



# **Hansard**

## **LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL**

**60th Parliament**

**Tuesday 28 May 2024**



# Members of the Legislative Council

## 60th Parliament

### President

Shaun Leane

### Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

### Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

### Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Lizzie Blandthorn

### Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Georgie Crozier

### Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Evan Mulholland (from 31 August 2023)

Matthew Bach (to 31 August 2023)

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

<sup>1</sup> Resigned 7 December 2023

<sup>2</sup> Lib until 27 March 2023

<sup>3</sup> LDP until 26 July 2023

<sup>4</sup> Appointed 7 February 2024

### Party abbreviations

AJP – Animal Justice Party; ALP – Australian Labor Party; DLP – Democratic Labour Party;

Greens – Australian Greens; IndLib – Independent Liberal; LCV – Legalise Cannabis Victoria;

LDP – Liberal Democratic Party; Lib – Liberal Party of Australia; LP – Libertarian Party;

Nat – National Party of Australia; PHON – Pauline Hanson's One Nation; SFFP – Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party



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**Tuesday 28 May 2024**

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

*Announcements*

**Papua New Guinea landslide**

**The PRESIDENT (12:03):** I want to make a brief statement in regard to one of our nation's closest neighbours. On behalf of the members of the Legislative Council, I wish to offer our heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of the people of Papua New Guinea who tragically lost their lives in the landslide that occurred last Friday. We pay tribute to all those who have contributed to the difficult rescue efforts and hope that those who have been injured will be well cared for and recover.

*Bills*

**Commercial and Industrial Property Tax Reform Bill 2024**

**Estate Agents, Residential Tenancies and Other Acts Amendment (Funding) Bill 2024**

**National Energy Retail Law (Victoria) Bill 2024**

*Royal assent*

**The PRESIDENT (12:04):** I have a message from the Lieutenant-Governor, dated 21 May:

The Lieutenant-Governor informs the Legislative Council that he has, on this day, given the Royal Assent to the under-mentioned Acts of the present Session presented to him by the Clerk of the Parliaments:

<b>16/2024</b>	Commercial and Industrial Property Tax Reform Act 2024
<b>17/2024</b>	Estate Agents, Residential Tenancies and Other Acts Amendment (Funding) Act 2024
<b>18/2024</b>	National Energy Retail Law (Victoria) Act 2024

*Members*

**Minister for Skills and TAFE**

*Absence*

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:05): I inform the house that for the purposes of question time today I will answer questions for the portfolios of regional development and skills and TAFE on behalf of Minister Tierney.

*Questions without notice and ministers statements*

**Country Fire Authority funding**

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:05): (533) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, the budget revealed the Allan Labor government plans to hike the fire services property levy to the tune of \$166.3 million in the next financial year. How much of this massively increased charge to Victorian home owners will pay for the undelivered CFA fire trucks promised in 2022?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:06): I thank Ms Crozier for her question, but the fire trucks for the CFA that you have mentioned in your question were funded in a previous budget and are in the process of being rolled out. I have been honoured to be personally present at some of those truck handovers, and I have got a few more to go.

*Members interjecting.*

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:06): Quite a few to go, as my colleagues remind me behind me. Minister, will all of the 48 new trucks promised in 2022 be paid for and delivered by the start of the fire season at the end of this year?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:06): Thank you, Ms Crozier. I think I have answered this question in here before, but I certainly answered it on Friday at PAEC. The 48 vehicles that you refer to, which have been funded and are progressively rolling out, will all be delivered to the CFA by July this year. Some of them are on the ground at brigades. When they become available to the CFA – once they have left the manufacturer, they go through testing, they go through training – they get rolled out as appropriate. I am very pleased to say there are additional fire trucks funded in this year’s budget, which will get underway in due course as well, so lots and lots of brigades will be in receipt of Labor-funded fire trucks.

### Youth justice system

**Katherine COPSEY** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:07): (534) My question is to the Attorney-General. Attorney, Nerita Waight, CEO of VALS, spoke yesterday as co-chair of Ngaweeyan Maar-oo, Victoria’s partnership forum on closing the gap, at the Yoorrook Justice Commission about social justice issues. Nerita spoke to the government’s piecemeal approach to consultation with the Aboriginal community. She used the example of the recently announced electronic monitoring ankle bracelet trial for young people on bail and that no Aboriginal community controlled organisations were consulted. Attorney, how can the government say it is committed to self-determination for Aboriginal peoples when it introduces such measures that will only further criminalise Aboriginal young people?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:08): Ms Copsey, I really value the contribution of many stakeholders to matters within my portfolio, and VALS are a large contributor to that. I do not agree with the premise of your question about the electronic monitoring trial further entrenching Aboriginal young people in the justice system. What we have said is that this trial is under development. It will undergo further consultation. It has not been legislated yet. That will be contained in the youth justice bill which has been foreshadowed to be introduced into the Parliament in due course.

There will be a lot of conversations around guidelines, around parameters and around the suitability of individuals in the youth justice system that would be appropriate to be part of the trial. The trial is all about ensuring that young people comply with their bail conditions. It is about keeping them out of custody. It is about ensuring that they stay on track, engage in education and take up employment opportunities. Where they are falling off the right track, they can often be identified by failing to comply with bail. It puts them at risk. We know it can put the community at risk. If young people are complying with bail, they are not committing offences; they are more likely to be engaging with the supports that ensure that they are getting the best opportunities to turn their lives around. That is the purpose of electronic monitoring. We know and we are conscious that there are other areas, other jurisdictions around the world, where it has not worked, because it has been applied as a punitive-only measure. That is not the goal here. I am very well aware of the criminogenic problems associated with trials of this sort. We are trying to do it differently.

It is not just about electronic monitoring; it is about improved supervision, intensive supervision and support for young people, because we are seeing more young people, more vulnerable young people, not only committing offences but committing really dangerous offences that are putting them at risk of harm to themselves and the community, and we want to do something that ensures that we can really target the cohort that we are concerned about. We will continue to have conversations with the Aboriginal community, and I will go back to the start of my question: we will be very, very careful around the eligibility and guidelines around suitability of the trial of up to 50 young people.

**Katherine COPSEY** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:11): Thank you, Attorney, for your answer. Similar concerns have actually been raised by Aboriginal community controlled organisations about the youth justice bill, particularly bail provisions for children and that consultation has been ad hoc



and only on certain provisions of the bill currently under development. Unusually, we have seen no exposure draft, and there are concerns from stakeholders that the previous feedback that they have given will not be adequately incorporated into the final bill and that because of this the bill may not be fair for Aboriginal children and young people and could contribute to further criminalisation or harm to them. Attorney, can you reassure the house that consultation on the child bail provisions in the youth justice bill have been extensive and comprehensive?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:11): Ms Copsey, the bill is actually not my bill. I have got components in it, but it actually is the Minister for Youth Justice's bill, and I do not really want to step into his lane, but a copy of the bill has been provided to the Aboriginal Justice Forum. We have engaged in extensive consultation. Consultation does not always amount to agreement, but certainly many concerns have been taken on board. I would point out that when it comes to bail, when it comes to the feedback from Aboriginal stakeholders, much of that was already in the bail bill that we did earlier, which I did have responsibility for and which you seem to be quite happy to dismiss the benefits of and the welcoming of that bill from Aboriginal stakeholders, but when it comes to the youth justice bill it has been provided to stakeholders and, as I said, will be introduced into this house after the other house in due course.

#### **Ministers statements: Ngwala Willumbong Aboriginal Corporation**

**Ingrid STITT** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:13): I rise to update the house on the outstanding work of the Aboriginal community controlled organisation Ngwala Willumbong in supporting the successful rollout of Victoria's health-led response to public intoxication. Victoria's previous public drunkenness laws disproportionately and unjustly affected First Nations people, and as we all know, its historic decriminalisation and the establishment of our health-based response followed more than 30 years of advocacy from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Last Friday morning I had the absolute pleasure of visiting Ngwala's dedicated sobering service in St Kilda to hear firsthand from the team how Ngwala's services are providing critical access to services for Aboriginal communities across metropolitan and regional Victoria. They told me about how the work of their outreach teams is helping to provide care and support to people who need it but perhaps even more importantly connecting them to the services they need to support their broader wellbeing, whether that is access to addiction treatment, housing support or family violence support. This is what Aboriginal communities told us was needed and that is exactly what Ngwala's service is doing. Victoria's public intoxication response has already helped over 5600 Victorians, and I am looking forward to hearing more stories of how these services are helping to change lives right around the state. If anyone in the chamber is interested to learn more and to deepen their understanding of the important, powerful work of these services, I am sure that the team at Ngwala would be very open to providing additional support about their services. There is one catch: you have to actually get out of the car and go and meet with people to do that.

