pays more than the 10 per cent refund that is advertised to consumers. The average figure is around 16 cents. That means there is a margin of roughly 6 cents per container between the amount collected and the refund available and no clear public explanation of how that difference is used or distributed. If a consumer does not return their container for a refund – if it goes into a yellow bin or the household waste stream – that 6-cent margin becomes effectively a windfall to government. But who keeps it? Is it retained by the scheme operator or does it flow to the state? How much has been collected in total, and what proportion of containers are actually redeemed? These are not unreasonable questions. They go to the heart of whether the scheme operates as a recycling initiative or as a revenue mechanism dressed in green. Victorians deserve to know whether they are paying a hidden tax every time they buy a drink.

The government’s own public communications emphasise the environmental benefits, but they say little about the financial structure. There has been neither transparent publication of the modelling used to determine the fees nor any explanation of the treatment of containers recycled through council kerbside systems rather than returned through official depots. If this scheme is genuinely designed to improve recycling outcomes, the government should welcome scrutiny; if it is efficient and fair, there

should be no reason to withhold the figures. But if on the other hand the scheme has been built around opaque charges, uncertain cost recovery and windfall revenue, then we in Parliament and the drink-buying public are entitled to know. This motion seeks documents that will clarify those matters, the methodology for setting fees, the correspondence that guided those decisions, the cost-benefit analyses relied upon and any reports assessing the impact on consumers, producers and councils. This is not an attack on recycling, it is a defence of accountability. The government has a duty to show that environment policy is being delivered efficiently, transparently and honestly, not through hidden levies or off-budget revenue streams. I urge the house to support this motion so that these documents can be made public and Victorians can see for themselves how this scheme is really operating. Sunlight, as ever, is the best disinfectant.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (10:10): This government is always happy to provide those in this place with the documents they request. I am happy that today what we see before us is a documents motion with respect to the container deposit scheme, one of the most popular policies this government has undertaken. I know that people up and down my electorate, the Northern Metropolitan Region, have welcomed the CDS in fact with open arms. Schools, families and businesses have all decided to collect some cans and bank some bottles to make an extra buck, and I, for one, am absolutely delighted about it.

The rollout of the CDS was really one of the quickest and most successful uptakes of any government program, with over 600 CDS refund points open right across the state. Can I take the time to acknowledge and commend Minister Dimopoulos for his oversight of the project and also thank the former CEO Jim Round, who did an unbelievable job in making this program a reality in a very, very quick way. And I have got to tell you, so many community groups and sites and others have taken to this with such gusto. Even my office in fact has been collecting bottles and cans to take down to our local CDS reverse vending machine. We are not a full-on operation there – we have collected \$47. But I will tell you that is \$47 we would not have had if it were not for this government's commitment to the circular economy.

On the circular economy, I have got to say, with this scheme Victorians are making wins at every point, creating clean streams of recycling, reducing their litter, reducing their waste and earning change for themselves, communities and charities. Victorians are taking these small steps to make a big difference not only in their back pocket but to their homes and to the environment, proving that this is for community and that we can continue to give back to community.

This government cares about the environment, and the \$515 million investment into this state's waste recycling industry is really a proof point of that. This investment has created jobs, with over 500 jobs being created in the first eight months alone of the scheme and now well over that in the past two years. This commitment has seen in the first year of the scheme's life over 1 billion containers returned. It is the most successful container deposit scheme rollout anywhere in the nation. With over \$100 million returned to Victorians in the past two years, this scheme has proven that the model of a circular economy works. These figures show the scheme is achieving at its core the environmental objectives of reducing waste, increasing recycling and providing an incentive to return containers rather than dump them.

Beyond the environmental gains, I must say the scheme is already contributing to jobs and community funding. In the first year, the scheme generated nearly 600 direct jobs in Victoria, and it has emphasised community participation, including some really important partnerships with schools, grassroots organisations and culturally diverse communities. This week in Parliament we are hosting the Australian Vietnamese Women's Association, which CDC has partnered with to ensure that Vietnamese Victorian communities are engaged, educated and benefiting from the scheme. I do know that there is a range of organisations right across the Northern Metropolitan Region who have partnered with the CDS and are taking up the enormous opportunity to increase participation in the circular economy. To them can I say thank you and keep it up – you are an inspiration to many more. I do hear from other organisations in the office asking about how they too can get involved in the

scheme and take it up. I am truthfully quite thrilled that those opposite wish to know more about this government and our efforts to drive the circular economy in our state through the container deposit scheme while achieving some strong early successes which really have been embraced wholeheartedly by the community.

We have seen substantial diversion of containers from landfill, high rates of return, enormous community benefits and alignment with this government's commitment to cut down waste. I could give you some tales, but I think if you are driving around the suburbs on the weekend and you come anywhere near a container deposit scheme, what you will see is a line-up of Victorians waiting to play their part in contributing to Victoria's circular economy, and I congratulate and thank them for that.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (10:15): I rise to speak on this motion. The Greens will be supporting this motion. We have a principle of supporting documents motions, but today, in the interest of transparency, I am very pleased to get the opportunity to talk about the container deposit scheme and the great benefits that it is already bringing to our state. For almost 10 years the Greens campaigned for Victoria to introduce a cash-for-containers scheme, and the success of this initiative is one of the countless reasons that I am very proud to stand here as a Greens representative and carry on the traditions of Greens members in this place who fought for the establishment of a container deposit scheme for nearly a decade. It is fantastic to hear the government's enthusiasm for this initiative. It did take nearly a decade while Labor governments dragged their feet, and we are really pleased that finally, with Greens in government, good things happen when we push for long enough.

For almost 10 years, as I said, we campaigned for this. The Greens introduced legislation that was knocked back by Labor several times, Mr Galea, and at long last, following a Greens-initiated parliamentary inquiry into recycling and waste management in 2019 that recommended that the government establish a container deposit scheme, finally we saw the introduction of the scheme in 2021. In late 2023 it was up and running, and a year later the CDS marked its first anniversary by celebrating 1 billion containers returned and \$100 million either back into Victorians' pockets or to the charities that they had chosen to donate their refunds to. The CDS has been massively popular, and its earning potential has been embraced by everyone from schools, sports clubs and students to older persons and others who seek to supplement their income, or, as one enterprising person recently referred to it in the *Age*, their 'bincome'. But it is not just about earning money, as has been said. The 2019 inquiry report found that in other jurisdictions container deposit schemes had been successful in both reducing litter, improving recycling rates by reducing contamination in different waste streams and providing that isolated and pure waste stream that is high value. In the first six months of Victoria's CDS, donation partners – the charities Victorians can choose to donate their refunds to – had received nearly half a million dollars.

None of this is to say that Victoria's CDS is perfect and we should rest on our laurels. There is much more that could be done to improve the scheme. For example, in New South Wales and South Australia recently they have expanded their schemes to include wine and spirit bottles, which are currently not accepted at return points here in Victoria, and a number of campaigners and recycling industry representatives have called for the 10-cent refund to be doubled to 20 cents per container. Jeff Angel from Total Environment Centre and the Boomerang Alliance noted that only about 65 per cent of eligible containers are currently returned in Australia, compared with return rates of above 90 per cent for European countries where they have higher refund amounts. Additionally, Total Environment Centre's recent 12-month review of Victoria's CDS found that greater transparency is needed to understand how the systems of geographic zone operators with different types of return options are impacting return rates and the user experience. We are also hearing that over-the-counter return points may be less accessible and user friendly than the reverse vending machines. It would be good to know in particular, for example, if there is appetite for more reverse vending machines. I think it would be a great idea if we had an easily accessible reverse vending machine right here in the parliamentary precinct or nearby. Imagine all the bottles and cans we could save on site, and it would be accessible for the public. We could refund the money that we raise for charity.

I want to thank Mrs McArthur for bringing this today. It is a fantastic step forward that we have taken to establishing the CDS in Victoria. It is wonderful to see the uptake of it and the benefits that it is already achieving. But we probably can improve, and it is good to monitor how the system is working, the uptake and any barriers so that we can continue to improve on it. Also, just in the short time I have remaining, I want to give a shout-out to all of the community groups who campaigned for so many years in order to see a CDS implemented. Boomerang Alliance has already been named, but in my electorate I know Beach Patrol and Love Our Street do so much work to pick up rubbish off our streets and off our beautiful foreshore, and they have seen a real, marked reduction in containers that are accepted in the CDS. This is just one part of a waste and recycling recovery system. The Greens will be supporting the motion today and I say bring on transparency and let us keep improving the CDS operation.

Moir DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (10:20): I also rise to speak in support of this wonderful motion, and I am so glad to hear that everyone is excited about government transparency. Obviously, we all know that this container deposit scheme was sold to Victorians as a simple, clever way to clean up our environment: collect your bottles, get 10 cents back and help reduce waste. As a councillor, I was happy to support it in Melton, and it is going very well. My son is there every weekend. It is good stuff. But behind that 10-cent refund is a complex web of government-imposed charges and handling fees that hardly anyone understands. We have had councils, retailers and beverage producers all raising serious concerns about how these charges are calculated and wondering if the actual main purpose is to run the program as an income earner for massive profit rather than for the environment. We want to know if the extra money that comes from this levy is reinvested in the purposes that the scheme was set up for or if it is sent, for example, to help pay the \$21 million of interest per day on our Victorian debt.

This motion, brought by my colleague Bev, simply asks for transparency. It calls on the government to table every document showing how these charges were worked out, what modelling was used and what impact they are having on consumers, councils and small businesses. If the scheme is fair and efficient and if it is totally 100 per cent geared at the purpose for which it was sold to the public, then the government should have nothing to hide.

Michael Galea: We don't.

Moir DEEMING: Good. Well, it will be exciting.

Michael Galea interjected.

Moir DEEMING: Well, then, wonderful. You will just release it all. I do not know why it is not already public on the websites, then. I support this motion –

Members interjecting.

Moir DEEMING: You should have made it already public. I have already moved a motion in this house, which you guys argued against – about making this stuff public as a matter of default. The fact we even have to come here and ask for documents via a motion is the real problem, may I add.

Sunlight is the best disinfectant, and Victorians deserve to see the books and know exactly where their money is going. We should not have to come in here and beg and waste time making speeches.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:23): I am very pleased to speak on this motion, despite the fact I have only got 2 minutes on the clock.

Members interjecting.

Ryan BATCHELOR: That is outrageous from the opposition, saying that they do not want me to have more time on this motion. But I will speak on a couple of things. They are always interesting, these debates. We do not get much time. The government does not oppose documents motions. I will say two things. Firstly, we have had a debate, a back and forth with members of the opposition and

the crossbench, about those who are moving documents motions. If they are interested in actually getting to the heart of the issue, they should try and move motions that are not such wide, catch-all nets seeking to get every piece of correspondence, every brief, every possible scrap of paper about a very broad issue. It makes it exceptionally difficult for the government to process these requests in a timely way. So I wanted to put that at the start. If you look at the terms of this documents motion, it is yet again casting a very wide net, seeking voluminous material. That will take time to process.

Secondly, it should not surprise me that the Liberal Party is criticising a program that is good for the environment and popular in the community, and it does not surprise me that the Greens are trying to take credit for it. Neither of those things surprise me. What the Labor government is doing is getting on with practical initiatives to support our circular economy, like the container deposit scheme – practical initiatives that are encouraging recycling in our community and encouraging individuals, like all those community groups and all the kids out there who are collecting these cans, to take containers back and get some change in their pocket. The CDS is popular. The CDS is working.

Motion agreed to.

Waste and recycling management

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (10:25): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes the failure of the government to release documents relating to the granting of seven new waste-to-energy licences and the increase of permitted waste to be processed through waste-to-energy facilities to 2.35 million tonnes per annum;
- (2) in accordance with standing order 10.01, requires the Leader of the Government to table in the Council, within 30 days of the house agreeing to this resolution:
 - (a) a copy of each application to Recycling Victoria for cap licences; and
 - (b) a copy of Recycling Victoria's final report or similar documents, outlining the calculations and rationale behind the allocations of each cap licence.

In the recent debate on our motion to hold an inquiry into the development and expansion of waste-to-energy infrastructure in Victoria we sought to counter the gaslighting and spin coming from the companies awarded the licences to operate these massive incinerators. Far from decreasing waste generation and increasing investment in recycling and resource recovery – or being key to Victoria's transition to a more circular economy – these facilities are expensive and carbon intensive and lock us into continual production of waste. They do not support recycling or a circular economy. Incineration destroys material that could be recycled back into production. These facilities are environmental nightmares, releasing toxic chemicals that remain in the environment for hundreds of years and consuming unsustainable quantities of water. It is hardly surprising that a huge number of state and federal MPs are up in arms about these facilities, given the community concern over the affected areas is just so great.

The process around the approval for these facilities has been particularly opaque. There are so many unanswered questions around the awarding of licences to operate these facilities, the location of these facilities and the quantity of waste to be incinerated by these facilities – questions which need to be addressed by the government. For this reason we are seeking the release of a copy of each of the applications to Recycling Victoria and a copy of Recycling Victoria's final report or similar, outlining their rationale for the awarding of these cap licences. We hope the documents we seek will shed a light on, for example, why the licences granted equate to 3.5 million tonnes when the government policy is only 2.5 million tonnes. What is the rationale behind Recycling Victoria increasing the waste tonnage by 40 per cent, apparently in one stroke? Is Victoria planning on importing waste from other states? Why this huge increase? And why were companies awarded these licences? Was there any due diligence in assessing the corporate character of these licences?

HiQ, formerly High-Quality – always watch the people that change their name – the company awarded the licence for the Sunbury waste-to-energy facility, have faced over a dozen charges of breaching their licence conditions at their Sunbury site, including improper disposal of asbestos waste, failure to comply with remediation notices and failure to comply with pollution abatement or establish an appropriate risk-monitoring program. But Recycling Victoria is fine to award them a licence to burn 750,000 tonnes of waste at HiQ's ironically named Eco-Hub in Sunbury. Even more bizarrely, when we were briefed by HiQ, they were only seeking 450,000 tonnes of waste. Is this Recycling Victoria going, 'We know you want more'? What is this? This is a huge increase, and there is no rationale behind it in the public sphere.

We are also curious about the decision not to award the Prospect Hill facility in Lara an operating licence. Could it have anything to do with federal MPs, including the Deputy Prime Minister, for goodness sake, getting behind the local protests? I am not criticising. I am just saying that everyone else in this chamber should join the push, because it is a terrible idea. But what was the role of these members? Did it have anything to do in fact with Daniel Andrews lobbying on behalf of the Chinese parent company? Whatever the reason, it would be interesting to know why that particular project at Lara has potentially fallen over but none of the others have, most of which have received more.

The move to incinerating our rubbish represents a significant and regressive shift for Victoria. These facilities are being pushed through at an unseemly pace, without consideration for the fact that these monstrous incinerators will be across the road in many cases from residential areas, homes, schools, businesses and shops. There are very real pollution and health risks associated with these facilities, which the government is not addressing. While there may be a place for incineration in a comprehensive waste management plan that incorporates proper recycling practices and contributes to Victoria's plan for a circular economy, the government needs to slow down and do the necessary work to bring the community along, and that starts with transparency. We urge the government to comply with this request. It is simple, it does not take a lot of hours and it does not take a lot of public servants. If the process for awarding these licences is thorough and genuine, there should be nothing to hide.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:30): I am very pleased to rise to speak on Mr Ettershank's motion seeking documents relating to waste-to-energy facilities, particularly a copy of applications made to Recycling Victoria for cap licences and a copy of Recycling Victoria's final report outlining the calculations and rationale behind the allocations of each cap licence. I cannot attest to the detailed knowledge of the way the cap licencing system works that Mr Ettershank clearly has. I do not have that level of detail or background knowledge – my apologies in advance. I should say at the outset that the government will not oppose the documents motion. It is not our practice to oppose documents motions, and the documents motions moved by this chamber will be considered by the government in the usual way.

More broadly on the waste-to-energy framework, as outlined in our Recycling Victoria policy and the waste-to-energy framework, we do support investment in appropriate waste-to-energy facilities where they will reduce waste to landfill, meet best practice environmental protection requirements, support community amenity and support waste avoidance and recycling. Any facilities that are deemed to be appropriate must operate in accordance with strict environmental and human health regulations in Victoria, including rules that require waste-to-energy facilities to use international best practice pollution controls. In developing these frameworks we have established a robust regulatory regime. As part of that regime, the Environment Protection Authority, planning authorities and Recycling Victoria each have a role to play in ensuring that thermal waste-to-energy facilities meet best practice environmental protection requirements, work with local communities in the way they operate and contribute to circular economy outcomes. The Circular Economy (Waste Reduction and Recycling) Act 2021 requires that all thermal waste-to-energy facilities in the state of Victoria that process permitted waste need to be licensed. Licences include permission to use a specified amount of

permitted waste within an overall cap for Victoria, something which obviously the documents motion itself is seeking to gain further detail on.

Waste-to-energy facilities do require a number of regulatory approvals before they can be constructed or begin operating. They have got to receive planning approval, development and operating licences from both EPA Victoria and Recycling Victoria. It was outlined in our *Economic Growth Statement* that the government's intent is to further increase the waste-to-energy scheme cap limit to 2.5 million tonnes per annum, subject to a regulatory impact statement. Data modelling in the regulatory impact statement supported the 2.5 million-tonne cap as the most appropriate limit. The statement and the analysis that underpinned it articulated that it believed that it struck the right balance between diverting as much waste as possible from landfill and managing the risk of overinvestment in waste-to-energy infrastructure. As mentioned, the regulatory framework that governs the planning and operation of waste-to-energy facilities needs to be operated within strict environmental and human health regulations requiring facilities to use international best practice pollution controls.

It is also critical that the proposed facilities build a social licence to operate, and the government expects operators to work closely with affected communities to understand and address concerns as they arise. To receive approvals from the EPA and the planning minister there is a rigorous process undertaken to ensure community consultation and scientific research is undertaken to understand impacts. Recovering energy from waste is one way that we have in Victoria to help shift to a more circular economy by producing energy from materials that would otherwise be sent to landfill, complementing other circular economy initiatives that prioritise waste reduction, reuse and recycling. Obviously these are not initiatives that can be seen in isolation but part of a comprehensive suite of initiatives that are designed to both reduce waste and promote reuse and recycling.

We are committed, as part of our overall suite of policies, to promote the circular economy and to work towards reducing the amount of waste that is being sent to landfill through things like the container deposit scheme, which we debated just minutes ago. We need to do more to address the capacity constraints that exist within our landfills, and securing infrastructure that can process quantities of waste that cannot be recycled is a priority for Victoria.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (10:35): I am pleased to rise in support of Mr Ettershank's documents motion to note the failure of the government to release documents relating to the granting of seven new waste-to-energy licences and the increase of permitted waste to be processed through waste-to-energy facilities to 2.35 million tonnes per annum. It was 1 million tonnes – let us just be quite clear; that was the original base that the government had – and it is now 2.35 million tonnes. We supported an increase in that, because it was clear that more than one facility was needed. But how they derived the 2.35 million is a mystery. The government has not explained that ever.

Standing order 10.01 requires the leader of the government to table in the Council, within 30 days of the house agreeing to the resolution, copies of each application to Recycling Victoria for cap licences and a copy of Recycling Victoria's final reports, including the calculations and rationale behind each licence allocation and the cap. This is a documents motion. It is in the public interest for these documents to be made available to the house and to the community. The community is entitled to know what is happening here. The seven locations are significant. They do impact on local communities, and communities should be entitled to understand fully how the government has arrived at decisions.

I want to be clear that we are not opposed to waste to energy in any way. We think that it has got a significant role in the state's future. That is not to say that every location of waste to energy is appropriate. It is not to say that every set of decisions made is appropriate. It is not to say that proper EPA and other approvals have been gone through. In some cases, it appears patently that the process has been deficient. I find it interesting, for example, that the minister who is intimately involved in approving these increased volumes is opposed to a particular facility in the north of the city. I mean, there is a raging inconsistency here with this Minister for Energy – a hypocrisy, some would call it.

But either way, there is an unexplained inconsistency about how she can be so vehemently opposed to a particular site – without characterising that in any particular way. She has not really put forward what I would call thoughtful or detailed arguments. It is really a ‘I don’t like it near me’ mode that is operating there but at the same time pushing for increased –

A member interjected.

David DAVIS: Well, I usually do go for the details, in fact, and in this case also I am talking about precise details about individual locations. You may be able to shed some light on the hypocrisy that is involved with the minister. The point I am making here is that it is in the public interest to understand these documents. It is in the public interest to put these documents into a zone where individual locations are explained, local communities know and the decision-making behind this is more transparent. Indeed I would say that the state government has been acting quite secretly on a lot of these matters.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:39): I rise today to speak on the motion in my colleague Mr Ettershank’s name, requesting documents relating to waste-to-energy cap licences. Specifically, this motion requests a copy of each application to Recycling Victoria for cap licences and a copy of Recycling Victoria’s final report or similar documents outlining the calculations and rationale behind the allocations of each cap licence. Put simply, this documents motion is about transparency.

In Victoria we have more waste-to-energy projects in the works than all other Australian jurisdictions combined, and the annual cap on the amount of waste that can be burnt has increased by 150 per cent in three years to 2.5 million tonnes. Once these projects reach capacity, the vast majority of waste in Victoria could be taken from landfill to be burnt, representing one of the most significant shifts in waste management policy in Victoria’s history. This rapid increase raises many concerns that our request for documents seeks to answer. We want to know what assurances these organisations have provided to get these licences to burn and how Recycling Victoria determines the size of these licences. This government has not been transparent about processes and decisions relating to waste-to-energy; affected communities deserve better.

I would like to thank all the community groups who have worked with us to put this major transition in Victoria’s waste management strategy under the microscope. Our communities are rightly concerned. In the area I represent, the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region, Great Southern Waste Technologies has been given approval for the development of a waste-to-energy facility in Dandenong South. This plant has capacity to process 100,000 tonnes of waste per year. Now, while this plant is in an industrial area, it is in close proximity to local waterways and Melbourne Water, where all of our water comes from, making the case for transparency in decision-making all the more important. In Hampton Park, I have been proud to join locals in their fight against the construction of the waste transfer station in the area. Waste from this facility would have been sent out to Maryvale, which could eventually have a capacity of 650,000 tonnes. The scale of this is massive and with it comes a massive responsibility on operators of these projects. The decisions we make will have consequences for generations to come, and it is only fair that we have the information available for us to decide if those decisions are the right ones. That is also why we successfully moved an inquiry into the development and expansion of waste-to-energy infrastructure in Victoria. This inquiry will examine the suitability of existing waste-to-energy plans and policies and the impacts on residential communities and transport infrastructure, the cost–benefit for consumers and businesses, how recycling and emissions are managed, other waste management options, new technologies that support a circular economy and the adequacy of community consultation.

We encourage concerned communities to stay tuned for when submissions are open to the public in the coming months. If we are closing landfills and handing out licences to burn at this kind of massive scale, government must be transparent about all aspects of this transition.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:42): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak briefly on this motion, having not made it quite on the list on the last motion. They are quite of a similar theme indeed – perhaps we should be calling it ‘wasteful Wednesdays’ or ‘waste management Wednesdays’ – but it is a good way to start the day, certainly.

I do just want to very briefly reflect in using relevance, in the broader context of waste, just to note on the previous discussion that despite the bizarre assertions made by the opposition speakers there is no government revenue being made out of the container deposit scheme. Indeed we know it is a great success. I would love to talk more about that; however, this particular slot is allocated for –

David Davis interjected.

Michael GALEA: Indeed Mr Davis, this is a different element of our wasteful Wednesdays that we are here for today.

Now, that is not to say it is not an important topic – it is a very important topic – and indeed I have had the opportunity to speak on similar motions in this place in the past few weeks and months of sitting when it is come to waste-to-energy but also indeed of course to the waste transfer stations, including the particular one in my electorate, to which Ms Payne referred, in Hampton Park. I also share those concerns, noting of course that that is currently before VCAT and noting in a previous recent debate as well there was a committee referral that was put forward in this place; I believe that was by Ms Payne or Mr Ettershank. Forgive me, I am not sure which one.

Rachel Payne interjected.

Michael GALEA: It was you, Ms Payne, and it was very good to see that referral actually endorsed and get up. I was proud to vote in favour of that, because as I said in much more lucid detail at the time, it is very important that we do get this right. There is a clear need; there is a clear issue of what we do with this problem. It is a wicked problem, and we need to balance local interests of communities such as mine in Hampton Park with the broader issue that we are facing, because we cannot sustain without utilising this technology in one way or another. But the appropriate level to which the controls in the local area are supported, and the consultation around that in particular, is something I am very anxious about, which is why I am very excited to see that the Environment and Planning Committee support it and indeed why I was so disappointed that you, Mr Davis, and Mrs Hermans voted against that motion. You chose not to stand with the community on that day in providing that opportunity for our community and many other communities across the state to have their say in that inquiry. It is a very important process to analyse the issue, so it is disappointing that the Liberal Party unanimously voted against that motion. But despite that, and despite their failure to stand up at that moment, we will see this inquiry take place soon. It is not one that I am on, but I very much look forward to seeing the work it does.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Safer Protest with a Registration System and a Ban on Face Coverings Bill 2025

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of David Davis:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (10:46): I am pleased to be able to speak about the Safer Protest with a Registration System and a Ban on Face Coverings Bill 2025. I do want to thank David Southwick, the Shadow Minister for Police and Corrections, for his work on this bill. I want to say as we approach this debate that we certainly have a willingness to work together with the government on this issue to pass legislation to stop violent and antisocial protesters, particularly those disrupting

Melbourne's CBD and threatening businesses, jobs and tourism. Mr Southwick has written to the Premier offering to split the bill in two parts so that the mask laws can be considered in isolation.

Now, peaceful protests have long been part of our democratic tradition, and it should remain that way. But in recent years Victorians have witnessed a troubling rise in protest activity that has been disruptive, dangerous and in some cases deliberately unlawful. We have seen protests that block traffic, interfere with emergency services, intimidate residents and place frontline workers at risk. We have seen recent examples, and I will talk to that later, that illustrate the disruption that unsafe protest activity has brought to Victoria. Members will recall that in September, protests at the Land Forces expo in Melbourne caused days of chaos, with activists blocking bridges, cementing themselves to cars and disrupting peak-hour traffic. Some groups now plan and coordinate for maximum disruption without any accountability. That is not democracy, that reflects a state that has lost control.

Victoria, and in particular Melbourne, has rapidly become the protest capital of Australia. Last year in Melbourne alone, Victoria Police reported that more than 500 protests had taken place. Many of them are linked to the conflict in the Middle East. This issue does not just impact Melbourne. It is felt across the state, as police resources from regional areas have at times been called upon to provide the additional resources needed. Former Chief Commissioner of Police Shane Patton said the force had redeployed nearly 10,000 officers from across the state, including regional areas, to ensure public order. That is thousands of hours of valuable police shifts manning protests instead of focusing on serious and violent crime. Right now, crime is skyrocketing, and we have seen the rates continue to go up and up and up, not just in Melbourne but across the state. We have over 1100 vacancies in our police force and many more on top of that on leave, and we have more officers leaving the force than are joining. So there are over 2000 vacancies at the moment.

We have station hours that have been reduced and thousands of cases in Victoria unresolved because we lack the resources. This needs to change. As well as thousands of police hours, it is tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars responding to each major rally. I remember witnessing a protest in Melbourne myself near an intersection at Flinders Street. A truck came into the centre. It was barricaded off with people that were wearing masks. They poured gravel into the centre of the intersection. There were hundreds of protesters that came from all different directions. I called 000 at the time and spoke with police, who said there was not much that they could do.

Now, Victoria Police have repeatedly called for and lobbied the Allan Labor government for a system to better manage protest activity, but for too long the state government has done nothing. The significant public safety and economic impacts of recent protests highlight the need for better management of protest activity and a framework to support Victorians exercising their right to protest in a safe and orderly manner. Let me be clear: the Nationals do support the right to peaceful assembly. But there needs to be a balance, and that is why we are calling on the Victorian government to introduce a protest registration system – a straightforward and transparent process that will provide protesters with the freedom to protest peacefully while not restricting the freedom of other Victorians; allow Victoria Police to work collaboratively with protest organisers and plan for sufficient use of resources for maintaining order at protests; align Victoria more closely with the rest of the nation as the only state currently without any state-run protest system; preserve the right to peaceful assembly while ensuring dangerous or disruptive protests can be managed effectively; and give police the power to direct a person to remove a face covering and arrest those who refuse to comply. But I note that religious reasons for wearing a face covering will be fully respected and accepted under the law.

This is not about silencing voices, it is about keeping the community safe and businesses open. Emergency services, local councils and even small business owners have told us they find out about protests after they have begun, leaving no time to prepare, divert traffic or protect public infrastructure, which puts lives and livelihoods at risk. A protest registration system already exists in other jurisdictions, including many parts of New South Wales and internationally. It is not controversial; it is common sense. It gives police better oversight, allows emergency management coordination and ensures that the rights of everyone, not just the loudest voices, are respected. We must also ensure that

protests do not become a cover for hate speech or extremist activity. We have seen very disturbing scenes on Victorian streets in recent months, scenes that have made people feel unsafe in their own communities.

I speak with people across the state – in Melbourne and right across regional Victoria – and they have had enough of the chaos and want the government to act. It was appalling to see the recent violence as crowds of protesters clashed at rallies in Melbourne. Police officers were injured as protesters hurled large rocks, glass bottles and food. Policemen ended up in hospital, one with a broken hand. Victoria Police acting commander Wayne Cheeseman said:

The people that came to pick the fight with police were the issue-motivated groups on the left.

...

They are cowards. They come in face coverings. They come in masks. They come with hoodies on.

He said:

... Melbourne has had a gutful.

Labor promised to crack down on masked agitators nearly a year ago, and week after week we see protests on our streets and the government continuing to do nothing. Our plan will establish a New South Wales-style protest registration system, strengthen police move-on powers and ban face coverings except for religious reasons. Repeat offenders will be banned from protest areas for up to 12 months, and peaceful registered protests will be protected in law. A registration system will enable Victoria Police to better balance the resources required for protest management and work collaboratively with organisers to ensure the safety of other Victorians.

We live in a free society, but freedom comes with responsibility. We need to keep Victorians safe, protect our democracy and restore order in our streets. Victorians deserve to feel safe, whether they are attending a protest or walking past one.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:53): I rise to make a contribution on this bill, the Safer Protest with a Registration System and a Ban on Face Coverings Bill 2025. It should come as no surprise to anyone in this chamber that the government opposes this bill. Our criminal anti-vilification laws came into effect last month, and if the opposition were actually concerned about hate, they should have supported them at that opportunity.

The Allan Labor government is committed to protecting the right of Victorians to peacefully and safely protest, and that is why we will be introducing laws very soon to strengthen safety at protests. Now, as a former trade unionist, I can attest to the importance of protesting. I know many of my colleagues on the government benches, who have also come from the trade union movement, understand the way to protest peacefully and to make our point heard, but what we are seeing happening on our streets is something more than that.

Our laws, unlike the laws proposed by those opposite today, will focus on people driving hate and violence at protests. They will be the laws that will actually make a difference and not bureaucracy that the Chief Commissioner of Police has said we actually do not need. Our protest safety laws were flagged in December last year, and we committed to dealing with violent, hateful and dangerous participants in public demonstrations by prohibiting the flags and symbols of listed terrorist organisations; empowering police to unmask violent, hateful, dangerous individuals who attend protests and cowardly hide behind masks; and addressing the use of dangerous attachment devices. We also committed to introducing new laws to protect the right of people to gather and pray free from fear, harassment and intimidation. Targeted consultation on these laws has already occurred with the police and select faith, legal, government, community and union stakeholders on what the safe protest laws will look like when we introduce these laws very soon. The government recognises that the right to protest is a critical part of our democracy and that we need to get the balance right. Our laws will allow Victoria Police to unmask violent and hateful demonstrators, like the neo-Nazis, who are

unwelcome on our streets. This will help protect our social cohesion and the right of Victorians to protest peacefully and safely without interference from extremist thugs. The opposition's bill is contrary to the advice of Victoria Police and will infringe the rights of ordinary Victorians.

As I said before, we know that the right to protest is something that is incredibly important to Victorians and also important to people in the union movement, and what we are seeing is fringe and extreme elements taking over the right to safely protest. All protests are not the same, and what we have seen in recent times is an escalation of violence and hatred and the rise of extremists who are taking over peaceful protests. This is why our government is going to take strong action. The *Age* interviewed Chief Commissioner Bush in July and reported on his response to questions about proposals for a protest registration scheme, which is similar to the one that was introduced in New South Wales to curb violence and hate speech by neo-Nazi groups and some Palestine groups. Chief Commissioner Bush at the time said to the *Age*:

We've had a look at it, and it's not something we're going to drive towards ... We've had a look at other jurisdictions that do that, and it's not the game breaker.

The majority of people that protest, do so peacefully and they are more than entitled to, and we support that.

In an interview with Raf Epstein on ABC Melbourne radio on 28 July, Chief Commissioner Bush reiterated that position, saying:

We've had a look at that. We've had a look at what our neighbour jurisdictions do. We do not believe it is something that will make a material difference, so we are not going to pursue that ...

That is because when there are people who are intent on breaking rules, you can have all the rules that you like, but people who want to and who are intent on not following them will continue down that path. So the registration and authorisation of public protests will not work. The proposed registration scheme is unlikely to be used by protesters who engage in dangerous or violent conduct, and we have seen this. What we are asking people to do is basically comply with the registration system, which they have no intention of doing. Neo-Nazis and sovereign citizens are not out there applying for a protest permit. They believe they should not have to. They do not want to. We cannot make them. As an example, despite New South Wales laws, 30 Nazis took part in the march last month in Sydney. They handed out flyers and took to the stage to lead chants of 'Heil Australia' and 'Blood and honour'. These laws will only create bureaucracy. They will not make protests safer. Introducing protest move-on and exclusion powers will undermine peaceful protests as well, and the bill would introduce move-on powers in protest environments and industrial disputes. That is something that is really a critically important issue. We need to make sure we have a fine balance in these laws and laws that will not be used or abused to curb legitimate, industrial, union-based protests. We repealed these laws in 2015 due to their impact on peaceful protests, including vulnerable groups. Breaching an exclusion order carries a maximum penalty of two years imprisonment.

In regard to face coverings and those offences, masks are not a free pass to break the law. What we have seen is a number of extremists who attend protests these days wearing face coverings, obviously to conceal their identities. There should be no place to hide it in this state if you are a racist stirring up hate on the streets – at least have the courage of your convictions to go out and protest and show people your face. But this bill will not target dangerous, violent and extreme protesters – it will target everyday people wanting to engage in peaceful protests. It would make it a crime for a person to wear a mask at a protest – for example, if you wanted to wear a mask to protect your health. We know that face masks can be an essential protection for people with underlying health conditions, and what you do see particularly at peak cold and flu seasons is that lots of people wear masks because they actually do not want to get sick. To protect your health is a legitimate reason to wear a face mask, but also to protect your identity because you are a victim of family violence fearing retribution. Wearing a face mask, for those people, is one way of participating in legitimate protest activity, still exercising their right to protest but protecting themselves from perhaps someone who may want to prey on them. Family violence victims should be allowed to attend a protest free from fear, and a face covering helps them do that. Also, to celebrate pride in costume – masks have long been a tool of expression at Midsumma,

for example, and these laws would criminalise Midsumma. The thing we would hate to see is someone making a fake complaint about someone wearing a mask at an event like Midsumma. I would not put it past some people to actually do that, and that is a very sad indictment on where we are right now, but unfortunately extremists will use whatever they can to invoke fear and hatred in what they do.