#### **Country Fire Authority funding**

**Richard WELCH** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:15): (535) My question is for the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, during PAEC hearings it was revealed that the CFA were selling off brand new trucks that were sitting in a warehouse for three years. Minister, why did it take three years for you to decide you could not afford to put tanks on those trucks?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:15): I thank Mr Welch for his question – again, a repeat of what I got at PAEC on Friday. I was pretty thorough in my answer there, but obviously for the benefit of the house, to clarify, we are not talking about fire trucks – we are not talking about red trucks – we are talking about vehicles that were purchased by the CFA at a discounted price, to buy vehicles that they had hoped to be able to fit out for their purposes. They had engaged with another state in relation to being able to retrofit all of those vehicles for the joint benefit of the states. That other state pulled out or reassessed their circumstances,

which led to it being uneconomical for the CFA to retrofit the vehicles that they purchased. So they have then onsold them to ensure that they can get best value for money.

**Richard WELCH** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:16): Thank you, Minister, for the answer. The fire sales of new Mercedes-Benz trucks at Manheim Auctions this month will cost the CFA budget around \$750,000. Will the government reimburse the CFA so that our long-suffering CFA volunteers will not miss out on their promised new trucks?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:16): President, I would just draw your attention to the standing orders, because Mr Welch has stated facts that are frankly untrue. So to put to me that his calculations are what they are, all I can say is that that is false and I find his question therefore very difficult to answer.

### Drug harm reduction

**Rachel PAYNE** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:17): (536) My question is for the Minister for Mental Health, Minister Stitt. Australia's only specialist benzodiazepine dependency treatment centre is here in Victoria. Reconnexion provides specialist services to treat, support and inform those dealing with withdrawal, anxiety, insomnia and depression. Reconnexion's funding runs out in July. They will have to cut staff, and this will increase wait times. This government has justified this cut based on SafeScript becoming embedded in the healthcare system, but this does not include the range of specialist services Reconnexion does. So my question is: will the minister commit to supporting the restoration of Reconnexion's funding?

**Ingrid STITT** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:18): I thank Ms Payne for her question. It is an important area, and obviously the Victorian government is committed to, in many ways, reducing drug-related harm in our community. We are proud of the fact that we have provided more than \$376 million for the next financial year for many, many of our wonderful community organisations that provide support in this area. Reconnexion is a service of EACH and remains the only specialist service in Australia. It has been continuously funded by the Department of Health for 36 years. I would certainly like to take the opportunity to thank and acknowledge all of the team at Reconnexion for that important work.

In terms of the particular program that you are talking about, that was a fixed-term funding arrangement that was provided for that organisation from 2019, and it was associated with the implementation of the SafeScript system to meet an expected increased demand for support from the rollout of that initiative. Additional funding provided to EACH for the Reconnexion program was provided on that fixed term while we waited for the SafeScript system to mature. We obviously continue to fund important helpline services that are aimed at reducing drug-related harm in our community, such as the DACAS and the DirectLine. Obviously with the announcement of our statewide action plan there is a further \$95.1 million that has been invested to reduce drug-related harms right across the community. So it was a very specific short-term range of supports that were provided associated with the introduction of SafeScript.

**Rachel PAYNE** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:20): I thank the minister for her response. By way of supplementary, Reconnexion's program have highlighted a nationwide problem of benzodiazepines being prescribed for extended periods of time, often without warning about the risk of dependency. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reported that around 4.9 million benzodiazepine scripts have been dispensed to 1.4 million patients since 2021–22. This report also highlighted that between 1997 and 2022 the rate of death where benzodiazepines were present rose from 1.9 per 100,000 population to 2.7. Will the minister advise what steps they are taking to address benzodiazepine dependency and reduce harm?

**Ingrid STITT** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:21): Obviously there is a role here for the federal government in terms of them being the primary funder of primary health services and GPs and the education that is required

for GPs to understand the importance of safely prescribing. It is certainly something I am happy to follow up with my counterparts federally and in other jurisdictions, but I think it is important to acknowledge that as a state we do continue to provide very substantial funding and support programs that are about people reducing any drug-related harm, including from prescription drugs.

**Ministers statements: LGBTIQA+ Domestic Violence Awareness Day**

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:21): I rise today to speak about LGBTIQA+ Domestic Violence Awareness Day. This is a really important day on 28 May every year, and the key message of this important day speaks to LGBTIQA+ community members experiencing violence and the importance of the message that they are seen and believed. LGBTIQA+ people make up 11 per cent of our population here in Victoria, and days like this can help to reduce stigma and feelings of isolation and shame that all too often surround those experiencing this immensely difficult challenge, often bedded in trauma. We know that around two-thirds – 64 per cent – of LGBTIQA+ Victorians report experiencing family violence in their lifetimes. Some LGBTIQA+ community members face disproportionately higher rates of family violence, particularly those who are trans and gender diverse, intersex and bisexual. More than 50 per cent of trans and gender-diverse people experience sexual violence, compared with around 13 per cent of the general population.

For rainbow communities there may also be significant barriers in accessing inclusive assistance due to negative experiences with service providers, lack of rural or regional access or lack of family support. Every Victorian, including those from LGBTIQA+ communities, deserves to be safe, recognised and able to access services. We want to ensure that LGBTIQA+ Victorians have access to inclusive wraparound and culturally safe support if they experience family and intimate partner violence. Since the 2015 Royal Commission into Family Violence, which included targeted recommendations for LGBTIQA+ people, Victoria has invested close to \$4 billion. Services for LGBTIQA+ Victorians impacted by violence and those seeking behavioural change support include Switchboard's Rainbow Door, Queerspace, Thorne Harbour Health, QLife and Elizabeth Morgan House. I encourage everyone to reach out for services and support that they may need.

**Water safety**

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:24): (537) My question is for the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, as you would be aware, the past summer experienced a 45 per cent increase in drownings – that is, over and above the long-term average – but during PAEC you laughed off the fact that after nearly 12 months you still had not read or seen the inspector-general for emergency management's report into drownings that was presented to you last August. So I ask: why not?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:24): At the outset, it has been a really concerning year for drowning, which has followed several years of unfortunate incidents that have seen people lose their lives, which is indeed why we have been working closely with Life Saving Victoria on messaging, on target groups et cetera. A tragic loss of life when it is the result of drowning is just that – it is so awful. It is always avoidable, and that is why we want to ensure that we do the very best we can to ensure that people know the dangers, particularly of our beaches but also inland waterways and backyard pools. We are seeing a range of drownings across the board in every type of environment. When it comes to the inspector-general for emergency management's report, that has been received by the department, and I will be receiving advice on it very shortly. It will be released in due course.

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:25): Extraordinary. I agree with you about the tragedy, and that is why you should have read it. I ask therefore: with ongoing cuts to Life Saving Victoria and a department that takes 12 months to read a report, can Victorians have confidence that the Allan Labor government takes water safety seriously?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:26): I thank Mr Davis for his question. Mr Davis, in this year’s budget alone there is \$9.11 million in funding over two years for Life Saving Victoria to deliver critical water safety programs, paying lifeguards and supporting volunteer services across 42 locations in the state. We provide rescue watercraft services. There are nine roving rescue jet ski crews that are targeting some of the high-risk areas. There is a rescue helicopter, drone observation and critical response service supports, and as I said in my previous answer, there is public information, relations and messaging to ensure the Victorian community are best made aware of water safety issues. This is always an ongoing pursuit. We will continue to work with Life Saving Victoria, other agencies and local communities who have water bodies in their areas to ensure the very best support for those amazing volunteers that turn out time and time again, year in, year out – (*Time expired*)

### **Greyhound racing**

**Georgie PURCELL** (Northern Victoria) (12:27): (538) My question is for the Minister for Racing in the other place. April was a horror month in greyhound racing. Eight dogs were killed in just four weeks on tracks in Victoria – six snapped legs, one broken neck and one broken spine. Victoria continues to hold the shameful title of the most deaths Australia-wide, recording eight more deaths than any other state and six more than this time last year. Will the minister establish an independent inquiry into the circumstances surrounding increasing greyhound racing deaths in Victoria?

**Enver ERDOGAN** (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:28): I thank Ms Purcell for her interest and her long-time advocacy on these issues. I will make sure that is passed on to the minister in the other place, and in line with the standing orders, make sure there is an appropriate response.

**Georgie PURCELL** (Northern Victoria) (12:28): Thanks, Minister, for referring that on. In 2022 this government invested \$6 million into a safety rebuild at Traralgon, promising a world-first J curve designed by the University of Technology Sydney. The intention was to reduce track death and injury. It has done the opposite, and only a year later the university severed its ties with greyhound racing following an integrity and governance review. Despite every effort, Traralgon remains Victoria’s deadliest track and has already recorded more deaths this year than it did for the whole of 2023. Will the minister accept the J curve is a deadly failure and close this track for good?

**Enver ERDOGAN** (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:29): I thank Ms Purcell for her question and raising her concerns on this matter. I will make sure that question is forwarded to the Minister for Racing in the other place and seek an appropriate response.

### **Ministers statements: early childhood education**

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:29): I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government continues to step in and assist the Commonwealth to bring affordable child care into more communities. The other week I was very pleased to attend Moomba Park Primary School with the member for Broadmeadows in the other place to announce that four further early learning and childcare centres will be opening in 2026. These ELCCs are a further four in addition to the 10 sites that are already opening in 2026. Three of the additional ELCCs will be located at new schools, including Mickleham South primary school, Toolern Waters primary school and Wollert Andrews Road primary school, as they are known at the moment – these are interim names for the ELCCs. The fourth will be built next to Teesdale Primary School on recently acquired land. These additional ELCCs will provide more than 450 licensed places for children, including child care and three- and four-year-old kindergarten. Importantly, each ELCC will help meet local demand for vital early learning services. They will also feature dedicated community spaces for programs and services, such as maternal and child health, allied health, playgroups and other child and family services, because we know that bringing services together has many benefits

for families. Together the 14 ELCCs opening in 2026 will create more than 1400 new licensed childcare places in communities that need them most.

I was also very pleased to announce that we have appointed the architects working on the 2026 projects as well as the builders for the first four ELCCs on track to open in 2025. Between 2025 and 2032 the Allan government will establish 50 new ELCCs to improve access to early education and help meet demand for kindergarten and child care in our communities. By early 2026 the first 18 centres will collectively deliver more than 1800 licensed places for local children and families. Through our nation-leading \$14 billion Best Start, Best Life reforms, the government is transforming early childhood education to help children thrive, save families money and support parents and carers to return to work or study if they choose to do so.

### State Emergency Service funding

**Bev McARTHUR** (Western Victoria) (12:31): (539) My question is for the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, the dedicated SES volunteers across Victoria, particularly the 25 SES units in Western Victoria Region, have reacted strongly to the lack of financial support shown by the Allan government for the basic costs of running an SES unit. Minister, in PAEC your department refused to provide to the committee a list of the ages of the SES trucks. Why is your department refusing to provide such basic information to a parliamentary inquiry?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:32): I again raise a concern with the frame of the question. Mrs McArthur has passionately put forward a question, and I support and concur with her passion and support for our hardworking VICSES volunteers, but the way she has framed her question contains incorrect information. There has been no refusal, as she has painted it. I am finding it quite difficult. It is happening time and time again. For what it is worth, I try and answer the questions that are posed to me, but when the question that is put to me is false, it puts me in a difficult position, because in responding to it I feel as though I am affirming the accuracy of the question that was put, and that is not true.

**Bev McARTHUR** (Western Victoria) (12:32): Surely it is pretty basic, but Minister, with no knowledge of truck ages, no capital funding and with SES units rattling tins to raise money to put petrol in emergency vehicles, can you assure SES volunteers that they are not missing out on vital funding because your government's priority is building a train tunnel in Melbourne?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:33): Mrs McArthur, I wish you had given me a bit longer with your first question to answer this question. Again, it does contain inaccuracies. To say that there is no capital funding – I am not quite sure how we funded all those SES buildings that I have been opening for the last 12 months, and I have got further ones in my diary coming up. I know a lot of members have been involved in opening them on my behalf, because there are so many to open I cannot possibly get to them all.

In this year's budget there has been \$7 million to deliver volunteer training. Particularly important is training volunteers in incident management team training, which ensures that they are well placed to step up into those positions when they are required in extreme emergencies. There is also funding for volunteer support programs. Last year's budget, 2023–24, included \$15.1 million for 35 heavy rescue trucks for the VICSES. VICSES volunteers are integral to the design of those vehicles. They have been involved and talked to about what they need, how we can best support them in the equipment that we provide. There are so many – *(Time expired)*

### Housing

**Samantha RATNAM** (Northern Metropolitan) (12:34): (540) My question is for the Minister for Housing. Minister, the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal recently found that National Affordable Housing Victoria has breached its duty in maintaining the affordable housing premises rented by Grace Bell in Dunlop Avenue, Ascot Vale. They have been ordered to carry out urgent

repairs. I remind you, Minister, that this is one of the first public housing sites demolished and outsourced by your government. No public housing remains at the site. When I raised these issues previously, I detailed the struggles that Grace has experienced in getting anyone, including Homes Victoria, to take her complaint seriously. The VCAT ruling is helpful, but Grace and other tenants continue to have issues with their affordable and community housing at this site, including concerns about the structural integrity of the buildings and drinking water quality. Minister, what are you doing to ensure affordable housing providers that you have outsourced your responsibility to are fulfilling their duties to tenants so people's homes are livable?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:35): Thank you, Dr Ratnam, for your question. I wish I had a counter for the number of days that it has been since you have not asked for a briefing on social housing, but that to one side. The work that we are doing to deliver social housing comes in partnership with the community housing sector. Now, as you would appreciate, this is a really important part of delivering on the investment that we are making of more than \$6.3 billion from state funding, the largest investment ever, alongside significant investments, particularly off the back of the Commonwealth budget, that will enable us to deliver additional infrastructure and capital and ongoing recurrent funding for programs and service delivery.

The particular development that you have talked to is, as other social housing developments are, covered and regulated by building defects warranties and the capacity to have those defects remedied in accordance with obligations that sit with builders for a 12-month period after completion. In addition to that, community housing providers are required to comply with the terms of their contracts for delivering and building and maintaining and operating social housing, which is, as I said, a really important part of meeting the challenges of availability and affordability.

We also want to make sure that in addressing the challenges around maintenance and supply, we continue to deliver on bringing down that backlog. As I indicated to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee last week, we have brought that down by about 80 per cent – down from over 90,000 maintenance requests to about 17,787 off the top of my head. Dr Ratnam, we also need to make sure that under the terms of the Residential Tenancies Act people have recourse to remedies, to dispute resolution and to early intervention when it comes to social housing being able to improve amenities to an acceptable standard.

National Affordable Housing is currently responding to that VCAT order, and I am looking forward to seeing what they have to say. Given that it has been within the remit of a legal proceeding, I do not intend to comment on it here. I will leave that for National Affordable Housing to respond to. Again, you would be well aware of that, Dr Ratnam, in terms of the work that happens in this place being distinct from the work of the judiciary or of quasijudicial tribunals in that regard. I will say, however, that when we look to the work that is being done and undertaken within the community housing sector, it is my expectation that remedies will be forthcoming as they relate to defects, whether that is within the scope and the contemplation of defects remedy obligations – that 12-month defect rectification part of a contract – or indeed as it relates to the standards and the reporting obligations that community housing providers have in discharging their responsibilities and in taking the benefit of contracts to deliver social housing across the board.