Our laws, which we will introduce into Parliament as soon as possible, will be proportionate, with appropriate exceptions, including for health, cultural and religious reasons. These laws will build on the work that we have already done to improve social cohesion. Earlier this year the Allan Labor government passed landmark legislation to strengthen our anti-vilification and social cohesion laws. Our laws will protect more Victorians from vilification – from the worst kinds of hate speech, which we have seen in growing numbers and fashion recently – or conduct that profoundly harms people and social cohesion. Some of the footage that we have seen in recent times that has been occurring around protests has been absolutely disgraceful, and it needs to be reined in. They will also introduce new criminal offences for serious vilification, such as inciting hatred or threatening physical harm against someone because of who they are or what faith they follow. These new offences commenced last month.

We are also going to strengthen existing civil protections against vilification and provide more options for remedy or resolution where people have been harmed. And we have seen that; we need to be able to protect people who have suffered harm as a consequence of hate. We are also going to protect the rights to free speech and religion by recognising exceptions for religious and artistic purposes and more. Protections will, for the first time, cover disability, gender identity, sex, sex characteristics, sexual orientation and personal association with a person who has a protected attribute – for example, a parent of a disabled child. It is a sad indictment on where we are right now, but what we recognise is that we need to provide protections for people who have been increasingly targeted by fringe elements in society and have been targeted on the basis of who they are or who they love. They need protection by the law.

It is a sad indictment on where we are right now. But as you can see, the Allan Labor government has given careful and thoughtful consideration to a range of measures that we see will strike the right balance between giving people the opportunity to protest, to protest publicly – protest in the city or wherever they might want to protest – and to protest peacefully, though, about the things that matter to them the most. These are important rights for people to exercise. But what we cannot allow is for extremist elements to infiltrate and basically take over and make it look like all protesters are extremists, because they are not. There are fringe elements that are infiltrating these protests and making it look like there is much more support for hate and for division. As I talked about earlier, a ban on face coverings is a tricky area for the reasons that I have outlined before, but we also cannot allow people to hide behind a face covering when they are using it to hide their identity because they are out there committing crimes.

As I said earlier, we have consulted with the relevant stakeholders on this. We have listened to the police, and we believe that this legislation strikes the right balance based on what stakeholders are telling us about what the police need, but it also strikes the right balance to allow people who want to protest to do so and have their say safely and effectively. We want to empower police to unmask violent, hateful and dangerous individuals who attend these protests. It is cowardly, and I really believe that people should have the courage of their convictions. If you want to make a point and you want to protest, do not cover your face. Have the courage of your convictions to actually show who you are. But again, we know that these hateful fringe elements are cowards, and that is why they use face masks.

As I said, the government opposes the bill brought by the opposition. We think that this bill does not adequately address the sorts of issues that need to be dealt with, and we will be introducing our laws shortly to assist. We have already done a lot of work in this area to address the issues that have come up previously. This bill covers a range of things. It covers a registration scheme. I have addressed that in the sense that, as I said earlier, people who are intent on breaking the law are not going to comply

with a registration scheme. It is just going to create a bigger bureaucracy for someone to administer. Again, I note that in the discourse around this bill there has been no mention of how this would be paid for. I know the Liberal–Nationals always complain about taxes, yet they propose these sorts of things. We have seen no costings on what this might cost to implement. Again, light on detail, big on political wedges. Where is the detail about how much this would cost, who would administer it and how it would actually work? I do not know. It is very light on detail.

Our government is working with the relevant stakeholders. We are consulting. We have consulted widely and broadly, and we will continue to do so. We want to ensure that people in Victoria can protest on the things that matter to them the most and that they can do so in a safe way. But we are also cracking down on people who use protests to basically show hatred and division and target individuals. The government opposes this bill.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (11:08): I rise to make a contribution on the bill before the chamber. The pithily titled Safer Protest with a Registration System and a Ban on Face Coverings Bill 2025 is, according to Mr Davis, about balance and about protecting the right to peaceful protest as a cornerstone of our democracy. It all sounds pretty reasonable. As Mr Davis noted in his second-reading speech, it is about:

... drawing a clear line between the right to protest peacefully and the right of every Victorian to live free from intimidation, disruption, and violence.

The bill itself, however, looks a bit more like creeping fascism to me, but I will talk more about that in a moment.

In Australia the right to protest and assemble is protected under international law and is an integral part of a functioning democracy. The right also comes from the implied freedom of political communication found in our constitution. Mr Davis mentioned that 500 protests had occurred in Melbourne since October 2023, so I am assuming that he is specifically targeting the pro-Palestinian rallies, which I would suggest many people have attended because they want to see an end to what both the UN and the International Criminal Court have denounced as the ongoing genocide in Gaza and, I would say not unreasonably, they want to see the Victorian government sever ties with the weapons manufacturers who are enabling that genocide. I myself have attended a number of these rallies, as have a number of my colleagues in this place. No doubt the recent protests have been disruptive, but sometimes democracy is disruptive and it is messy and it is inconvenient. It is what separates democracy from authoritarianism.

I was not around in Parliament to see how those opposite responded to the anti-government, anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine protests that took place in Melbourne a few years back, but I do wonder if they spoke as passionately about the right of Victorians to live free from intimidation, disruption and violence during the protests of that era. I suspect not.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Apologies, Mr Ettershank: I have been advised that your speech on this bill was incorporated into *Hansard* on 10 September. Therefore, I have to take the call away from you.

David ETTERSHANK: That is disappointing. I was just warming up.

Sonja Terpstra: You can't recycle.

David ETTERSHANK: I covered the government's inability to recycle in the last speech. In that case, I express my regret and I thank you.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (11:11): I would have liked to have seen what else Mr Ettershank was about to say. He said that this bill looks like fascism to him. I just wonder if he is happy to go on record to say that the states that have these exact laws in place, like Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Western Australia and New South Wales, are also fascists. But we will leave that one because he was not meant to be speaking anyway.

It has now been over 10 days since police chief and superintendent Wayne Cheeseman held a press conference where he said that Melbourne had had a gutful of violent protesters. He said:

The people that came to pick a fight with police were the issue-motivated people on the left ...

He stood up and he held a huge rock, and he said it was what was hurled at police. He spoke about how there were bottles filled with shards of glass used to attack police, used as projectiles. He said:

The truth is, there's probably 40 to 50 hardcore protesters who were trying to harm the police ...

He said:

What concerns me though, is they are standing with the larger group, and the other group are not intervening, they're not telling them to stop. So in a way, they're offering their support which is unacceptable.

I was so pleased to see Mr Cheeseman call this stuff out. I understand that 10 days is not a long time, but it has now almost been a year since the Premier of this state, Premier Jacinta Allan, released a press release that said this is what she was going to do:

banning the use of face masks at protests, which are being used to conceal identities and shield agitators from crowd-control measures like capsicum spray

It is almost a year since she said that. If the government is now approaching a year and is serious about protecting the people that protect us, like police, now is their time to stand up and show it. Mr Southwick was in the paper today and he was quoted:

This issue is so important it should be above partisan politics. This is about community safety, law and order and protecting every Victorian.

He said:

I am offering a constructive way forward.

That is exactly what he is doing. This is a practical, bipartisan step that honours your government's own commitments, equips VicPol with the tools they need and, most importantly, will make Victoria safer. The Premier first vowed to overhaul the protest laws in December last year and has repeatedly said that the government would introduce this legislation by the end of the year. Well, time is really ticking, it honestly is, and the same Labor government that could lock a whole state down in a matter of hours has not been able to introduce a bill to protect police, the people that protect us, in a matter of a year. So I think it is time for them to stop talking out of both sides of their mouths. Victoria wants their city back. This is affecting businesses. This is affecting social cohesion. We have seen outrageous violence on our streets.

I also want to talk about some of the stats that Mr Ettershank quickly alluded to. The fact is that between October 23 and February 25 the response to pro-Palestinian protests has taken police away from their regular duties on over 18,000 occasions, and managing community safety during protests, over 554 times. That is absolutely massive. And in the meantime we have had people like a Greens MP saying to these protesters:

I am inspired every day by the people who refuse to give in – those who chain themselves to coal trains, who march in the street despite police intimidation ...

It is not police intimidation to try to keep communities safe; that is not police intimidation. And I can see even now the member of the Greens here arguing with that. It is not police brutality to protect people. It is not police overreach to try to manage regular protests and protect people. So I just think this is very interesting. Also, Ms Terpstra said what the police were apparently saying, that Victoria Police have repeatedly called for and lobbied the Allan government for a system to better manage protest activity – a call to action to the Premier and her government, which they have continually ignored.

So what the Liberals and Nationals are doing in this bill is standing up for public safety while ensuring the right to peacefully protest. We have struck the right balance in this bill. Victoria is the only state

that does not have a permit system, and it is going to be a voluntary permit system, following some different states. The other thing the Liberal–Nationals are saying is that violent protests have brought Melbourne to a standstill and Labor has allowed this chaos to reign at the expense of public safety and economic security. The other day I saw somebody say that Melbourne is the most livable state for criminals, and it is true – it is not the most livable city anymore, but it is the most livable city for criminals. Our plan introduces a sensible registration system which will assist in maintaining public safety while ensuring that those who wish to express their views can do so safely. Our plan places trust in Victoria Police to make decisions that will keep Victoria safe while ensuring that people who want to protest can do so safely. Victorians deserve a government that will stand up for them, and that is what we will deliver with this bill.

I just wanted to put those few thoughts on record. I absolutely commend this bill to the house. The state is out of control; the government has lost control of our streets.

Jacinta Ermacora interjected.

Renee HEATH: Ms Ermacora can roll her eyes as much as possible. Her own leader, the Premier, admitted this in writing in December 2024. I commend this bill to the house.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:19): I also would like to say a few words on the private members bill brought by the opposition, the Safer Protest with a Registration System and a Ban on Face Coverings Bill 2025. The Libertarian Party will be opposing this bill. Effectively what this bill is doing is allowing the Chief Commissioner of Police to decide whether the citizens of Victoria have the right to peaceful assembly or not. Firstly they need to apply for a permit, and if that permit is not authorised, then they may not protest and they may not have their right to peaceful assembly. I am not sure where they get the idea that this is somehow in line with the principles of liberalism, because it certainly is not. The other thing that this bill does is allow the chief commissioner to set out exclusion orders. An exclusion order is where the chief commissioner names someone and says that this person is not allowed to exercise their right to peaceful assembly, because of reasons that the chief commissioner deems are reasonable. If they breach, if they go ahead and protest anyway, they can go to jail for up to two years under an offence under this proposed bill. Obviously this is an extreme authoritarian overreach, and I would not support this under any circumstances.

The other thing that this bill does is something which is totally superfluous because the government already does it, and that is prohibiting face coverings at protests. This is already done through designated areas, which the police force regularly does, where they have special powers to search without warrant, to order people to remove face coverings and a whole bunch of other powers. The existing powers that the police have are worrying enough without giving them these further powers. I note that the only exemption here is having a face covering for religious purposes. I would note that many people have other reasons to have face coverings, such as health reasons. They may have a mask for health purposes, and that is their right if they feel that they want to do that. I do not wear masks anymore since the pandemic, but some people do and that is their choice.

I would like to comment on some of the problems that we have had with protests. Of course I condemn what has been happening with throwing rocks at police and inciting violence. This is already a crime, though, and I hope that police track down the people that were throwing those rocks and charge them to the fullest extent of the law. This is a clear breach of the non-aggression principle that libertarians believe in. Also we have seen an alleged attack by far-right extremists on an Aboriginal campsite, and this also was shocking. I hope that everyone involved with that is charged and suffers the full force of the law. We cannot allow violence to be initiated or incited at protests – this is the line. This is where it goes beyond peaceful protest, and the people that incite or indeed initiate violence must be held to account. This has occurred on all sides of politics, frankly. We have seen it and it is not good enough.

Some of the protests have intentionally and deliberately attempted to take away other people's rights – rights such as freedom of movement – where protesters have deliberately blocked streets or blocked

access to businesses, with the purpose of taking away other people's rights. This also is an initiation of aggression, and it is my view that the police should be able to stop people doing this. If protesters are deliberately blocking people's access to businesses or streets or things like this, then the police's job in my view should be to clear the way to allow access for these people to carry out their business in peace, unobstructed by protesters. I acknowledge that sometimes protests unintentionally block people's access just due to their size and things like this, but that is very different to someone that deliberately goes out to block access. We have seen this with people trying to block access to cafes and factories and import businesses and this sort of thing. This should not be allowed, because they are taking away other people's rights. It is hypocritical to the extreme to complain about your right to peaceful assembly whilst you are simultaneously trying to take away other people's rights, and that should not be tolerated.

I have seen the government a few times recently cave in to pressure from the opposition and others on law and order issues, and invariably they have been mistakes for the government. I think the most obvious one is the machete bins, which have been met with nothing but ridicule from everyone in the Victorian public, and rightly so, because the machete ban is totally ineffective and wasteful. I think that this, however, is not just ineffective and wasteful, it is an offence to the principles of liberalism and should be opposed.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (11:25): I do enjoy following on from Mr Limbrick, because sometimes I fervently disagree with what he says, but at other times I absolutely do agree with what he says. And that is what we should do in this place. We should listen to each other and, where we disagree, acknowledge that disagreement and debate and fight on the policies, principles and positions which we come to and, where we agree, get on and do things for this state that improve the economy of our state, that improve the quality of life and that improve the lived experience of all our lives.

Mr Limbrick made a comment that I did write on my notes, before I dropped them, that what the Liberal Party are trying to do here today is extreme authoritarian overreach. We know that the Liberals are not underpinned by a set of values that bring them in here. We know that the Liberals make their policy on the fly. When you make policy on the fly and when you are just looking for a headline, we get the sort of drafting of words that we see in here today. As I have said before, I think we should all cherish our democracy. What we have in Victoria, what we have in Australia and what those that have gone before us in our defence forces have fought for – for the quality of life we have and the things that we take for granted in this state and in this country – we should absolutely cherish. On respecting other people's opinions, I think the majority of Victorians, the majority of Australians, want to go about their life. They want to get on. They want to try and buy a house. Those that have kids want to get their kids educated. They want good health services and they want good connecting transport, whether that is public or road infrastructure. They want to get on with their lives.

What I think is important for all of us is to push back on the fringes – the fringes that will not accept anybody's view except their own, because in their mind they hold the answers to every problem in this community. Most of us in here know that there are a lot of things across our society and across our community that we have to weave and wrangle our way through. Everything is not a black or white answer – good, bad or whatever it might be – there are complexities to everything. One of the things I am most grateful for in this country is that we have mandatory voting, the fact that the majority of us turn out to vote, because I think that keeps our politics moderated. It does not mean that we do not have the extremes out on the fringes trying to call on people's insecurities or hatreds or whatever it might be to try and win votes. I just wanted to start with that as a starting point. I think we should cherish what we have, our institutions. We should cherish our democracy and everything that is delivered by that.

The government and I oppose this bill. Our criminal anti-vilification laws came into effect last month, and if the opposition were concerned about hate, they would have supported them. The Allan Labor government is committed to protecting the right of Victorians to peacefully and safely protest. That is why we will be introducing laws very soon to strengthen safety at protests. Our laws, unlike the laws

proposed by those opposite today, will focus on the people driving hate and violence at protests. I think it is important, as we have heard in some other contributions, to acknowledge that the majority of people at protests are there doing the right thing. They have an opinion, a point of view, and they are demonstrating that point of view without looking to resort to violence, words of hate and this sort of thing. These laws will actually make a difference; they are not the bureaucracy that the Liberals are looking to implement and that the Chief Commissioner of Police has said we do not need.

In December last year we committed to dealing with violent, hateful and dangerous participants in public demonstrations by prohibiting the flags and symbols of listed terrorist organisations; empowering police to unmask violent, hateful and dangerous individuals who protest and hide behind masks; and addressing the use of dangerous items that people may have. We also committed to introducing new laws to protect the right of people to gather and pray free from fear, harassment and intimidation. Targeted consultation has occurred with police and select faith, legal, government, community and union stakeholders on what the safe protest laws will look like, and we will introduce these laws very soon.

The government recognises that the right to protest is a critical part of any democracy and that we need to get that balance right. Our laws will allow Victoria Police to unmask violent and hateful demonstrators, who I think the absolute majority of Victorians agree are unwelcome on our streets. This will help protect our social cohesion and the right of Victorians to protest peacefully and safely, without interference from extremists. The opposition's bill is contrary to the advice of Victoria Police and would infringe the rights of ordinary Victorians. The chief commissioner was interviewed on this in July. In his responses to questions about proposals for a protest registration scheme similar to that introduced in New South Wales to curb violence and hate speech, Chief Commissioner Bush said to the *Age* that:

We've had a look at it, and it's not something we're going to drive towards ... We've had a look at other jurisdictions that do that, and it's not the game breaker.

The majority of people that protest, do so peacefully and they are more than entitled to, and we support that.

In another interview with Raf Epstein, Chief Commissioner Bush reiterated that position, saying:

We've had a look at that. We've had a look at what our neighbour jurisdictions do. We don't believe it's something that will make a material difference, so we're not going to pursue that line.

Registration and authorisation of public protests is unlikely to be used by those who want to participate in dangerous and violent conduct. If you are preparing to go with a mindset of violence, you are unlikely to register yourself in the first place. This has been experienced in New South Wales.

The bill would reintroduce move-on powers in protest environments and industrial disputes. We repealed these laws in 2015 due to their impact on peaceful protests, including vulnerable groups. Breaching an exclusion order carries an excessive maximum penalty of two years imprisonment.

Face masks are not a free pass to break the law. There should be no place to hide in this state if you are stirring up hate on our streets. But this bill would not target dangerous, violent and extreme protesters. It would target everyday people wanting to engage in peaceful protest, which is why the government's laws, which we will introduce into Parliament as soon as possible, will be proportionate. Earlier this year the Allan Labor government passed landmark legislation to strengthen our anti-vilification and social cohesion laws. Our laws will protect more Victorians from vilification, the worst kind of hate speech and conduct that profoundly harms people and social cohesion; introduce new criminal offences for serious vilification, such as inciting hatred or threatening physical harm against someone because of who they are or what faith they follow; strengthen existing civil protections against vilification and provide more options for remedy resolution where people have been harmed; and protect the right to free speech and religion by recognising exceptions for religious and artistic purposes and more. Protections will, for the first time, cover disability, gender identity and a whole lot of other characteristics of people.

I just want to come back to the point that I think it is important for all of us in the political discourse to take responsibility for our comments. Unlike in other nations that do not have mandatory voting, our mandatory voting does limit the ability of those on the fringes who do not respect common decency in the way they operate to be active.

I think it was pretty disappointing in recent years when we had violence occur or, from a political perspective, electorate offices being attacked and electorate office staff being fearful as they entered and exited their workplace. I think I have said before we had a Labor state conference about a year before this one, which people ran through. People on the floor had their children in the creche on the other side of the conference venue, where people who had broken in were trying to knock down a wall. Now, maybe those people did not really think about what they were doing at the time, but it has had pretty serious implications from my perspective. The conference was very inclusive, open to the media and to public witnesses to come and sit and watch. This year it was very different. We had intense security, with one entry point only. People of working age, who find it harder and harder to engage in the political process, were bringing their kids into the creche. There was just a massive pullback from that this year because younger mums and dads who want to be actively involved and engaged in the political process were worried about something occurring again.

So I think it is on all of us to call out the extreme elements of politics. For those that do not, we have seen them be punished in recent elections, and that will continue to happen in Australia. While taking the low road may work in some nations around the world, I do not think it works in Victoria and I do not think it works in Australia. I think that it is really important for elected representatives, when this sort of thing goes on, to call it out and not to sit back. I think definitely a lot of the violence that has occurred in the last couple of years was perceived to be aligned with the Greens, and they have suffered a political consequence of that, whether their members were or were not involved – for not speaking loudly and demonstrating an absolute position against violence and intimidation. As I have said, with mandatory voting in this state and in this nation, people aligned with that will be punished – and the same goes for those on the right and the far right of politics as well.

I will conclude by saying all of us should absolutely cherish what we have, cherish our institutions, cherish the quality of life that we have – that we and those that have gone before us and those that will come after us get to enjoy every day. Of course at times many of us will not stop to appreciate just how good we have got it. But it is incumbent upon every single one of us to make sure we remember how good we have got it and to make sure we maintain that not only for all of us here and now but for generations to come, because too many people have fought too hard to give us such an incredible quality of life here in Victoria and Australia.

Moir DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (11:40): Yet again we are here talking about protests and it seems yet again everyone is falling all over themselves to tell everybody that they believe that peaceful protest is a human right. Face coverings have come up a lot. We know that there are many people in Victoria who are afraid to attend protests and show their faces. One of the reasons that they are afraid to do that, even though they are the ones being peaceful and just protesting about issues of failure in the government according to them, is that what they are actually worried about is being defamed, cancelled, discriminated against and having their whole lives blown up unjustly. That is an important issue that everybody needs to deal with here, because that is something that many people in both chambers in this place have engaged in. Others wear masks, obviously, so that they can commit violence, commit vandalism, make death threats and hide their hypocritical, hateful attitudes and then go back out into the media and their public service jobs or wherever it is they happen to work and pretend that it was not them.

Who is in charge in Victoria? Either Labor have lost control of the streets, or they are protecting this bunch of lunatic criminals out there. You cannot have it both ways. Families used to be able to go about their business, walking around on the streets without fear. But everything is unsafe in Victoria. Our streets have become theatres of division, fear and propaganda. In a democracy, when you want freedom, you are going to have to balance rights and duties. You cannot just say, ‘Gimme, gimme,

gimme; I want what's mine,' and not understand that you have responsibilities in return. Whatever disagreements people may have about the proposed bill, it does propose a solution, a way to recreate the presence of order. When Labor tore up the strong move-on powers a decade ago, which I really could have used a couple of years ago myself, they tore up the moral clarity that held our civil life together, that held in tension the ability to protest and the ability for police to move-on those very obviously demented, lunatic, far-left, violent people in masks and with Nazi flags and whatnot. Because you got rid of the move on laws, in effect that is turning a blind eye to the intimidation, the vandalism and the violence that peaceful protesters actually suffered.

Michael Galea: Far-left Nazis.

Moira DEEMING: Far-left lunatics and Nazis, whoever they are. I am not tribalistic, unlike some. I condemn violence on all sides. It is a revolutionary idea over there. But I do not protect disgusting corruption on my own side, and I have got a record to prove that. It is incredible that when you think it is on your own side, you use that famous line used in America, that they were mostly peaceful protests, but if it is on the other side, 'That's just scandalous. They're a threat to society.' But then you do not do anything to actually provide a framework in order to create some kind of law and order.

This hypocrisy just has to be named. This government has presided over a culture in which extremists on the left and the right, including those vile neo-Nazi elements, have actually been empowered by the neglect to put in proper laws and incentivised by the politics. Decent people reject these groups and violence outright. They are obviously hateful, repugnant and utterly unwelcome. But Labor has actually played a dangerous double game. By refusing to police protest properly and by removing powers that could have excluded such individuals they have created the very conditions that allow these extremists to appear in public and profit off it every single time, unchallenged, emboldened and filmed for the evening news. And they were exploited. They were exploited to smear and silence innocent Victorians that had nothing to do with them. It is just completely ridiculous and hypocritical for you to complain about all of these things when you have taken no action, and the innocent people who are trying to exercise that right get bulldozed – absolutely disgusting. I would just put it to the people voting no, against this bill: where is your solution? What are you going to do about it? As per the norm, the answer from this Labor government is 'Absolutely nothing'.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:45): That was an interesting contribution.

Moira Deeming: It was short.

Michael GALEA: I will grant you that, Mrs Deeming; it was succinct. I will perhaps leave my remarks on that contribution there.

I rise to speak on the Safer Protest with a Registration System and Ban on Face Coverings Bill 2025. Actually, there is one thing I will pick up on. I was going to make reference to Mr Limbrick's comments earlier. Now, I always enjoy it in this place when he gets up and tells the chamber that he is really, really upset because he agrees with something that the government is doing. It is always a great moment, and I find myself in a bit of a reverse situation because of comments he made, and I will keep my reflections to his comments. With protests, when this side of the chamber speaks, we are talking about how people should have the right to protest. That is not some extremist notion. Those of us on this side of the chamber believe very much in that right to protest, but we do not support the far right, the far left and the far extreme – anyone using violence – and that is the distinction. That is what this government has been very clear about. Mr Limbrick made similar remarks in talking about either end of the political spectrum, and although it is a rare occasion that I find myself agreeing with him, I will begrudgingly concede some space there.

At the outset, I do indicate that, as with other speakers on this side, I will not be supporting this bill. It is not some trite statement to say that the right to protest is very important. It is foundational. It is foundational to our democracy. But it is important that we ensure that people working in, living in, visiting and travelling to the city are not made unsafe by protest activity. It is really critical that public

safety is not compromised by a protest, that safeguards are in place to ensure that any protest is conducted peacefully and that the risk of violence is mitigated. People have that right to protest, but workers, tourists and residents should never need to fear a protest. A right to protest is important, but it does not, and nor should it, infringe on the rights or safety of others. We know that protests are often very loud, very visible and often disruptive, and that is their purpose. But it is not a right, and a violent protest is not a right. The law must reflect these principles and not unduly burden freedom or compromise safety.

I understand that people have been concerned by the extent of protest activity in the city, and that is a reasonable view. When several protests occur on the same day in the same location, often with polar views designed to be targeting each other, that can be a concerning confluence of events. And I commend the work of Victoria Police for ensuring the safety of all and the safety of the public at large during these events. I note some of the frustrations that they have expressed, particularly when they, I am sure, in many cases would much rather be attending to other duties across all other parts of Melbourne and indeed Victoria. But in my view, I cannot support the amendments in this bill, which would shift that dial too far away from that right to protest without a justifiable increase in safety. In its implementation, this bill is, in fact, rather, if I may say, ill conceived and rushed. It speaks to a kneejerk reaction –

Renee Heath: On a point of order, President, I do not think the member has read the bill, so I was just wondering if you could bring him back to the substance of the bill.

The PRESIDENT: There is no point of order. Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: There is no point of order, I believe. I am literally speaking about protest and safety, and I am talking about how far this bill goes, so I am not sure where you are interpreting that from in my remarks, Dr Heath, but I am literally speaking directly to the bill. Have you read the bill? Have you read the bill, because I am speaking directly to it.

We know that it is still a mystery to the Liberal Party, as many things are, of course, but political stunts do not make for good legislation, and they are not usually in the public interest either. We know that the opposition is convoluting itself into twisted arguments to talk about and justify what it claims to be supposed government inaction. We know that this whole bill is targeted at pre-empting another bill that the government itself will be bringing in, a more measured and reasonable approach to this matter, no doubt so they can try and score some political points off of it. But I also would remind the chamber – and I think some other speakers on this side may have mentioned this as well – that in fact legislation that passed the Parliament this year, which has come into effect just in the last month, is very important for protecting the rights and safety of Victorians, and that is the anti-vilification laws. It is worth repeating that the opposition did not support those laws.

Ryan Batchelor: Did they vote against them?

Michael GALEA: They voted against them, Mr Batchelor, laws that specifically address many of these concerns about vilification and targeting of people based on their race, based on their religious belief –

Evan Mulholland interjected.

Michael GALEA: Based on their religious belief, Mr Mulholland, based on their sexuality, gender or disability. These were laws that the Liberal Party could not support – I am still curious as to why, every time they talk about community cohesion, cultural cohesion and community safety. They voted against the very laws that go to the heart of this matter. We know that in the Assembly debate they brought up all sorts of objections – some more reasonable than others – and the government came and met with them on those more reasonable objections and modified and were prepared to work with the opposition to accommodate them. They were accommodated, the bill came to this place and suddenly, ‘Oh, we still can’t support it.’ We know that they were never going to support it, and indeed we saw

that from the final outcome of the vote. Those laws are now in place. What that means is that we are protecting more Victorians from vilification: the worst kind of hate speech or conduct that potentially harms people and also harms community cohesion.

A member interjected.

Michael GALEA: It also means there are new criminal offences for serious vilification, such as inciting hatred or threatening physical harm against someone because of who they are or the faith that they adhere to. It includes strengthened civil protections against vilification and more options for remedy resolution where people have been harmed, and those aspects of the law will come in coming months. It will protect the rights to free speech and religion by recognising exceptions for religious and artistic purposes and more, and all the other protections as well.

We know that during that debate Mr Mulholland gave comments about the rise in his concerns about actions and certain protestors on the streets. In light of that it was all the more concerning that he was not in a position to support that bill. It is notable that the bill today does very little in the way of addressing what we have been seeing with some of those fringe protestors hurling abuse at vulnerable Victorian communities.

I do want to see our laws strengthened to target those individuals – those who start violence and incite others to do so through their hateful and provocative actions. The Allan Labor government is committed to protecting Victorians' right to protest safely. And as I mentioned, we will soon be introducing laws to strengthen community safety at protests. These laws, unlike the laws that we are debating here today, will focus on the people driving hate and violence at protests. They will be laws that will make a difference, not just add a layer of bureaucracy that the Chief Commissioner of Police himself has said we do not need.

Already we have taken action in a number of areas to tackle violent, hateful and dangerous participants by prohibiting the flags and symbols of listed terrorist organisations, empowering police to unmask violent, hateful and dangerous individuals who attend protests and who cowardly hide behind masks and addressing the use of dangerous attachment devices. Unlike the opposition, which wants to impose restrictions on everyone, we are protecting public safety by going after the actual individuals that are causing the problems while ensuring that our laws still reflect the very important principle of people's right to protest and also people's rights to gather, pray, celebrate or assemble for any peaceful purpose free from fear, harassment and intimidation.

We have undertaken targeted consultation with police and with faith, legal, government, community and union stakeholders on what these safe protest laws will look like, because it should not be a one-sided approach. It should be one that takes all these genuine concerns into consideration, not just dismissing completely, as members opposite have sought to do, one entire side of the argument. It is a very concerning thing to hear indeed, members denigrating things, making comments like 'so-called right to protest'. It is a very, very concerning commentary, and it underscores my hesitancy and deep anxiety about supporting these laws today, because we know from their comments the sort of direction that the Liberal Party would be taking this state. And I think Victorians would be very alarmed. But unlike them, we have done the work properly.

I note that there has been extensive work done by the Attorney-General's office in engaging with those stakeholders to ensure that the laws are reflective of community expectations, are reflective of a system that will provide safety for Victorians and are reflective of that very foundational right to protest as part of the democratic state that we live in. Through this consultation – and I do look forward to having this bill come through to the chamber in coming weeks – we know that the laws will allow Victoria Police to unmask violent and hateful demonstrators like the neo-Nazis, who are so unwelcome on our streets. This will help protect our social cohesion and the right of Victorians to protest peacefully and safely – as they have every right to do, despite what some members of the opposition might claim.

We also know that the opposition's bill is contrary to the advice of Victoria Police and will have great potential to infringe on the rights of ordinary Victorians. We know that in his usual slapdash style, Mr Davis is putting slogans before policy, and the way that he has done that with this bill is particularly alarming because anything that impacts on the civil rights of Victorians is something that deserves better than Mr Davis's usual shambolic approach. We know that the approach has been called out by the chief commissioner.

Nick McGowan: What do you call the COVID lockdown, then? Goodness me.

Michael GALEA: Again, you have given me so many areas to walk into, Mr McGowan. Talking about extremists on our streets, we saw on the streets of Melbourne political leaders threatened with being lynched. But if you had been listening, if you had actually been here, Mr McGowan, you would have heard me –

Nick McGowan interjected.

Michael GALEA: Well, I am glad you were watching it on TV. I suggest you maybe go back and watch again where I repeated ad nauseam about balancing that right to protest. But for the benefit of members who have been here, I am not going to go through that all again.

We know that Chief Commissioner Bush was questioned about similar arrangements that the Liberals have proposed in New South Wales, and we know of his comments. Chief Commissioner Bush said:

We've had a look at it, and it's not something we're going to drive towards ... We've had a look at other jurisdictions that do that, and it's not the game breaker.

The majority of people that protest, do so peacefully and they are more than entitled to, and we support that.

So we know that the opposition is more concerned with optics than action – perhaps not you, Mr McGowan; perhaps you are more interested in mowing the lawns than –

Nick McGowan: I am, because you are not providing the funding for police to do that, and that's very sad.

Michael GALEA: Well, you are welcome to continue carry on mowing the lawns while we get on with legislating for the laws that will actually make a difference for Victorians without greatly and grossly infringing on their civil rights, which is what you are putting forward here today. Maybe Dr Heath would like to ask if you have read this legislation as well, Mr McGowan. Now that you are a frontbencher, I am sure you are well across it. I am sure you have put robust, rigorous debate into it. In between getting the whipper snipper out, and the lawnmower, I am sure you gave that a great deal of attention. Indeed I certainly hope you can talk some sense into your other colleagues, like Mrs Deeming, who seems to think that the right to protest and that basic, foundational civil liberties that we have in a democracy are not that important, which is what we were hearing before and which you may have heard before as well on your television screen, Mr McGowan.

We know that this bill is nothing more than a cheap and desperate attempt by a cheap and desperate opposition to score some political points. You frame it as if you are doing something when you know full well that this government is bringing laws into this place. And unlike those opposite, we have done them carefully, deliberately and with a focus on ensuring that the two very important principles are not being overrun, one in favour of the other. They are two very important principles, not that you would know it from the bombastic way that Mr Davis and his fellow collection of characters over there have been presenting this bill to the chamber. It is not a serious bill. It is not reflective of any serious policy thought, and this house would be well within reason to be voting it down should we get to that point later today. I very much look forward to contributing and speaking on further legislation that the government will be introducing in coming weeks.

Bev McArthur: On a point of order, President, yesterday Minister Blandthorn potentially misled this house when she alleged the following:

The community members mentioned by those opposite are not native title holders for Gunaikurnai.

I reference correspondence from a Kurnai woman offended by the use of her language to name the new Aboriginal representative body. The individual and her family have confirmed again that they are the native title holders. Would the minister like to correct the record?

The PRESIDENT: I think we will get through questions and ministers statements first. I am not sure if that is a point of order to start with.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

West Gate Tunnel

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:01): (1093) It was deeply disturbing for communities living near the West Gate Tunnel to learn that the flaws in the design of the ventilation stacks will greatly increase exposure to pollution of nearby residences, sporting fields and businesses. An expert engineering report concluded that, due to the low air-volume propelling velocity of the five vents within each stack, the exhaust fumes are likely to slide down the structure's facade and into surrounding areas, increasing the risk of adverse health outcomes, including cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. It concluded that the only feasible option to reduce the risk to community is to install pollution filters. Transurban has now applied for an operating licence. I ask: will the minister hold a conference of interested parties to review the new evidence and ensure that the operating licence is withheld until the filters are installed?

The PRESIDENT: Mr Ettershank, was that for roads or environment?

David ETTERSHANK: For the Minister for Environment, sorry.

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:03): I thank Mr Ettershank for his question, which will be referred to the Minister for Environment for a response.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:03): The decision to forgo filtration on the West Gate Tunnel stacks was made in 2017 by the then Minister for Planning Richard Wynne, who was dubious about the cost-effectiveness. The updated Environmental Protection Act 2017 – the 2021 update – mandates a preventative focus to address harms to health that may be cumulative and arise from a range of factors, so it is likely that the EPA would now advise to install those filters. The cost of installing air filtration on the tunnel's ventilation stacks would make a tangible difference in reducing residents' exposure to emissions and the consequential health impacts. In light of the new evidence of the flawed design of the ventilation stacks and the updated EPA act, will the minister commit to installing filters before the tunnel is operational?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:04): Again, I thank Mr Ettershank for his question. This matter will be referred to the Minister for Environment, as will the substantive, and I am sure that he will respond as per the standing orders.