**Samantha RATNAM** (Northern Metropolitan) (12:38): Thank you, Minister. I think it was really unfortunate that you did not even mention the social housing regulation review that has been sitting now on the government's desk for years. We are still waiting for the government response, which is the government's responsibility to regulate these providers. You are basically saying to these residents, 'It's not our responsibility. Go and work with the broken system that is already failing so many private renters out there.' Minister, given the failure of your government's outsourcing approach to public housing sites across Victoria already, will you now buy back 26 Dunlop Avenue, Ascot Vale, as public housing?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:39): I will start as you started. I think it is really disappointing that in your supplementary question you go directly to the social housing regulation review when that was not in fact part of your substantive question. Nonetheless, what I will say is that alongside the review of social housing regulation, which is, as you would hopefully be aware, the remit and the responsibility of the Assistant Treasurer and me in delivering and overseeing, I am looking forward to continuing to deliver on those policy, operational, administrative and funding implications and making sure that we can continue to support growth and to make sure that quality is delivered across our social housing portfolio. Dr Ratnam, I need to be really clear here: we are delivering social housing, including in partnership with the community housing sector, and whatever you want to say about that not being good enough, it is part and parcel of delivering on the largest ever investment in social housing across the state. We are determined, as I referred to earlier, to continue to assist people, including with an \$18 million investment for maintenance pipelines and inquiries and responses, and we will continue that work to make sure that amenity – *(Time expired)*

### Ministers statements: National Volunteer Week

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:40): Continuing the theme of today, last week was National Volunteer Week, so I would like the opportunity to speak about volunteers, as many of us do often in this place. One of the best parts of being emergency services minister and Attorney-General is meeting amazing people, and many of those are in volunteer capacities. I do know that all MPs in this place do place value on the contribution of our amazing volunteers at the SES, CFA, Life Saving Victoria and Marine Search and Rescue. And certainly while some seek to politicise these volunteers, I focus on my opportunities to support them, and this budget does just that. There is \$6.95 million invested for SES to support volunteer training and programs, as I outlined earlier; \$18.6 million for the CFA, particularly in relation to new primary response urban pumpers to add to their fleet; as well as a \$9.11 million boost for LSV, including their volunteer services.

I do want to take the opportunity to say it is not just emergency services volunteers that I come across; it is also the invaluable contribution of those that partake in the community legal sector. Regardless of your postcode, whether you are from Melbourne, Melton or Mildura, these passionate people work every day to deliver what I like to call real justice outcomes. Of course hardworking staff at our community legal centres are amazing, and many of them started out as volunteers. Many advisers in my office were CLC volunteers, and I think probably many members of Parliament have also done a stint in a CLC, and you cannot do that volunteer work unless you have a well-supported community legal sector. This budget ensures just that: \$28.8 million in funding provided to the legal assistance sector, including 22 programs and the continuation of Fitzroy Legal Service's Q+Law service and Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service's specialised legal service, which provides crucial legal advice and assistance to Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who come into contact with the justice system. We know the important work that CLCs provide to vulnerable Victorians in need of support, and I again want to extend my sincere thanks to those who continue to ensure that the system is accessible and that they are well supported. To all of our volunteers across Victoria, thank you.

### Written responses

**The PRESIDENT** (12:42): That ends questions and ministers statements. Can I thank Mr Erdogan, who will get two responses from the Minister for Racing for Ms Purcell.

### Constituency questions

#### Eastern Victoria Region

**Tom McINTOSH** (Eastern Victoria) (12:42): (872) My question is for the Minister for Consumer Affairs in the other place. In both 2021 and 2024 severe storms brought down trees and damaged

infrastructure across Eastern Victoria, causing prolonged power outages. Mobile telecommunication towers lost all power, meaning thousands of people could not call their loved ones to tell them they were okay. One example was the recent storms in Mirboo North, and I would welcome the chance for the minister to visit my electorate and discuss what the government are doing to keep the telecommunications companies to account. Currently these telcos are not meeting their obligations to keep customers safe, instead choosing to lay off staff when they are needed most, despite billions of dollars in profits. This is primarily a federal responsibility, but this government is stepping up to the plate. As part of our \$540 million Connecting Victoria plan, we have installed battery backups in over 200 mobile towers in disaster-prone areas, because we understand that not having access to 000 during extreme weather events puts people's lives at risk. Minister, what is the government doing to keep the telco companies to account and maintain power to phone towers when Victorians need them most?

#### **Northern Metropolitan Region**

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (12:43): (873) My constituency question is for the Minister for Police, and I ask the minister: what additional resources have local police been provided to tackle the scourge of tobacco shop arsons? You only need to tune into the 3AW news bulletin every morning to hear another story about an arson attack in, you guessed it, the northern suburbs. It is an almost daily occurrence, if not weekly. It would occur even more if some of the attempted arson attacks were not botched. Those on the other side might think it is a laughing matter, but there have been at least five attacks in the last two weeks, with many more in places like Glenroy, Fawkner, Hadfield, Broadmeadows, Epping and Campbellfield, over and over again. My community are sick of it. It is not a laughing matter like those on the other side of the chamber think. This government has to do something about it.

#### **South-Eastern Metropolitan Region**

**Rachel PAYNE** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:45): (874) My constituency question is for the Minister for Emergency Services. My constituent is a man living in Frankston North. He volunteers his time to support the State Emergency Service Frankston unit. Thanks to incredible volunteers like him, we have a 480,000-strong team prepared to respond to a wide range of emergencies throughout Victoria. Unfortunately, this unit is forced to rely on volunteer-led fundraising to procure equipment and maintain facilities. Many other states include their State Emergency Service in the broad emergency services levy. Victoria does not. My constituent asks: what is the minister doing to ensure indexed sustainable funding so this unit and my constituent can continue the good critical work they do?

#### **Eastern Victoria Region**

**Renee HEATH** (Eastern Victoria) (12:45): (875) My question is for the Minister for Planning: when will you finally act to remove this arduous environmental audit overlay which is affecting so many innocent home owners in Wonthaggi North? My constituent bought a house two years ago in Wonthaggi North. When they bought the house there was no environmental audit overlay, but the government has applied one retrospectively. She and her partner have a two-year-old daughter and one on the way. They have saved to build a verandah for their young family to play on, and this cannot happen because if they pay the \$15,000 to \$80,000 required to satisfy the EAO, they will have used their savings and have none left for the verandah. This has caused an enormous amount of stress, and young families that are on one income are under enough pressure as it is. I ask the Minister for Planning to act on this straightaway.

#### **North-Eastern Metropolitan Region**

**Aiv PUGLIELLI** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:46): (876) My question is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, and it relates to the North East Link toll road and its disastrous environmental impact on the Koonung Creek wetlands and its diverse ecosystem. Mycelium is a long, branching root-like structure of a fungus. Its tiny threads seek nutrients needed for the fungal reproductive organ, the mushroom, to penetrate the surface of the soil and release its spores. Mycelium also wraps around



and bores into the roots of trees, which feed carbon to the fungi in the form of sugar. In return not only does the mycelium provide trees and other plants with nitrogen, phosphorus and other essential minerals, but its network structure also enables trees to transfer water, nutrients and electrochemical messages to kin and to cousins alike. This symbiotic relationship is known as the mycorrhizal network, and it is crucial to a healthy, diverse ecosystem. Can you provide any evidence of having considered the project's impact on the mycorrhizal network currently being destroyed at the Koonung Creek wetlands?

### **Southern Metropolitan Region**

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:47): (877) My matter is for the attention of the minister for Homes Victoria, for social housing and public housing and so forth, and it concerns the Beacon Cove Neighbourhood Association and the meetings that I have had and Ms Crozier has had with that association and the government's plans for an almost fivefold increase in the number of people on the site, which is basically on the boulevard very close to the beach, a reasonable-sized piece of land. But actually there is a real set of concerns about the process that is occurring here. The minister has not ensured proper community input and not ensured that the proper arrangements are in place, so I would ask the minister to go back to meet with the community again and to ensure that there are proper processes and proper community input and consultation.