Suburban Rail Loop

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:04): (1094) My question is for the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. Minister, I refer to the findings on pages 96 and 98 of the PAEC budget estimates report tabled yesterday. Infrastructure Australia has called for the Victorian government to provide certain information before the Commonwealth commits to any further funding of the Suburban Rail Loop East project. This information is updated cost estimates, a detailed and

comprehensive value capture strategy and an updated cost–benefit analysis. Minister, I ask: why has this information not been provided to date, and when will it be provided?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:05): Mr Welch, what a pleasure to hear from you on the Suburban Rail Loop. It has been a couple of weeks since you asked, but in those weeks a lot has been happening on the ground for a project where major construction is already underway. What I would say to you –

Richard Welch interjected.

Harriet SHING: I will take up that interjection, Mr Welch. You just said, ‘What about Infrastructure Australia?’ Well, ding-ding, it seems like finally you have actually read that report, which starts with a very clear statement that the Suburban Rail Loop is a nation-building priority project, that it is a project that warrants funding. And the recommendation was to allocate \$2.2 billion to that particular –

Members interjecting.

Richard Welch: On a point of order, President, I am referring to the PAEC report. The minister is referring to a different report. The question is about the findings in the PAEC report and the request of Infrastructure Australia. When is she going to provide that information?

The PRESIDENT: The minister to continue.

Harriet SHING: At the risk of tedious repetition, Mr Welch, you might wish to repeat your preamble, which was very, very clear in its reference to Infrastructure Australia and the direct citation which then informs the PAEC report. Mr Welch, it seems that at last you have read the Infrastructure Australia report, which is also clearly set out in the way in which that reasoning from the parliamentary committee here in Victoria has made a number of findings. What those findings do is very clearly indicate the work of Infrastructure Australia. Again, it is not a decision-making body, as you know, Mr Welch; it is an advisory body which does provide information to the Commonwealth infrastructure department. It has done a power of work in providing its report and has also made it very clear in that report; as you would know, Mr Welch, it recommended release of the \$2.2 billion. Now, we are continuing to do that work.

Evan Mulholland interjected.

Harriet SHING: Mr Mulholland, I am going to take you up on that interjection. You just referred to exit strategies. Any major project that is delivered needs to have an exit strategy. A couple of your mob might like to be thinking about exit strategies as well, Mr Mulholland, because as it stands, you have got no plan to deliver anything. You have never delivered a major project. Victorians have backed this project in at multiple elections. It stacks up. The Prime Minister, the Treasurer, the Deputy Prime Minister, the infrastructure minister, the Premier and Victorians at multiple elections have been very clear about this project. We are continuing to provide information.

Members interjecting.

Harriet SHING: I am literally answering the question.

Richard Welch: On a point of order, President, I am desperately searching for and seeking any semblance of an answer to the question in that ramble. I cannot find it.

The PRESIDENT: Order! From what I could hear I felt that the minister was responsive to the question.

Harriet SHING: Again, you cannot help yourselves in the way in which you ask these questions, because the answer to the question actually lies in the question itself: Infrastructure Australia’s report has been issued, which recommends release of the \$2.2 billion. Infrastructure Australia is an advisory

body. It has acquitted its responsibilities and obligations. We continue to work with the Commonwealth on, again, the due diligence process for the delivery of this project. Now, Mr Welch, I do not want to have to table the business and investment case again, but if you would like me to, I am very happy to do so. Again, it is set out in the business and investment case. The project is on time and on budget. Get on board, Mr Welch, because Victorian certainly have.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:08): President, I do not know if drivel is unparliamentary, but that is certainly what we have just heard. It was a very –

Harriet Shing: On a point of order, President, Mr Welch has asked a question. I am not sure if that was his supplementary or not, but if it was not, I would invite him to withdraw.

The PRESIDENT: I reckon we just kind of move on in a better way.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: I think it was a question of me, but I do not want to set a new precedent that you can ask questions of me, because I do not think I would enjoy that. I reckon we just reset. Mr Welch, you may start from the start, without the other bit, and we go on.

Richard WELCH: I think everyone should note that we did not get an answer on when this information, and particularly the updated cost, is going to be provided – we never ever, ever do. I refer again to Public Accounts and Estimates Committee budget estimates report recommendation 16 that:

... The Department of Transport and Planning publish an update on the recommendations in Infrastructure Australia's report.

and recommendation 17 calling for:

... an updated cost-benefit analysis ...

This was something, of course, that the committee had unanimity on. We had bipartisan support on this. It is clearly important, and your colleagues think so also. Minister, will you comply with these recommendations and if so, when?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:11): This is a supplementary which has departed very significantly from the substantive question. You were in the first instance inviting an action as it relates to the Commonwealth government. What I would say to you, Mr Welch, is that we are continuing to work with the Commonwealth and we are continuing to make sure that as we step through that process of due diligence we are providing information to assist with that process as set out in the business and investment case. Again, Mr Welch, for the comfort of you and your constituents as you work through what appears to now be the 10th or 11th different position that the coalition has had on this particular project, we are working on time and on budget. We will have tunnel-boring machines arriving later this year. We will have tunnel boring kicking off next year.

Richard Welch: On a point of order, President, with about 15 seconds left, there has not been any attempt whatsoever to answer the question. You cannot use up the first half of the response in recrafting the question to your own desires and then not answer the question.

The PRESIDENT: You are debating the point of order. I call the minister to continue.

Harriet SHING: Mr Welch, we want to continue with the work to provide the Commonwealth with the information that it is seeking. And this is where again there is continuous engagement between me, the transport infrastructure minister and her office, the Treasurer, her counterpart, the work across departments. Again, this is a process we will continue to work through. Get on board, Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:12): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Ministers statements: mental health workforce

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:12): The mental health workforce is the backbone of our mental health system and is critical to the successful delivery of our mental health reforms. The Allan Labor government is committed to continuing to strengthen and grow this workforce. Last week I was pleased to announce that the latest round of the mental health and wellbeing workforce scholarship program is now open. Supporting workforce retention and career progression, this important program is available to registered nurses wanting to specialise in mental health as well as mental health nurses, allied health professionals, alcohol and other drugs practitioners and lived and living experience workers. Up to \$13,000 in financial support is available to recipients for eligible postgraduate studies in allied health, AOD and lived and living experience courses. Nurses are eligible for full fee coverage of their postgraduate mental health nursing studies of up to \$3000 towards postgraduate education.

A key initiative of the Victorian mental health and wellbeing workforce strategy, we have already supported more than 1700 workers through this program. Since the royal commission we have invested more than \$600 million in workforce initiatives, helping Victoria's public mental health workforce grow by 25 per cent in just three years. This is the largest dedicated investment in the mental health workforce in Victoria's history. We are helping more Victorians gain the skills they need to deliver safe, high-quality care across Victoria's mental health and AOD services, meaning more Victorians can get the care that they need close to home.

I just want to take a moment to acknowledge the highly skilled and dedicated workforce for their tireless work, day in and day out, to support Victorians when they need it most. The Allan Labor government will always back our mental health workforce with the support, training and opportunities they need to keep delivering the best care for Victorians.

Regional rail

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (12:14): (1095) My question is for the minister representing the minister for transport in the other place, who I believe might be Minister Shing. In 2014 the Napthine government committed \$40 million to provide free wi-fi on regional train services between Melbourne and Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Seymour and Traralgon, a project your government scrapped in 2015. Since then patronage on country rail has grown by about 60 per cent, with strong uptake in the Gippsland area driven by fare reductions and, more recently, increased services thanks to the Gippsland line upgrade. Meanwhile, internet technology has leapfrogged ahead. In 2014, mobile satellite internet relied on slow, high-latency geostationary systems. Today low Earth orbit satellites offer fast, portable, cost-effective connectivity that can realistically support high-speed internet on moving trains. With more Victorians now integrating train travel into their hybrid working lives, will the government commit to finally delivering reliable and free internet on regional trains?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:15): Thank you, Mr Bourman, for that question. I will ensure that it is passed on to the minister in the other place for an answer in accordance with the standing orders.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (12:16): I thank the minister for passing that on. Minister, back in 2014 a Labor spokesperson dismissed the coalition's wi-fi plan, saying:

Wi-Fi is a nice idea, but not if you're only using it to email your boss to say the train is running half an hour late, again ...

Now the trains are running more reliably, thanks in part to your government's investments, will you now fix the connectivity and ensure that commuting time can also be productive time for regional Victorians?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:16): Thank you, Mr Bourman, for that supplementary question. I will ensure that that is passed on to the relevant minister for an answer in accordance with the standing orders.

Housing

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:16): (1096) My question is to the minister for housing. Minister, time series data from the Master Builders Association shows that in 2012–13 the average duration of an apartment from approval to completion was 21.54 months, and this has increased to 28.56 months in 2024–25. Why has the Allan Labor government dropped the ball on the construction duration of new apartments with a seven-month, or 32 per cent, increase – that is two and a quarter years after approval – in time to go from approval to completion of the apartment?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:17): Thank you, Mr Davis. I just want to say, perhaps for the sake of triage and clarity, that this is actually a question which spans a number of portfolios. It might be easier if I address this under the remit of the building portfolio, because that also intersects with planning. But what I would say to you, Mr Davis, is that there are a number of levers that have been activated in accordance with the housing statement and the planning reforms announced by and being implemented by the planning minister Sonya Kilkenny. What I also want to be really clear about, Mr Davis, is that the work that we are doing is in stark contrast to what happened under previous governments. We are building more homes more quickly and in more typologies than other jurisdictions, Mr Davis, and that is not happening by accident. It is also something which intersects with a range of other areas within government. That includes addressing workforce and material shortages, and this also includes the sorts of incentives that we have to make sure that the viability of developments, Mr Davis, is something which stacks up to ensure that confidence in developer interest, markets, appetites and decision-making can realise those investments more quickly.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, the question was very specifically about the period after approval to completion time. It was not about earlier, it was about this period from approval to completion, and that has gone up 32 per cent. The minister has not addressed that at all.

The PRESIDENT: You are debating your point of order. I will call the minister back to the question.

Harriet SHING: Thank you very much, Mr Davis. It is interesting that your question should be framed in the way that it is. I am not sure if you ran that past your shadow ministerial counterpart.

David Davis interjected.

Harriet SHING: Did you? You did, Mr Davis. Because one commentator by the name of R Reardon from the other place has actually said and acknowledged that we, Victoria, ‘have in fact built more homes than other states’. So, Mr Davis, I am not sure what kind of –

David Davis: On a point of order, President, it is a very, very specific question. It is about the time from approval to completion, and that has increased by 32 per cent. The minister refuses to deal with this period of time. It has gone up 32 per cent under your government.

Harriet SHING: Mr Davis, we are building more homes than the rest of Australia. We are at 98 per cent of our housing target under the Commonwealth accord. Mr Davis, the work that we are doing is informing and shaping the work in other jurisdictions. Your own shadow minister, Mr Davis –

Renee Heath: On a point of order, President, I believe the minister is debating.

The PRESIDENT: I think the minister has been relevant to the question.

Harriet SHING: It is a shame also, Dr Heath, that you do not want to hear the answer to the question, namely that we are building more homes, we are building more homes of quality. What a shame you opposed the buyer protection legislation in this place not that long ago.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, the minister is wilfully stepping away from the actual question. The question is about the time from approval to completion. Why has that gone up? She does not seem to want to answer that.

The PRESIDENT: I think without paraphrasing people, which is very dangerous for me to do, I think the minister is rejecting the premise of the question as far as delivery of housing, but I will call the minister back to the question.

Harriet SHING: Thank you, Mr Davis. Again, your own shadow minister has conceded, has been drawn, as you should also be drawn, kicking and screaming to the actual factual conclusion that we are approving, building and completing more homes than other jurisdictions. Ninety-eight per cent of the Commonwealth target under the accord has been met. That is in stark contrast to New South Wales and Queensland. I am looking forward to speaking further about that in a moment. Mr Davis, you need to stop blocking and help us to continue building.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:21): I notice that the minister continues to refuse to answer the simple question about that time period. Now I ask further, the NBA figures show that in 2013–14 it took 8.28 months from approval to completion of new homes on average under the Baillieu government, while it took 9.78 months for homes for approval to completion, an 18 per cent increase in duration. Why has the government that you are housing minister in failed Victorians so badly in this completion time, which adds to cost. Why has it gone up 18 per cent for houses?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:22): Thanks, Mr Davis. Again, you quote the master builders. I am in constant discussion with the master builders, and I just want to quote to you Michaela Lihou, who said in a press release of just last week:

... the latest Master Builders Australia data is further good news for Victorians looking to build a home.

She said it seems like:

... we've turned a positive corner and that's great news for the industry and Victoria's potential home builders.

Members interjecting.

Harriet SHING: You use selective data.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, the master builders have a time series that goes back longer. The minister refuses to address this.

Harriet SHING: It is a 2024–25 figure.

David Davis: Yes, and that figure is still far higher than it was under the Baillieu government. I think it is higher than it was under the Baillieu government. That is the point, and I am asking why you cannot achieve the Baillieu government figures.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! I think it has sort of turned into a conversation across rather than a question and answers. But I think the minister was being relevant, and I will call her.

Harriet SHING: Thank you so much, Mr Davis. I just want to be really clear, the figures released just last week by the Master Builders of Victoria – again, the 2024–25 data shows that in Victoria the average build time for a detached house is 39.12 weeks, compared to the Australian average of 45.96 weeks. Now nationally for detached houses, there was an 11.5-month gap between building approvals and completions, and townhouses typically took 14.8 months to complete, while apartments

had a 32.9-month build time and detached houses saw the biggest improvement in build times, now 9.7 per cent shorter or 5.4 weeks. Mr Davis, stop selectively quoting and get on board with building.

Ministers statements: early childhood education and care

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:24): I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is making significant reforms to child protection legislation in Victoria, allowing more families to reunify when it is safe and in the child's best interests. As many in this house would be aware, I was privileged to appear at the Yoorrook Justice Commission in 2023. As part of my evidence, we discussed the operation of the permanency settings and how they were a blunt instrument impacting the ability of families to reunify with their children. These settings also have disproportionate impact on First Peoples. Following the commission's hearings, recommendation 25 of the Yoorrook for Justice report stated:

The Victorian Government must amend the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic) to allow the Children's Court of Victoria to extend the timeframe of a Family Reunification Order where it is in the child's best interest to do so.

And this week, in the other place, we will second read the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025, putting forward a bill to enact this recommendation. Whilst reunification will still be pursued at the earliest possible opportunity when it is safe to do so and in the child's best interests, we recognise that family reunification orders need to be more flexible. Under this bill initial orders will be available for up to 24 months cumulative time in out-of-home care, with an unlimited number of 12-month extensions available when it remains in the child's best interests.

We will undertake further reform. This legislation will also acquit a recommendation from the Parliament's 2021 forced adoption inquiry by removing adoption as a case planning objective in child protection. Whilst this amendment will affirm the longstanding practice that adoption is not pursued by child protection, it will ensure beyond any doubt that it will not be a part of child protection case planning. We will also modernise the term 'permanency' in the act, with the more fulsome term 'stability' to replace it. This moves away from a focus on merely a child's legal stability to a consideration of legal, physical, cultural and relational stability together as a holistic concept. I am extremely proud to put forward this legislation to the Parliament as it will ensure that every single family in this state will have the best chance to reunify when it is safe and in a child's best interests.

Early childhood education and care

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:26): (1097) My question is for the Minister for Children. Minister, your ministerial diaries show you met with the acting Chief Commissioner of Police Rick Nugent and executive director Alison Crichton on 3 April this year. Minister, noting this meeting was three months before the first news stories broke about alleged childcare paedophile Joshua Brown, I ask: were you informed in this meeting about any potential future criminal charges against Joshua Brown or any other Victorian childcare worker?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:27): I thank Mrs McArthur for her question, and categorically the answer to that question is no. I regularly talk with my department, including with officials that work with Victoria Police, and I am very privileged to have met with acting chief commissioners and chief commissioners since to talk about various issues but most importantly the safety of children in our child protection system and ways we can do better by those children that the child protection system exists to support. But no, in no way was that meeting a discussion of anything to do with the child safety related matters or to the accused that you refer to.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:28): I thank you, Minister. Well, what was discussed at that meeting? You also met with the acting principal commissioner for children and young people on 23 April this year. We can only assume the meetings were about children and the welfare of children. So what were you meeting about, if not the welfare of children?

The PRESIDENT: There are two questions there around two different meetings. I think the minister should answer in terms of the supplementary to the substantive.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:28): I thank Mrs McArthur for her supplementary question. Indeed one of the items that I was discussing at the time with the acting chief commissioner was the very proposal I just provided an update to in my ministers statement. I am always looking for ways in which we can improve the child protection system; fulfil the commitments we have made, such as that which I made to the Yoorrook Justice Commission; and ensure that we have a system of supports that support stable families. That was what I was talking about with acting chief commissioner Nugent at the time, an intention to reflect the commitment that I made at the Yoorrook Justice Commission in removing and modernising the provisions around child protection orders of hierarchy but also, in doing so, how we can make sure that families are supported in their reunification journey – and indeed vulnerable families more broadly – so that we can help children as a whole receive the services and the supports that they need that ensure that they get those early interventions that allow them to live safe, happy, fulfilling lives and hopefully never end up coming to the attention of the – *(Time expired)*

Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:30): (1098) My question is to the Treasurer. The Allan Labor government claims to allocate every cent of the \$3 billion raised through the emergency services tax to fund Victoria's emergency services. Treasurer, can you assure Victorian lives and property will be safe this summer when firefighters are protesting because of broken trucks, broken promises and broken pay deals?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:30): Ms Bath, every cent of the ESVF goes to our emergency services organisations, including volunteer equipment and new trucks. We have ordered new trucks for all three agencies. We have increased funding for training. We have doubled the VESEP grants, which I am sure you would be aware of because it is a very popular program, for all of our brigades and units.

Members interjecting.

Jaclyn SYMES: Picking up the interjections – this is what the ESVF is funding, and when you go out there and tell the communities that you are going to cut the ESVF, you have to tell them that you are cutting funding from training, from equipment, from support for volunteers, which will absolutely go to the point of your question.

Melina Bath: On a point of order, President, my question was: can you assure Victorian lives and properties will be safe this summer when there are broken trucks, broken promises and broken pay deals, Minister?

The PRESIDENT: I think the Treasurer was relevant to the question directed to her, as far as the funding goes.

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Bath, the reason that we have introduced the ESVF is because of more severe, more regular natural events that are impacting communities, particularly in regional Victoria. That is why every dollar will go to our emergency services and volunteers – to protect those communities, to prepare those communities and to recover those communities – as opposed to those opposite, who have a policy of slashing money from emergency services. If you scrap the Emergency Services And Volunteer Fund, you will be –

Members interjecting.

Melina Bath: On a point of order, President, question time is not an opportunity for the government to attack the opposition.

The PRESIDENT: I uphold the point of order. There are a number of rulings that reflect on that. I call the Treasurer.

Jaclyn SYMES: I think it is important to point out a world where you have an ESVF and what it funds and a world where you do not. When you do not have money from the ESVF and you have promises that account to \$10.8 billion, how are you going to fund the new trucks, the new training et cetera? The only alternative would be to probably close hospitals, close schools and sack police. That is the only way you can do everything for everyone. So if you want –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Treasurer.

Jaclyn SYMES: I am proud to be part of a government that backs our emergency services, not just through words but through funding and real-life support for those people that put their lives on the line to protect people, property and their communities.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:33): Treasurer, has any of the \$3 billion to be raised by the emergency services tax been allocated to repair or replace any of the up to 290 broken G-Wagon fleet?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:34): Ms Bath, every dollar that is attributed to the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund goes towards funding for emergency services. As part of that there is a \$10 million annual fleet replacement program for the CFA, for SES and for FRV. In relation –

Members interjecting.

Jaclyn SYMES: There is also –

Members interjecting.

Jaclyn SYMES: For the first time, Ms Bath, the ESVF will also contribute funding for FFM Vic. I am proud to absolutely support the hard work of those people in green as they are known on the ground. But in relation to your specific question, it is actually a matter for the responsible minister, which is the Minister for Environment. So if you would like more details on the maintenance schedule – *(Time expired)*

Ministers statements: housing

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:35): While we are on the subject, Mr Davis, we are committed to growing well here in Victoria by delivering more homes for more Victorians within walking distance of jobs, transport and services. Unlike some of those on the crossbench and the opposition, we back our commitments with real action. That is why Victoria is scheduled to reach 98 per cent of its share of the housing accord target of 1.2 million homes built – leading the nation. By comparison New South Wales is projected to reach 65 per cent of its share and Queensland is projected to reach 79 per cent of its share. Let us compare that: Victoria, scheduled to reach 98 per cent of its share. We have already reached 18 per cent of the share under the housing accord, tied with Western Australia and once again ahead of New South Wales and Queensland. On top of this, Victoria continues to build more homes year on year than the other east coast states. Over the year to the end of June 2025, Victoria has commenced over 55,600 homes – 8900 more than New South Wales and 19,600 more than Queensland, and we have completed over 55,700 homes – 13,100 more than New South Wales and 22,400 more than Queensland. Now, median house and unit rents in Melbourne remain more affordable than Sydney and Brisbane, and the same is true for house and unit prices. In fact the Grattan Institute just this weekend said that Melbourne has:

... some of the most affordable housing in the country now ... And that is in large part, a success of building more homes.

I was pleasantly surprised to hear one commentator acknowledge that we here in Victoria have in fact built more homes than other states. It is really, really good to hear such enthusiasm for the work of the Allan Labor government. But again, in a show of unity, at least with government, that enthusiasm coming from the Shadow Minister for Planning and Housing is a wonderful thing to see. I am sure the member for Polwarth's YIMBY membership pack is in the mail as we speak – *(Time expired)*

Drug harm reduction

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:37): (1099) My question today is to the Minister for Mental Health. Minister, last week you announced the commencement of works at the community health hub at 244 Flinders Street. As part of this hub there is the planned hydromorphone trial. Minister, can you confirm for the house: is this an efficacy trial or an implementation trial?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:38): I thank Mr Puglielli for his question and his interest in these matters. Of course the statewide action plan that the Premier and I announced last year is an important part of our effort in terms of tackling drug harm, and building a health hub at 244 Flinders Street was a key part of that announcement, so too was a hydromorphone trial in that facility. That trial will be a Victorian first, and I believe the size of that trial will be an important way in which to test whether, for people who are particularly resistant to other forms of treatment in opioid addiction, this can be a real game changer in terms of their recovery and their trajectory. As part of the statewide action plan, we announced funding for that trial. We will obviously take advice from the experts that will be delivering that trial. There is obviously a lot of work going on getting ready for that trial to commence, including partnership arrangements between the department, the operator of 244 and a tertiary hospital that is also part of the scope of that program. We will have more to say about the details of the trial as we get closer to the completion of that project at 244.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:40): Thank you, Minister, for that response. I am sitting on that word 'test' that you used, and I would like to gauge the government's intentions here. Minister, as you are aware, around two people die of heroin overdose in the City of Melbourne every single month. Overdose deaths are at a 10-year high. This trial is to support 30 people per year for two years. Does the government plan to extend the trial beyond the two years and expand the scheme to more people at the Flinders Street site?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:40): I thank Mr Puglielli for his supplementary question. I understand where your question is coming from, and I think it is certainly coming from a good place. But I want to be respectful of the fact that we are setting up this trial. It will be a state first in terms of this particular drug and this program, and I do not want to pre-empt the outcomes of the trial. We have been very up-front that it is a trial. I would also point you to our record of being prepared as a government to do new things and to invest and innovate when it comes to treatment options for Victorians who are struggling with addiction. I am certainly committed to continuing to find ways and taking expert advice on these matters. I am about to establish the AOD ministerial advisory council, which will have that purpose, and we have already put in place the chief addiction officer within the Department of Health to continue to advise government on best practice.

Renewable energy infrastructure

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (12:42): (1100) My question is to the Treasurer. The PILOR scheme penalises councils that host energy infrastructure. For example, for existing wind farms Moorabool shire are collecting just 38 per cent of the rate revenue they would normally collect under the CIV-based rating system applied to all other properties. So, Treasurer, how do you justify creating this inequity amongst councils, particularly rural councils?

The PRESIDENT: Sorry, Mr McCracken, would you mind repeating the question?

Joe McCracken: The PILOR scheme, it is called – payment in lieu of rates.

Jaclyn Symes: Sorry; I couldn't hear you.

Joe McCracken: Do you want me to repeat the whole thing again?

The PRESIDENT: Sorry, Mr McCracken. Could you do the whole question?

Joe McCracken: I am happy to. My question was about the PILOR – payment in lieu of rates – scheme, which penalises councils that host energy infrastructure, and the example I gave was of Moorabool shire. They collect just 38 per cent of the rates they would normally collect under the CIV-based system, which all other properties are subject to. So my question is: how do you justify creating that inequity, particularly for rural councils that host energy infrastructure? Many city councils cannot.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:43): I thank Mr McCracken for repeating the question, because I was trying to find a hook in that to be helpful in answering as the Treasurer. The policy recognises the importance of building renewables, but the actual application of the policy and the question that you have asked are better directed to the minister for energy. It is not within my portfolio – the specifics of what you have asked. I can pass it along. You would get a more detailed answer from the minister for energy, because it is her policy, not mine.

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (12:44): Thank you, Treasurer, for that response. I have had correspondence from a number of my local councils that say that this impacts the financial viability of their operations going forward, and when you have got a significant cut to rate revenue, that has an impact. So my question is: do you intend to take a review of the impact of this particular scheme on the financial viability of councils to see if it is actually going to work going forward or not?

The PRESIDENT: It is hard to put that question after the minister answered that this particular issue does not fall within her remit. The minister may pass it on again.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:45): Mr McCracken, you asked a good question, and the information should come to you, but you are asking the wrong minister. I am more than happy to pass that on to the minister for energy because I think that would be a better use of time. I can talk to you about renewable energy, but I do not think that you need that answer. You want an actual answer to your question, and therefore if you ask the relevant minister, that would be a better way home for you.

Ministers statements: economic policy

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:46): Back to my portfolio – I do this occasionally – I want to update the house and remind them about our disciplined fiscal strategy. Five years ago we laid out a strategy for the Victorian community and our economy to navigate the pandemic and emerge stronger. We used our balance sheet, as many people know, to protect lives, businesses and jobs. But what that meant was that we had to cut – we had to make sure that we had a plan to communicate –

Nick McGowan interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: I will get to cuts in a minute, Mr McGowan. We shifted our focus to returning to surplus following this, and we have delivered three consecutive operating cash surpluses since 2022–23. Our disciplined and sensible decisions mean that in this budget we are on track to delivering an operating surplus in 2025–26, the only state on the eastern seaboard to do so. We are also on track to stabilise net debt as a share of the economy and reduce net debt as a share of the economy over the forward estimates. This is the right strategy for our times, with a firm focus on driving new economic growth across the state. We are making sure that we are maintaining revenue, reducing expenditure and delivering the essential services that Victorians need. It is a finely tuned machine, a machine that

could easily be thrown out of balance by the reckless economic damage that is advocated by others out there. There are some who want to create a \$10.8 billion black hole in the state budget, a black hole that can only be filled with cuts –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! I cannot hear the Treasurer.

Jaclyn SYMES: cuts to schools, cuts to hospitals, cuts to police, and ripping millions of dollars from the emergency services budgets. We are focused on getting the fiscal settings right to ensure the Victorian economy is in the best position possible for a strong economy. Victoria needs a government that will responsibly manage the state budget and deliver the frontline services that matter most to Victorians.

Gorgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:48): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:48): Minister Shing is going to chase up answers within the standing orders from the Minister for Public and Active Transport for Mr Bourman's question, as will Minister Tierney for Mr Ettershank's questions for the Minister for Environment.

Mrs McArthur, I invite you to make your point of order again.

Bev McArthur: On a point of order, President, yesterday Minister Blandthorn potentially misled this house when she alleged the following. It was in the debate regarding treaty and her summing-up position. She alleged:

The community members mentioned by those opposite are not native title holders for Gunaikurnai.

I referenced correspondence in my contribution from a Kurnai woman offended by the use of her language to name the new Aboriginal representative body. The individual and her family have confirmed again that they are the native title holders. We are asking if the minister would like to correct the record for her contribution.

The PRESIDENT: There are a number of ways forward from here. Those particular community members, if they feel they have been misrepresented, can write in for a right of reply to be published in *Hansard*. Also, Mrs McArthur, if you want to, you can form a substantive motion as far as reflecting the concerns you have just outlined. But it is not for me to decide the veracity of what anyone says in here at any given time. Unless the minister wants to reply, we can leave it at that and leave the options to those community groups or you, Mrs McArthur. Very good.

Questions on notice

Answers

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:51): On a point of order, President, I have a number of outstanding questions on notice and I wish to seek an explanation from the minister: questions 2161 and 2153 to the Minister for Finance; questions 2160, 2159, 2158, 2157, 2156 and 2155 to the Minister for Police; and questions 2152, 2043 and 2042 to the Minister for Environment.

The PRESIDENT: Minister Erdogan, would you be able to commit to follow them up?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:51): Yes, President. I will get those numbers from Ms Copey and make sure I follow up with the relevant ministers.

Constituency questions

Southern Metropolitan Region

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:52): (1909) My constituency question is for the Minister for Corrections, my good friend Mr Erdogan. The Allan Labor government has taken strong steps to ensure the safety of my community of Southern Metro. Whether it is the 320 new youth justice roles created by this year's budget, the 400 new roles in corrections to respond to the tough new bail laws or the \$7.4 million to boost police recruitment, the Allan Labor government has made strong investments to boost the capacity of our law enforcement and corrections systems to deal with the criminal behaviour. We are also helping rehabilitate people while they spend time in custody. My question to the minister is: can he inform me of what more the Allan Labor government is doing for my community of Southern Metro to lower the rates of recidivism and ensure adult and youth offenders on remand do not go off and reoffend?

Western Victoria Region

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (12:53): (1910) My question is to the Minister for Youth Justice. I recently visited St Arnaud and met with locals. We spoke at length about the significant challenges facing the community, particularly when young people turn to crime. I want to acknowledge Dusty McIntyre, an extremely intelligent young lady who conveyed in great detail the difficulties that locals experience with both clarity and maturity beyond her years: anti-social behaviour, illicit drug taking leading to drug dependency, burglary and theft, coupled with a lack of supports and diversion programs in place. To access many services, people have to travel to Bendigo or Ballarat. Some of those are very difficult to access for some people. Minister, will you investigate place-based localised solutions to youth crime, particularly for my constituents in St Arnaud, to ensure youth crime is prevented at every possible point?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:54): (1911) My question today is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport. The Box Hill to Ringwood shared use path is an important, almost entirely off-road path that allows for pedestrian and cycling connections between Box Hill and Ringwood, as it says in the name. Cycling advocates, including Metro East Bicycle User Group and Whitehorse Active Transport Action Group, have long been calling for a further connection of this shared use path to Whitehorse Road. I am told this can be done through the laneway beside the Harvey Norman in Nunawading and along Richards Street in Mitcham. Whitehorse council, I understand, are investigating these proposals. Minister, can you please support Whitehorse council in their work to upgrade these important active transport connections in my region?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (12:55): (1912) My constituency question today is to the Minister for Health in the other place. Residents across Melbourne's Northern Metropolitan Region rely on some of our state's busiest and most trusted health services, including the Royal Melbourne Hospital, Austin Health and the Northern Hospital in Epping. These hospitals provide world-class care for our communities, but they hold a particular importance for families in the north who depend on accessible, high-quality public care close to home. That is why I am excited about the announcement of the Allan Labor government's new virtual hospital pilot, led by Royal Melbourne and the Austin. It will bring specialist hospital care into people's homes using digital monitoring, real-time data and virtual consultations to deliver high-quality safe care closer to home. It will allow more Victorians to recover comfortably and safely in familiar surroundings while freeing up more capacity in our hospital beds. My question to the minister on behalf of the residents of Northern Metro is: when will this pilot commence, and how many patients are expected to benefit from these new virtual hospital services?

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:56): (1913) My question is to the Minister for Housing and Building. In a recent video the minister said that every worker deserves to be paid fairly and promptly, but subcontractors from Pakenham and across Melbourne, including local plumber Aaron Lafranchi, are still waiting to be paid more than \$4.3 million for work on government school projects that were completed over a year ago. The adjudicator has ruled that the Victorian School Building Authority must pay them under the Building and Construction Industry Security of Payment Act 2002, but instead the authority is using taxpayer dollars to fight the ruling in the Supreme Court. How can the minister claim to support fair and prompt payment while her own department refuses to pay tradies who have already won their case for work?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:57): (1914) My constituency question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. A constituent from St Kilda has contacted my office about the placement of signage for priority seats on the route 96 tram. They have pointed out that the signs explaining priority seating are positioned high up near the roof of the tram where they are not easily seen by other passengers and that this lack of visibility can mean that these seats are not made available when they are needed by those who rely on them. With free public transport on weekends beginning in December and an expected increase in tram patronage, my constituent is concerned that elderly passengers may struggle to access priority seating. Minister, will the government ensure that clearer eye-level signage is installed on trams to help increase awareness that the orange seats are reserved for elderly passengers, pregnant passengers and people with a disability and other needs?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (12:57): (1915) My question is to the Minister for Housing and Building, on how the government is supporting people in the Southern Metropolitan Region who are experiencing homelessness. Last week we opened Madden House, a great new facility on Wellington Street in St Kilda West providing 26 new homes with support for those who are sleeping rough and experiencing homelessness in and around the St Kilda area. It is a great partnership between the Allan Labor government, the City of Port Phillip and St Kilda Community Housing, which have come together to deliver this project. More than just providing permanent and safe accommodation, Madden House will provide wraparound support services to help those who have been rough sleeping. The Allan Labor government is making significant investments in building more homes and in building more community housing, and we are big supporters of community housing in this state. Madden House is a great example of what can happen when governments work together.

The PRESIDENT: We will acquit the rest of the constituency questions when we come back at 2 pm after the break for lunch.

Questions on notice

Answers

The PRESIDENT (12:59): I just do want to reinstate a question on notice. I have received a written request from Ms Lovell seeking the reinstatement of a question on notice directed to the Minister for Corrections. Having received the response, I order that question on notice 2143, part 1, be reinstated, as the responses do not address the range of information sought by Ms Lovell.

Sitting suspended 12:59 pm until 2:01 pm.

Constituency questions

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (14:01): (1916) My question to the Minister for Environment relates to the new Wombat–Lerderderg National Park and the department’s consultation

on this proposal. My constituents in Darley have serious concerns about fire management and emergency services access. The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council investigation appears to have proceeded without formal consultation with the CFA, Fire Rescue Victoria, Forest Fire Management Victoria, the SES and Victoria Police regarding changes to tracks, access roads and other important matters. Minister, will you confirm whether each of these agencies was consulted before land use change? If not, when will such consultation occur and will the outcomes be made public? And will your government guarantee that no further state forest to national park conversions will occur in my electorate until emergency services access, track networks and equipment readiness – *(Time expired)*

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:03): (1917) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. Every day thousands of my constituents drive south to work along Plenty Road. I do it too. I travel that road frequently, and it is a painful and frustrating experience. The core problem is the poorly sequenced traffic lights, which create unnecessary slowdowns. The traffic lights are all seemingly out of sync with each other and create unnecessary inefficiencies along the road. Drivers go from 80 kilometres to 60 to 70 to 40 and then back to 80 again. It is well recognised as one of the worst roads in Melbourne. This is very frustrating. Will the minister commit to a wholesale review of the traffic light sequencing and speed limits along Plenty Road in Bundoora to ensure locals in my electorate can get to and from home safer and quicker?

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (14:04): (1918) My question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. Minister, will you adopt the Border Rail Action Group's proposal for a fourth seating-only carriage to be added to all three carriage services, boosting capacity by 50 per cent, on trains between Melbourne and Wodonga – from 152 to 230 seats? The Allan Labor government's policy to cap fares on regional lines drastically increased patronage but without first increasing capacity, leading to frequent overcrowding of trains to Wodonga. In the first six months of the year over 248,000 passengers used these trains, which were often fully booked, and 24 per cent of travellers – about 60,000 people – had to accept unreserved tickets. These are standing-room-only tickets for a train journey that takes several hours. Lack of capacity has been made worse by the fact that many services are unexpectedly reduced from six carriages to three due to train faults. On Sunday demand was so high that four additional buses were scheduled from – *(Time expired)*

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:05): (1919) My constituency question is for the Minister for Disability. My constituent is a resident of Noble Park. He works in disability support at the local supported independent living facility, or SIL. With the state subsidy for the SIL set to expire at the end of this year, my constituent holds grave concerns for the future of vulnerable residents in Noble Park. Fifty-nine group homes across Victoria have already closed, and a further 580 are at risk. This threatens the homes of nearly 5000 Victorians and the jobs of 7500 support workers. This presents severe consequences for community health and requires immediate action to prevent service collapse. My constituent reported that requests from the Health and Community Services Union, HACSU, to meet with the minister have been denied. So my constituent asks: will the minister urgently collaborate with worker representatives to protect Noble Park SIL residents?

Western Metropolitan Region

Moir DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (14:06): (1920) My question is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. For years residents of the Western Metro Region have been promised vital infrastructure, most recently at the WoMEDA conference, yet the reality is that the western suburbs are neglected and taken for granted. The BIFT was built instead of the WIFT, the Suburban Rail Loop was funded instead of the *Western Rail Plan*, the North East Link is being built while the vital outer

metropolitan ring-road is ignored. The western suburbs are one of Victoria's fastest growing regions and apparently Labor's own voter heartland, so my constituent asks: why does the government take us for granted by constantly delaying our infrastructure in favour of infrastructure on the other side of town?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:06): (1921) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. On Thursday of last week, my constituent David called the office to report that he had damaged the wheel of his car after driving over a large pothole in Canterbury Road near Arthur Street in Surrey Hills. That pothole is not the only one in the area; the state of this main arterial road is appalling. David estimates that the pothole was 300 millimetres deep – that is 1 foot deep – and he observed other cars pulling over nearby with damage clearly caused by the same gaping hole. Later that day callers flooded the airwaves on 3AW, complaining about damaged cars at the same location. Minister, this is just another example of the appalling state of Victorian roads, which are damaging vehicles and in some instances putting the lives of Victorians at risk. My constituent wants to know, however: when is the government going to act to address the dangerous potholes in Canterbury Road?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (14:07): (1922) My question is to the Premier. At a community safety forum in Kangaroo Flat, residents raised concerns about Victoria's crime crisis. The latest crime statistics show that crime has jumped a further 10 per cent in Greater Bendigo and across the region, with total offences up by 24 per cent in Greater Shepparton, 11 per cent in Hepburn, 15 per cent in Loddon, 24 per cent in Macedon Ranges, 12 per cent in Mitchell shire, 19 per cent in Moorabool, 24 per cent in Mount Alexander shire, 19 per cent in Nillumbik, 34 per cent in Strathbogie, 23 per cent in Whittlesea and 16 per cent in the Yarra Ranges. The government weakened bail laws, cut \$50 million from the police budget, cut crime prevention programs, closed stations and left over 2000 police jobs empty. Nearly half of all reported crimes in Victoria remain unresolved. What action is the government taking to address Victoria's crime crisis and prioritise community safety?

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:08): (1923) My question is to the Minister for Carers and Volunteers. In the Eastern Victoria Region, our neighbourhood houses are a vital, vital hub. Rising costs and piecemeal funding means that many in my electorate are at risk of closure. There have been no pay increases, even in line with the CPI, for many, many years, and costs are outstripping income. In Wonthaggi our local food pantry has been shut down, with other essential support services at risk. Even Omeo is completely unfunded and may need to close. These are a lifeline for people struggling for food and housing essentials, all during a cost-of-living crisis. I want to understand, Minister: will the government commit to reviewing the funding for neighbourhood houses in my electorate and work with them so that they are not forced to further reduce support services or close their doors permanently?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:09): (1924) My question is for the Minister for Police. My local constituents in the south-east are becoming increasingly frustrated by escalating crime and antisocial behaviour in our area, with the crime rate up by 17 per cent alone in Dandenong. I have been told that many have contacted government members' electorate offices seeking help and advice, only to be told to contact the opposition member's office instead, which is deeply concerning and suggests that the Labor government MPs and their representatives are refusing to assist constituents with serious community safety matters. Minister, please explain why residents in the south-east, particularly in Dandenong, are being turned away by Labor government electorate

offices when they raise concerns about crime. What steps will you be taking to ensure that all Victorians, regardless of where they live, who they vote for or who they are, receive proper assistance and support from their local Labor members and Labor government representatives on their concerns about crime?

Bills

Safer Protest with a Registration System and a Ban on Face Coverings Bill 2025

Second reading

Debate resumed.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (14:10): I am pleased to rise to make a contribution today on this matter that has been put forth by the opposition. I must say, it was a little galling to read the comments from the opposition in the paper this morning calling for bipartisan support for this private members bill while those opposite who claim bipartisanship only do so when it suits their political end. I want to just remind those opposite that our Justice Legislation Amendment (Anti-vilification and Social Cohesion) Bill 2024 was a classic example of where bipartisanship would have been welcomed, I am sure, not just in this place but in the broader community, and would have been absolutely appropriate given some of the pressure we have seen across the community and how that has impacted our particularly diverse communities and the way that they feel. But those opposite proved that they are not really focused on that. They are not really concerned about improving that social cohesion across our community. When it came to vote on that particular legislation, which would have made a real difference to protecting our community from hate, they were found lacking. They were only focused on division, with perhaps a bit of internal division in the mix there as well. They have been pretty focused on political pointscoring in this area of debate today. If they were truly interested in bipartisanship and a commitment to tackling hate, as I said, they would have supported our anti-vilification bill. I might remind those opposite that that bill had the support of multicultural and faith leaders from right across our community, and they would commit to supporting the bill that we as a government will soon be bringing before the Parliament to improve safety at protests.

We are committed to protecting the rights of Victorians to peacefully and safely protest. Our new laws are around strengthening safety at those protests, and unlike the laws that are proposed by those opposite today, they will crack down on those individuals who use protests to drive hate and violence. These laws, when they come before the Parliament later this year, will make a real difference for the community, for those who want to participate in protests safely and, I might add, for Victoria Police, who often bear the brunt of violence at protests.

Our protest laws will deal with violent, hateful and dangerous participants in public demonstrations through a number of different means, including prohibiting the flags and symbols of listed terrorist organisations; empowering police to unmask violent, hateful and dangerous individuals who attend protests and in a quite cowardly way hide behind those masks; and address the use of dangerous attachment devices. I say again, if the opposition is serious about a bipartisan approach to these issues, they will support our carefully drafted legislation when it comes before this place and not seek to play wedge politics with these issues.

Our laws will give Victoria Police the power to unmask violent and hateful demonstrators, like those cowardly neo-Nazis who hide behind masks and spread their racist ideology, neo-Nazis who turn up – announced or unannounced – to demonstrations that target our proud multicultural communities, neo-Nazis who must all be unequivocally opposed by all of us in this place. As part of this work we are also committed to introducing new laws to protect the right of people to gather and pray free from fear, harassment and intimidation. Once again, these are laws that should be truly bipartisan. These laws will help protect our social cohesion and the right of Victorians to protest peacefully and safely without interference from extremism, whereas the opposition's bill before us today is contrary to the

advice of Victoria Police and will infringe the rights of ordinary Victorians. Our government is strongly focused on the safety and wellbeing of our community, and we are focused on balancing this, like any good government, with the rights of individuals to protest peacefully.

Nobody has the right to hide behind a mask to commit dangerous and violent acts. There should be no place to hide in this state if you are a racist stirring up hate in our streets. This bill will not target those dangerous, violent and extremist protesters, it will target everyday people who want to engage in peaceful protest. It would make it a crime for a person to wear a mask at a protest to protect their health, for example – we know that a face mask can be an essential protection for people with underlying health conditions; to protect their identity, for example, if they are a victim of family violence who might be fearful of retribution, and family violence victims should be allowed to attend a protest free from fear; and also to celebrate pride. Masks have long been a tool of expression in many cultures and communities. Our laws will be proportionate and get that balance right with appropriate exceptions, including for health, cultural and religious reasons.

These laws will build on the work that we have already been doing to improve social cohesion, of which I must say the list is extensive. I have already mentioned our anti-vilification laws, which protect more Victorians from vilification, the worst kind of hate speech or conduct that profoundly harms people and undermines our social cohesion. These laws came into effect last month and introduced new criminal offences for serious vilification, such as inciting hatred or threatening physical harm against someone because of who they are or what faith they follow. These laws will also strengthen existing civil protections against vilification and provide more options for remedy and resolution where people have been harmed. They will protect the right to free speech and religion by recognising exceptions for religious and artistic purposes and more.

These protections will for the first time cover disability, gender identity, sex, sex characteristics, sexual orientation and personal association with a person who has a protected attribute – for example, a parent of a disabled child. These are significant reforms that are all about making sure that Victorians have the protections they need. There is also the work of the Anti-Hate Taskforce that is being led by our Premier, which is engaging those communities who are at the receiving end of some of the most hateful behaviour that we have seen. The Anti-Racism Taskforce in the release of the anti-racism strategy, which is the first of its kind in Australia, provides a four-year road map for government to tackle racism and discrimination in all its forms and across all sectors. But it also importantly recognises and calls out that taking action to stamp out racism is a whole-of-community effort as well as a government effort, and I am proud that our government has been able to develop that strategy in close consultation with our community and particularly our wonderful diverse communities.

We also commissioned the Lekakis review to look at how our multicultural settings and institutions can better build bridges and heal divisions. George Lekakis is someone who I have an enormous amount of respect for, and the working group that worked with him – some really eminent Victorians, including Hass Dellal AO, Carmel Guerra OAM, Miriam Suss OAM and Mark Duckworth PSM – worked closely with George and really did deep engagement across the community in formulating their review and work for government. They spoke with more than 600 individual Victorians; they had over 50 open and targeted consultation sessions, and there were dozens and dozens of written submissions made to the Lekakis review. Last month the Premier and I announced the Allan Labor government's initial response and the strong immediate action which we will take; they are all about putting multiculturalism at the heart of government where it belongs, tackling racism and improving safety for our multicultural communities.

We will create a new statutory body, Multicultural Victoria, and it will be established and have a new chair appointed to lead it. The chair will be supported by two deputies, with one from regional Victoria, plus a five-member advisory council of commissioners. At the heart of this reform, the creation of this new organisation will combine the engagement role of the Victorian Multicultural Commission, a proud institution in Victoria, with the policy role of the department, and it will have new responsibilities, including developing safety plans for communities affected by serious and distressing

events, to name but one of the initiatives. The Premier will also lead a whole-of-government multicultural strategy to elevate community needs across all of our portfolios, and it will require multicultural needs to be considered in all cabinet decision-making. Let me just repeat that: we will be required to take into consideration the needs of multicultural communities in all cabinet decision-making. That is a really important cultural change, which we are proud to endorse 100 per cent.

Organisations applying for multicultural grants will be empowered to pilot a social cohesion commitment before it is rolled out as a standard funding agreement across all government portfolios, and we will create a new \$5 million fund to strengthen the capacity and the sustainability of multicultural organisations to deliver for their communities and equip them to be leaders in resolving conflict and division but, more than that, equip them to be leaders in building social cohesion and connection across and within communities. In line with the recommendations made in the review and a recommendation from the anti-hate taskforce, an additional investment of almost a million dollars will support more people, including children, to visit Victoria's multicultural museums, which are currently seeing reduced visitation. They are places where our kids get to know and understand the multicultural and multifaith stories at the heart of our state, including the wonderful Holocaust museum – if you have not been there, please go, as it is a very powerful reminder of what we must never, ever see again; the Islamic museum; the Jewish museum; the Chinese Museum; the new Vietnamese museum; the Golden Dragon Museum in Bendigo; and more. We are also doing work combating Islamophobia and antisemitism, which sadly have been on the rise, and we are working closely with our Jewish and Muslim communities to combat this hate. We are also working closely with our Sikh, Hindu and broader South Asian communities to make them feel safe, despite recent increases in anti-Indian and anti-immigration sentiment, including from, shamefully, the federal opposition.

All of these initiatives work together to improve our social cohesion, to tackle hate and make sure that everyone, regardless of their cultural background, their faith or their political beliefs, has the right to participate in every aspect of our society free from discrimination.

In summary, there have been many opportunities for those opposite to show their bipartisan commitment to tackling hateful behaviour – too many to go through again – and improving our social cohesion. Time and time again they have failed, instead succumbing to their natural state of division and political point-scoring.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:26): I rise to make a contribution on the bill before the chamber. The Safer Protest with a Registration System and a Ban on Face Coverings Bill 2025 is, according to Mr Davis, about balance and protecting the right to peaceful protest as a cornerstone of our democracy. It all sounds pretty reasonable. As Mr Davis noted in his second-reading speech, it is about drawing a clear line between the right to protest peacefully and the right of every Victorian to live free from intimidation, disruption and violence. In Australia the right to protest and assemble is protected under international law and is an integral part of our functioning democracy. This right comes from the implied freedom of political communication found in our constitution. Mr Davis mentioned that 500 protests have occurred in Melbourne since October 2023, so I am assuming he is specifically targeting the pro-Palestinian rallies. I would suggest many people have attended these rallies, me included, because they want to see an end to what both the UN and the International Criminal Court have denounced as an ongoing genocide in Gaza. And I would say, not unreasonably, they want to see the Victorian government sever ties with the weapons manufacturers who are enabling that genocide.

No doubt the recent protests have been disruptive, but sometimes democracy is disruptive and messy and inconvenient. It is what separates democracy from authoritarianism. I was not around in Parliament to see how those opposite responded to the anti-government, anti-lockdown, anti-vaccination protests that took place in Melbourne a few years back, but I do wonder if they spoke as passionately about the right of Victorians to live free from intimidation, disruption and violence during the protests of that era.

Regardless, this bill and some of the recent laws introduced by the government are quite chilling and put me in mind of how government abjectly failed to respond to the rise of fascism in Britain. It is quite a fascinating example. As we know, fascism started to take root in Europe in between the two world wars, but one would not have thought Britain was a natural home of fascism. Britain did not lose the war, for starters, and the impacts of the Great Depression were not as severe as in other parts of the world and Europe in particular. But nonetheless, a small group of fascists were able to tap into the genuine concerns of working people, sow fear and propagate images of chaos and destruction. What does that have to do with the bill before us today? Well, we have seen neo-Nazis doing the same thing here on the steps of Parliament. We have heard Thomas Sewell on the steps of Parliament, addressing his fellow protesters and promising that his men would fight for our survival against the ginormous empires of the Third World.

If the bill's aim is to free us from intimidation, disruption and violence, and we take the recent anti-immigration protests as an example, how would providing for an authorisation and prohibition of certain public protests work? Would it permit everyone bar the Nazis to protest in that case? This bill does not provide guidance on how we might respond to groups like the fascists, merely on the means to stop any protest. This bill empowers police to move on protesters, but police already have sufficient move-on powers under the Summary Offences Act 1966, so why do they need further powers? The provision enabling a court to exclude a protester from certain places is similarly redundant. Our position on the introduction of a permit system has been informed by the comments of police commissioner Mike Bush. On 28 July, he was asked in an ABC interview about introducing a permit system, which exists in other jurisdictions like New South Wales. He said:

We've had a look to see if it will be effective, where we've landed is that it's not worth bringing in ...

There may be a valid argument that the commissioner is not the lawmaker and that responsibility is vested here in Parliament. But I believe that to simply ignore that expert assessment is reckless.

As for prohibiting protesters from wearing face coverings, it is not a crime to wear a face covering in public. The proposed change in this bill would hand Victoria Police extraordinary powers to arrest peaceful protesters where there is no danger to the public. People wearing face coverings wear them for a variety of reasons. The banning of face coverings at protests will prevent people with a disability, elderly people and people with health conditions from participating in their democratic right to protest. It will have a similar chilling effect on people who want to protect their anonymity and privacy. Who are we to say that someone that has been the subject of gender-based violence, stalking, doxing, or retaliatory violence does not have the right to protect themselves or their families by preserving their anonymity while exercising their democratic right to protest? And of course, there are people who wear face coverings for religious or cultural reasons. How are we protecting these people from intimidation, disruption and violence? Are people not allowed to protect themselves from the unlawful and indiscriminate use of OC spray and tear gas by police, which we have seen a bit of lately, all from racial profiling, which we have also seen take place in this state. It is already a crime in Victoria to wear a disguise with unlawful intent, and police have powers to remove face coverings if a crime is reasonably suspected. So why do we need to give them more power? Are these new laws only there to protect certain Victorians from intimidation, disruption and violence?

This bill before us is not the strong, fair and necessary reform that is argued by the opposition. It is yet another attempt to weaken our democratic right to protest and to restrict people's civil liberties. It hands more power to the police, enabling them to criminalise ordinary people for protesting. We are aware that the government is in the process of formulating its own protest bill. It is my sincere hope that they have done the necessary work of consultation and engagement with the community and have developed specific measures that uphold our rights and liberties, rather than impose these sorts of lazy blanket bans. It is worth noting that, at the end of the day, extremists love these restrictive laws. It enables them to paint themselves as martyrs while drawing ever more attention to their cause and allowing them to recruit more easily. The laws we have in place already afford police the tools they

need to deal with violent and intimidatory individuals on our streets. We do not need any more. The Legalise Cannabis Party is a party built on peaceful protest, and we will not be supporting this bill.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (14:33): I am looking forward to the opportunity to talk to this particular bill today, particularly given the issues that have come up around the sorts of challenges in the public domain and in the way in which we are addressing rights to exercise public gathering in spaces where, again, there is democratic action at play, but also an inherent danger of compromise to public safety. In this sense, I do want to make sure that we can address the importance of balancing various interests. When we talk to balancing various interests, I want to take us directly to the anti-vilification bill – the Justice Legislation Amendment (Anti-vilification and Social Cohesion) Bill 2024 – which was debated and passed in this place. After considerable debate, it was revealed that no matter how much work would be done to provide a measure of balance, there are people in this Parliament – namely, those opposite – who were never going to support anti-vilification legislation.

It is very, very easy to say that people want to ensure that freedom to love who we love, to pray to whom we pray or to live in cultures where stories, history, experience and culture are embedded as part of the DNA of particular groups and organisations, some of our many vibrant migrant communities who call Victoria, one of the most multicultural places on earth, home. And we are also determined to make sure that people have the right to peacefully and safely protest, so strengthening safety at protests is another matter that will be addressed through legislation that we will be introducing very shortly. But the focus of that legislation is on the way in which we address people, and their behaviour, involved in the driving of hate and violence at protests. We do want to make sure that the starting point is one based in real-world experiences of people at protest gatherings, at public gatherings.

As people in this place might be aware, at the end of last year it was made very clear by the Allan government that we are dealing with violent and hateful and dangerous participation and conduct in public demonstrations through a range of mechanisms, including the prohibition of flags and symbols of listed terrorist organisations, the empowering of police and the capacity to unmask violent and hateful and dangerous individuals who attend protests where those individuals – those cowards – hide behind masks. There are several emblematic images of people undertaking protest which, on their reading of it, might be said to be peaceful – until you take a step back and look at their masks, until you take a further step back and look at their stance, until you take another step back and realise that the gestures that they are using are Nazi salutes and that they are happy to invoke the most abhorrent, disgraceful, vile ideologies that continue to cause a ripple effect of terror, of fear, of anguish and of grief upon those who have lived and experienced that ideology translated into action.

Addressing the use of dangerous attachment devices is also really important. But the other side of this coin is also making sure that we are protecting the right of people, as I said earlier, to gather and to pray, free from fear and harassment and intimidation. As the Minister for Multicultural Affairs Minister Stitt said just before in her contribution, we are developing law that is a consequence of really deep consultation and engagement, work that is being done in good faith for a proper purpose, to make sure that balance is struck. Making sure that we develop safe protest laws is a process that does not, in and of itself, hang upon three-word slogans or front pages. It is deep work. It is work that takes place based in relationships and discussions, based in work that meets people where they are to understand the importance of cultural safety, to understand the existence of disadvantage because of membership of, or identification with, a particular group, culture or faith.

The right to protest is a really important one. It is really crucial to the bedrock of democracy. The way in which we create and sustain the balance to assist with that right to protest is the nuance that is inherent in a debate like this. On the one hand, the development of laws that enable Victoria Police to unmask violent and hateful demonstrators like the instances that I referred to earlier is incredibly important not just to protect social cohesion but also to send a really strong, clear message, an

unambiguous message, that we have zero tolerance here in Victoria for interference by extremist thugs. I think that there is nobody from any kind of multicultural background who would not be able to recall an experience of having been singled out, of having been treated differently and for particular cultural groups – depending on the period or the era in which we are, depending upon the place where you are, depending upon the news cycle at any one time – experiences of hate, whether in language or in conduct, and exposure to compromised safety.

I also want to make sure that we are really clear in this debate about the importance of balance in the way in which we are assisting police to do their valuable work. Chief Commissioner Bush has been really clear about the protest permit issue, and he said, amongst other things, that protest permits are not the game breaker, that the majority of people that protest do so peacefully, that they are more than entitled to do so and that Victoria Police supports that. Chief Commissioner Bush also said that in coming to this position Victoria examined what occurs in other jurisdictions and is not of the view that it will make a material difference and that on that basis it was not an avenue that Victoria Police was inclined to pursue.

The other issues that are inherent in the opposition's bill relate to the use of the proposed registration scheme. Let us be clear about the environment in which violent and extremist behaviour occurs. It is based in a flouting of the rules. It is grounded in an inherent disregard for the structures and the systems that would under other circumstances apply. To that end, the vast majority of people who do protest peacefully are more than likely overwhelmingly to be those who apply for protest permits. Violent extremist thugs have little reason to ask for permission to undertake the sort of conduct that they are wilfully prepared to engage in by attending protests or counterprotests simply for purposes or for reasons that include the incitement to criminal behaviour, the compromise to public safety, the causing of injury or the creation of unsafe environments. Just last month in Sydney we saw 30 Nazis take part in a march – in New South Wales, where those permits operate. They handed out flyers and they took to the stage to lead chants – 'Heil Australia', 'Blood and honour'. These are the sorts of lightning-rod phrases and slogans that resonate with very, very particular parts of our community who loathe multiculturalism, who are happy to incite violence.

Neo-Nazis and sovereign citizens like these are not out there applying for protest permits. They have no regard for the law. The whole point of the sovereign citizen movement, or a key point of the sovereign citizen movement, is the virulent opposition to systems such as these. It would be an inherent contradiction for a sovereign citizen on the one hand to say that they refuse to accede to systems and processes, whether through the collection of taxation, the use of currency or the rule of law, and in so protesting say, 'But we will in fact apply for a protest permit.' It is hardly consistent with ideology to agree to be part of a system that is at its heart something you are protesting.

Masks are not a free pass to break the law. Let us be really clear about that: there should be no place to hide in this state if you are determined to stir up hate on the streets. The bill is not actually going to target those violent and extreme protesters. It is almost like a dragnet – it will scoop up so many categories of people who do wear masks for proper, appropriate, legitimate reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with violent or extreme behaviour. It was not that long ago that we sat in this place after we returned to limited sittings and very specific systems of work with face masks on. This is about essential protection, not just in respect of our own health but in respect of the health of others. It is not a new concept, but it is not excluded by this particular bill.

People ought also to be in a position to protect their identity because they are a victim of family violence fearing retribution. Family violence victims should be allowed to attend a protest free from fear, because victim-survivors of family violence experience so much fear, intimidation, coercion and control that this is, as far as the ignorance of the issue, something that really belies the corner-cutting that has taken place in development of this bill.

The laws that we are introducing to Parliament will build on the work that we have already done to improve social cohesion. We want to make sure that as our anti-vilification laws that commence next

week get underway, we are also continuing with the work on social licence, respect, recognition and safety. This bill does not do any of those things.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (14:48): I too would like to rise to make a contribution to the private members bill, Safer Protest with a Registration System and a Ban on Face Coverings Bill 2025. As my colleague Ms Copsey already outlined in her earlier contribution to this debate, the Greens will not be supporting this bill. Victorians have always fought for a fairer state by standing together in public places – sometimes loud, sometimes inconvenient, but always essential. From the first 8-hour day in the world, which was won in Melbourne, to calling on the government to protect rivers and forests and the long, unfinished work of equality and justice, peaceful protest is the engine room of democratic change. It is not a favour the state extends, it is a right the people exercise. This bill seeks to tip the balance away from that right. It seeks to create a police-run protest registration regime and criminalises face coverings at protests with limited carve-outs. It widens the doorway to move-on and exclusion-type orders. It will chill peaceful assembly and burden those least powerful in our community. For those reasons, and because the bill does not satisfy the charter's proportionality standard, the Greens cannot support it.

Let us take some time now to run through these issues one by one. The charter test – section 16 of Victoria's charter protects the rights of every person to peaceful assembly and freedom of association. These are not ornamental words; they are binding human rights that require public authorities, including the Victoria Police and this Parliament, to act compatibly with them and to limit them only where demonstrably justified under section 7(2). The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission explains that section 16 protects the freedom to gather, pursue common goals and protest, gather or meet, whether in public or in private. That right belongs to everyone. Under section 7(2) the proportionality test asks us to justify any limit to:

- the nature of the right; and
- the importance of the purpose of the limitation; and
- the nature and extent of the limitation; and
- the relationship between the limitation and its purpose; and
- any less restrictive means reasonably available to achieve ...

the same end.

On each of these tests the bill fails. The next one – registration is a permit by stealth, and it would chill free speech. The premise of compulsory registration is that the state should be empowered to licence dissent in advance. Human rights law protects peaceful protest even when it is temporarily disruptive of traffic – for example, such disruption does not make a protest unpeaceful. Criminalising tactics used in nonviolent direct action and requiring prior permissions are classic forms of authoritarian overreach. Requiring registration creates a chilling effect. People fear being identified, recorded or burdened with conditions they cannot meet, so they stay home. That is precisely what a democratic society should guard against.

We are told by the opposition that the bill is needed to 'give police tools'. Well, let us listen to police leaders on this point, shall we? Victoria's Chief Commissioner of Police has said publicly he does not support a permit system for protests. When the state's most senior police officer says a permit model is unnecessary and undesirable, but this bill proceeds with that regardless, I can only infer that the opposition is wilfully deaf. Let me be very clear: Victoria Police already have extensive arrest and search powers and even more powers in designated areas declared under the Control of Weapons Act 1990. These areas can be declared on a planned or unplanned basis by the chief commissioner. Recent declared areas have covered large CBD blocks. Once declared, police and PSOs already have existing powers. I will repeat that to make it clear: police and PSOs already have existing powers to stop and search people and vehicles without a warrant in public places, seize any suspected weapons, require people to disclose their identity and require people to remove masks – yes, this power already exists, which begs the question why this bill has been brought forward in this place and why the

government will be bringing forward their bill later this year. Police are able to use these powers in addition to ordinary arrest and evidence-gathering powers for any criminal offending, such as offences of assault, property damage and incitement to violence, to name just a few.

It is also important to be precise about move-on powers in and around designated places. Under section 6 of the Summary Offences Act 1966 in Victoria, police and PSOs at designated places can direct a person to leave a public place where they reasonably suspect risks like breach of the peace or danger to safety. However, move-on powers cannot be used merely because a person is lawfully protesting. Protest activity per se is not a ground for a move-on, noting that police may still intervene where specific criminal offences are reasonably suspected. In short, Victoria has already granted police strong powers to mitigate risks and maintain safety at protests. Indeed the Greens would argue that many of these existing powers go too far without introducing a new generalised permit regime for protests or broad mask bans.

In terms of addressing community concerns about violence and hate, let me be clear: violent conduct at protests is unacceptable, antisemitism and Islamophobia are unacceptable and racial hatred is unacceptable, but we have the legal tools to respond to violence and vilification already. We do not need to criminalise peaceful assembly or force people to pre-register with police. The Australian Human Rights Commission reminds us that police powers are already very wide to respond where problematic behaviour occurs. Let us use them lawfully, proportionately and with human rights at the centre.

Let us consider masks and face coverings. The bill mask ban provisions look at a first glance like a neat answer to isolated instances of violence or anonymity, but broad prohibitions are a blunt instrument. The Human Rights Law Centre has cautioned that mask bans can harm vulnerable groups: people masking for health or disability reasons, immunocompromised Victorians, workers seeking to avoid employer retaliation for lawful participation, survivors of family violence or harassment who must protect their identity and communities who have legitimate fears of targeted online abuse. Narrow religious exemptions cannot fix the broader rights harm to privacy, expression and assembly. The better answer, the obvious answer and the available answer is to enforce existing offences against violent or hateful conduct, not to criminalise the act of covering one's face. We all condemn violence – antisemitism, Islamophobia and all forms of hate – but conflating hateful conduct with protest activity is simply wrong. Offensive or violent acts are already unlawful and can be prosecuted, as I have outlined in detail above. Banning masks and enforcing registration will not prevent an individual intent on violence; it will, however, deter thousands of peaceful people from attending a rally at all. In a democracy we should not be trading off these rights. The Human Rights Law Centre *Protest in Peril* report charts two decades of creeping restrictions on protest across Australia. Vague offences, high penalties, specific protests and specific laws – these trends have drawn criticism from the United Nations experts, who warn that criminalising non-violent direct action is specifically anti-democratic. Surely as we look around the world, particularly now, why would we want to shrink our democratic spaces?

Let us now consider the disproportionate impacts of a bill such as this and ask: who bears the cost? Registration schemes and mask bans do not affect everyone equally. These include those who work in jobs that depend on employers' goodwill, First Nations communities, migrants and refugees, climate activists and students, women escaping violence, LGBTIQ+ communities who have faced harassment – these are the people who most need the shield of anonymity and the freedom to gather without pre-clearance. A system that compels identification and advance notice will suppress their voices first. That is not theoretical. The Human Rights Law Centre's evidence base shows how laws such as these skew participation and shrink civic space. Mask bans will be hard to enforce fairly. I mean, how do you distinguish a person masking because they are immunocompromised and those that have a fear of doxing from a person concealing identity for unlawful reasons? How can police officers make those distinctions at scale and in real time across thousands of people? They cannot. The likely result is selective enforcement among marginalised groups, black and brown communities, who

always bear the brunt of this. A recent Human Rights Law Centre analysis underscored that blanket mask bans risk penalising the many for the acts of the few and are not a proportionate response under human rights law.

As I finish my contribution, I note that now of all times, when we look across the world and see democracy under pressure, the mark of a healthy, confident democracy is not that we fear disruption in a knee-jerk fashion but that we can absorb it without lurching to overreach. The registration scheme in this bill is a permit system by stealth, and the mask ban is a sweeping limit that will fall heaviest on vulnerable people. As a member of the Victorian Greens, it is useful for me to reflect that the Greens were founded on four pillars: ecological sustainability, social justice, grassroots democracy, and peace and nonviolence. This bill undermines at least three of them. Peaceful protest is the practical expression of grassroots democracy – ordinary people assembling to be heard. Peaceful protest is also an instrument of social justice. It is the way communities press for fair treatment when institutions fall short, and it is inseparable from our commitment to peace and nonviolence. We change society not through force or fear but through collective, nonviolent action in public. A registration regime and broad mask bans chill that tradition. They would not make Victoria more peaceful, they would make it more silent. Our task is to safeguard the nonviolent means by which people seek change, not to legislate those rights away.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (15:02): My assessment of this bill is that it is a retrofit from a press release – they tried to work backwards – or perhaps it was a meme or a social media tile, because there is no substance to it. I can kind of see the strategy, and it is disappointing because that strategy is pure politics and actually has nothing about safety at its heart. It is about saying ‘We want a safe Victoria’ without doing the hard work to get there. At the outset, if they are going to present a narrative that they care about these things, I would start by pointing out that those opposite opposed – they voted against – the government’s anti-vilification laws, which is frankly out of step with everything they are purporting to try and stand for through their empty words and this flimsy bill.

Enver Erdogan interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: There is form in this regard, Minister. I agree with that. I will spend a bit of time just touching on the anti-vilification laws, because they came about in the way you should legislate: through consultation, through talking to people on the ground, through consulting with police and through consulting with courts and working out what actually might make a difference so that you can stand up and say ‘We want to send a strong message’ but back that up with laws that are actually enforceable and work. The laws about anti-vilification introduced a new criminal offence of serious vilification, and this was something that, as a former Attorney-General, I know was really important to those that have been subjected to discrimination, hate speech and fearful conduct in their communities. They wanted to see consequences and they wanted the threshold lower, and we delivered on that. Again, these new offences and reforms commenced last month. It is a sigh of relief for those that worked so hard to ensure that there was a response to those that incited hatred and threatened physical harm against others just because of their faith, their appearance or those they loved. We have also got the civil scheme coming into effect very soon, strengthening the existing protections against vilification and providing more options and remedies where people have been harmed. Again, it is lost on me how we have an opposition who is presenting a bill like this and saying it has a similar purpose to the bill that they chose to oppose.

This bill, in its 18 pages, does nothing to counter hate or protect communities that need it. Instead, it sets out, as I said, points on a web page or perhaps a press release. I think it is called the five-point plan – wishy-washy, empty statements on the Liberal’s website. As part of the five points or the five sentences, the opposition promised to introduce the registration and authorisation of public protests, introduce protest move-on laws and exclusion powers and make face coverings at protests an offence, which they have tried to pick up in this bill.

I will start with the protest permits proposal. Victoria Police have sufficient powers to do their job, including enforcement of offences such as trespass, obstruction of roads and violence. I do not believe much thought has really gone through to the workability of these provisions in the bill. I was here to listen to Ms Shing's views on the fact that the very conduct you want to stop is committed by people that are unlikely to check a box on a website or sign up for approval for wanting to go out and cause disruption. I would go further in that the experience of Victoria Police right now is that they have good engagement with a lot of the leaders of the protest movements, regardless of what the cause might be, I will exclude your extreme people that purely come to disrupt, but most of the protests that occur in Melbourne actually have engagement with police, and there is a free flow of information.

If you introduce a permit system, what you could potentially do is discourage those conversations out of fear that you might be told, 'No, you can't.' So I do not think it would discourage people coming to protest, but it would drive underground that free flow of information and the police being able to respond appropriately for their own safety and the safety of the people that have come to protest. Frankly, that is what the job of police is. They do not have a view on the cause. They are there to protect safety of the people who are participating and people who are just going about ordinarily in the city at the same time, for instance. I am concerned that a permit system really would discourage those open conversations, not to mention that we have a new Chief Commissioner of Police who, frankly, is out there on the streets. He has made Melbourne his home. He is really getting to understand it. He is committed to community safety; he has made this his number one priority. And I think the community is getting right behind the chief commissioner and the police. But we have an opposition who have got form in undermining public officials. This is not the first time they have done it. But rather than listening to Victoria Police, rather than working with them and seeking advice from them, they are basically just saying, 'Oh, we don't really care what they think. We're just going to create a bill that asks them to do something that they don't think will work.' That is not usually how the Liberals operate, I have got to say. They usually say that they support police and are advised by police and want to give police the resources and the tools and the legislation that works for them. Well, this is in contradiction to some of that past practice and those empty words.

I just want to touch on face coverings at public protests. I picked up the bill from the centre table, and I thought there were some pages missing, because part 4 deals with offences and it merely says:

A person participating in a public protest must not wear a face covering other than for religious purposes.