### **Northern Victoria Region**

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL** (Northern Victoria) (12:48): (878) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. For the last seven months the Goulburn Valley Highway at Koonoomoo has been reduced to one lane with traffic lights after a truck crashed into the bridge barriers. This section of the highway carries hundreds of cars, trucks and buses between New South Wales and major northern Victorian towns such as Cobram, Yarrawonga and Shepparton. The residents have been frustrated by the delay in repairing this bridge – seven months is completely unacceptable. Koonoomoo is a tourist hotspot along the Murray River, and the delays cause frustration and anger for visitors and locals alike. While the traffic lights help ease congestion, locals and police are concerned that the lights have been malfunctioning, and this has caused yet another accident. VicRoads has told constituents that it could be three or more months until new barriers are designed and installed. My constituents ask the minister: why has it taken so long for these repairs to be started, and when can they expect the repairs to be completed?

### **Northern Victoria Region**

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (12:49): (879) My question is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport and is regarding the lack of bus services in Marong, which is approximately 15 kilometres from the Bendigo city centre. Why is it that the Maiden Gully bus route, which is only a few kilometres from the Marong, is not extended to service Marong residents, families and schoolchildren trying to get to work and school? Junortoun is 14 kilometres from Bendigo city centre and Strathfieldsaye is 10 kilometres; both have a bus service. I would appreciate the minister's assistance in reviewing the lack of public transport in the Marong area, which consists of a thriving and growing community with a solid family base.

### **Northern Metropolitan Region**

**Samantha RATNAM** (Northern Metropolitan) (12:50): (880) My question is for the Minister for Planning. I am concerned about the increasing amount of public land that is being earmarked for privatisation under your government, in my electorate. Last week the Merri-bek community was made aware of your government's plans to privatise the former Kangan TAFE site in Coburg. Minister, I have previously asked you whether your government would consult with the community about this site at 31 The Avenue, Coburg, given significant community interest in retaining the site for community use and public benefit. Unfortunately your office responded with information about the wrong site, specifically 12–18 Charles Street, Coburg North. Minister, given the growing waiting list

for public housing and the worsening housing crisis, will your government retain this land to build desperately needed public housing across the site?

### **Western Metropolitan Region**

**Trung LUU** (Western Metropolitan) (12:51): (881) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety and is regarding inadequate funding allocated to the Brimbank council under the municipality maintenance agreement for the upkeep of state assets and maintenance of arterial roads. Can the minister please update my constituents on who is going to maintain arterial roads and upkeep state assets as the Brimbank council indicate they are not in a position to subsidise the state government any longer. I recently received communication from the mayor of Brimbank City Council expressing her concern. Maintenance costs for these assets have amounted to \$475,000, excluding GST, with funding from the department being only \$109,090. This council cannot possibly afford to cover more than three-quarters of the cost under the municipality maintenance agreement any longer. The serviceability of these road assets is essential to assure connectivity and safety for Victorians, especially for those in my electorate who use the roads daily.

### **Western Metropolitan Region**

**David ETTERSHANK** (Western Metropolitan) (12:52): (882) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety in the other place. My constituent suffers from fibromyalgia and several other health problems. Managing her chronic pain is a daily battle. She says the side effects from opioids are too profound, so she wants to give medicinal cannabis a try. She started using CBD oil, but so far it has not helped her manage her pain. Her doctor has advised her that she is likely to need a THC-containing medication to be able to come off her schedule 8 medicinal heroin, but she does not want to risk losing her licence. She lives in Taylors Hill, and her journey to work by car typically takes 35 minutes – or 2 hours by public transport. Given that the government has effectively abandoned public transport reform in the western suburbs, when will the government make a final decision about allowing medicinal cannabis patients in Western Metropolitan Region to drive?

### **Northern Victoria Region**

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (12:53): (883) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. Will the government allocate funding for urgent maintenance works on Toolamba Road? I recently had the pleasure of talking with students at Shepparton ACE Secondary College about democracy and how they can engage with Parliament. One of the many concerns that students raised with me was the dire state of rural roads. They might not drive yet, but they have bumped around in the back seat of the family car as it hit potholes or swerved to miss the depressions, corrugations, rutting and cracks on our rural roads. Students mentioned the disrepair of Toolamba Road, particularly the section from the Midland Highway intersection to Rumbalara Road, where the surface is severely degraded and hazardous. There are also a series of potholes on the side of the road between the Toolamba-Rushworth Road and Waugh Road that need to be repaired. I promised the students I would raise this road in Parliament, and I hope the minister will provide them with a positive response.

### **Western Victoria Region**

**Bev McARTHUR** (Western Victoria) (12:54): (884) My constituency question is for the Minister for Education, and it concerns the fabulous volunteering work done by my constituent Tim Gibson. Mr Gibson is retired and became frustrated at the behaviour of some young people in his community. Instead of just complaining, he decided to do something. He now spends an hour each week in Moolap Primary School listening to and assisting learning in grade 1 and 2 classes. This is possible because of work of EdConnect Australia, which recruits and trains skilled volunteers to provide life-changing mentoring and learning support. It truly connects communities and connects generations, often providing much-needed older male role models in schools. Government spending is at its best when it harnesses the effort of committed volunteers, not creating new professional paid bureaucracies.

Minister, will you commit to providing funding to expand the enabling role EdConnect plays in Victorian schools?

### **North-Eastern Metropolitan Region**

**Richard WELCH** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:55): (885) My question is directed to the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. Last week I was fortunate enough to meet with Josie, Greg and Vincent and the team of the Box Hill brickworks parkland association. One of their biggest concerns is what the landscape and skyline of Box will look like in five, 10 and 15 years time after the construction of the Labor government's property speculation project, bizarrely named the Suburban Rail Loop. Greg and the team at the Box Hill brickworks parkland association share my view that a balcony on a 40-storey building is not open space and not sustainable. The old brickworks has laid unused for many, many years and in the eyes of the community is an incredible missed opportunity for open space for this and the next generation. The government need to step in and leave a legacy for Box Hill that is not shoeboxes and tunnels and turn this site into green space that will otherwise be eliminated by the Suburban Rail Loop and property development. Will the minister guarantee that the government and SRL will work in earnest to ensure the Box Hill brickworks is turned into parkland?

### **Southern Metropolitan Region**

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:56): (886) My question is for the Minister for Police. The Southern Metropolitan Region is home to the largest Jewish community in Australia, and many of my constituents are living in fear with the dramatic rise in antisemitism since 7 October. Mount Scopus Memorial College is the largest Jewish day school in Victoria, with a majority of the school community living in my electorate. On the weekend Mount Scopus was vandalised with the words 'Jew die' on its front gate. Parents are afraid to send their children to school, and students have been told to avoid wearing their uniform and Jewish symbols in public. This is utterly unacceptable. So the question I ask is: can the Minister explain why Victoria Police have said that if the perpetrators of this abhorrent hate crime are caught they will be charged with criminal damage and not under Victoria's hate speech laws?

### **Eastern Victoria Region**

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (12:57): (887) My constituency question is to the Minister for Housing, and the question I ask is: what will the minister specifically do to address the homelessness crisis in Gippsland? My constituent advises me that he and his family have noticed an increase of people sleeping rough in parks and under trees and gathering around the local bus stop. His young daughter recently experienced a terrifying experience as she was exposed to a half-naked man who was sleeping rough in the park. Once a rare occurrence, it is now commonplace unfortunately in Latrobe Valley. Cost-of-living pressures are affecting Victorians; they are struggling, and the government need to address this issue as a priority. Local community groups do an enormous amount of wonderful work to support those experiencing housing instability, yet they need a solution as well. Minister, noting your government is failing vulnerable homeless people in Gippsland and failing to increase the housing stock and you yourself have decreased the target for social homes by a further 100 in 2025, what are you going to do about it?

### ***Joint sitting of Parliament***

#### **Senate vacancy**

**The PRESIDENT** (12:58): I have a message from the Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly has agreed to the following resolution –

That this House meets the Legislative Council for the purpose of sitting and voting together to choose a person to hold the place in the Senate rendered vacant by the death of Senator Linda White, and proposes

## PETITIONS

1706

Legislative Council

Tuesday 28 May 2024

that the place and time of such meeting be the Legislative Assembly Chamber on 29 May 2024 at 6:30 pm –

which is presented for the agreement of the Legislative Council.