Full stop – that is it. And:

A police officer may direct a person participating in a public protest who is wearing a face covering other than for religious purposes to remove the covering while participating in the public protest.

Honestly, I thought I should get another copy. I wondered where the other pages were, because as someone who has spent a lot of time crafting laws and seeking advice on how to make sure that those laws are effective, this is nonsense. Not only that, I do not think you can apply this law; I honestly do not. You need much more detail in legislation for police to be able to apply a law. Our job as legislators is to craft laws, but you have got to give enough detail as to how it is going to work in practice. What is a religious purpose? I do not know. There is no definition. It is unworkable. There is no account of vulnerable cohorts. There are no exclusions for people that have health issues, have a genuine reason for their –

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: Respirators are a great example. There is nothing in here to protect the community. It is so incredibly empty that it is offensive. At the outset, as I said, this is working backwards from a social media post, because what I think the Liberals want to do and what I would ask Mr Mulholland to explain in their suggestion around splitting the bill – and it is not for me to talk about the Liberal strategy, but I would like him to refute this – is how this is about a strategy of splitting the bill because the government have said that they will ban face coverings. We have said we will do

that, but we are doing the work to make sure it is effective, to make sure it is targeting those that come with violence – examples are your black-balaclava types, where police have got issues in identifying those people that cause intimidation and hate on the streets. The feedback from police is it would be useful to identify some of those, frankly, scary people that are causing harm in the community. That does not mean that we are going to sign up and say, yes, we agree with the coalition's bill that is so poorly drafted and has so many unintended consequences. But it gives them an opportunity to say, 'We wanted to go first. We were out there saying how tough on crime we are, and Labor opposed.' That is what I am expecting is probably actually being drafted now. I reckon there is a ready-to-go –

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: The press release was drafted weeks ago, but the social media ties will be, probably with all our faces, 'They don't care about safety in the community.' That is the only reason I can see that the bill is drafted in the way it is – because there is no substance, there is no strategy, there is no impact, there is no care for the community. It is a stunt. And I would ask Mr Mulholland to explain why he is proposing to split the bill, even though I understand that the Office of the Chief Parliamentary Counsel were not given enough notice to be able to do it anyway. Even if we were able to get past the second-reading today, I understand that you guys would have to adjourn because you would not be able to bring on your instruction motion to split the bill, which can only go to my suggestion, which you are welcome to refute, that this is a stunt. You are trying to bring the Labor members in to vote against the stunt so you can turn around and say, 'Oh, actually, look how they don't care about community safety.'

So, Mr Mulholland, please explain your strategy for splitting the bill, because we are opposing both elements of your bill, and we are opposing them because they will not work. In fact the bill could cause harm. In fact it is unenforceable and probably subject to challenge. Police did not ask for it. You have not done the hard work. You are ostracising people who legitimately have the right to protest. This is all in the name of politics, and it is disgraceful. I look forward to your social media memes.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (15:14): I was really getting into the contributions there by the Leader of the Government and then realised that I was indeed next on the list, so thank you very much for bringing me back to the room.

I rise to speak in, well, strong opposition to the Safer Protest with a Registration System and a Ban on Face Coverings Bill 2025. The bill from those opposite does not make our state safer. It does not make protest safer, and it does not reflect the advice of Victoria Police or the lived experience, truly, of communities across Victoria. The Allan Labor government is absolutely committed to protecting the rights of Victorians to protest safely, peacefully and free from hate. We recognise that protest is at the very heart of our democracy, from the land rights movement to the campaign for marriage equality. The right to gather, to speak up and to call for change has been central to who we are as Victorians. But we also know that this right must be exercised in a way that keeps people safe. That is why our government is developing a balanced and evidence-based package of safe protest laws, reforms that target the small amount of violent and hateful actors who threaten public safety and social cohesion without burdening the vast majority of Victoria's peaceful protesters. The bill before us today fails that basic test. It is not evidence-based, it is not supported by police and it punishes the wrong people. The centrepiece of this bill is a protest registration and authorisation scheme – in other words, a permit system. But as former chief commissioner Shane Patton has made clear, this idea just simply does not work. In July, when asked about similar proposals in New South Wales, he said:

We've had a look at it, and it's not something we're going to drive towards ... We've had a look at other jurisdictions that do that, and it's not the game breaker.

The majority of people that protest, do so peacefully and they are more than entitled to, and we support that.

On ABC Radio Melbourne he reiterated the same point that a registration scheme is not something that will make a material difference. That is advice from Victoria Police – not a political statement, not a talking point. That is an operational reality from the people responsible for keeping Victorians

safe. A protest permit scheme might sound good on paper to some, but in practice it only creates bureaucracy, not safety. The people that we are all most worried about – neo-Nazis, sovereign citizens, extreme agitators – are not going to fill in a registration form. They are not going to submit an itinerary or wait for approval before marching. As has already been shown in New South Wales, with 30 neo-Nazis able to march in Sydney last month handing out flyers and leading some really hate-fuelled chants, their registration laws did nothing to stop them. This bill will not stop extremists. It will simply tie up police, councils and community groups in red tape while giving false comfort that something meaningful has been done.

Perhaps even more concerning is how this bill will criminalise ordinary Victorians exercising their democratic rights. It reintroduces protest move-on and exclusion powers, which this Labor government repealed back in 2015 because of their effect on peaceful protest and industrial action. It goes even further to create a new offence for wearing a face covering at a protest. No-one on this side of the chamber believes a mask should be a free pass to break the law. There should be no place for people to hide if they are using anonymity to spread hate or incite violence. But that is not what this bill does. This bill makes it a crime for a person to wear a mask at a protest even if they are protecting their health – something we all learned the importance of during the pandemic – or are a victim-survivor of family violence protecting their identity from an abusive ex-partner or community member. It makes it a crime if they are celebrating pride or cultural identity, wearing costume or creative expression, as thousands of Victorians do every year at Midsumma. In other words, this bill would criminalise Midsumma. It would criminalise a woman who marches in solidarity with family violence survivors who chose to cover her face for safety. It would criminalise an immunocompromised Victorian wearing a mask to protect their health or the health of those they love. Our Labor government here is taking a very different approach. We are preparing targeted, proportionate reforms that will give police the powers they need to respond to violent or hateful conduct without undermining human rights or democratic freedoms.

Last December we made a clear commitment to deal with violent, hateful and dangerous participants in public demonstrations by prohibiting the flags and symbols of listed terrorist organisations, empowering police to unmask violent or hateful individuals who attend protests and hide behind these masks. We are addressing the use of dangerous attachment devices like those that have endangered both protesters and police officers. We are also committed to introducing new laws to protect the right of people to gather and pray free from fear, harassment or intimidation, ensuring that faith communities, women and minority groups can come together. Since then, targeted consultation has occurred with Victoria Police as well as key faith, legal, union and community stakeholders to make sure the law gets the balance right. Those laws will be introduced very soon, I can assure those in this chamber. Unlike this bill from those opposite, the bill that we will introduce will very much make a difference, because we have listened to the experts. Victoria Police have said that a permit system is unnecessary and is unhelpful. We have listened to communities across Victoria who want to be safe on our streets, who want to stand up against hate and who also value their right to peaceful assembly.

The truth is social cohesion is not built through overpolicing or red tape, it is built by standing up to hate and fiercely defending inclusion, and this government has already taken some of the strongest action in the country to do just that. Earlier this year we passed landmark reforms to strengthen Victoria's anti-vilification and social cohesion laws. These new laws protect more Victorians from the most extreme forms of hate speech and conduct. They introduce new criminal offences for serious vilification, including inciting hatred or threatening physical harm against someone because of who they are or the faith they follow. Those offences commenced on 20 September this year and strengthen civil protections which give people more options for remedy and resolution. Others will come into force on 30 June next year. For the first time, these protections cover disability, gender identity, sex characteristics, sexual orientation and personal association, because hate does not stop at one attribute – frankly, it is intersectional and so should our laws be.

These are real reforms that make our communities safer and fairer. Yet when those laws came before this chamber, the Liberals and the Nationals did not support them. If the opposition were truly serious about tackling hate and violence, they would have backed those laws, but they did not – because of division in their own party room. When they talk about safety, what they really mean is control; they want to control who can speak, where they can gather and what they can wear. It is an approach that runs against the grain of what Victoria and Victorians stand for: fairness, equality and respect for difference. Victorians do not want a government or opposition that tells them when they can raise their voice, they want leaders who trust them and who know that ordinary people standing together in solidarity are not a threat to safety but a sign of a healthy democracy. Our state has a proud record of peaceful protest movements that have changed our history, from the women who marched for equal pay to the climate rallies led by young people demanding a safer future. These movements were not registered and they were not approved; they were driven by conviction, driven by courage and driven by the belief that democracy only works when people are free to participate in it.

That is what this bill fails to understand. It mistakes dissent for danger, and it seeks to solve division not through unity but through restriction. It is hard to take seriously their sudden interest in safety when they have had a chance to support real protections and have chosen to walk away. Victoria has a proud record of balancing rights and responsibilities. We can protect the right to protest while ensuring that hate and violence are never tolerated. That is exactly what our new safe protest laws will do. They will empower police to unmask violent and hateful demonstrators, like the neo-Nazis who have been protesting outside on the streets of this Parliament, and they will strengthen protections for many ordinary Victorians who simply want to be heard. They want to stand together, and they want to stand up for what is right.

The opposition's bill is not only unnecessary, to my mind, it is dangerous – and for so many reasons. But beginning first and foremost, it is contrary to the advice provided by Victoria Police and very publicly by the former Chief Commissioner of Police, Shane Patton. What we also know is that this bill is contrary to human rights and, foundationally, that it is contrary to the values of a fair and democratic Victoria. Every Victorian should be able to gather safely, to march for equality, to pray in peace, to call for climate action or demand justice or so many other causes that I too have stood proudly with my fellow Victorians for. I would hope that to do that – to march for equality, to pray in peace, to call for climate action or to demand justice – you can do that in this state without fear of violence or intimidation. That is what Victorian Labor is building – a state where social cohesion is strengthened, not undermined; where diversity is celebrated, not criminalised; and where safety and freedom go hand in hand.

We will always condemn hate, racism and extremism. I am thinking to the work that I do as the co-chair of the Anti-Racism Taskforce. I think about the members of that committee and what they want to see for the future of social harmony and social cohesion in our state and how they talk to me of the lines of fear that now entirely engulf some members of our multicultural community. I know that their aspirations for themselves and their communities and their children are something that we should all strive for in this place, a place where those here in Parliament want to defend the rights of Victorians to speak up, to assemble and to be part of a proud, democratic life and history of this state, because for so many of them the simple act of speaking up for what they view as right and just and fair for them and their children is something that they did not have before they found a home right here in Victoria, and that is exactly what they want to continue to protect and defend. This bill does not do that. It creates red tape, it punishes the wrong people and it ignores, frankly, the experts.

I am very much looking forward to seeing the bill, when it comes to this place, on the reforms that we are presenting that will make protests genuinely safer without silencing the voices of Victorians. I look forward to discussing that, as I do with many significant pieces of legislation, with leaders of the faith community, with representatives of the Anti-Racism Taskforce that I lead and also with other members of faith and community groups right across Northern Metropolitan Region. I am going to absolutely take the opportunity to speak to them about what we hope that bill will deliver for the safety and

security of Victorians but also the safety and security of democratic life here in our state. It is for those reasons that I look forward to the government presenting the bill very soon, as I said earlier, and that I stand here today unable to support this bill.

With my final time on the clock I will say that I do encourage other members of this chamber to join me in opposing the bill before us.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Gaelle Broad): I would just like to acknowledge a former member, Neil Lucas, in the gallery. He was a member of the Victorian Parliament from 1996 to 2002. It is good to see you.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (15:29): Today I rise to contribute to the Safer Protest with a Registration System and a Ban on Face Coverings Bill 2025. This bill, as proposed by Mr Davis, seems designed to have the government, civil society and regular Victorians spend more time in court. You may as well call it the ‘clog up the court system bill’. The supposed five-point plan of those opposite involves (1) introducing a protest registration system, (2) banning face coverings at protests without lawful excuse, (3) ending the autonomy of those who commit violence, (4) re-establishing move-on laws and (5) increasing police powers. Hang on – I thought it was a five-point plan, but there you go. To continue on, there is (6) introducing exclusion orders for repeat offenders, (7) removing serial troublemakers off the streets, (8) at the same time safeguarding free speech for lawful protesters and (9) protecting those who do the right thing. Just a month ago, our criminal anti-violence laws came into effect, and the opposition is doing this, which again I want to make clear is ironic given they opposed the bill. But why have they now introduced this bill when a month ago they opposed our government’s bill? I think it is because of division in their party room. It is that simple.

The Allan Labor government is committed to protecting the rights of Victorians to peacefully and safely protest. That is why we will be introducing laws very soon to strengthen safety at protests. Our laws, unlike the laws proposed by those opposite today, will focus on people driving hate and violence at protests. We have seen it in our communities, and we know who they are. I know in my community of Southern Metro, in particular the community that has the largest Jewish population in the country, many have expressed concern to me about the pro-Palestinian rallies that have been occurring. These rallies still keep taking place, despite the temporary peace, having all too often descended into hate. In New South Wales we saw the Stand for Palestine Australia group plan a ‘glory to our martyrs’ event in the Sydney suburb of Bankstown. Shockingly, we saw the ‘Glory to Hamas’ messages on billboards and even more disgraceful ‘Oct 7, do it again’ messages painted on at least two walls in Melbourne. As the Premier said, this was definitely:

... not in the spirit of wanting peace.

It is just so deeply wrong and offensive.

Those are the Premier’s words, and I could not agree more. And the Prime Minister said it was abhorrent and that the AFP would work with the Victoria Police to bring those responsible to justice.

If those opposite wanted to make a difference, they would have supported our harsher laws. They would have supported the laws that actually make a difference – not random bureaucracy, not more clogged courts. Even the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police says we do not need them. Our government is committed to dealing with violent, hateful and dangerous participants in public demonstrations. We are prohibiting the flags and symbols of listed terrorist organisations, and our legislation will actually empower the police to unmask violent, hateful and dangerous individuals who attend protests and cowardly hide behind those masks, and addressing the issue of dangerous attachment devices. We also committed to introducing new laws to protect the right of people to gather and pray, free from fear, harassment and intimidation. Targeted consultation occurred with police and selected faith, legal, government, communities and union stakeholders on what the safe protest laws would look like, and we will introduce those laws very soon.

Government recognises that the right to protest is a critical part of any democracy and that we need to get the balance right. We know that this bill needs to get it right. I had the opportunity, as part of preparing for this speech, to consider varying views of people in this place on these laws, and while I do not agree with all of what has been said, I do want to associate myself with a line that Mr Ettershank said. It pertains to this bill. He said:

In Australia the right to protest and assemble is protected under international law and is an integral part of a functioning democracy. This right comes from the implied freedom of political communication found in our constitution.

I know how important the rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of speech are. I have used them countless times after countless times in my career as a union organiser, union secretary and before that a rank-and-file union member and delegate. That is why it is so crucial that we get this done right. Our laws will allow Victoria Police to unmask violent and hateful demonstrators like those thug neo-Nazis, who are unwelcome on our streets – those Nazis who crash press conferences and run around with their black masks. Our laws will help protect our social cohesion and the right of Victorians to protest peacefully and safely without interference from extremist thugs. The opposition's bill is contrary to the advice of Victoria Police and will infringe on the rights of ordinary Victorians, and that is why we will not be supporting this bill.

The Allan Labor government is committed to curbing violent protests in our streets and city. In July this year, the Premier announced that we would establish an Anti-Hate Taskforce, a collaborative initiative between our government and Victoria Police to prevent vilification and hate speech against our most vulnerable groups. This built upon the strengthening of legislation in the landmark Justice Legislation Amendment (Anti-vilification and Social Cohesion) Bill 2024, passed earlier this year. The commissioning of the Lekakis review, also referred to as the multicultural review, was announced in December 2024. Intended to address ways in which our government could strengthen support for our diverse multicultural communities, this review was comprehensive and far reaching: 641 Victorians had their say in 57 in-person or online consultations, with 157 submissions received and 41 recommendations published. Critically, it affirmed our commitment to social cohesion here in Victoria. The Anti-Hate Taskforce, commencing in July this year, began their work by updating the Premier on how Victoria Police plans to operationalise the criminal components of the Justice Legislation Amendment (Anti-vilification and Social Cohesion) Act 2025, providing progress and updates on local escalation and helping meetings to occur within the Jewish community. This commenced its operations earlier this year, working closely with our government, local councils, the Department of Justice and Community Safety and Victoria Police to promote the safety of the Jewish community and to combat antisemitism and is updating the Premier on the progress of community consultation and the development of legislation for increased police powers to stamp out extreme and violent protest.

It is a crime to promote hate and vilification against other Victorians based on their culture, ethnicity or religion, and through the anti-vilification and social cohesion bill in 2024 the Allan Labor government has made the way clear for the police to stamp out this disgusting behaviour. The bill increases protections for the rights, safety and dignity of all classes within the protected attribute group, whether this is in regard to disability, gender identity, race, religious belief or activity, sex or sex characteristics, sexual orientation or personal association with anyone holding these protected attributes.

We understand and respect the need for peaceful protest in this state. Section 16 of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities protects the right to peacefully assemble and the freedom to associate. Victorian law does not contradict this, nor does the Allan Labor government seek to contradict this, but our government does not condone violent public demonstrations promoting discrimination and harassment. Hate does not belong in Victoria, and violence does not have a place in our society. The Allan Labor government has already committed to banning flags and symbols of listed terrorist organisations in public, giving Victoria Police more powers and filling in any of the

gaps in Commonwealth and anti-terror legislation. These listed terrorist organisations include Hamas, Hezbollah and white nationalist and racist, violent, extreme right-wing groups. We have committed to banning the use of face masks at protests to conceal identities and shield agitators from crowd control measures. To touch on the point that the opposition has raised in their proposed bill, this ban is specifically to penalise individuals wearing a face covering who are refusing to cooperate with police or who police have reason to believe are committing a criminal act. There are clear provisions in this legislation for religious, cultural and health exemptions. This ban is not to punish those who use face masks to protect their health or, as the opposition has suggested, to punish those displaying pride through masks at Midsumma or other events celebrating LGBTQIA+ Victorians. This is a ridiculous suggestion from the opposition, and blatant fearmongering.

We have committed to banning the use of glue, rope, chains, locks and other dangerous attachment devices that protesters have used to cause maximum disruption and endanger others, including themselves. This is not the only legislation we have passed to protect vulnerable communities from hate speech and rhetoric. In October 2023 we passed the Summary Offences Amendment (Nazi Salute Prohibition) Bill 2023, banning the use of the Nazi salute as well as other gestures and symbols used by the Nazi party. This also gave Victoria Police powers to direct a person to remove the display of the Nazi symbol or gesture; to arrest or lay charges against an individual for doing such; and to apply to the Magistrates' Court to search premises and seize property displaying a Nazi symbol or Nazi gesture. This is connected to a display offence, allowing police to seize symbols that may be publicly displayed in the near future or have already been displayed at a march or a protest.

This bill also imposes penalties of \$23,000 or 12 months imprisonment or both for anyone intentionally displaying these symbols or gestures. Several high-profile radical extremist individuals have been charged under this legislation, preventing them from spreading their vile extremist rhetoric throughout the community. It is clear that our government does not tolerate violent, dangerous or extremist behaviour at protests, so we will not be supporting this bill, because we are already doing the work to stamp out violent extremist misbehaviour and protest in our streets. The Premier, the Minister for Police and the Minister for Multicultural Affairs have worked tirelessly to draft and introduce legislation restoring social cohesion in our state, and the Allan Labor government as well as the Andrews Labor government before that have been doing the work to stamp out violent extremist behaviour at protests since 2016.

This bill seeks to bring in laws against the wearing of face coverings at protests and laws that will allow police to identify individuals or groups of individuals whose intent is violence rather than a genuine desire to protest and demonstrate, providing police with powers to intervene to prevent individuals or groups with violent intent from entering a designated area or areas, with a requirement for local government to consult with Victoria Police prior to providing permits for certain types of protests. Passed in 2016, the Crimes Legislation Amendment Act 2016 is doing just that, bringing in stronger penalties against those who commit violent acts at public events. At the end of the day, the Allan Labor government completely rejects violence and extremism, and we reject division and hate in our communities. We have been doing all the work for years, demonstrating our commitment to protecting our most vulnerable communities. We have been empowering our tireless police force through a series of legislative acts over the past decade to protect these communities and to stamp out extremism and violence in Victoria.

I know how important this work is to Victorians, and particularly to my community in Southern Metropolitan Region. I proudly represent a diverse and proud range of multicultural communities across my electorate, including a large, historic and proud Jewish community, which has been exposed to rising antisemitic activity and rhetoric over the past few years. This bill, brought in by the opposition as a fearmongering tactic, is entirely unnecessary and, frankly, poorly considered. I will not be supporting this bill today, because our diverse, multicultural Victorian communities deserve reforms and legislation that work – reforms and legislation that community organisations and multicultural groups support – not increased bureaucracy, not overburdened court systems and not unnecessary

fearmongering. I would urge the opposition to instead support us in targeted, effective consultation and the work that we are doing to protect these communities rather than exploit the safety of these communities in what appears to be a blatant attempt to score political points.

This bill brought by the opposition does not align with the consultation engaged in this year prior to the introduction of the Justice Legislation Amendment (Anti-vilification and Social Cohesion) Act 2025; it does not align with the recommendations from our parliamentary inquiry into anti-vilification protections in 2021, supported by the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, the Centre for Multicultural Youth, the Islamic Council of Victoria, the Law Institute of Victoria, the Online Hate Prevention Institute and a diverse range of multicultural faiths, LGBTQIA+ and other community organisations; and it does not align with the experience of our police force, who do not need to be facing more bureaucracy in their work to protect our communities. This bill contradicts the wishes of our diverse protected communities. Once again, the Allan Labor government and I will not be supporting the bill in this chamber today.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (15:44): We have had an interesting debate, mostly entire slabs of text repeated by every single Labor MP, dragging on this debate to avoid a vote. That is literally exactly what we saw –

Members interjecting.

Evan MULHOLLAND: You can interject, as Tom ‘Speaking Notes’ McIntosh suggests, but it was the case that we heard entire slabs of text. They spoke about the multicultural review; over in the other chamber right now they are ignoring recommendations from that. They said, ‘Here’s what the Chief Commissioner of Police said,’ over and over again, the exact same quote by each and every one of them. You know who they did not mention? Mr Cheeseman, the acting commissioner, I believe, on the day, who went out after the worst day of protest we ever saw in our CBD. Do you know what was not mentioned by that side of the chamber? Who he blamed for it: issue-motivated groups on the left. We heard every other explanation as to who is causing trouble in our CBD except for that one. Not once was that repeated by those on that side of the chamber, and you have got to wonder why. This bill goes a long way to resolving a lot of the issues we have. Who on earth comes to the CBD with rocks, with trolley poles, with chains? I mean, it is a good thing that some of these Sunday protests have ceased. But we can see with the continuous protests in the CBD the undercurrent, underbelly of those protests in the CBD and continuing to protest. They miss their Sunday protest ritual. They are still coming to the CBD to cause trouble, and they are still cowardly behind masks. Show your face. Do not abuse police. We saw several police injured, hospitalised.

Again, this government does not want a way forward, and we have seen it with several pieces of legislation. We saw it with the child safety rapid review. Most of its recommendations for legislation that were due to be tabled by the end of October – not tabled. Clearly it is not in a hurry for urgent rapid review. Again, masks – the Premier wants to move on this. Where is the legislation? We have not seen it. We have not seen it from this government. It is too busy with other things that are clearly more urgent. What could be more urgent than banning masks at protests? What could be more urgent when our police are being injured? What could be more urgent when we know – they will not say it, some of them will not say it – issue-motivated groups on the left are disrupting our CBD. Businesses are going out of business because there are groups that are causing issues. We had masked neo-Nazis marching through the CBD performing hateful salutes – around 100 masked protesters dressed in black moving through the CBD spreading fear and disorder, a masked mob – and this was a disgrace, with an attack on Miznon restaurant on a Friday night terrorising diners, while a nearby synagogue was firebombed on the same evening, and of course we saw rocks hurled at police, Australian flags burned and violent confrontations in the CBD. These are not isolated incidents. They represent an alarming rise and pattern of hate and intimidation turning Melbourne streets into a battleground against police that has left police and the public exposed.

We have offered a step forward, to split the bill. If the government does not support the protest part of the bill, it can support a ban on masks at protests. Where is the legislation, Premier? That is what we want to know. Where is the Premier's urgency when we see police hospitalised? I mean, seriously. Again, this bill should be supported, and I call on the Premier to act with a bit of urgency when we have got a CBD in tatters, businesses on their knees and people not coming into the city on a weekend due to the chaos that the Premier has unleashed.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (15): 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, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Noes (23): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, 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

Motion negatived.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (15:56): I move:

That the consideration of notice of motion, general business, 1117, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Cohealth

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (15:57): I rise to move my notice of motion 1118 regarding Cohealth. I move:

That this house notes that:

- (1) Cohealth have announced they will end their GP and counselling services in Collingwood, Fitzroy and Kensington in December 2025 and close their Collingwood clinic in 2026;
- (2) this will impact 12,500 community members who receive affordable, wraparound health services at Cohealth;
- (3) community health centres play a critical role in our healthcare system, despite receiving only 0.3 per cent of Victoria's health infrastructure spend;
- (4) Cohealth's closure and reduction in services will be disastrous and will result in increased poverty, disadvantage, poor health and hospital overloading;
- (5) since 2019 Cohealth has requested support from the Victorian government to rebuild their Collingwood health centre, alongside a fully funded build of 50 co-located community homes;
- (6) the community health sector has been saying for years that the Medicare model for funding bulk-billing is not appropriate for the complex services their centres provide;
- (7) Infrastructure Victoria has recommended that the Victorian government increase community health funding to three per cent of their health infrastructure budget;
- (8) operational funding for primary and community health funding is a shared responsibility between federal and state governments;

and calls on the Victorian government to commit, by 30 November 2025, to funding a \$4 million rescue package to save the GP and counselling services at all three centres and a minimum of \$25 million to upgrade the Collingwood building, and to negotiate a shared commitment with the federal government for a long-term funding model for community health.

I quote:

Without Cohealth, I would have no way to access the kind of holistic, wraparound healthcare and support that has helped me survive. Cohealth has been the one consistent and compassionate support in my life through some of my darkest chapters. Please don't let these closures go ahead. The impact on people like me will be devastating.

This is part of correspondence we received from a local resident and client of Cohealth, who has been supported through trauma, depression, anxiety, family violence, a complex rheumatological condition, mobility impairment and rejection from other health services. Their story is one of countless we have heard since the announcement by Cohealth that they would be ending their GP services and closing their Collingwood facility.

In 2019 Cohealth in Collingwood asked for assistance from the government to repair and upgrade their crumbling, leaking community health centre and build 50 co-located community homes at their Collingwood site. They were asking for a government contribution of \$25 million for a project that would benefit the broader community in both a health and a housing crisis. Every year since, that project has been put on the government's radar at budget time, but the government has consistently turned its back on funding this project. I have personally done so. I have personally raised this with the government in my first months in this place, following a visit to Cohealth's Collingwood site with the member for Richmond, where we saw the dilapidated state of the building, which was literally falling apart. There were wide cracks in the walls, which meant that consultations could be heard from the tearoom, and parts of the site even had to be shut down in 2022 due to leaks in the ceiling. Yet repeated requests to the state government for funding have been ignored.

Along with the community, Cohealth has advocated for years to develop 365 Hoddle Street. Over the past few years they have led a dedicated campaign and community consultation process. They have created a public petition to build support and partnered with Unison housing to call for an integrated health and housing hub. They have made submissions to government inquiries and engaged with decision-makers about the urgent need for funding for modern facilities. Despite their efforts, Cohealth have not received the funding needed for this. They have also repeatedly advocated, along with the rest of the community health sector, for increased funding to support their operational costs, which are the responsibility of both the state and federal governments, and yet these calls too have been ignored. In December 2025 GP services at Cohealth's Hoddle Street, Collingwood; Brunswick Street, Fitzroy; and Gower Street, Kensington, sites will end. All other services, such as allied health, will also close at the Collingwood site from mid-2026 but will be relocated to the Fitzroy site. In June 2026 Cohealth Collingwood will close altogether. On Cohealth's website they say:

This is not an easy decision to share. For many years, we have advocated, alongside community, for the funding needed to provide better care from a safer health centre.

We cannot continue delivering services from the Collingwood site and cannot afford the significant upgrades the site needs to give care our staff, clients and communities deserve. Therefore, we are closing the site.

Cohealth's clinics in Collingwood, Fitzroy and Kensington see more than 46,000 patients each year across these three sites. Nearly 70 per cent of these people hold concession cards. The closure of the Collingwood, Fitzroy and Kensington GP clinics will mean tens of thousands of people will now no longer have access to their doctor, with around 25 doctors and counsellors to be made redundant at a time when demand for community health services is at an all-time high.

Patients who attend Cohealth's GP clinics are among the most vulnerable in the community, and there are simply no other options for them to access essential care from GPs. A physician at St Vincent's wrote to us, saying:

To be clear, these people will not be able to find new GPs in Melbourne's inner East; most existing practices are closed to new patients. If the closure of Kensington CoHealth's GP programme is included with the Collingwood and Fitzroy sites, approximately 12,000 of Melbourne's most vulnerable patients will be without a GP. This is simply unacceptable.

While state and federal governments buck-pass and try to absolve themselves of their role in this situation by hiding in the complexity of community health funding, the reality is they do play a key role. Community health funding – both infrastructure and operational funding – is heavily reliant on state government, and Victorian Labor are well aware of this. While Medicare, a federal funding system, supports GP services, fee-for-service Medicare billing does not suit the kind of work that these community health centres deliver, and this is something the federal Labor government are also all too aware of. They smile in front of novelty-sized Medicare cards, pretending to be the champions of universal health care, but have allowed the continued privatisation and erosion of access to primary care that is funded by the government. Both levels of government have failed to address the funding needs of these services despite being well aware of the problems for many years. What makes it particularly galling is that investing in community health is just about the best bang for buck you can get in the health system. The holistic care it provides keeps people well in the community and avoids countless hospital attendances. If all you care about is the return on investment alone in dollar terms, that should be enough incentive to fund these services. For every dollar spent you get over \$14 return in value to the community and benefit to the broader community.

Victoria spends \$27 billion a year on health, and less than 0.5 per cent is directed to community health. Infrastructure Victoria's health report from August this year highlights that, despite providing services to one in 10 Victorians, registered community health receives just 0.3 per cent of the Victorian government's \$2 billion annual health infrastructure budget. The chronic failure to fund community health infrastructure is plain to see. Nearly all community health organisations reported having at least one building in poor condition or close to the end of life. Infrastructure Victoria has recommended that the state government increase community health funding to 3 per cent of the state health infrastructure budget. That is still a very small amount of a massive budget, but it would pay off enormously to invest in these facilities. Then if we look at the services provided, community health program funding is less than 0.5 per cent of the total Victorian health budget, around \$22 per Victorian. This compares to \$3166 per Victorian for hospital care. And while the community health program did not get a cut in absolute terms in the last state budget, the failure to index funding and the growing demand for services mean it was effectively a cut.

Community Health First have been calling for a 10 per cent increase in funding for the community health program, which in relative terms is a tiny amount – \$7.5 million a year. This is just a drop in the \$31 billion state healthcare spend but would provide 60,000 more hours of care, meaning 12,000 more patients would be seen.

On Friday and Saturday last week, there were two public meetings, in Richmond and Kensington, where community members, patients and workers from Cohealth came together to express their opposition to the closure of these services. They told powerful stories about the need for these community health centres in their local communities. Kensington's meeting had over 100 people; Richmond's had over 300. It shows the depth of support for community health that is out there. Our local Greens MPs – Ellen Sandell, MP for Melbourne, and Gabrielle de Vietri, member for Richmond – were there to support the community. Over 5000 people have signed their community petition against the closures. These meetings passed resolutions that I also want to acknowledge, and we have modelled some of our motion on their motions. I want to thank the community for their work on this campaign. The Greens support you. We will continue to fight to save these vital community health services. I really hope that everyone in this chamber supports this motion to acknowledge how important these services are.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:07): I rise to speak on the member for Western Victoria Region's motion on GP services in Victoria at Cohealth's Collingwood clinic site. In doing so I would like to first thank my friend the Minister for Health in the other place, Minister Thomas, for all the hard work she has done to support this sector.

The Allan Labor government has always placed health as a priority, whether it be emergency care, less urgent primary care, community organisations or any other part of our large and complex health

system. This government has always taken seriously the need to invest in these services, and nothing demonstrates this government's commitment to supporting our healthcare sector more than the 2025–26 state budget, which puts investment in frontline care as a top priority. That includes \$9.3 billion for hospital care and the operationalising of nine brand new or expanded hospitals across Victoria. It also invests nearly half a billion dollars in mental health services in Victoria, particularly the mental health and wellbeing services sector, to support those in need.

This year the Allan Labor government are providing around \$31 billion for the health sector because we know how important it is to invest in frontline care for every Victorian, and that includes community health organisations like Cohealth, who provide important care for patients at their Collingwood site. But even more specifically, the Allan Labor government is leading the way on several healthcare initiatives, including when it comes to urgent care clinics. Urgent care clinics are GP-led care centres where Victorians can expect quality attention in situations which are urgent but perhaps not an emergency. This includes treatment for situations ranging from mild infections and burns to suspected fractures and sprains. The budget includes \$27 million for those GP-led urgent care clinics to continue their hard and essential work.

The urgent care clinics that have gone on to benefit Victorians are a result of the collaborative effort of the Allan Labor government and the federal Labor government in Canberra, who are dedicated to delivering these critical services – a collaborative effort which has stood to take pressure off emergency services and hospitals, which were being flooded with less-serious emergency cases, and to take pressure off GPs, who may not be the best to see such urgent cases with their current patient load. These clinics were the missing middle, and they helped our health system all around. This is in no small part thanks to the Victorian Labor government. By taking pressure off primary care-level clinics and emergency wards, they now have regained the capacity to deal with more urgent cases on their waitlist rather than looking after patients who should really be elsewhere.

This motion highlights the importance of Commonwealth and state responsibilities when it comes to funding, and this is something that I would like to briefly expand upon. Australia is of course a federation, with different corners of our health system taken under the wing of different levels of government. The Commonwealth coordinates national healthcare programs and jointly cooperates with the states, which themselves are responsible for such things like hospitals and frontline health services. GP clinics are for the most part, under the current convention and practice, under the purview of the Commonwealth, especially as they relate to Medicare, which is a federal program, not a state-based initiative. This is particularly important when we consider aspects such as funding, grants or subsidies. In this case it is important when we consider the proposals put forward in this motion against the scope of what the Victorian government does and what the Commonwealth is responsible for. For example, this motion makes allusions to the Medicare bulk-billing system. Medicare bulk-billing is a proud achievement of the Hawke Labor government, which fulfilled the mission set out by the Whitlam Labor government of ensuring every Australian, no matter their background or circumstances, would have their essential healthcare needs looked after. I note this because bulk-billing is a federal program. It is not administered, managed or controlled by the Victorian government; it falls outside the scope of this chamber and of this Parliament.