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:59):  
I move, by leave:

That the Assembly's message be taken into consideration forthwith.

### **Motion agreed to.**

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I move:

That this house meets with the Legislative Assembly for the purpose of sitting and voting together to choose a person to hold the place in the Senate rendered vacant by the death of Senator Linda White, and as proposed by the Assembly, the place and time of such meeting be the Legislative Assembly Chamber on Wednesday 29 May 2024 at 6:30 pm.

### **Motion agreed to.**

**The PRESIDENT:** A message will be sent to the Assembly informing them accordingly.

## *Petitions*

### **Cannabis law reform**

**Rachel PAYNE** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) presented a petition bearing 2785 signatures:

The Petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that the criminalisation of cannabis has failed to reduce demand or supply in the illicit market and the 1 in 3 Australians who have accessed cannabis should not be classed as criminals.

Cannabis criminalisation harms the community, wastes millions of dollars on law enforcement, disproportionately impacts First Nations people and prevents us from enjoying the economic and social benefits of a regulated cannabis market.

The Petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to change the laws so that Victorian **adults can responsibly consume and possess small quantities of cannabis without fear of persecution**.

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

## *Committees*

### **Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee**

#### *Alert Digest No. 7*

**Sonja TERPSTRA** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:00): Pursuant to section 35 of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, I table *Alert Digest* No. 7 of 2024, including appendices, from the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee. I move:

That the report be published.

### **Motion agreed to.**

## *Papers*

### **Papers**

### **Tabled by Clerk:**

Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010 – Documents under section 303 of the Act in relation to –

Education and Care Services National Amendment Regulations 2024.

Education and Care Services National Further Amendment Regulations 2024.

Land Acquisition and Compensation Act 1986 – Minister’s certificate of 22 May 2024 to not require the service of a notice of intention to acquire land, under section 7 of the Act.

Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 – Government response to the Integrity and Oversight Committee’s Report on the Performance of the Victorian integrity agencies 2021/22.

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

Baw Baw Planning Scheme – Amendment C150.

Golden Plains, Latrobe and Mount Alexander Planning Schemes – Amendment GC239.

Mildura Planning Scheme – Amendment C124.

Monash Planning Scheme – Amendment C166.

Stonnington Planning Scheme – Amendment C314.

Warrnambool Planning Scheme – Amendment C214.

Whitehorse Planning Scheme – Amendment C250.

Yarra Planning Scheme – Amendments C326 and C327.

Statutory Rules under the following Acts of Parliament –

Child Employment Act 2003 – No. 33.

Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 – No. 34.

Survey Co-ordination Act 1958 – No. 31.

Water Act 1989 – No. 32.

Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013 – No. 35.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule Nos. 31, 34 and 35.

Victorian Law Reform Commission – Report on Recklessness, February 2024 (*Ordered to be published*).

Wildlife Act 1975 – Notices under section 86 of the Act –

Wildlife (Closure of Lake Lonsdale) Notice (*Gazette S239, 16 May 2024*).

Wildlife (Prohibition of Game Hunting) Notice No. 3/2024 (*Gazette S241, 16 May 2024*).

### *Petitions*

### **Waste and recycling management**

#### *Response*

**The Clerk:** I have received the following paper for presentation to the house pursuant to standing orders: Minister for Planning’s response to petition titled ‘Reject proposal to construct a waste-to-energy plant in Lara, Geelong’, presented by Dr Mansfield.

### *Production of documents*

### **Energy policy**

**The Clerk:** I present a letter from the Attorney-General dated 17 May 2024 in response to a resolution of the Council on 1 May 2024 on the motion of Mr Davis relating to national energy bodies. The letter states that the government has undertaken thorough and diligent searches and does not hold a copy of the documents sought.

**David Davis:** On a point of order, President, it is a little disingenuous to argue that the government just does not hold these documents.

**A member:** It is not a point of order.

**David Davis:** It is a point of order.

**The PRESIDENT:** I think you are debating a point of order.

**David Davis:** President, the orders of the chamber were quite clear, and the government has access to those documents.

**The PRESIDENT:** I think there are a couple of things you have access to, Mr Davis, and one of them would be to just move a motion to take note of the minister's letter on the next day of meeting.

**David Davis:** I will certainly do that, President, but I think there is also a point of order. The point of order is that the document tabled is incorrect. The government does have access.

**The PRESIDENT:** You are debating again, Mr Davis.

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (13:04): I move:

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

**Motion agreed to.**

**David DAVIS:** I move, by leave:

That debate on the letter be handled forthwith.

**Leave refused.**

### *Business of the house*

#### **Notices**

**Notices of motion given.**

#### **General business**

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (13:20): I move, by leave:

That the following general business take precedence on Wednesday 29 May 2024:

- (1) order of the day 11, second reading of the Payroll Tax Amendment (Protecting Victorians' Access to GPs, Dentists and Other Allied Health Practitioners) Bill 2023;
- (2) notice of motion given this day by Mr Davis on Victoria's gas strategy;
- (3) notice of motion 422, standing in Mr Mulholland's name, on the Suburban Rail Loop; and
- (4) notice of motion given this day by Mrs Deeming on disclosure of information relating to government spending.

**Motion agreed to.**

#### *Committees*

#### **Legal and Social Issues Committee**

##### *Reporting dates*

**Trung LUU** (Western Metropolitan) (13:20): I move, by leave:

That the reporting date for the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into workplace drug testing in Victoria be extended to 27 August 2024.

**Motion agreed to.**

#### *Motions*

#### **Middle East conflict**

**Katherine COPSEY** (Southern Metropolitan) (13:21): I move, by leave:

That this house:

- (1) notes that since the Legislative Council's resolution on 17 October 2023 concerning Israel and Gaza, which stated this house 'stands with Israel', the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, on

20 May 2024, applied for arrest warrants for war crimes and crimes against humanity, having reasonable grounds to believe that Yahya Sinwar of Hamas; Mohammed Diab Ibrahim Al-Masri of Hamas; and Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas; Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel; and Yoav Gallant, the Minister of Defense of Israel, bear criminal responsibility for such crimes;

- (2) further notes that:
  - (a) Australia signed the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court on 9 December 1998, completed ratification on 1 July 2002 and has therefore been a state party for more than two decades;
  - (b) state parties have a legal obligation to cooperate fully with the International Criminal Court, such as enforcing the court's warrants;
- (3) does not support the state of Israel's continued invasion of Gaza; and
- (4) supports calls for an immediate and permanent ceasefire.

**Leave refused.**

### *Members statements*

#### **Metro Tunnel**

**John BERGER** (Southern Metropolitan) (13:22): I have two matters to update the house on today. The first is that last Monday I had the pleasure to check out the progress of the brand new State Library train station. The Metro Tunnel is on track and ahead of schedule, and it will be a game changer for my community. We have recently invested more than \$233 million in the 2024–25 budget to get the groundwork done, and that means running test trains, training staff and checking systems down to the smallest light bulb. We are getting it done, and I am looking forward to it opening.

#### **Port Phillip Community Group**

**John BERGER** (Southern Metropolitan) (13:23): My second matter is that on Thursday I had the opportunity to visit Port Phillip Community Group to recognise some special volunteers on their work, with a certificate and T-shirt. I have had a lot of connection with that team, and I am proud that the 2022–23 budget supported their work, from the direct advocacy and policy with the government and social partners to delivering on the ground support, food banks and support for socially isolated individuals that the group delivers. Thank you for the invite from Ruth, and thank you to chair Gina Fiske and executive officer Veena Mishra for a great day.

#### **Tennis Victoria**

**John BERGER** (Southern Metropolitan) (13:23): I have a little bit of time left, so on a third and separate matter I want to shout out to the community of Tennis Victoria. I had the opportunity to represent Minister Spence last Thursday at their awards night at Kooyong, and I congratulate all the nominees and winners.

### *Never Again: The Fight against Antisemitism*

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (13:23): Last night I attended a special screening of the documentary *Never Again: The Fight against Antisemitism*. Josh Frydenberg, who presented this important documentary, interviewed a line-up of eminent Australians, including former prime ministers John Howard and Julia Gillard; the former head of ASIO and Department of Defence Dennis Richardson, who has served for many years in national security roles; Sir Peter Cosgrove, who served in our defence forces and was Australia's former Governor-General; and of course our own former Governor here, Linda Dessau, all of whom spoke with such conviction and clarity about their concerns with the rise of antisemitism.