While I am very proud of the legacy built by the Labor government, it is not within our scope to debate and determine the scope of Medicare rebates. What we can control is what the Victorian Labor government do, and I am proud to say that we have continued to deliver the essential services we need in this state, and we have continued to support GPs and similar community health organisations. Last year the Allan Labor government launched a series of grants programs directed towards general practitioners. Specifically, this Labor government committed to investing \$32 million over two years to provide core financial incentives to doctors to become GPs. Around 800 grants of \$40,000 were available, with 400 grants in 2024 and 400 grants in 2025. This was all about supporting doctors to specialise in general practice in order to strengthen the primary care sector and in doing so improve health outcomes for all Victorians. The grants program was designed to help boost the number of GPs

in Victoria in training enrolments and to provide \$10,000 in support to the costs of exams to be undertaken during GP training. This program wraps up at the end of this year, so for anyone hoping to potentially access the scheme, now is the time to try and lock it in. The reason I raise this scheme is to highlight the Allan Labor government's commitments to supporting GPs and the state's network of general practitioners. Another core example is that this government gave exemptions from payroll tax to bulk-billing GPs, starting this financial year. Now if a GP clinic is bulk-billing its patients, those instances are exempt from payroll tax, taking off the burden from these businesses. This government has and will continue to consistently advocate for the best possible deal for our healthcare sector and workers, including investing in staff and frontline care.

Community health organisations play an important role in our healthcare system, and the Allan Labor government continues to provide these organisations with significant funding. Last year we invested \$188 million to support the delivery of care across the state, and we will do more. We will continue to advocate for the Commonwealth to address any concerns around Medicare rebates for patients with complex care needs, which is a core element in this motion here today. We are focused on strengthening care across Victoria's healthcare system, whether it is through our public hospitals or through our community health partners, such as Cohealth's Collingwood site, so that every Victorian can get the essential care they need close to home. Cohealth is an important community health partner organisation that operates clinics in metropolitan Melbourne, delivering essential services at accessible locations for Victorians. Community health organisations and centres such as the Collingwood site deliver a mix of services funded by both state and federal government, such as primary care, alcohol and drug treatments and mental and social support services. That is why this Labor government will continue to advocate for sites such as Collingwood, run by Cohealth.

The Allan Labor government is working to create more connected health systems under the *Health Services Plan* that strengthen across the primary care sector, particularly for those living in rural and regional communities. It is a plan which builds on our commitment to building more resilient and well-resourced health systems. This plan invests in community and local health service networks to ensure people can access care closer to home and where they are in need, with geographic groupings of health services responsible for planning and managing care so that it meets the population health needs of that community. The model formalises stronger connections between specialised health professionals, ensuring every Victorian has access to specialist care expertise when they need it.

The plan outlines a system-wide reform to help meet growing demand in the health system, strengthening consistent access to high-quality care. It focuses on improving communication between services to help support general practices. The relevance of this is to understand that health systems are not only insular or an exclusionary group of independent bodies but rather an extremely holistic network of care, with domino effects across the health system. We saw during the COVID-19 pandemic how quickly overwhelmed frontline care workforces being overrun with the virus led to system-wide issues with pressure and under-resourcing. When we invest in the various aspects of our health system it not only takes pressure off other sectors, it shows how urgent care clinics are taking pressure off GP clinics. But it also delivers more primary care for Victorians, which is the very heart of this motion.

The Allan Labor government is proud of its record when it comes to investing in our health system, and in particular when it comes to supporting community health programs and organisations. We will always put our health systems first and will always advocate for Victorians to get the very best. We will always back in our frontline and primary care services, and we will continue to advocate on behalf of Victorian patients for the Commonwealth government to address any issues with Medicare rebates and those with complex care needs. But they can rest assured that the Allan government is putting them on our extensive GP network first, and we will always fight for more reliable support access for patients at these clinics.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:17): I rise to speak to this motion put to the house by Dr Mansfield – an important motion, I might add, and one that the Liberals and Nationals will not

be opposing. In fact I want to make some points in support of this motion, because I think Mr Berger is confused. I think he in his contribution said that Labor was continuing to advocate for Cohealth at the Collingwood site. Well, Mr Berger, this is the point of this motion, because the GP clinics are closing down and goodness knows what is going to happen to that site. If you actually read the motion properly, it states:

Cohealth have announced they will end their GP and counselling services in Collingwood, Fitzroy and Kensington in December 2025 and close their Collingwood clinic in 2026 ...

The motion goes on to say, concerningly:

this will impact 12,500 community members who receive affordable, wraparound health services at Cohealth; community health centres play a critical role in our healthcare system, despite receiving only 0.3 per cent of Victoria's health infrastructure spend;

Cohealth's closure and reduction in services will be disastrous and will result in increased poverty, disadvantage, poor health and hospital overloading;

since 2019 Cohealth has requested support from the Victorian government to rebuild their Collingwood health centre, alongside a fully funded build of 50 co-located community homes;

the community health sector has been saying for years that the Medicare model for funding bulk-billing is not appropriate for the complex services their centres provide;

Infrastructure Victoria –

and this is the important point I wanted to make –

has recommended that the Victorian government increase community health funding to three per cent of their health infrastructure budget;

operational funding for primary and community health funding is a shared responsibility between federal and state governments ...

The final part of the motion:

... calls on the Victorian government to commit, by 30 November 2025, to funding a \$4 million rescue package to save the GP and counselling services at all three centres and a minimum of \$25 million to upgrade the Collingwood building, and to negotiate a shared commitment with the federal government for a long-term funding model for community health.

I read that in from Dr Mansfield's motion because I think there are some excellent points in it. I want to go to those points in my contribution, because, as the motion says, thousands of vulnerable Victorians will lose access to those very important services.

I made this point yesterday with what was going on at St Vincent's emergency department, which sees a lot of vulnerable patients too. When this service shuts down, where are these vulnerable patients and vulnerable people accessing these vital services going to go? They are going to access the acute system. They are going to end up in our busy EDs. They are going to have an impact on an already overstretched acute health system.

It is something that the government fails to understand as well – that when you have GPs and you have community health care and you have patients coming in and having a relationship with those providers and practitioners and carers, you get better health outcomes. Mr Berger was just raving on about the investment that the government has done and their priorities in health care. It has been a disaster, actually. He mentioned COVID. Let us not forget what the government did: they cut down surgery, they cut down cancer screening and they did a whole range of things that have put more pressure on the system since those disastrous decisions. I was saying at the time, and I will say forever more: we should have had a royal commission into COVID to understand what worked well and what did not. Shutting down cancer screening and elective surgery was going to have a massive impact on chronic disease.

I digress. A lot of vulnerable Victorians who access these community healthcare centres and GPs, as I said, develop relationships. The urgent care centres that Mr Berger was saying the government has

set up to try and deal with some of the issues in our acute system as a result of all of those issues that have been building up over years, including what happened in COVID, are a bandaid measure. These vulnerable patients need, more than ever, continuity of care, and that is what these GPs and these community healthcare centres actually provide. They are an absolutely critical part of our health system. Whether it is acute care, aged care, primary care or community care, it is all part of the matrix of our healthcare system. Yet the government in their speaking notes just point to ‘We’ve invested in this’ and ‘We’ve done that’ and ‘We’ve done this’ in a very departmental, talking-point way, without understanding how the health system works. It beggars belief that the government is shutting this down and not going in to bat with the federal government to support these GPs.

I was phoned, before the announcement was made, by somebody extremely concerned about what was happening, and I could not believe it. I could not believe it because of the impact it will have on this community, which does have a lot of vulnerable Victorians. The Cohealth Collingwood area, we all know, does have some very vulnerable patients, and they were distressed.

I have had another letter from a GP, and I want to read this in, because they too understand. It reads:

[QUOTE AWAITING VERIFICATION]

I am a GP working in community health, and I am shocked and saddened to hear of the closure of three longstanding, quality, community-based Cohealth general practice clinics – Kensington, Fitzroy and Collingwood. These clinics are all located near public housing estates and provide wraparound, bulk-billing health care in areas of high need. As a GP working in community health, I know this patient group. They often experience high levels of social disadvantage, have complex physical and mental health issues and struggle to access mainstream care. They face barriers of cost, sometimes language and fear when trying to find a GP.

Again, I go to the point: having that relationship and having a GP there for this vulnerable cohort, as this GP has explained in her email to me, is what I am concerned about. And I know that the state government is going to blame the federal government – ‘Oh, GPs are primary care, that is a federal government responsibility.’ Well, no, because you have a responsibility, state government, to work with your federal counterparts to say, ‘Hey guys, we’ve got a problem here. We’ve got a very vulnerable cohort of people, and we need help and support, and we need to keep these people out of our acute healthcare system, because that is going to cost us more in the long run.’

I go back to the very point that they do not understand how the health system works. They do not understand exactly the issues around health care and the complex needs of patients. In fact, they make sweeping statements without actually understanding the full impacts.

The AMA and other medical groups, such as the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, have all expressed deep concern. They have actually slammed this government. They can see through this government. They can see through what this government has failed to do and see the hollow words and the inability to understand the priorities of what we need to do – and that is put taxpayer money into areas within our community so that we can have better patient outcomes and better health outcomes. We hear a lot from this government about doing various programs that are working towards this, but it just flies in the face of this when there are 12,500 vulnerable Victorians that are not going to have access to this service, and I do not know where they are going to go. I think the government should answer that question. I think their next speaker should stand up in this house and tell this house and tell that community and tell Victorians where these 12,500 people are going to get care.

Community health right across Victoria is an incredibly important part of the overall health ecosystem, as I have explained. This government has ignored community health. They have ignored the preventative healthcare measures that are undertaken in these community healthcare centres. They have literally done no investment in preventative health care at all. Community health has been crying out for sufficient funding for years. In fact in terms of the ageing population and in terms of the increasing population we are going to need more community healthcare centres, not less, and this government has failed in acknowledging that piece of work and understanding.

I want to in the last 30 seconds that I have say that they bailed out when they stuffed it up last year. I am sure with the \$20 million of interest repayments Victoria is paying each and every day on the Victorian debt they can find \$4 million for a rescue package to save the GP and counselling services at all of these centres. It is \$25 million – 1½ days of interest repayments – that this community is crying out for. Government – just do it.

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (16:27): I would like to talk a little bit about the Kensington experience in this matter, because I have been a resident there for 30 years and the Kensington community health centre has been a part of that community since 1975 continuously. I will come back to the history and the nature of the organisation in a minute, but the meeting we had on Saturday morning was on very short notice. It was 10 o'clock in the morning, which is a terrible time to do a community meeting, and we still had a couple of hundred people there packed into the Holy Rosary School hall, and they were thoroughly, thoroughly outraged and frustrated. I think in large part that was due to the fact that the communication from Cohealth was atrocious, to the point where both staff and patients found out about it from the *Age*, from the *Herald Sun*, from the ABC or from their neighbours but not from Cohealth. No rationale, no FAQs, and going hand in hand with that was the entirely opaque decision-making process. As Cohealth have grown so too have their governance structures changed, and they have gone from roughly half professional and half community voices to a self-selecting board that perpetuates its own wisdom and invariably narrows its scope. I think the way in which this has been handled is just an indictment of the current organisation. They really need to take a good, hard look at themselves, because there are so many distressed people that having a simple discussion is extremely difficult.

As I said, the Kensington community health centre was set up in 1975. My first involvement with it was in about 1993, I think. I was working for the Health Services Union, and I got a phone call from the union rep saying, 'They're forcing us to merge with the Flemington community health centre. We've put a ban on the CEO; we've cut off her communications. We've set up a picket line out the front. Can the union send someone out, because we need to know what to do next,' which I thought was pretty damned impressive. But it is a spirit of fight that has been within these community health centres for more than 50 years. And when they were merged into Doota Galla Community Health Centre there was argy-bargy and a bit of aggro, and then that in turn ultimately got aggregated into Cohealth.

Cohealth do some great work. They have some innovative programs. They have a lot of incredibly skilled, talented and committed staff, many of whom feel betrayed by this. More than that, in many of these suburbs the community health centre is part of the fabric of the community. It is something that people come to rely on. Particularly in Kensington, where we have got a large public housing cohort, the Kensington community health centre also services a lot of residents from the Flemington flats and some from the North Melbourne flats. It has got a big catchment, and its books have been closed for years – literally one in as one dies or moves away. It is that tight, and it is also a testament to how good the service is and how restricted the resources are.

If we look at who is, for example, in the Kensington public housing estate, we see that there was put in by the government – a Labor government at the time – specifically an older persons block, so we inherently got older, complex patients. It is also a first port of call for refugees, many of whom have been through horrendous life experience prior to coming here, and they get dropped into Kensington. Up until now they could look at a suite of wraparound services, from primary health through to allied health and suchlike. This is a really, really important part of the community, and to have the rug so suddenly ripped out from under them is horrendous.

My understanding is that of the roughly 55 community health services around Victoria only seven now offer GP services, so that is a dying trade. But in those neighbourhoods and in those catchments where we are talking about older and often more complex clients, the wraparound suite of services that are provided are critical not just to caring for those people in situ but also to preventing, as has been alluded to before, admissions to hospital and to other health services. When we look at an

organisation like this and we hear the state government saying, ‘We only do capital works,’ and the feds saying, ‘We do Medicare, but their model doesn’t work with us,’ it is not good enough. From a state point of view there are something like 80 programs that are run through and funded – many of them are state, and you cannot just tease out one service or another, particularly if you are offering a wraparound suite of services.

The other thing that Cohealth does is it has its doctors on salary, and those salaried doctors are fantastic. But of course if you look at, for example, the recent Medicare bulk-billing incentive from the feds, it was targeted particularly at places where you are not dealing with salaried medical officers – you are dealing with GPs who are doing a bulk-billing service, and bit under half goes to the service and bit over half goes to the GPs. At Cohealth that does not happen, because they are salaried, so that is a problem as well. If we have this rug pulled on the GP services, it is like pulling one thread in a woollen jumper: it is all going to unravel, and the quality of care and support provided will inevitably be fundamentally reduced.

In that context we support the motion that has been moved by the Greens. We thank them for kicking this off. We indicate that this is a really, really important issue for the communities that are directly affected, and I think everyone is very committed to fighting it. Kenny and Flemington have always been fighting. This will just be another encouragement and the next campaign because this is worth fighting for. The community is committed to getting this change, and I would call upon the Minister for Health at a state level and I would call on the health minister at a federal level to come together to reach some understanding about how funding shortfalls can be addressed and how the structure of Medicare incentives can be tweaked to allow for the models of care that are premised upon quality time with patients over a longer timeframe to be maintained and for that suite of wraparound services to continue to be provided to the communities concerned.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (16:35): First and foremost thank you to Dr Mansfield for bringing this motion before us. I must confess that I have spent a great deal of the last week with the leadership of our community, talking to them about Cohealth and what is going on, and not just the leadership, but the community – the frontline workers, the service users, the other impacted services and others in the community health space. I have certainly very much felt the ripples of this news in Fitzroy, Collingwood and Kensington. Just like so many others, it came to me as a giant shock and frankly a scare, and I was not alone. My phone has not stopped since the news came through. Can I first and foremost thank everybody who is speaking out, everybody who has an idea that this is not what community health is about. For so many who rely on Cohealth each and every day, I send to you my understanding when you say that it feels like the rug has been pulled out from underneath you.

I was actually deputy chair of Merri Health, which is one of the neighbouring community health services, before I entered Parliament. I sat in deliberations around funding models, Medicare benefits schedule (MBS) payments, the ineffective federal system, whether or not the community health system is established with the square peg into a round hole thing that I never quite get right, but it did not seem, in my experience there, to just work. It seemed that Canberra just was not listening when were talking about the very unique circumstances of service users in community health. These are indeed community health consumers that need a little bit more than 2 minutes and 10 seconds to talk to their doctor. I know from being in conversations around the modelling of MBS and what it looks like that it is just not enough. Perhaps some folks have got to listen to that, because these calls have been going on for a very long time, and I cannot help but think of the lives of families in my community that will absolutely be affected by this.

So many have reached out to me, clearly distressed, very troubled, very lost, very hurt and very much concerned about what their future health care will look like, because for them Cohealth is the place that they can go and get culturally safe health care. They can go in and be their true self and get the service that they absolutely deserve. There are parents of young children, older residents, people with very complex medical conditions, those that have housing insecurity and others that have been using Cohealth services for a very long time. I have actually visited during some of the outreach work of

Cohealth and seen the work that they do firsthand with members of our homeless community, and I know that what they do is vital. It is important and it matters, and it very much makes a difference. These people do not just vanish when Cohealth vanishes. They are left with enormous questions, starting with: what now? Because for so many, Cohealth is not just a service; it is part of their life, it is their sense of community, it is how they connect, it is a link to their wellbeing and it is a link to their care.

I just want to make sure that everyone knows that I did not get a phone call from Cohealth. It was not like I was sitting on some secret information. I too found out just the same way that everybody else did. I was not informed and did not get an early mark – just to be absolutely clear with the chamber – of their imminent closure. Nor did they reach out to attempt to have these closures avoided. This is something I am really disappointed about. I have had a long-term relationship with community health, and frankly, I thought that I deserved better, and these consumers deserve better. They deserve answers that we could have found before they went to such a drastic step. I have met with the workers affected, I have met with consumers and I have talked to board members, and I cannot tell you the kind of rage that I feel about this right now. Community health needs community to be involved. It is in the name. It is about who they are. It is about what they do. As you have said, Dr Mansfield, over 12,000 community members are provided with care by Cohealth, and the depth of the services across all of the centres is quite vast. There are mental health, dental, physiotherapy, child and family health care and general health concerns and so much more. They are really designed for easy access. They are designed for common and low-risk health concerns to reduce the burden on our health system, and sometimes they are the place that people go to when there is just not anywhere else that they feel that they can go – they often go to Cohealth.

The effects of this closure will be vast. I could go on about it, but the truth is that it will be felt very deeply in the Northern Metropolitan Region. I have been talking with other elected representatives in the area, and I thank members who have attended community forums that have been held. Yes, they were held at very late notice, but the turnout from elected representatives has been incredibly strong, and I will acknowledge the member for Maribyrnong Jo Briskey, the member for Melbourne Sarah Witty, City of Melbourne Cr Davydd Griffiths, the City of Yarra mayor and deputy mayor as well as other members of the state Parliament who have been engaging with the various community forums that are taking place. I know that the message is the same: it is not on. I just want to say that there are a range of efforts that are being undertaken to see what we can do to stop this decision, because we must live up to community health and what it is about. Very foundationally, it is about the social, emotional and cultural determinants of health being part of the wraparound support services in one place, a place that provides you with the comfort to come back time and time again to get the help that you need, particularly for our most vulnerable health consumers.

I have spoken to the Minister for Health, and I know that there is a vast array of advocacy that has been happening here. Victoria is home to a very unique model of care in community health. It is something that we have held onto very tightly for many, many years when other states have long abandoned it. We believe in community health and have invested in it, and sometimes it takes a little while longer for Canberra to understand the unique and powerful role that community health plays in our state. I am entirely committed to continuing to work with whoever it is that comes to me about these concerns, because they have certainly hit home. I know that I am not giving up today or tomorrow. I thank Dr Mansfield for bringing this before us because it gives me an opportunity to say to this chamber that I too will join with you in fighting against these closures, and I have been – rather privately, I must confess, but now I am putting it on the record rather publicly.

To the board members of Cohealth and to the leadership of Cohealth, please know that there is more that you can do. I do encourage you to step up and consider alternatives, because this sudden closure is deeply saddening, and it should not be a part of the community health story at Cohealth. This government believes in community health and the community believes in community health, and it absolutely needs it. I will continue to walk with you as we take all the advocacy required to make sure

that our most vulnerable health consumers and people that deserve modern, patient-centred care are at the forefront of the decision-making. For community health, whether that is Cohealth or others, right across our state, I know that a smarter outcome is possible, and I implore Cohealth to step up and meet the opportunity to change its mind for the community that most relies on it.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (16:45): I rise to speak on the Greens' motion regarding Cohealth, and it particularly mentions that Cohealth have unfortunately announced they will end their GP and counselling services in Collingwood, Fitzroy and Kensington in December 2025 and close their Collingwood clinic in 2026. Again, 12,500 community members who receive affordable wraparound health services at Cohealth – the centres play a critical role in our healthcare system, despite receiving only 0.3 per cent of Victoria's health infrastructure spend. We heard comments from the other member for Northern Metropolitan, Ms Watt, that she wished that she had been told or given some forerunning so that they could possibly help sort this out, but we know that since 2019 Cohealth have been practically begging for additional support from the Victorian government to rebuild their Collingwood health centre alongside a fully funded build of 50 co-located community homes, with continuous requests for additional supports.

Groups like Cohealth do not make those requests for no reason: it is because there is a financial situation that they are trying to deal with. So to come in and say, 'Oh, I'm outraged they didn't come and see me first' – they have been trying to see the government and making requests of the government since 2019. So to me that is just like a little bit of crocodile tears playing out regarding the situation that we find ourselves in. We know that Infrastructure Victoria has recommended that the Victorian government increase community health funding to 3 per cent of their health infrastructure budget, up from 0.3 per cent. That would be nice, that would be fair, but of course what is 0.3 per cent to 3 per cent when you are dropping over \$50 billion on infrastructure cost blowouts? When you have up to \$190 billion of debt, \$25 million a day, over \$1 million an hour just to service the interest on that debt – could you imagine what Cohealth could have done with a million dollars an hour? But this is the problem with Labor's lack of fiscal responsibility.

So I do support this motion, and I think it is worth speaking in support of the motion by Dr Mansfield. The opposition and the Greens do not often agree, but where we can, it is on the idea that this Labor government's priorities are wrong. Cohealth have operated in Collingwood for 75 years and also have facilities in Fitzroy and Kensington, most of which happen to be in my electorate. Since the 1970s, Cohealth have provided primary care for the community's most vulnerable, including people facing homelessness, refugees, people experiencing family violence and people dealing with trauma and chronic illness. It has been reported that as a result of this government's refusal to fund the service, 25 doctors and counsellors will be made redundant, and around 12,500 Victorians who receive care will be impacted. Cohealth will cease its GP services and general counselling at its Collingwood, Fitzroy and Kensington sites in December 2025. This is despite Cohealth chief executive Nicole Bartholomeusz saying that several compounding issues made it impossible to sustain services. She said:

We have a \$4 million gap between what we receive from Medicare and what the cost is to deliver our services.

It's been death by a thousand cuts.

She said that the service had also struggled with the dilapidated Collingwood building, which had a leaking roof and uneven floor, and there were also structural issues affecting the buildings, which were in desperate need of repair, with leaks in the roof and buckets catching water during storms. We saw the media response from a Labor spinner:

The government remains committed to ensuring that all Australians, particularly those who are most vulnerable, can continue to access high-quality, affordable primary care close to home ...

As is so often the case, Labor's rhetoric does not match their action, or in this case the lack of action that has come from this government. This is one of their core responsibilities – shared, of course, with their Labor mates in Canberra – and they are shirking it.

I join Dr Mansfield in calling on the government – who always seem happy to find money for twisted priorities like the Suburban Rail Loop – to commit to a \$4 million rescue package that will allow Cohealth to continue to offer their vital services for those most in need across my electorate in the northern suburbs. Again, it is \$4 million. When you weigh that up against \$50 billion in infrastructure cost blowouts, or what is very likely going to be close to \$50 billion for the Suburban Rail Loop East, this chamber is asking for \$4 million for community health care. These are the twisted priorities of the minister. They will say, ‘They should have come to us.’ They are spending billions after billions of dollars on both blowouts and warped priorities like the SRL East, which we know is not going to cost between \$30 billion and \$34 billion. Literally no expert the minister can find will repeat that claim, because it is not going to happen. It is not going to happen because their cost–benefit analysis is baked in from –

Ryan Batchelor: On a point of order, President, I am struggling – really struggling – to understand what the Suburban Rail Loop has got to do with the motion.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): I will invite Mr Mulholland to come back to the motion.

Evan MULHOLLAND: I was talking about the fiscal parameters in which the government, even though they have had requests since 2019, cannot find money for community health care. The fiscal parameters in this state are dire, and the government have warped priorities where they allow and have been complicit in infrastructure cost blowouts – in blowouts across most government departments, in blowouts in the public sector – despite promises to rein that in. We see yet another promise that is going to come in in December with the Silver review, yet it cannot find \$4 million to keep Cohealth going, to keep vital healthcare services going in the northern suburbs. These are the warped priorities that are going on with this government at the moment. Yes, the Suburban Rail Loop is connected to that. Yes, other infrastructure cost blowouts are connected to that, because when Labor cannot manage money – and they cannot manage money – it is Victorians that pay the price. It is Victorians that need vital health care in the inner city of Melbourne that are paying the price, because when they blow out the budget, somebody has to pay for that. It is my community in the northern suburbs that are paying for that. The fact that you cannot find \$4 million is shameful. And it is shameful for Ms Watt to come into the chamber saying, ‘I’m outraged that they didn’t tell me.’ They have been asking since 2019 for additional funding. They do not ask that for no reason. So spare me the crocodile tears from the other side about the situation that we are in right now.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (16:55): I am very pleased to rise to speak on Dr Mansfield’s motion about Cohealth and the decision that Cohealth has announced – that they will end their GP and counselling services in Collingwood, Fitzroy and Kensington in December of this year and close their Collingwood clinic next year. I want to acknowledge the very passionate contributions that have been made by many in the chamber who obviously care very deeply about the quality service that our community health services provide to those in the communities that they represent.

I echo the words of my colleague Ms Watt, who I think very clearly outlined, as a government member in this region, what she has been doing in terms of engagement with this particular independent community health service and the decision that the board of that health service has taken with respect to their plans for the provision of their primary care services, particularly their GP and counselling services. I can echo Ms Watt’s comments that we know that not just with Cohealth and not just in the northern suburbs of Melbourne but right across Melbourne and right across Victoria the Victorian government understands the incredibly important role that these community health services play in various parts of our community and in various different ways. I have certainly engaged extensively with the community health providers in the Southern Metropolitan Region, particularly as they have recently gone through a merger of various community health providers to integrate into the Better Health Network in Southern Metropolitan Region. Certainly a pattern of consolidation and merger has occurred across the sector.

This particular case obviously arises because of decisions that the Cohealth board have taken with respect to the challenges that they see in their continuing, as an organisation, to provide GP services at these locations in this way. That is by no means the totality of the services that they provide. The funding and support that comes from the Victorian government to support the range of other services – support services and community-based services – that this community health network, Cohealth, provides and that other community health networks provide is not what is in question here. The Victorian government's support for community health and support for this community health service and others is not what is in question here, because the programs that we fund are continuing to be funded.

The challenge that Cohealth have described in their operating model, which has led them to make this decision, arises because of the way that federal funding of our primary healthcare system works. It is a fact that our health system in Australia and in Victoria is the product of agreements between the Commonwealth and the state about the provision of different types of services. You will forgive me if I do not have the current acronym of the name of the health agreement in my head; it has had many over many years. Essentially we have an agreement and an understanding in this country that there are certain services that are provided by the state and there are certain services that are provided by the Commonwealth. For example, the provision of public hospitals in this country is delivered by the state.

There are a range of community-based support services that are delivered and funded by the state, and some by the Commonwealth. But primary healthcare – the provision of general practice, Medicare – that is the responsibility of the federal government. The settings that exist in the funding of primary care and the way that Medicare funding works in this nation – not just in this state, but in this nation, because these are rules that apply nationally – clearly are not working for Cohealth. That is something that the federal government should fix. Funding arrangements under the Medicare system, the Medicare benefits schedule, mean that they are not working for Cohealth and are matters that require attention and a resolution by the Commonwealth. That is who needs to step in and provide a lasting fix to the funding model for the continued provision of general practice services in community health settings in Victoria.

Whether it is Cohealth or others, if community health providers and the boards of community health organisations are demonstrating that they have got issues with the federal government's funding model, we join them in saying the federal government should fix it. We join them in saying this because we know that the cohorts that our community health sector provides the most support and benefit to are often the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in our community. While I am not as familiar as other speakers are with this particular community health service and the work that it does, it would stand to reason it is performing a similar function to the contribution that others have made and what other community health providers do that I am familiar with.

If the Medicare funding model does not fully recognise the particular complexity of the general practice and primary care services that are required to be provided in these settings, then it is incumbent upon the level of government that is responsible for the provision and funding of those services and the funding arrangements that allow those services to continue in our community to step in and do something about it. They need to understand that maybe they do need to think about different ways of funding these types of health services and systems, just as they have taken decisions in other contexts to provide additional or alternative funding streams to support the ongoing provision of primary health care.

One of the things obviously that we have had an issue with in this country for several years, particularly given the way that previous federal Liberal governments took the knife to Medicare, is the issue of bulk-billing rates across the community. What we have seen from the federal Labor government since it was elected is both an unfreezing of the Liberals' freeze of the Medicare schedules and significant new investments being made in the Medicare system to encourage more bulk-billing. This includes a tripling of the bulk-billing rebate and an additional quarterly 12.5 per cent incentive payment for eligible services that is commencing on 1 November.

I am not familiar with the decision-making of the Cohealth board and the factors that they have taken into account in deciding to close their GP services in December. I hope that those decisions and calculations have taken into account these changes that are about to commence, because they are significant and they are material. They may not be enough to support the particular complexity of the client base that the community health sector provides. If that is so, then more work needs to be done. But there are changes that are coming by way of provision of increased incentive payments to support bulk-billing by general practices at the primary healthcare level, funded by the federal government. We hope that they help support more bulk-billing in our community. Whether they are enough or not for Cohealth is a question that only the Cohealth board can answer. If it is not, then I implore the federal government to sit down with this community healthcare provider and find a way to support the ongoing provision of general practice as a part of this community health network.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:05): I rise to speak in support of Dr Mansfield's motion 1118 today in regard to supporting Cohealth. On the odd occasion – and it does not happen very much – the Greens and the coalition join up, and that is because there is a Labor Party that is so far detached from reality – that cannot even read a motion properly – that it causes two completely opposing parties to say, 'Hang on, I think you've got something wrong.' There is no better evidence than the selective cherrypicking that Mr Batchelor just displayed, saying that this has all got to do with the board of Cohealth and that Cohealth have made this decision. But he has failed to even mention that number 5 in this motion says:

since 2019 cohealth has requested support from the Victorian Government to rebuild their Collingwood health centre, alongside a fully funded build of 50 co-located community homes ...

He did not mention that at all. He just said, 'Oh, no, this isn't our responsibility. This is Cohealth that shut that down.' Another thing he forgot to mention was number 7 in this:

Infrastructure Victoria –
one of their own bodies –
has recommended that the Victorian Government –
not the federal government, the Victorian government –

increase community health funding to three per cent of their health infrastructure budget ...

He did not mention that at all. The fact is that if this government had not handled the budget so dismally – if we were not paying \$1 million in interest alone on our repayments of the state debt that this government has racked up on the public's credit card – it would be absolutely no problem to fulfil this ask of just \$4 million. In fact, that is the amount of interest repayments we have had to pay since lunchtime today. Since coming back from lunch today, we have paid more than that amount of money in interest repayments. So when there is a government that is so dismal in balancing budgets, that is so unable to get their own infrastructure funds under control and that has not been able to stamp out corruption on their own Big Build projects, then we are going to end up in a situation like this. But what I am asking is that the government stop gaslighting Victorians and stop saying, 'Oh, this is up to Cohealth. Oh, this is their issue,' and actually just take responsibility and stop selectively cherrypicking the details on this as they want to.

There are a couple of things that he said that I thought were quite interesting. Mr Batchelor particularly said the Victorian government understands the very important role that community health plays. Well, it is okay to say that, but if you understand the role, then fund it. The second one is that he said this is a decision the board of Cohealth has taken. Well, if that is the case, why didn't you respond to number 5 and number 7 of this very motion? Ms Watt said that she was also surprised, that it was offensive to her and that it was so upsetting to her. Well, she had better go to her government then and advocate for the people that she says she is standing with to make sure that this funding is replaced.

The health crisis in Victoria is out of control, and here we are talking about some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people not being able to access their health care. Up to 12,000 people, or slightly more, will be affected by this. I remember when I worked at the community health centre in Collingwood. The most lovely people, who relied on those services, would come in. That was around 2015 to 2017, when I was working in the community clinic in Collingwood. I absolutely loved it. There were people coming in that were vulnerable, who could not afford regular health care. They would come in and they would bring what they could. I remember when I would be brought a block of chocolate as thanks because these people could not afford to pay. These are the people that are going to be affected by decisions like this.

Mr Batchelor also said that health care is the product of an arrangement between state and federal funding – that is correct. But if our budget is so far out of control that the state cannot match federal funding, it is our state that misses out. We have seen this in education. We have seen this in health. We have seen this in many funding arrangements that require matched funding from the state. Victoria used to be the economic powerhouse, and now we are continually behind. So the truth is, if a state continues to run its economy into the ground, we are going to see more cuts like this. Rather than funding health centres, rather than building hospitals, that money is going to be redirected to interest repayments, and that is an extremely devastating place to be in in the state of Victoria.

This government has to stop using basic responsibilities as a political handball. They have now been in government for over a decade, and they are still blaming people like Jeff Kennett for their dysfunction. Well, it is time for them to get their priorities in order and start funding the things that matter: education, health and roads. These things are the very basics of what taxpayers rightfully expect from their government. So I commend the motion to the house. Thank you so much for bringing it here today.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (17:11): I want to speak on the Greens' Cohealth motion. From the outset I want to say that the Allan Labor government understands just how essential access to affordable primary health care is for Victorians. At a personal level, I worked in a community health centre as a social worker in the past and saw just how effective early intervention can be in maintaining people's health and in providing services within communities that are local and relationship based. We deeply value the role of independent community health, like organisations like Cohealth – organisations that have long been the backbone of our state's approach to equitable health access.

Here in Victoria, community health organisations are unique. They are founded on the principle that health care should reach people where they are, in their communities and in settings that understand their circumstances and needs. These organisations deliver care to those who might otherwise fall through the cracks, and when I say fall through the cracks, they might otherwise end up in tertiary health care, with much more serious health conditions and much more expensive health conditions than what they might have had by approaching a community health centre. This is for people that are facing homelessness, addiction, poverty, chronic illness or disadvantage, but it is also for broader community members. It is quite a diverse mix of people who enjoy getting their comprehensive health needs met in the context of a community-based health centre. They are places of trust, inclusion and social connection, and they have earned the respect of the communities they serve.

The system receives accolades for its service, with the Victorian Healthcare Association's (VHA) report into Victoria's community health service model stating:

In Victoria, a key component of the primary care system is the community health service model. Victoria's community health services have a proven track record of delivering accessible and affordable primary care services for people with complex and chronic health needs, especially those who face barriers to accessing mainstream health services.

On Friday 17 October 2025 the VHA called on the federal government to step in and provide further support to community health services across Victoria. This is because it is important to acknowledge

that Victoria's community health organisations are funded through multiple levels of government and across multiple departments.

Specifically, when I worked in community health, I was a consumer advocate. It was nothing to do with health – I am squeamish – but I worked in a community health setting. There were obviously GPs, there was podiatry and there were a whole range of funding services that came from all over, both different state departments and different federal departments as well. They do remain proudly independent in their management and governance structures, a strength that allows them to be responsive, flexible and community-driven. That independence is part of what makes them so effective. But it also means that they are vulnerable when federal policy settings change.

The recent decision by Cohealth to close its general practice component is a deeply concerning example of how Commonwealth funding arrangements can have direct and real impacts on vulnerable patients. It is important to note that this decision was not about Cohealth's ability to secure accommodation or operational space. It was about the federal primary care funding model, a model that simply does not meet the cost of providing high-quality, bulk-billed care to the most disadvantaged Victorians. The Commonwealth has a critical role to play in ensuring organisations like Cohealth can continue to deliver bulk-billing GP services. They must be supported to navigate financial pressures and operational challenges, because these are not ordinary GP practices, they are safety nets for people with nowhere else to go.

This is why the Victorian government, alongside other states and territories, has consistently lobbied the Commonwealth to strengthen the Medicare system and make bulk-billing viable again. We know why bulk-billing has become unviable. It is because we have had a long period of conservative government who openly did not agree with the principles of the Medicare system and undermined it by freezing various elements of the financial structure of the Medicare system, making cuts to other elements and then making rules about who is eligible based on where they are working from a GP perspective as well, which impacted the community.