The Jewish community in Victoria and indeed across our great nation is understandably afraid, with antisemitic incidents at record levels. We cannot ignore these facts, and to argue otherwise is completely blind to what is happening on our streets, in our universities and in our communities. Just a few days ago we witnessed the disgraceful words 'Jew die' scrawled across the front gate of Mount

Scopus Memorial College. In the documentary parents explain their fear for their children's safety and how Jewish-owned businesses have been boycotted, and Holocaust survivors give their accounts of the similarities between what we are seeing in Australia today and 1930s Europe. It is utterly chilling. President, I urge you and all members of this Parliament, and indeed all members of the Victorian community and the Australian community, to watch this very important documentary.

### **Mullivaikkal Remembrance Day**

**Samantha RATNAM** (Northern Metropolitan) (13:25): Over the weekend of 18 May our Tamil community gathered to commemorate Mullivaikkal Remembrance Day here in Victoria and across the world. Mullivaikkal was our Rafah. In the final stages of a 30-year civil war hundreds of thousands of Tamils were told to shelter in no-fire zones. As people sheltered desperately in Mullivaikkal for safety as the war surrounded them, the Sri Lankan army bombed them from the air, land and sea. Between 40,000 and 70,000 people were killed. Tens of thousands remain missing. Fifteen years on we remember all those lives taken from our community and the scars that will remain. We will never be the same.

My family left Sri Lanka because of the war in the 1980s, but I returned in 2004 during the ceasefire to volunteer in Vanni in the north as the Tamil community were rebuilding and preparing for independence. I met the most remarkable and strong people. When war returned, some fled across the world, some had to remain. There are many who we do not know what happened to – up to 100,000 people remain missing to this day.

The Tamil community carries with it the responsibility to remember them and to stand against genocide anywhere and everywhere. That is why we speak up for the Palestinians and stand in solidarity with all oppressed peoples. As we speak, Rafah is being bombed. People who are sheltering in safe zones are being slaughtered, and we are seeing images of children burnt and lifeless. Many of you remain silent. Many of us will never forget those of you who did nothing as innocent people were being slaughtered. Free, free Palestine!

### **The Torch**

**Ryan BATCHELOR** (Southern Metropolitan) (13:27): The 15th annual Confined exhibition, presented by the Torch, is currently on at the Glen Eira City Council gallery. The exhibition consists of over 400 artworks by 380 talented First Nations artists. I had an amazing tour of the exhibition last week. The exhibition reflects on the disproportionate representation of our First Nations Australians in our criminal justice system; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 2 per cent of Australia's population yet make up 28 per cent of the national incarcerated population.

Programs run by the Torch make real change by creating opportunities for their participants to generate income through selling their artworks, and there are a lot that have been sold through the exhibition. The exhibition runs until Sunday, and the last week coincides with National Reconciliation Week this week. National Reconciliation Week marks some significant milestones in our nation's journey towards reconciliation – the 1967 referendum and the High Court's Mabo decision, and obviously we recently had National Sorry Day, which commemorates the tabling of the *Bringing Them Home* report in 1997. It is an important time to learn about our nation's history and how together we can move forward towards reconciliation. After the recent referendum it is more important now than ever for us to stay engaged and focused on what our role in reconciliation is, because we all have a role to play on our nation's journey towards reconciliation and this state's journey towards treaty, now more than ever.

### **Shirley Hill**

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (13:28): Happy 100th birthday to Shirley Hill. Shirley was born on 10 June 1924. She is the youngest of three daughters born to Hilda and Bertie Coates. During her teen years she helped her parents in their stationery and gift store in Traralgon. At the outbreak of World War II she joined the Voluntary Aid Detachments as a nursing aide, and after the war finished



she joined the Red Cross and has had life-long experience as a volunteer. In 1949 she married Douglas Hill – grandson of William Caldwell Hill, a founding member of the Country Party and the federal member for Echuca from 1919 to 1934. During this time she volunteered at the Red Cross, in the blood bank.

In October 1964 she lost her dear husband to MND and stoically, beautifully and successfully raised her four children and went on to continue with her volunteer work in the Red Cross throughout her life. She also participated in the agricultural society and as a Sunday school teacher in her local church. She began with Lifeline in its inception in Gippsland in 1968. She is a great lady of faith, of compassion and of insight, with great passion and advocacy for her region. She has nine grandchildren and one great-grandchild, and she is an inspiration to all who know her. Happy birthday to Shirley Hill.

### **Bloody Big Survey**

**Georgie PURCELL** (Northern Victoria) (13:30): I rise today to talk about periods – around half of the members in this place have them. I just finished mine a few days ago actually, but we do not talk about them enough. Bleeding is not shameful; it is period poverty and discrimination that is. But Share the Dignity is trying to fix that through their Bloody Big Survey, by collecting information on menstruation experiences. They are seeking 200,000 respondents to capture evidence-based data to advocate for change. Run every three years, their last survey found that one in five people who bleed had to improvise on period products, almost 50 per cent wore a single tampon or pad for 4 or more hours because they had no more, 40 per cent had to call in sick due to their period symptoms and 48 per cent of students had missed class because of period symptoms. For disabled people or those living with chronic pain, finding and accessing a period product that works for them can be even harder, which is why it is so important that Share the Dignity hears from as many people as possible.

My whole office has completed the Bloody Big Survey. Between us we have shared insights on premenstrual dysphoric disorder, endometriosis, period undies, exercising with our periods and so much more, and we are proud to have contributed to the conversation that will not just normalise periods but remove the barriers surrounding them. There are just three days to go, so head to [sharethedignity.org.au](http://sharethedignity.org.au) to take part.

### **Duck hunting**

**Bev McARTHUR** (Western Victoria) (13:31): My members statement today relates to the shocking decision by the Surf Coast Shire Council to write to the Minister for Environment, the Minister for Police and the Game Management Authority requesting three local wetlands be closed to duck hunters. Hunting has occurred at Brown Swamp, Lake Gherang and Lake Modewarre for a long time. It is not enough to suddenly say, without consultation, that it should be banned for the sake of certain residents. The wetlands have been there since long before any houses, and duck hunting is a traditional, sustainable, healthy, legal activity in Victoria. It is disgraceful that Surf Coast shire have taken it upon themselves to try and ban it.

I encourage all members here to visit the expo in Queen's Hall this week, featuring the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia, Field and Game Australia, the Victorian Amateur Pistol Association and the Australian Deer Association. And I encourage all local residents to support the tabling of a petition against the motion at the council's meeting. That will happen tonight at 6 pm at Newling Reserve on Hendy Main Road, Moriac. Turn up, ask questions and show councillors that they should not bow to minority activists but listen to those who actually understand and care about wetlands and our great Victorian outdoors.

### **Electric vehicles**

**Katherine COPSEY** (Southern Metropolitan) (13:33): The New South Wales government announced yesterday the largest rollout of public kerbside electric vehicle chargers in Australia, co-funding 671 chargers at 391 sites. These chargers will be located at kerbsides and in council car parks

and are designed to support people who are renting, people who live in apartments and other households that do not have an off-street parking space to charge their electric vehicle at home.

Transport is Victoria's second-largest source of carbon emissions, and emissions are rising. A speedy, planned and orderly shift from petrol and diesel to electric vehicles will be an important part of reducing those transport emissions. Making sure people have ready access to cheap charging infrastructure, giving them the confidence that they will be able to top up their battery conveniently, will be crucial to encouraging and enabling Victorians to make the shift to EVs. They not only reduce emissions but are also cheaper per kilometre to run.

This is particularly important since the Victorian Labor government last year scrapped purchase subsidies for electric vehicles, a year earlier than originally planned and before the allocated funding was even spent. The Victorian Labor government should follow their New South Wales counterpart's lead and invest in a similar, forward-thinking fund for more kerbside charging stations, to give people more options to charge electric vehicles close to their homes.