There is quite a big task ahead for the federal government to clean up the mess left behind by the previous coalition federal government. I do thank them for the changes that they have made so far. We did strongly advocate for measures such as the tripling of the bulk-billing rebate and the introduction of an additional quarterly 12.5 per cent incentive payment for eligible services, and they will begin on 1 November. These are positive steps, but there is more to be done to restore Medicare back to where it was before the coalition were in charge.

These are positive steps, but there is more work to ensure that the most vulnerable Victorians are not left without access to primary care. I must say this is another example of a complete refusal to understand what equality and equity means. As I have already said, some people have complex conditions and have additional needs that cost more to deliver. So sometimes in order to provide the same service to one person, it costs more than it does to another. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that, if your value set is reflected in a commitment to equality and equity.

While the federal government's funding model has created the pressures that led to this closure, the Allan Labor government remains absolutely committed to supporting Cohealth and its clients. Our support continues through many programs we fund to assist Victorians who face complex health and social challenges. Cohealth continues to deliver specialised services funded by the Victorian government, particularly for people living with alcohol and drug dependency and for their families and loved ones. The closure of the GP component of the clinic will have no impact on access to state-funded alcohol and other drug, AOD, programs. These essential services will continue, and our Department of Health is working closely with Cohealth to ensure that the clients experience continuity of care and support throughout this transition period. Our government's record of support for Cohealth is strong. In the 2025–26 financial year alone the Victorian government will provide Cohealth with \$68.3 million in funding across the Department of Health and Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. This includes \$14.9 million for programs delivered under the community health program

and more than \$6 million for family services, child protection and homelessness support. These are real investments that make a real difference, helping Cohealth to continue providing wraparound care that supports not just individuals but families and whole communities.

Our commitment extends beyond Cohealth. The Allan Labor government is building a stronger, more accessible primary care system across Victoria. This year's budget delivers \$27 million to continue operating 12 urgent care clinics across the state, ensuring all Victorians can access free health care when and where they need it most, taking the pressure off emergency departments. Many of those have now taken up funding from the federal government – which they should – but we were not going to let people down. So I fully support the Allan government's commitment to primary health care, and I do not support this.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (17:21): Can I start by thanking my colleagues from across the chamber for their contributions. In particular I would like to thank Ms Watt and Mr Ettershank for sharing the experiences of communities in their electorates in the Collingwood and Fitzroy and Kensington areas respectively. I think they provided a really rich description of the importance of these services in those communities. Can I also thank Dr Heath and Mr Mulholland, who made it very clear that the closures of these clinics and the closure of the Collingwood facility should absolutely not be coming as a surprise to this government or the federal government. There has been years and years of advocacy, which has been ignored, that has led to the closure of these clinics. The government is well aware that these clinics have been in financial trouble for some time and has done nothing about it, so to say that this has all come as a surprise I think is a little bit disingenuous. So I thank them for their contributions.

Can I thank Ms Crozier, who I think did a really good job of describing the importance of holistic care and the type of care that is provided by Cohealth. I have not actually worked at a Cohealth facility, but I have worked in a similar sort of space as a GP, and I can tell you it is so different being in a place where you are not under the same time pressure, where you can give people the time that they need, where you can walk down the hallway and grab a social worker and say, 'Look, this person needs some support with housing,' or you can get the podiatrist and say, 'Look, this person has been walking around without shoes on. Their feet are burnt from the hot bitumen; they really need some foot care and some shoes.' I mean, that is a very different sort of environment to work in, and I think Ms Crozier did a great job of describing the sort of care that is provided by these clinics.

Some of the contributions did conveniently leave out the fact that one of the issues raised in the motion is the state of the Collingwood site – the infrastructure. This infrastructure spending is squarely in the state government's remit and is something that has been ignored. There was also a comment made about alcohol and other drug services being unaffected, which is a surprise. Hopefully that is the case, but it is my understanding that it is a key service provided by these GPs. They are often prescribers and are important referrers in this space.

The other thing that I think was left out and missed in all of this is that Cohealth is not the only community health service that is in trouble. As I noted, Infrastructure Victoria has warned of the need to invest in community health infrastructure. It needs a significant increase in investment. Community Health First has for several years highlighted the need for a significant uplift in the state spend on the non-GP services provided by community health, so Cohealth may well be the canary in the coalmine. But what is clear is that there is widespread support for Cohealth and these communities across the chamber, so the question is: why is the government not stepping in? We are calling on them to provide a \$4 million rescue package to give the time to come to a long-term, sustainable solution for the communities in these areas, because it is patients in these communities who will bear the brunt of these closures. It is patients and communities who should be the government's top priority here.

Motion agreed to.

*Statements on tabled papers and petitions***First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria***Report 2024–25*

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:25): I rise to speak on the 2024–25 annual report of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria. This report is not just a collection of pages and figures, it represents a historic step towards justice and self-determination for First Nations people in Victoria. Before I begin, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today, the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. Sovereignty was never ceded: it always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

I want to thank the past and present members of the First Peoples' Assembly, including co-chairs Rueben Berg, Ngarra Murray and former co-chairs Aunty Geraldine Atkinson and Marcus Stewart. Their tireless work has brought us to this extraordinary moment where treaty is being debated and advanced in this Parliament. The journey to treaty has been deliberate and deeply consultative. Since its formation in 2019 the assembly has spent six years listening to communities, gathering ideas and aspirations and presenting them to the government and the public. That work has culminated in the Statewide Treaty Bill 2025, and it is a bill that will make the assembly permanent and enshrine its role in shaping a fairer future.

Over the past year, the assembly has achieved remarkable milestones. It launched the Treaty Authority at the Melbourne Museum in July 2024 and hosted major treaty gatherings in Geelong and at the MCG, where thousands of First Peoples came together to share stories, knowledge and aspirations. These events ensured that voices from across Victoria were heard and reflected in the negotiations. Community engagement has been central to this process. Through education and campaigning, the assembly has helped Victorians understand the deep history and colonialism and the significance of treaty, while strengthening its electoral roll and representation. I want to acknowledge the cultural celebrations that have accompanied this journey, such as the two Treaty Day Out concerts, featuring incredible artists like A.B. Original, Troy Cassar-Daley, Electric Fields, Emily Wurramara and more. These events brought people together in the spirit of unity and pride, while keeping the conversation about treaty front and centre. The passage of the Statewide Treaty Bill will strengthen this representative body as it evolves into the assembly of Gellung Warl, a democratic institution elected by and for First Peoples. The assembly will hold government to account, provide advice and continue vital community engagement to close the gap and deliver better outcomes for First People.

Before closing, I want to acknowledge the four current representatives from the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region who made treaty possible: Belinda Briggs from the Yorta Yorta and Wamba Wamba nations, Kaley Nicholson from the Taungurung nation, Levi Power from the Yorta Yorta nation and Nicole Atkinson from the Bangerang and Gunditjmara nations. Their leadership has been instrumental. I look forward to the continuing work of the assembly of Gellung Warl and proudly commend the achievements of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria over the past six years. I commend this report to the house.

Department of Health*Report 2024–25*

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:28): I rise to speak on the Department of Health annual report 2024–25. Over the past few weeks I have had the pleasure of meeting with and getting to know a group of passionate young people who are advocating for adolescent mental health beds in the Hume region. The group who call themselves Silent Sounds of Survivors is conducting a Parliament of Victoria online petition calling on the government to provide eight acute inpatient mental health beds for adolescents in the Hume region. These young people with lived experience of the mental health system explained to me in detail the dehumanising experience they endured. There was not a single

adolescent acute inpatient mental health bed in the Hume region. The closest beds are located at Box Hill, 3½ hours away from Wodonga and 2½ hours away from Shepparton and Wangaratta.

Victoria has only 58 child and adolescent mental health beds to service the state, and only four of these are in regional Victoria – two in Mildura and two in Traralgon. For young people in the Hume region, this means they must compete for a bed in the metropolitan area. Patients from the Hume region are sent to Box Hill, where there are 12 beds that are almost always full and sometimes closed.

Last week I met with some of the young people who told me their stories. They described the dehumanising experience of waiting for hours in the emergency department, which is not a therapeutic environment for a young person and can further contribute to their deteriorating mental health state. Even worse was the description of a typical transfer to Box Hill that involved being strapped to a stretcher in an inpatient transport vehicle or divvy van, frightened and alone. They said that sometimes families are left to transport the young people, and the families are told to lock the doors and not let the young person out of their sight. They told me the story of a young woman who had been the victim of abuse, and yet she was placed in the care of her abuser for the transfer. This led to her being retraumatised by the time she reached Box Hill. They also told me how difficult it was to get a bed at Box Hill, and said beds were either full or sometimes closed due to staff shortages.

It is clear that the current situation is not delivering good health outcomes for the young people or their families. Young people are traumatised by the process. They are removed from their community and support networks. One of the girls described how her time spent at Box Hill meant that when she returned, she felt disconnected from her sporting clubs, friends and other services.

In the past I have been contacted by families of young people who are distraught that their child is so far away and that due to work or the need to look after other children they cannot be with them when they are needed most. We all know that patients recover much better when they can stay in their own community, and Box Hill is a very long way from communities in northern and north-east Victoria.

The final report of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System on page 4 of volume 2 says:

Victoria's young people, aged 12–25 years, will be supported to grow into adulthood with good mental health and wellbeing.

It is time the government delivered on this.

Recommendation 21(2)(b) recommends the government create:

... a new stream of inpatient beds across Victoria for young people aged 18 to 25 by reconfiguring existing inpatient beds for adults and using an allocation of the 100 new beds referred to in recommendation 11(3) ...

Now, while I do not agree that these beds should only be for 18- to 25-year-olds, because we also need beds for 12- to 18-year-olds, at least it gives some indication that regionally located beds for young people were in the minds of the commissioners.

Both Albury Wodonga Health and GV Health are about to undergo redevelopments of their mental health departments. Both these redevelopments seem to be in limbo, and the government needs to get on with the job because these services are desperately needed. Money has been allocated for the redevelopment of Nolan House at Albury Wodonga Health that includes 32 adult beds only. GV Health was allocated money for a redevelopment in the 2023–24 budget. It was supposed to be completed by October to December 2026, but it has been pushed out to June 2029. This project has not even broken ground, and due to the two-and-a-half-year delay, GV Health will most likely have to do a review of service provision. Both these projects present the perfect opportunity to provide acute inpatient adolescent beds for 12- to 18-year-olds in the Hume region.

I call on the minister to listen to the young people of Silent Sounds of Survivors and deliver these services and beds that they so desperately need. In doing so, Minister, I point out that the young people want and need acute inpatient beds. The Youth Prevention and Recovery Care (YPARC) facilities and

other services do not provide this level of care. The minister should also review recommendation 9 of the royal commission that recommended:

four safe space facilities across the state, comprising a mix of drop-in spaces and crisis response services, co-designed with and for young people.

The update on this recommendation on the department website just says it will be implemented in future. This is not good enough – *(Time expired)*

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:34): I rise to speak on the Victorian government's tabled response to the Inquiry into the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023. This is the response of a weak and cowardly government. It is an outright rejection of decriminalising cannabis. This government has failed to fully support any of the inquiry's recommendations. They are so fearful of a tough-on-crime election that they think this response makes them look strong. This fear is entirely misdirected. Victorians are not scared of a cannabis consumer with the munchies – they are afraid someone is going to break into their house in the middle of the night with a weapon. The government's response indicates that they are considered equally as important crimes. They are so deeply out of touch, and they should be ashamed. The time for change is now, but instead they have chosen a race to the bottom with an opposition that is already dead in the water while over 80 per cent of the public and the overwhelming majority of stakeholders are in support of decriminalisation.

We have worked in good faith with this government for the last three years. When we introduced this bill in 2023, the government committed to ongoing discussions based on the evidence. We bent over backwards to get that evidence to you. We initiated a bill inquiry, a chance for a parliamentary committee to seek submissions from the public, hear from the experts and even travel to the ACT to hear the experiences of decriminalisation. All of this work cumulated into the committee's final report, which was supported by Labor MPs. The findings of this report were overwhelmingly in favour of decriminalising cannabis. When we went to the ACT we spoke to the community, we spoke to the police, and we spoke to fellow politicians and to academics, who all agreed that decriminalisation has been a wholly positive experience. They did not see an increased use in health presentations. Despite increased testing, rates of drug driving actually went down. In light of these success stories and the support of the vast majority of stakeholders, recommendation 1 of the report was that the Victorian government draw on the experience of the ACT in successfully decriminalising the cultivation and possession of small quantities of cannabis for personal use with its associated health, social and legal benefits and aim to consider adopting an approach in line with that proposed by the bill along with any amendments recommended in this report. The government's response to this recommendation was a simple 'do not support'. After all of this work and all of this evidence, you are telling me that you do not even support the principle of decriminalising cannabis.

In the government's response they say that they will reduce harm by evidence-based action. They say they believe the ACT's positive experience and they claim that they will monitor the issue. Their hypocrisy is glaring. This kind of inaction is inexcusable. You are lacking courage. At a time when many Victorians are worried about community safety, this government is happy to spend millions upon millions of dollars on policing and the criminal justice system to arrest and prosecute people for possessing small quantities of cannabis. Crime Statistics Agency data shows that in Victoria an average of almost 8000 people a year come into contact with the criminal justice system for possessing cannabis. Of those almost 4000 are arrested, a disturbing number of which are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. At the end of the day, it is not just us I feel sorry for, it is them. Shame on this weak and cowardly government.

Board of Inquiry into the McCrae Landslide*Report*

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (17:38): I rise to make a statement on the report of the board of inquiry into the McCrae landslide. The McCrae landslide has been a significant and ongoing matter over the past 10 or 11 months, and for some residents, for years prior. I have worked with residents over this time to advocate for this inquiry, for them to get back into their homes and for there to be positive, good faith work undertaken from this point on to remediate the site.

The McCrae landslide occurred on the escarpment of 6 and 10–12 View Point Road in McCrae on the morning of 14 January 2025. The 14 January landslide was preceded by a smaller landslide nine days earlier on 5 January 2025, which damaged the back of 3 Penny Lane, and two landslides that occurred in quick succession in November 2022, damaging two properties. These landslides also occurred on the escarpment of 10–12 View Point Road to the west of the site of McCrae landslide. I would like to start by acknowledging the many residents who have been impacted by this event, many of whom I have come to know over the past 11 months. The residents have self-organised and advocated in a coordinated way to the many agencies involved through the McCrae Evacuees Response Group, better known as the MERG group. I would like to acknowledge the work of Bob Stensholt as chair of the group and Mike O'Neill and Richard Bendell as spokespersons.

I quote from the report:

The Board of Inquiry has found that the McCrae Landslide and the earlier landslide of 5 January 2025 were caused by water that leaked from a burst water main owned by South East Water ... That burst water main was located approximately 450 metres south of 3 Penny Lane, near the corner of Bayview Road and Outlook Road. The burst water main had leaked for several months prior to its repair over New Year's Eve, releasing about 40.3 million litres of water during the period it was undetected – the equivalent of about 16 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

I would also like to acknowledge the chair of the inquiry Ms Renée Enbom KC for her thoroughness and careful conduct of a complex inquiry and her 30 recommendations to safeguard the residents of McCrae into the future. The inquiry conducted 13 days of public hearings, received 86 public submissions and heard evidence from residents, local authorities, state government bodies and geotechnical experts.

Finally, I would also like to acknowledge the leadership of Minister for Local Government Nick Staikos, who set about setting up this board of inquiry and responding quickly, including already delivering recommendation 1, appointing a mediator. I am pleased to add that on Friday 24 October Minister Staikos appointed Dan Star KC as an independent mediator. Mr Star is an accredited mediator under the Australian Mediator and Dispute Resolution Accreditation Standards and a senior barrister with more than 25 years experience. This is a particularly important step for the residents impacted by the landslide because for the first time since the event there will be a structured process with the shire, South East Water, affected landowners and any other necessary parties working to reach agreement on appropriate mitigation and remediation works.

I am also pleased to report that, to my knowledge, all parties have so far agreed to participate in that mediation. Most, but not all, residents have returned to their homes after an extended period of uncertainty and anxiety. The report has a section on the lived experience of the residents directly affected by this landslide, and I encourage people to look to this section to understand what it has been like for these people. To these residents and the many others impacted, I want to say directly: your experiences have been heard in this place, and they will not be for nothing.

I would like to finish by reiterating the words of Minister Staikos upon the release of this report, when he said, 'The landslides have taken a significant toll on residents', and he called on both South East Water and Mornington Peninsula Shire Council to work with the McCrae community to achieve the best possible outcomes.

Dingo protection*Production of documents*

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (17:42): I will speak on the letter from the Attorney-General the Honourable Sonya Kilkenny MP, dated 31 January 2025 and tabled here concerning the government's response to this Council's order for production of documents on the dingo unprotection order. Members will recall that on 13 November 2024 a motion passed here which required the government to produce within 10 weeks all documents relating to the dingo order in Council, including on consultation with traditional owners, scientific and population reviews, the reasoning behind the decision to protect dingoes in Victoria's north-west, the end of the wild dog bounty and the program's cost and compliance.

The Attorney-General's letter advised that the government could not meet the timeframe, saying 'that the date for production of documents does not allow for sufficient time', that thorough searches were still being conducted and that a response would be provided as soon as possible. This kind of approach is seriously telling of the government's attitude generally, as well as on the specific subject of dingoes or wild dogs. That attitude matters because while the paperwork was still being searched for in Melbourne, the consequences of this policy were already being felt hundreds of kilometres away.

The ABC's report of 5 September 2025 sets out the situation plainly. Since lethal control of dingoes was banned in 2024 across the Big Desert region, farmers have been suffering devastating losses. One grazier told the ABC he had lost as many as 1000 sheep and lambs, with hundreds confirmed dead and many others maimed or missing. Another described the psychological toll, the exhaustion, frustration and despair of watching years of breeding and hard work wiped out almost overnight. When asked how widespread the problem was, Agriculture Victoria could not say. The agency admitted that no figures on livestock deaths had been released. So even as farmers struggle to contain the damage, the public has no clear information about the scale of what is happening. The government claims to be following the science, yet the data informing these decisions is at best uncertain and at worst absent. Instead of effective assistance, landholders have been told to rely on so-called non-lethal controls – that is, fencing, guardian animals and water points on public land. In practice these are expensive, patchy and often ineffective in vast open country. Many farmers have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on fencing, with minimal help from the state and no compensation for their losses.

Just when those families might hope for a hint of understanding, what do they hear from the Minister for Environment? In an interview reported by the *Weekly Times* on 3 September 2025 Minister Dimopoulos suggested that dingoes could be a tourist attraction. He described them as important to First Nations people and said they might feature in a First Peoples tourism plan. That comment has gone down in the Mallee and Wimmera like a lead balloon – and indeed across Victoria. Farmers who have watched their stock torn apart are told that the very predators doing it might soon be promoted as a tourism opportunity. It is simply insulting. It shows how completely detached this government has become from the realities of life in regional Victoria.

Many landholders now fear that this is not just about the Big Desert but that the next step will be dingo reintroduction across wider parts of the state under the guise of rewilding or ecological restoration. The same ideological mindset that banned lethal control will, if left unchecked, push to spread dingoes further, with devastating consequences for sheep and cattle producers across Victoria. This whole policy is not based on balance or evidence, it is based on ideology. It elevates symbolism above practicality, and it sacrifices rural livelihoods to satisfy metropolitan sentiment. The people who are paying the cost are the men and women who actually live with the consequences, not the activists or bureaucrats who designed the policy.

Legal and Social Issues Committee*Inquiry into the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023*

David ETTERSHPANK (Western Metropolitan) (17:47): Surprisingly, I also rise to make a brief contribution on the government's response to the inquiry into the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023. I would like to echo the sentiments of my colleague Ms Payne. The government's refusal to heed the advice of experts and the committee is craven and misguided. Despite support for decriminalisation being at an all-time high, the government has failed to listen to the Victorian community. Despite data from the ACT showing that the decriminalisation of cannabis has led to no negligible adverse outcomes, the government has chosen to disregard this evidence. Despite the recommendations of the inquiry receiving unanimous support from the government's own members, the government has refused to support them.

On that note, I want to express my compliments to Mr Galea and to Mr Batchelor, who came to this inquiry with an open mind and a healthy scepticism, and through conversation and listening to the expert witnesses we came to a consensus on how to move forward. I want to thank them for that. Why has the government chosen to drop these good members down the elevator shaft? Well, to put it simply –

Ryan Batchelor: On a point of order, President, I just struggle with Mr Ettershank's reflections on Mr Galea and me in this contribution and what the consequences of the government's response mean. I am just a little troubled by the way he has been using his interpretation of matters to reflect on us.

The PRESIDENT: I am not too sure if it has been something that is offensive. I have listened. I will call Mr Ettershank to continue, and I will continue to listen intently.

David ETTERSHPANK: I apologise for my excessive language causing any distress to the good members.

We ask ourselves: why has the government walked away from this compelling case for change? We have been told quite simply and directly by government representatives that next year's election will be a law and order election. The government is attempting to position itself as the toughest on crime, and that is a stupid notion that they can never win in that sort of tit-for-tat battle or posturing with the opposition over who is harder on crime. They are conflating the sort of violent crime that Victorians are rightly concerned about – the carjacking and the home invasions that we are witnessing across the state – with the victimless offence of consuming some weed. Apart from being ridiculous, it is disingenuous and, frankly, immoral. Victorians are not fools, and as we have mentioned previously, 80 per cent of them support decriminalising cannabis possession. As the esteemed former supervising magistrate of the Drug Court the Honourable Tony Parsons stated recently, cannabis law reform is the holy trinity of good policy. It is the right thing to do, it is backed by evidence and it enjoys broad community support.

This government's gutlessness has created an outrage amongst our members that is palpable. We simply say: stop arresting 4000 members of our community every year. These are victimless crimes, and this is inane policing. And to us, with a government that knows that these laws adversely impact upon First Nations communities, where they are eight times as likely to get picked up for cannabis possession, and other marginalised communities – the hypocrisy of wrapping themselves in a cloth of self-esteem and hubris over the moves on treaty, which are fantastic, whilst at the same time turning their back on a simple reform that directly affects the communities that we are targeting through treaty belies belief. We just express our deep, deep disappointment in the government, and no doubt this is something that will play out over time.

Legal and Social Issues Committee*Inquiry into Ambulance Victoria*

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:51): I am pleased to rise to share a few remarks on the report of the Legal and Social Issues committee's inquiry into Ambulance Victoria. Along with Mr Batchelor, Mr Tarlamis and other members on this side, it was a great privilege to take part in this inquiry, looking at one of the most important service aspects that is covered by state administration.

Paramedics and the support officers within Ambulance Victoria (AV) do such important work, and I wish to once again reiterate the heartfelt appreciation from members on this side, and I am quite sure across the aisle too, of the work that they do. I note that whilst this report in some areas does make some sharper criticisms, that should be in no way taken as any attempt to undermine the very important work that they do or our appreciation of that work.

It is an important report that covers a few various different aspects of the ambulance service in Victoria, providing some historical context as well and including two areas in particular. On the culture, we did receive a lot of evidence, both in submission form and in witness hearings, be it from current or former paramedics – some very difficult testimony in some cases as well. We very much appreciated them bravely coming forward and speaking about some of the issues that they had faced. We also heard from agencies such as the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, which has undertaken by far the most comprehensive review into AV's cultural issues. Indeed it was very good to have that report back, as our report was a snapshot in time, looking at what has been improved as a result of the VEOHRC report and where there is still some work to be done.

We also heard evidence from representatives of the current and former executive, and we were able to put some of these challenges to them, be it broader workplace cultural issues or things as simple as rostering faults or other issues in the payroll or HR systems that were causing grievance to workers. It was also very good to have the new CEO Jordan Emery appear before the committee. Whilst, given the timeframe of the committee, it was a very short part of the hearing and limited in scope, certainly on the cause of it, which was the guards of honour issue, the proactive nature Mr Emery showed in reaching out to the committee to advise us of an error in some evidence that other members of AV had given to the inquiry was certainly appreciated. Whilst that evidence was certainly disappointing to have put before us, I note, as per the minority report's contextualising remarks, the government members believe that IBAC would be the appropriate channel for that, but the committee has resolved to refer that to the Ombudsman. But it was nevertheless good to hear directly from Mr Emery and certainly encouraging to see that proactive attitude, which I sincerely hope will be reflected through broader, more cultural changes in the organisation.

We also heard extensive evidence on performance, and we know that on several metrics, AV and the professionalism of their staff are contributing to Victoria having some of the strongest results in the nation. We have seen the data from the performance indicator targets showing that, on almost every measure, AV is consistently exceeding those targets, including on pain management, on transport performance, on cardiac survival and on infection prevention and control. These are all very encouraging signs. Indeed, whilst some members of the committee were not too excited to be incorporating some of the details of the additional funding that this government has been providing to Ambulance Victoria as recently as in this year's budget, there is certainly some more context that can be found both in that minority report and in the extracts of proceedings as well.

This is a government that has continued to and will continue to heavily invest in our ambulance services. In my own electorate. I can draw on the example of the brand new Clyde North ambulance branch, which has opened and is currently serving our south-east community, a community with many members who will remember, not so long ago, the Cranbourne ambulance branch being privatised by the Liberal Party back in the 1990s.

Nick McGowan: How's the ramping going?

Michael GALEA: We are a long way from that, Mr McGowan, and thanks to you lot not being anywhere near government, they are all the better for it, especially with the provision of local ambulance services. There will be much more to say at other opportunities, but I will conclude my remarks there.

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (17:56): Just briefly, I want to rise to make a statement on the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into the state education system in Victoria. As part of that inquiry, we did some analysis of how Victoria is performing in NAPLAN. After the tabling of that document, we got our results for this year and the Education State did not disappoint. The Allan Labor government's investment in education is delivering NAPLAN results that are nation leading. Victorian students are top of the class, ranking first or second in 18 out of the 20 measures and significantly improving on 2024 results. Seventy per cent of Victorian students are scoring in the top two bands, sitting in either the 'strong' or 'exceeding' categories, while our primary students are first or second in all 10 domains. I want to particularly shout-out some of the fabulous schools in the Southern Metropolitan Region who are implementing practices designed to teach kids how to read and write more effectively. It is great going around and talking to principals, teachers and staff about how they are going about the task of improving our literacy and numeracy here in Victoria. These achievements are no accident. They are the result of dedicated work by teachers, policy settings put in place by this government and our continued determination to make sure Victoria is the Education State.

Petitions

Koala management

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

That the petition be taken into consideration.

I would first like to start by thanking those in the community who signed this petition, and the Koala Alliance for sponsoring it. It is because of your voices and your commitment that we are here today seeking justice for the koalas of Budj Bim.

Today we bring attention to a deeply problematic and unprecedented action taken by the Victorian government at Budj Bim National Park from 2 April until 25 April this year. To understand why it occurred we need to look at the events that led up to it. On 10 March 2025 a bushfire started by a lightning strike destroyed a significant amount of koala habitat in the park. Koalas were left stranded in remaining trees, some suffering life-threatening burns, with limited access to food and water. In response to aerial assessments, the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) concluded that a secretive aerial shooting operation was necessary to prevent further suffering.

Despite the severity and scale of this operation, only one wildlife veterinarian signed off on this entire cull. This is the first time to our knowledge that aerial culling has ever been approved for this species, and it could set a dangerous precedent. From the limited information we have received, we know that while many koalas were euthanised from helicopters, some were also shot on the ground at point-blank range. Shooting programs are notoriously unreliable, and any missed shots could have caused prolonged suffering to these koalas. There is no way for us to check whether joeys in pouches were able to survive, and given that this took place in a remote area away from public oversight, it is impossible to verify whether it was truly the most humane approach. Wildlife rescuers will confirm that standard protocols for wildlife euthanasia were not consistently followed in this operation, and the community is rightly demanding answers for it. I am not here to dispute that in some cases euthanasia of native animals may be necessary, nor am I questioning the intentions of those involved. But what I am questioning is the methods that were chosen and the secretive nature behind it. Our government

should have engaged wildlife rescue groups and the broader community and given these highly skilled volunteer veterinarians and wildlife experts, some of whom are in the gallery today, the opportunity to individually assess and, where necessary, rescue or humanely euthanise the animals with care and with consideration. Yet to this day we still have no answers whatsoever from DEECA.

Budj Bim National Park is surrounded by blue gum plantations, and when these plantations are harvested koalas are displaced and forced into areas that are not safe. Victoria is approaching a critical point for koalas. In New South Wales, Queensland and the ACT koalas are already endangered; here they face multiple threats, and preserving every surviving population is absolutely essential. An independent inquiry is needed to determine whether DEECA followed proper protocols and met the standards expected by the Victorian public. We are asking for simple answers; the international community is asking for simple answers. We must ensure that secretive lethal measures do not occur ever again, that the community is informed and that broader koala conservation strategies, including habitat restoration and protection, are only strengthened. The 10,000 signatures on this petition reflect the deep concern of the Victorian public, where the community has been so determined to get answers that even legal action has been taken against DEECA by Australians For Animals.

Native animals, which existed here long before we ever did, are increasingly treated as nuisances, with lethal control often seen as the easiest solution, the simplest solution, and we never know any details behind it. This approach must change, and that is what this petition calls for today. We are not disputing the difficult circumstances caused by fire, nor whether even koalas could have been suffering. What we are demanding, though, is accountability, transparency, ethical decision-making moving forward and involving the voices of the real experts. We owe it to the koalas, to the wildlife carers and to the citizens of Victoria to ensure that such an unprecedented action is never repeated without public oversight and rigorous scientific review ever again.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (18:04): I am pleased to respond to this petition, even though it is about a really sad and tough event. I would like to start by thanking the people that signed the petition and also to express my appreciation for wildlife carers in our community. I think this is a good opportunity to say that. I have had occasion to visit Mosswood Wildlife centre near Koroit, where I live in south-west Victoria, where Tracey and Peter Wilson just do an absolutely marvellous job bringing back to health a whole range of different animals. The fire at Budj Bim on 10 March was unfortunately only one of several terrible fires that have affected our iconic native animals in western Victoria in the last two years. The bushfires in the Grampians and the Little Desert also injured, killed or displaced thousands of native animals. Koalas are particularly vulnerable to bushfires. They cannot run ahead of fires as much as some other animals can, and as well as direct burns they can suffer damage to their airways due to superheated air and smoke. The ongoing impacts of climate change mean that, distressingly, we are going to continue to have to manage the impact of fire on wildlife. It is not something that anybody wants to have to do, but it is the reality we face. We do so informed by expert animal advice in consultation with traditional owners and community.

In this instance the decision to use aerial operations to euthanise the koalas was not taken lightly. The wildlife welfare emergency response was delivered by trained Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) and Parks Victoria staff along with accredited local wildlife rehabilitators and veterinarians from the Wildlife Emergency Support Network. They searched for, assessed and treated impacted wildlife. Those of us who have been fortunate to visit Budj Bim will know that its distinctive lava flows mean that it is extremely rough and rocky. Only 13 per cent of the area affected by fires was accessible on foot, hence the need for the aerial assessment. Supplementary feeding and provision of water were trialled without success. The only viable options for the injured koalas were to leave them to deteriorate and die slowly and painfully or to end their suffering.

The wildlife welfare approach was developed following assessment by an experienced welfare veterinarian. It was then peer reviewed by an independent third-party wildlife ethicist. DEECA provided regular community updates, including with representatives of key wildlife welfare groups, who were informed of the proposed approach. These included Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners

Aboriginal Corporation, Animals Australia, the RSPCA, Wildlife Victoria, Humane World for Animals and the International Fund for Animal Welfare. These groups were briefed five times throughout the response. I think there was an enormous sense of difficulty in the tough decisions that they had to make.

In the months following the operation, veterinary assessments have confirmed that the overall state of welfare of koalas in the fire-impacted areas of the park is significantly improved. The land manager will continue to monitor wildlife in the national park and undertake koala health check programs. Through the BushBank program the Victorian government has provided up to \$1 million to help create additional habitat on private land near the park to help improve food and habitat availability for koalas in the future.

In closing, I would just like to say that, having visited Budj Bim on many occasions, it is very difficult to access. It is a beautiful space, and it is a wonderful refuge for our native animals. I do thank the community and particularly the Budj Bim operators, the Aboriginal people who look after that space and have a big say in how it is run.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:09): I am pleased to rise to make a contribution on petition 652 that was signed by 7000 Victorians, identifying their severe concern about welfare and the actions of the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action at Budj Bim when 750 koalas were aerially culled or euthanised, depending on which way you want to turn it, as a result of their potentially being unwell and health compromised. It is really disappointing that the government kept this information and did not provide context for the community. It was a found-out-after case, where there was no public consultation, investigation or ability for scientists to come and make some comments. We also know that aerial shooting does not really provide that context. How did the government know that those animals did not have joeys inside or that they were indeed fully euthanised by the time that the shooters left? It really disappoints that public trust and transparency about animal welfare, and I appreciate the people that signed that form.

Indeed I was recently down at Budj Bim. I did not have a lot of time to go for a walk round there, but speaking with Gunditjmara people, the passion that they have for that region and the beauty of it is most understandable. We know that there was bushfire across that landscape, and we know that bushfire can be healing to country and healing, in the past, in keeping wild native populations healthy and in check. But the interruption of some of these fire regimes over many hundreds of years has created a problem – indeed we know that koalas have had them in the past. I have listened to some what I will call koala experts. These were people who presented to an inquiry. It was called the inquiry into ecosystem decline, and that was tabled in Parliament in 2021. We had a koala historian who had studied in great depth around this in terms of the history of koala populations across the nation but in the south-east, and also a gentleman by the name of Dr Jack Pascoe from Melbourne University – and very esteemed. They are two very different people – one was Vic Jurskis, and one was Jack Pascoe – but they actually had very common themes around the cyclical nature of koala populations. They do erupt, I think the term is. When there is good foliage and good food, of course you will see population numbers increasing to a potentially unsustainable level, and when the canopy goes and the food for those koala populations diminishes, then of course you are going to get a bust and you are going to get the decline of those populations. If you add fire to that regime, it certainly can cause the level of tragedy that we saw back in April.

One of the clear things that I want to know about, and I have argued this in this place for a long time, is: does this government actually understand the forests and monitor species within forests? I have argued quite loudly that you cannot save every koala, and we understand that, I believe, but you should be looking at a healthy population on a landscape-wide basis and start planning and monitoring that. But do we know what the population of koalas is in Victoria? Do we understand what our native koalas are doing? Various people will have ideas, but what is this government doing to actually understand those populations, monitor those populations, present that monitored scientific research to the Victorian public and then develop a strategy that is out there?

I believe there is a strategy around koalas, but we have seen that the government back a few years ago had a strategy around the brumbies in the high country, and then when it did not serve them, they abandoned that strategy and then went and aerially culled them. We know that we need to have management of species. We understand that. But I certainly do not think that the government did the right thing in this way. It did it in a subversive way. It also represents that there has been an ecological imbalance. I believe that we should be doing more cool burns within our state forests and national parks to take the foliage away, to create a better environment, so that we will not be seeing this sort of tragedy occur for these vast numbers of koalas.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (18:14): Can I start by thanking Ms Purcell for bringing this debate on in this chamber and thanking the thousands of people who signed this petition. I, along with many in my community in western Victoria, were shocked to learn that earlier this year hundreds of koalas were shot from helicopters in Budj Bim National Park following devastating bushfires and storms that destroyed large areas of their habitat. The Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action justified these actions on the basis that koalas were burnt, injured and starving and that euthanising them was the only humane option. Given the challenging terrain and lack of accessibility, a decision was made to undertake aerial culling, something that has not occurred for koalas before. We understand that staff involved genuinely felt that they were making the best decisions they could in the circumstances; many were distressed by the choices before them. But what happened raises serious questions and speaks to a broader failure of this government to plan for and protect koalas and other native species. It also speaks to serious failures in transparency. They failed to engage meaningfully with community members, and communities are now left trying to put the pieces together about exactly what happened here.

This event was in fact entirely preventable and predictable. We should not be in a situation where hundreds of koalas impacted by climate disasters are being killed like this. It speaks to Labor's broad failures to protect wildlife and nature. For years Labor has allowed native forest logging, deforestation, clearing of land and grasslands, as well as fuelling climate disasters by continuing to burn coal and gas, all of which have contributed to the destruction of koala habitat. Rising CO₂ is also changing the composition and reducing the nutritional quality of gum leaves. Koalas are under threat right across the country and are being pushed further and further south. There is a distinct possibility that Victoria could be the last remaining state with any wild koalas, and even across our state there are many areas where they are on the brink of extinction, as we have seen with the Gordon plantation koalas near Ballarat. Despite the so-called abundance of koalas in the south-west of Victoria, these populations are being pushed into smaller and smaller areas of habitat where there is not enough food. They are also being pushed into urban areas where they are at increasing risk of road strike. Many are seeking out the plentiful food and shelter available in blue gum plantations. And while we strongly support plantations as an alternative to native forest logging, when they have been harvested there have been numerous instances of koalas being injured or killed due to lack of appropriate management plans. And then there is the risk of fire. When so much of the remaining koala population is forced into such a concentrated area, all it takes is one significant bushfire to wipe out a huge proportion of them, as we saw in Budj Bim National Park.

If we continue with business as usual, there is the very real possibility that Australia will lose native species like koalas, yet Victorian Labor refuses to release a long-completed review of the state's outdated wildlife laws, which are failing to protect wildlife and are not fit for purpose. This sort of incident is a perfect example of what happens when you do not have adequate wildlife protections. It is also yet another example of the secrecy and lack of transparency that has become a hallmark of this government.

This tragedy is a wake-up call. We need Labor to take wildlife and habitat protection seriously, or these tragedies will continue to occur. There is no way that they can say that they did not know about it, that they were not told that this was a crisis that they needed to do something about. Time and time again the community, including many of the people who signed this petition, have begged the

government to do something more about protecting wildlife, about protecting our nature, about protecting native species like koalas. Yet the government continues to ignore them. It is high time that they listen to the community, that they are open with the community. I really commend the petitioners' calls for a further investigation into what occurred in Budj Bim with these tragic events. We need a lot more action from this government.

I also use this opportunity to remind them we need that wildlife review released, we need our wildlife laws updated because we are running out of time. We are going to lose many species, including our koalas, and I think it would be an absolute tragedy to sit by and watch that occur.

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:19): Seldom does any good happen behind the cloak of secrecy. That is certainly the case with this disaster, and it is nothing short of a disaster. I too would like to congratulate Georgie Purcell for bringing this forward, and the 7000 Victorians, perhaps even some from further afield, probably from right across the country and right across the planet. I was aghast when I first learned that we were perhaps the first state in the world to ever tackle a problem of this nature in this way. The fact is that it was a decision of this government to kill some 1061 koalas from an aerial assault – an aerial assault; let us not mince words. There was no possible way that that gunman could have understood or comprehended the individual animals and their role in the ecosystem when they shot one by one by one, up to tens, up to hundreds, up to 1061 koalas culled – killed – from an aerial assault. I mean, it just lacks common sense. I do not understand to this day how this has not been front-page headline news right across Victoria and right across Australia.

What we were told in the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee process is that there was an assessment. There was a ground assessment of some 1091. There was a further aerial assessment of 1128. But then we were told, on the same hand, that it was feared that officers themselves could not go into the park because 13 per cent of the park, it was claimed, was inaccessible to officers and there was a risk of trees falling on the assessors. So they did not actually bother to send people in to investigate, is what they are saying to us. And somehow the bureaucracy thought that it was okay to simply sign off on the culling – the killing – of 1061 koalas. You might say that having done that abominable act, perhaps they went in and saw for themselves that they were actually done humanely, that that sniper – that gunman – actually had great aim and knew what he or she was doing. I do not want to individualise this, because it is not about that individual. That individual was doing their job, a job they were paid to do by the state government. But what we know, because of the public accounts and estimates process, is of all the koalas killed, 1061, do you know how many they recovered? It is breathtaking. It is a scandal. They told us they recovered six, and then a further eight in total. Six, then eight, so 14 of the 1061 koalas were ever recovered, and they were not all dead. And that is just at that smallest sample size. I mean, this truly goes well beyond a scandal. It is an illustration of how a bureaucracy and multiple layers in that bureaucracy can lose their way, perhaps with good intentions, perhaps with the bushfires – but do not use those as an excuse or as a shield for poor behaviour or silly decisions and just bad decisions, both for our native environment but also for the biodiversity and for our broader environment.

And then we get to the broader questions of how many people were involved, because time and again we have been told different things, which actually speaks to what the petitioners are calling for – that is, an independent investigation, because none of us in this chamber I think for a second are convinced we have anything near the truth. As my colleague in the chamber has said today too, there was no transparency around any of this. No-one actually oversaw this from an independent standpoint, and no-one therefore can say that this actually happened humanely. What an unmitigated disaster. I will leave my comments there, because I would like anyone else in the chamber that might want the opportunity to speak to do so, and we have very little time left.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (18:23): I would like to thank all members for their contributions today. It is interesting to finally get a response from the government on this issue, and it is unfortunate that it takes the signatures of thousands and thousands of Victorians to finally get them to say something about this, because that is all we have been asking for – to explain this decision, and

if they believe in it so strongly, to justify this decision. This petition is not calling for anything but an inquiry, and if they really, genuinely believed those excuses that they have just given us now, they would let that be heard in an open forum. They would tell us that information. They would have the people front up that stand by these decisions.

As we know, there was only one vet who oversaw this operation. What we do know is that we have heard from multiple other vets who are absolutely appalled at how this went ahead, and they have not even been able to access this information as those experts. We really want to reiterate that this is what happens when we have a department that is not just responsible for the protection of wildlife but at the same time responsible for the slaughter and the destruction of wildlife that are all too often being seen as nuisances or problems in this state. For the most part, koalas have escaped that. Now we are facing a time when even they are not exempt from the cruelty and the secrecy of the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. The reality is the impacts of the climate crisis are going to mean more fires: we are going to have more events like this. That is why we need to support the experts, who are calling for change, and our carers and our shelters more than ever. These people possess the skills, knowledge and experience to speak to the government in complex situations where wildlife do need care, and they have been shut out from this operation. They are demanding answers. We are demanding answers. I think the whole chamber besides the government wants this inquiry, and we implore them to listen.

Motion agreed to.

Adjournment

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (18:26): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Beverley Hills Primary School

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:26): (2046) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Education, and the action I seek is for the minister to provide an update on the progress of construction works for the new student toilets at Beverley Hills Primary School in Doncaster East. The Allan Labor government continues to deliver for our great local public schools, providing fairer funding, rolling out evidence-based programs like Phonics Plus and investing in vital capital upgrades across the state. I recently had the pleasure of visiting Beverley Hills Primary School, where I met with acting principal Elena Pitsiakkos and assistant principal Rachel Wallace. It was wonderful to hear about the outstanding education being delivered at the school and the strong sense of community that underpins everything they do. During my visit I toured the school and saw the capital works underway to refurbish the student toilet block. The Allan Labor government has invested just under \$500,000 in this upgrade, which will ensure the facilities are modern, hygienic and fit for purpose, which supports a safe and welcoming learning environment for students. These works are part of our broader commitment to making sure every child has access to high-quality education in facilities that meet their needs. I know the school community is excited to see these improvements take shape, and I look forward to the minister's response.

Thomas Embling Hospital

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (18:27): (2047) My matter is for the Minister for Mental Health in relation to staffing cuts at a mental health hospital. The action I seek is for the minister to intervene and immediately halt the proposed staffing cuts to Thomas Embling Hospital and ensure that the safety of both patients and staff is prioritised over budget savings. Thomas Embling Hospital is Victoria's only mental health facility for prisoners, housing some of the state's most vulnerable and high-risk psychiatric patients. Yet despite an increasing demand and expanding capacity, the Allan Labor government is slashing critical specialist roles. This includes the planned removal of drug specialist nurses. Even Forensicare, which runs the hospital, admits there are security issues with illicit

substances being circulated within the facilities. An internal email confirms drugs were present on campus as recently as September, prompting an emergency security measure. This followed July's incident, when a patient under the influence of drugs set fire to his room. Still the government plans to cut staff and specialist skills.

These are not isolated incidents. There are reports of patients returning from day release high on ice, attacking staff and breaching conditions. One patient even went missing for two days, yet instead of strengthening support, the government is cutting registered drugs and alcohol specialists, autism nurses and occupational therapists. Occupational violence claims have nearly doubled in the last three years, and injuries requiring time off have tripled. Staff are stretched thin. The hospital is failing to meet its own benchmarks. Only 12 per cent of the male security patients are admitted within the target timeframe, and the average time to wait for a bed is over 370 days.

I call for the minister to reverse this ridiculous cut and prioritise the safety of both patients and staff. Thomas Embling Hospital is not just a facility but a lifeline for some of Victoria's most vulnerable individuals. Undermining its workforce in the name of savings is not just shortsighted but reckless and dangerous. If the government is serious about delivering on the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, then it must start protecting the very people who deliver the care, because when safety is sacrificed for savings, it is not just the workforce that suffers but the entire Victorian community.

Nursing and midwifery students

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:30): (2048) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, and the action I seek is for the delivery of an emergency funding package to ensure nursing and midwifery graduates secure work. During the COVID pandemic our health system was pushed to the brink, and we asked a lot from our healthcare workers. These included people who stepped up and selflessly took on roles as nursing assistants to help at a critical time. Many of these people, often young women, realised that they loved the work and went on to enrol into nursing degrees, which the Victorian government helped pay for. In 2022 the Victorian government offered to pay the course fees for more than 10,000 nursing and midwifery undergraduates with hopes to boost staffing across strained healthcare services. In 2026 these nursing and midwifery students will enter the workforce. Unfortunately, what should be an exciting time is now full of anxiety.

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation warns that increased workforce retention due to cost of living means that more than 2000 student nurses will be left without graduate positions next year, up from 350 the year prior. They are calling on the Victorian government to step in with an emergency funding package to ensure nursing and midwifery graduates secure work. I spoke with these women outside of Parliament at a rally a few weeks ago; there were so many bright and eager and talented people who were willing to give back and are now worried that they will not be able to. While there may be a short-term surplus of graduates, the government's own modelling shows that by 2027 we will need these nurses in the system to address shortages, but if these graduates do not have jobs to go into next year we risk losing them to other professions. These graduates received scholarships from the Victorian government to ensure their degrees, but somehow that support was not extended to helping them use their degrees. Part of these scholarships were contingent on two years of work in the Victorian public health system; now those roles do not exist, graduates are set to be \$750,000 worse off. I ask: will the minister deliver an emergency funding package to ensure nursing and midwifery graduates secure work?

Glasses for Kids program

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (18:32): (2049) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Education Ben Carroll. The Glasses for Kids program has now reached a milestone of over 10,000 pairs of free glasses for Victorian kids. I ask the minister for an update on how initiatives like this are actively helping address barriers to learning and supporting equity across Victorian schools.

West Gate Tunnel

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (18:33): (2050) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, and the action I seek is that the minister publish the full tolling model and concession terms for the West Gate Tunnel and freeway and table them in Parliament before the tolls commence. When the West Gate Tunnel opens, Labor's tolling deal with Transurban will ensure that the very people who build, drive and deliver for Victoria will pay more than anyone else just to get to work. Under the deal, cars and light commercials will be tolled on the tunnel and the Hyde Street ramps, and heavy vehicles will be tolled on the West Gate Freeway between Millers Road and Williamstown Road, the only freeway in the state where trucks must pay simply to access the city. At the same time Labor's so-called no-truck zones on Francis Street, Somerville Road, Buckley Street, Moore Street, Blackshaws Road and Hudsons Road will funnel every single delivery truck straight back into Transurban's toll network. That is not congestion management; that is a forced monopoly – a toll trap for workers in the west. And who benefits? The same company whose CityLink concession was extended to 2045, guaranteeing toll increases of the greater of 4.2 per cent and CPI until 2029. While families in Box Hill or Brighton drive to work toll free, families in Werribee, Laverton and Sunshine pay thousands a year just to show up for their shifts. This is reverse Robin Hood economics – taking from the tradies, the truckies and the small business owners of the west to line the pockets of billion-dollar corporations in the east.

Sheep industry

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (18:34): (2051) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Agriculture, and the action I seek is that the government establish a parliamentary inquiry into Victorian sheep farming. The inquiry should investigate the welfare of sheep in Victoria, the adequacy of the legislative framework and the effectiveness of the current regulatory scheme.

Sheep Advocate Australia has documented widespread mistreatment of sheep on Victorian farms and repeated failures by Agriculture Victoria to ensure compliance with our animal welfare laws. Their material points to significant systemic problems in how we protect sheep welfare in this state. The patterns they describe are not a handful of bad actors, but rather they do suggest a broken framework that is not deterring cruelty and a regulator that is too stretched, too conflicted or both. Victoria's laws are clear about the duty to provide food, water, shelter and veterinary care, yet Sheep Advocate Australia reports routine breaches of obligations under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986 and the Victorian sheep code. They also raise concerns that complaints and evidence are not being investigated quickly or thoroughly and that enforcement actions are inconsistent. One of the community members has written to me saying:

[QUOTE AWAITING VERIFICATION]

As a farmer, I am personally offended at how many people get away with neglecting their livestock. It's not rocket science – feed, water and shelter. Every loser who neglects their stock not only gives away a free kick against farming, they anger and offend those of us who do look after our stock properly. Common decency says if you have the control of life or death over something, you do a proper job of it. And the government departments who keep letting it slide aren't doing farmers any favours. You might think you're giving farmers a hand by not acting promptly and enforcing strongly, but you just send the message that they don't have to take care of their stock and make a mockery of good farmers.

We know that the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986 is out of date and that the government has consulted on the draft Animal Care and Protection Bill that aims to modernise the framework in Victoria. We have been expecting that bill to arrive in Parliament, and we hope to see it soon. I repeat: the action I seek tonight is that the government establish a parliamentary inquiry into Victorian sheep farming to address concerns such as those raised by those who have contacted my office.

Kew Neighbourhood Learning Centre

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:36): (2052) My adjournment is for the Minister for Carers and Volunteers in the other place, Minister Spence. The connecting carers in their community

small grants program 2025–26 closed applications in August this year. With support in partnerships with Carers Victoria and the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, I am pleased to note that in my electorate of Southern Metropolitan Region, Kew Neighbourhood Learning Centre was awarded a grant to support their caring and carers program. With the funding provided by this grant program, unpaid carers for individuals experiencing challenges with mental health, physical or mental disabilities or age-related health conditions will receive targeted support through the Kew Neighbourhood Learning Centre through a holistic, community-based program designed to increase social connection, improve wellbeing and reduce stress. This project will involve the facilitation of peer support groups for unpaid carers, workshops designed to build skills and community events and activities to improve wellbeing in the community. This is an excellent initiative that adds to the incredible work that the Kew Neighbourhood Learning Centre is doing to support the Kew community, including childcare programs, playgroups, educational training, community support groups and health and wellbeing services.

I am pleased that I am part of an Allan Labor government committed to supporting unpaid carers with our \$38 million investment over four years in 2023 to support over 700,000 unpaid carers across the state. I had the pleasure of visiting Kew Neighbourhood Learning Centre in 2023, early in my term, to meet with the winner of the 2022 Ro Allen Award, who completed a pre-accredited creative industries course with Kew Neighbourhood Learning Centre. This demonstrated to me the value that the centre's programs bring to the people of Kew. The action that I seek is for the minister to join me in visiting the Kew Neighbourhood Learning Centre and seeing the work that the centre's tireless, hardworking volunteers do in supporting my community of Kew.

Mount Alexander Road, Essendon

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (18:38): (2053) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and it concerns yet another broken promise to the people of Essendon: the long-delayed intersection upgrades along Mount Alexander Road. The action I seek is an update to this project, because back in 2023 the bumbling member for Essendon Danny Pearson together with Moonee Valley City Council proudly announced \$6.5 million to upgrade the dangerous Essendon North intersections along Mount Alexander Road. At the time, locals were told this funding would finally address what has been long known as one of Melbourne's worst and most hazardous intersections. Then earlier in May this year Mr Pearson reannounced the same project on social media, stating that the Allan Labor government is investing \$6.55 million to upgrade the roundabout at Mount Alexander Road. But when one of my constituents contacted Moonee Valley City Council this week to ask when construction might begin, the answer could not have been clearer. The council confirmed:

[QUOTE AWAITING VERIFICATION]

To our knowledge, no construction funding has been committed to date.

After two years and multiple Labor spin announcements there are still no timeline, no works underway and no funding actually committed to complete or even start construction on these notorious intersections.

Meanwhile VicRoads data recently identified this location as one of the most dangerous intersections in metropolitan Melbourne, with a troubling number of crashes and near misses continuing to occur. Essendon residents are rightly asking why, after two years of promises and photo opportunities, nothing has been delivered. They deserve genuine safety improvements, not recycled media releases, social media photos and planning phases.

The action I seek of the minister is to provide a clear update to the community on the status of this project. They specifically want to know when construction funding will be committed, when works will commence and when residents can expect to see real safety outcomes on the ground. The government wants to, through its activity centre changes, push a huge amount of people into the area, particularly Essendon North, which the minister actually campaigned against his own government for

changes to – but not anywhere else in the state. With that you actually need commensurate infrastructure investment. The government has had two years to deliver on its promise. It is time to stop the spin and start the work before another serious crash occurs at one of Melbourne’s most dangerous intersections.

Kilmore secondary school

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (18:42): (2054) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Education. The action I seek is for the minister to fund the master plan for a public high school in Kilmore. Kilmore is a thriving, growing town in my electorate of Northern Victoria, with a current population of 12,269 residents and predictions of a population of over 24,910 by 2046. It seems inconceivable that there is no local public high school in the town. Because of this projected growth, the Mitchell Shire Council listed a public high school in Kilmore as a priority project before the 2022 state election and have again, unanimously, listed it as a priority for the 2026 state election.

Students are currently forced to attend either Broadford or Wallan, both nearing capacity, or Assumption College, the private school, whose fees are out of reach for many families. There are reports of students spending up to two hours travelling to and from Broadford and Wallan. Often these buses are overcrowded, with students being left behind at stops, leaving them stranded. The burdensome travel times directly affect mental health, family time, after-school work and participation in local sport or community activities.

Some parents opt to homeschool their adolescents due to the limited options available in Kilmore. Some families are even looking to relocate so they have easier access to schooling. A local public high school would give students in Kilmore equal access to education and opportunity right where they live. The action I seek is for the minister to fund the master plan for a public high school in Kilmore.

Deadly Little Dribblers

[NAME AWAITING VERIFICATION]

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (18:43): (2055) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Community Sport in the other place. Last Sunday I had the opportunity to represent the minister at the Deadly Little Dribblers clinic at Narrandjeri Stadium in Thornbury, led by the Koorie Academy and supported through a \$100,000 investment from the Allan Labor government’s 2024–25 budget. It was one of five junior basketball development camps held across Victoria. The Deadly Little Dribblers program gives First Nations children the opportunity to try basketball, connect with culture and build pathways in sport. Clinics have been held right across Victoria, from Ballarat to Mildura to Dimboola, Melton and the inner north in Thornbury, all designed to strengthen community connection and build inclusive spaces for young First Nations people. It is a brilliant reminder of why local community sport matters. A special shout-out to Ricky Baldwin, the founder and CEO of Koorie Academy, along with all the dedicated family, staff and volunteers who put in a massive effort to make this a success. I was thrilled to help hand out prizes to what is undoubtedly the next generation of basketball superstars and see firsthand how sport and culture can come together to support our youth. Despite the cold and rainy, rainy, rainy weather outside, the energy and teamwork inside were unmatched. Special mention must go to Riley and all the other Deadly Little Dribblers, who showed their impressive skills on the court. The action I seek from the minister is to provide information on how other initiatives that the Allan Labor government is delivering support Aboriginal participation and excellence in sport across Victoria.

Kingston City Council

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:45): (2056) My matter is for the Minister for Local Government, and it concerns the City of Kingston. On the back of an FOI application to Bayside council concerning any declaration of conflicts of interest by Cr Andrew Hockley, Bayside council reported that no conflicts of interest have been declared at any council meetings up to and including the date of this decision, being Tuesday 28 October. In his role as advocacy lead at the City of

Kingston, Andrew Hockley is required to declare conflicts of interest. In the most recent report, titled *Quarterly Advocacy Update*, it was reported no council officer or officers or contractors that have provided advice in relation to this report have declared a conflict of interest regarding the matter under consideration. All this seems highly unusual. How can a councillor, Mr Hockley, possibly fulfil their elected duties on one hand at Bayside whilst being the advocacy lead at Kingston on the other – two councils with different views on many things – and not declare a conflict of interest to either council? It is very curious how this is operating.

I notice that at the same time, or through a similar period, the Minister for Local Government Nick Staikos has appointed two monitors, Mr Tanner and Mr Watson, and these are obviously both eminent people. The purpose of the monitors is to assist the council in strengthening its governance, with a specific focus on health and safety, meeting procedures, decision-making processes and managing conflicts of interest. This is this the Kingston council that Mr Staikos described in August this year when he appointed the monitors. He said the council was less than ideal.

So we have got a situation here where Mr Hockley, with his deep Labor links, has been very active in working as an advocacy lead, talking about things like the Suburban Rail Loop and other matters in the City of Kingston. At the same time, he is an elected councillor, more recently in the City of Bayside. These are obviously adjoining councils – they have some interests that are in common, but inevitably they have some interests which are not in common. How on earth does Mr Hockley, with one hat here and another hat there – how does this work? How can you operate like that, when you have got clear conflicts of interest in two separate roles? It appears there has been no declaration of conflicts of interest in either role. This smells very bad. Corruption is open in these sorts of matters. We need to be very clear. We need to have proper declarations of conflicts of interest. These matters are important. The Minister for Local Government needs to make sure that these conflicts of interest are declared properly and that there is no lapse in governance.

Cohealth

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (18:48): (2057) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Health. The action I seek is a commitment from the Labor government, by 30 November, to provide a rescue funding package to enable Cohealth GP services to stay open at Kensington, Collingwood and Fitzroy and to advocate to federal government for a longer-term, sustainable model for community health centres. Cohealth have announced they will be forced to end their GP and counselling services in these areas in December 2025 and to close their Collingwood clinic permanently in 2026. Cohealth offers a unique, free wraparound health service, and losing these services means 12,500 people in our community will lose access to affordable services they depend on.

These clinics see more than 46,000 patients every year, where nearly 70 per cent of those patients hold concession cards. If these closures go ahead, tens of thousands of people will lose access to their doctor and around 25 doctors and counsellors will lose their jobs. This is disgraceful at a time when demand for community health services is at an all-time high. With waitlists for health services ballooning in recent years, resulting in record delays, this is an unconscionable political choice. Infrastructure Victoria has made it clear that despite serving one in 10 Victorians, community health receives just 0.3 per cent of the state's \$2 billion health infrastructure budget. Nearly all community health organisations report having at least one building in poor condition or close to the end of its life, and currently less than 0.5 per cent of Victoria's \$27 billion health budget goes to community health, even though it is one of the most effective ways to improve outcomes and reduce pressure on hospitals. Minister, we know that funding for our community health services that support local communities should be prioritised. It avoids increased poverty, ill health, homelessness and hospital overloading, as well as providing access to health care. Access to health care should be free, local and accessible to everyone.

Landcare

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (18:50): (2058) I am delighted to be able to get up and talk about Landcare grants, and I think everyone here knows how much I love Landcare. It was great to be out on the lakes recently thanks to the catchment authority and catch up with the Romawi Landcare Group, and we had some great conversations about how we get kids more involved in Landcare groups. But anyway, off the back of that, my adjournment matter is for the Minister for Environment Steve Dimopoulos. This year \$3.6 million in Landcare grants will help fund Landcare and environment volunteer groups to restore and protect vital habitats and waterways. The action I seek is for the minister to specify what grants have been made to groups in Eastern Victoria and for what purposes.

Transport Victoria

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (18:51): (2059) My adjournment is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport. When it comes to V/Line and Metro connections, the Transport Victoria journey planner currently allows just 1 minute to change platforms at Footscray station. According to the app, that is a distance of only 20 metres – possibly if you could fly between platforms. In reality passengers must climb multiple sets of stairs, exit through the gates, descend again and swipe back through the barriers. For most commuters, especially those with luggage, mobility issues or children, 1 minute simply is not enough. Missing a V/Line service can mean waiting another hour for the next train. A Public Transport Victoria staff member has confirmed that this problem is well known and regularly affects travellers. The action I seek is for the minister to review the journey planner connection times between city and V/Line services to ensure that they accurately reflect the time required for passengers to walk, not fly, between platforms.

Youth crime

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:52): (2060) My adjournment item is for the Minister for Police. I recently had a long conversation with a person who is passionate about crime prevention and who has enormous expertise and experience working with young offenders in south-east Melbourne. To summarise a long conversation, he said that the majority of offending was done by a tiny percentage of young people. He told me the problem of repeat offending can be boiled down to offenders not being held accountable. Whilst there need to be major reforms to the system to increase accountability, I asked him what was one practical thing that we could do to help. He said that police engagement programs in schools should be expanded to involve 13- and 14-year-olds. Having a police officer give young people an early warning about what lies ahead or tell them about support services available could stop them from jumping into the revolving door of crime. This would be a small investment in time and resources that could divert some young people from serial offending. My request for action is to expand police engagement programs in schools for 13- and 14-year-old children.

Local government

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:53): (2061) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Local Government, and the action I seek is that the minister review the local government reforms being delivered by the Crisafulli government in Queensland. Across Victoria I meet councillors from every corner and of every political persuasion. A common theme that has emerged is that local government has become a patsy for the state. They are being crushed by cost shifting, strangled by Orwellian so-called integrity measures and left to fend for themselves under mountains of debt and red tape. But north of the border the approach could not be more different. The Liberal–National government of Premier David Crisafulli is treating local government as an equal partner in government. They have taken swift action to repair Labor’s broken relationship with councils. They have established a red tape reduction taskforce to tear down the bureaucratic barriers holding councils back. They have launched a depreciation taskforce to help local government tackle depreciation costs and deliver better value for ratepayers, and they have locked in funding for the Works for Queensland

program, creating jobs and building regional infrastructure where it is needed most. At the Local Government Association of Queensland's annual conference Premier Crisafulli announced sweeping reforms, including clarifying the roles of mayors and councillors, empowering them to speak freely and removing conduct breaches from the councillor code of conduct framework.

Meanwhile, here in Victoria this Labor government continues its crusade against local government. Their model councillor code of conduct, rammed through late last year, has well and truly succeeded in silencing dissent. It is punishing those who dare to challenge the government's pet projects or its activist allies on council. In May, Baw Baw shire councillor Danny Goss, a popular and plain-spoken mayor, was suspended for 21 days for what amounted to a bit of straight talking. If he was an MP, the worst he would get for his colloquialisms and rural wit is a warning in the chamber. Then in September, Surf Coast councillor Paul Barker was benched for a month after questioning the attendance numbers at a so-called truth-telling event promoted by his council on social media. It was not even in the council chamber, and since when was asking a factual question worthy of a suspension? This is what happens when government replaces common sense with political correctness, when councillors are punished for words instead of outcomes. The sector has had a gutful of monitors, arbiters and compliance officers. Let us get back to roads, rates and rubbish rather than foreign affairs and fringe ideologies. I urge the minister to study Queensland's reforms. If they can cut red tape and treat councils as equals, so can we. Local government should serve its communities rather than the political elites of Spring Street.

Padre Coffee

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:57): (2062) My adjournment matter today is for the Minister for Industrial Relations. The action I seek is that you act in solidarity with Padre Coffee workers in their struggle for improved pay and working conditions. The roasting and production team at Padre Coffee in Brunswick East have been negotiating an enterprise agreement with their employer since August of 2024. These workers do not feel that their current wages reflect the true value of the work they bring to this business. They have kept up with neither the rising cost of living nor the increasing work demands. Alongside a wage increase, these workers are fighting for better conditions, paid cultural leave for First Nations staff and paid gender-affirmation leave. I have heard that some of these Padre Coffee workers are struggling to meet rent payments and to afford basic healthcare costs. They even find it hard to cover the cost of bringing lunch into work some days, yet what they hear from their bosses is that:

[QUOTES AWAITING VERIFICATION]

Shareholders continue to expect a return on their investment into our business.

At this point, while the employers have agreed to some non-financial claims, they have not made a single counteroffer on the core claims from workers and are instead crying poor and saying they cannot afford them. I will note that Padre Coffee is part of the Seven Miles Coffee Company group. This group is funded by the private equity firm LVP, who reportedly manage over \$1.6 billion in assets. I stand with the workers of Padre Coffee and support their calls for better wages and conditions. In the words of one of their workers:

For the literal blood, sweat and tears we shed for our work so that the business can operate to generate revenue, we do not think it unreasonable to expect a little more so that we can live happy, healthy lives without fear of a crippling dentist bill or rent increases.

Machete amnesty

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:59): (2063) My adjournment is for the Premier. The action I seek is for the government to acknowledge that the recent Victorian machete amnesty surrendered weapons statistics show that it has been not the criminals handing in the majority of machetes but the retailers. Three-quarters of knives handed in came from retailers, so it is clear that the minister must commit to regulating the commercial availability of dangerous weapons, including

extending current bans on knives over 30 centimetres to cover shorter knives, which can be just as dangerous. Perhaps we are also going to need to consider the role of tools. However, it is also clear that the bins are not eradicating violent crimes with weapons in Victoria. From 1 to 12 September, Victorians disposed of 1362 machetes and other dangerous knives at designated disposal bins located at 45 police stations across the state. These bins were made available to the public to encourage the safe and anonymous surrender of illegal dangerous weapons. With 1362 machetes and the overall cost of the bin program being \$13 million, that is over \$9500 per machete.

However, what is particularly striking is that during the same period, major retailers handed in 3400 machetes, more than double the number surrendered by individuals. This figure raises important questions about who is distributing these weapons in our communities. These statistics show the proliferation of machetes is not just a matter of criminal possession but also one of commercial supply. The fact that retailers have reportedly surrendered thousands of these knives, double the number surrendered by the community, in the initial two-week period highlights the scale at which these weapons have been circulating, legally and perhaps irresponsibly, through retail channels.

The government's push for a national ban on the sale and possession of machetes is touted as an effective strategy, but there are many problems around the amnesty, and the main one is that criminals, which this amnesty was designed for, are not the ones that are actually handing them in. This is obvious, because daily we are still hearing about machete attacks. It is clear that legislative reform must address not only the end users but also the supply chain. I urge the Premier to consider the implications of these figures. We must ensure that future policy not only deters criminal possession but also regulates the commercial availability of weapons that have no legitimate place in our communities.

Urinary tract infections

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (19:01): (2064) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health. I have suffered from urinary tract infections for as long as I can remember, frequently as a child and at times throughout my adult life. In fact my own election campaign was characterised by them. I know they were often brought about by the stress and fatigue of that time. Fortunately, I have always been able to access antibiotics directly and treat the infection before it became too serious. Since the last election, the government has made it possible for Victorians to access antibiotics for uncomplicated UTIs over the counter. It is a simple and sensible reform that has made treatment far more accessible for so many Victorians. While this change has made a real difference for many, the reality is that for countless others treatment for UTIs is actually far from simple.

My story is not unique. I gathered that from talking to my girlfriends and even my staff in the office when writing this adjournment matter. For thousands of others, though, UTIs are not a short-term inconvenience but a long-term debilitating battle that too often goes unrecognised. Chronic urinary tract infections are a life-altering, often invisible illness that, like most women's health issues, continues to be misunderstood, misdiagnosed and under-researched. The advocacy organisation Chronic UTI Australia have been bringing attention to this critical issue for years now. They support people who have been living with the unrelenting pain, fatigue and psychological distress of chronic UTIs – people who are often dismissed, disbelieved or told that their suffering is in their heads. One of the women supported by the organisation, Amy, has shared her story publicly. After giving birth to her daughter, in 2019 Amy developed a chronic UTI that transformed every part of her life. She said:

Life before chronic UTI felt open and joyful, full of connection, purpose and freedom. But all of that changed ...

Amy's experience is representative of many others across the country who are battling this silent and debilitating condition. Chronic UTI Australia is calling for improved medical recognition, more dedicated research and greater treatment options for people living with chronic UTIs. This is a

condition that can have devastating impacts on physical health, mental wellbeing and overall quality of life, yet it remains largely ignored by mainstream medicine.

The action that I seek is for the minister to provide a clear update on the status of the government's inquiry into women's pain, including the steps taken to ensure that the experiences of people living with chronic conditions such as chronic UTIs are recognised, invested in and addressed.

McCrae–Chapel streets, Bendigo

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (19:04): (2065) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the action that I seek is for the minister to take urgent action to improve safety and traffic flow between trams and cars at the McCrae Street–Chapel Street intersection in Bendigo by immediately ordering a safety audit of the intersection to establish how safety can be improved. The Midland Highway winds through the centre of Bendigo, becoming Napier Street, then McCrae Street, then Pall Mall, then High Street – all different names but the same long and busy road that is the main artery of traffic through the city. It carries cars, motorbikes, cyclists and trucks, and it also carries heritage trams that give visitors a taste of old-world charm as they tour the gold rush city. All these vehicles and their drivers occupy the same few lanes of traffic, and while they usually succeed in safely navigating the shared space, there are regular accidents and many more near misses. There are several intersections on the Midland Highway that urgently need to be upgraded, including the Howard Street intersection and the Violet Street intersection, both of which I have raised in the Parliament many times.

Likewise, Bendigo's heritage tram operators have advocated for years for safety improvements to the intersection of McCrae Street and Chapel Street, which they say is particularly dangerous, but they have not yet seen any action by this Labor government to solve it. The McCrae Street and Chapel Street intersection has a right-hand turning lane for vehicles turning right into Chapel Street, but that right-hand turning lane is also the space where trams coming from the opposite direction must pass through as they go straight ahead. Before trams start crossing the intersection, they must wait until the turning lane is empty, and it is easy to imagine how tricky it is for tram drivers to time their move and how chaotic the scene can become. Tram drivers report that after waiting for the lane to be clear and starting their move across, cars will often pull into the turning lane at the last second, right in front of the tram, forcing drivers to slam on the brakes. Tram drivers report frequent near misses at this spot as well as numerous small incidents with trucks where mirrors are swiped or tram steps are clipped, which quickly add up to expensive repairs.

Drivers are worried that more serious collisions are just waiting to happen. The Bendigo Heritage Attractions CEO has proposed that this could be fixed by allowing tram drivers to control the traffic lights at the new pedestrian crossing at Mundy Street to hold vehicle traffic up until trams have passed through that intersection. I urge the minister to consider this proposal as well as immediately ordering a safety audit of the McCrae Street intersection to establish how safety can be improved. Despite the premier's own seat being in Bendigo, the Allan Labor government has not shown any interest at all in addressing the desperate need for safety upgrades at several Bendigo intersections, including those along the Midland Highway, as well as the Maiden Gully Road and Calder Highway intersection, which is the council's top – *(Time expired)*

Responses

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (19:07): It is a joy to confirm that this evening we have received 20 matters on the adjournment. They will be referred in accordance with the standing orders to ministers to acquit them in accordance with established practice, and I thank you for your time and attention.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 7:08 pm.