### **Energy policy**

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (13:34): I want to alert the house to the nonsense that we heard from the Minister for Energy and Resources at PAEC this week and at other times that there is no gas available for Victorians. She is so wrong on gas. There is plenty of gas offshore within the 3-mile zone which the state administers and onshore. Onshore conventional gas is available either in Gippsland or indeed in the west of the state. I think Jane Norman from Cooper Energy has belled the cat on this minister today. She said Victoria does not have a gas shortage; it has enough resources to meet current demand for at least 25 years, while Lily D'Ambrosio said to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee 'we do not have sufficient supplies of gas in Victoria to meet our future needs'. There is a constriction in supply, but the reason for that constriction is Labor has blocked exploration. In the years between 2013 and now there have been no onshore conventional gas licences given – none. The last three licences were given out in 2013 by the Baillieu–Naphthine governments. That is when those licences were released. So with no new exploration licences for onshore conventional gas, no wonder we have got a constriction in supply. But the gas is there; the state government has just got to allow it to be got out under proper processes, and it should get a move on.

### **Albury Wodonga Health**

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (13:36): On 6 March this year I moved a motion for the government to produce documents relating to the Albury Wodonga Health redevelopment. It is now 12 weeks since the motion was passed in Parliament and nine weeks after the due date for documents to be produced, and the government has not delivered anything. The New South Wales government was able to produce documents within three weeks of its Parliament requesting them, and there is no reason why the Victorian government cannot do the same. Why is Labor hiding these documents? Why doesn't it want the people of Albury–Wodonga to know the truth about the hospital redevelopment? The government must release the documents as soon as possible, go back to the drawing board on this hospital redevelopment and engage in genuine community consultation.

### **Shepparton rail line**

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (13:37): In a media release dated 14 August 2021 the then Victorian Minister for Transport Infrastructure Jacinta Allan stated that stage 3 upgrades to the Shepparton line would be completed in 2023. But we are now halfway through 2024 and the job is not done. There are reports that an extra \$11.4 million was committed to the Shepparton line stage 3 upgrade project in the recent federal budget for the 2024–25 year. The Victorian Labor government has obviously gone over its budget for the project and run out of money before it could finish the signalling upgrades, which are essential for the full nine weekday services to begin. This is just one more example of Labor's financial mismanagement and cost blowouts, and unfortunately the Shepparton community are being disadvantaged by Labor's incompetence.

### Artificial intelligence

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (13:37): Last Friday I hosted a big ideas forum in Bendigo with my Nationals colleague Senator Bridget McKenzie about artificial intelligence and the potential for AI to benefit our regions. People came from across the state to this public forum to hear about the impacts of AI on employment and benefits for regional areas in business, education, agriculture and medical care. I would like to thank all those who attended and contributed to this important discussion, especially the members of the panel: Nathan Vincent, technology columnist for McPherson Media Group; Shainal Kavar, La Trobe University chief information officer; Daswin De Silva, professor of analytics and AI at La Trobe University; Craig Hunter, director at Clear Dynamics; Doug Amos, sales manager at Ag Leader; and Dr Umair Masood, a GP and founder of ConsultNote.ai.

AI presents a new and exciting frontier, and it was great to hear the panel provide insights into this rapidly developing technology. Questions were also raised about how much trust we can place in the credibility of AI information and how that could be managed moving forward. The forum paid tribute to the life work of Bruce Nicholls, a Nationals member who was a former diplomat, businessman and author. Bruce was a big-picture person. He was passionate about public policy and promoted discussion on key issues. AI is rapidly changing. It presents risks as well as opportunities for our society. It is an important conversation and one that we need to have because it affects us all.

### Tamil community

**Trung LUU** (Western Metropolitan) (13:39): On the weekend I had the opportunity to join the Tamil community in Williamstown to celebrate the Tamil new year, an annual event promoting culture, the arts and music. I also had the privilege of being part of the release of the VCE Tamil textbook. Tamilar is a not-for-profit community organisation sponsoring Tamil language schools in Point Cook, Lalor, Melton and Caroline Springs in my electorate of Western Metropolitan Region. I and many of my constituents are grateful for their contribution. Based on the Tamil language, traditions and culture, the school community promote classical Tamil language and culture through literature, music and drama with its diverse talents and multiculturalism. I want to congratulate all the students and performers for putting on a spectacular show over the weekend.

I want to say thank you to the Tamil community for allowing me to be part of the release of the Tamil VCE textbooks for units 3 and 4. The textbooks are a game changer which will enable students to have a clearer guide and reference for their studies. Thank you to Tamilar president Vinoth Balu and the entire volunteer team for a fantastic event. Their efforts have helped build social cohesion between communities. Thank you to the Tamil communities who invited me for such a welcoming, exciting display of multiculturalism. I look forward to attending any future events.

### Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund

**Renee HEATH** (Eastern Victoria) (13:40): I was honoured on Friday to join in the 45th birthday celebrations of the GERF. GERF is the Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund, which has been helping Gippslanders after natural disasters since 1978. It has funded emergency resources like food and clothing, education resources for children, resources to keep livestock safe and shelter for those who have lost their homes or have been badly affected by disasters such as fire or flood.

Gippsland is beautiful, but it can be volatile when it comes to weather. It is one of the most bushfire-prone places on earth, and the GERF is run by volunteers, allowing them to keep expenses low and return every dollar to the community. The GERF knows that more disasters will come, and they are ready to act fast – funds are often in people's accounts within two days. I would like to thank everybody involved in the GERF for the amazing support you show our community, and I would like to say a big thankyou to Barry Whitehead for emceeing the night, to Andy Tegart for the amazing job he does as president, to Di for sharing her story and of course to all of the incredible volunteers.

*Business of the house***Notices of motion**

**Lee TARLAMIS** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:42): I move:

That consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 427, be postponed until later this day.

**Motion agreed to.**

*Motions***Budget papers 2024–25**

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (13:42): I move:

That the budget papers 2024–25 be taken into consideration.

**The PRESIDENT:** Pursuant to the resolution of the Council on 14 May 2024, the budget papers will be debated concurrently with the second-reading debate on the Appropriation (2024–2025) Bill 2024.

*Bills***Appropriation (2024–2025) Bill 2024****Budget papers 2024–25***Second reading***Debate resumed on motion of Harriet Shing:**

That the bill be now read a second time.

**And Jaclyn Symes's motion:**

That the budget papers 2024–25 be taken into consideration.

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (13:43): It is a delight to be speaking on what is not a very delightful budget for my electorate. It is quite a disappointing budget not just for my electorate but really the whole state. We continue on a downward spiral as a state. Almost \$190 billion of debt we are staring down the barrel of. All the chickens are coming home to roost for this government when it comes to debt, when it comes to waste and mismanagement – waste and mismanagement of the budget that we have seen over and over and over again. We have got net debt predicted to reach \$156 billion by 2024–25. The interest payments will hit \$26 million per day by 2027–28. Imagine what \$26 million could fund in Ms Bath's community, in Mrs Broad's community or in my community – \$26 million per day. This is a result of the fact that Labor cannot manage money. When Labor waste with their \$40 billion of infrastructure blowouts, someone has to pay for that, and because of the waste and mismanagement we have seen by that side of the house, the chaos that they have got themselves involved in with different ministers going out saying different things, other ministers having to clean up their mess and then the Deputy Premier doubling down, you have absolute chaos today on that side of the house.

It is clear they are tired. They are a decade-old government that have run out of ideas, they have run out of money and they are making Victorians pay the price. We have seen them jack up the waste charge, we have seen them jack up the waste levy, pushing it back onto regular punters that need to use the tip. Some of those on the other side that live in the inner city might not be aware of the crisis going on in our growth areas of illegal dumping of rubbish, but it is actually a very big issue in my community. All jacking up the waste levy does is insert barriers for people to legally dump rubbish. Instead we are seeing littering all throughout our community, particularly my community up in Greenvale and Roxburgh Park, where it is a major issue in that community. All Labor is doing is

setting up barriers. They do not care that there is a cost-of-living crisis going on. They are passing and shifting their debt burden onto local councils, who are passing it on as well.

They do not care about the cost-of-living crisis, and we see the fact that they do not care about the cost-of-living crisis through their facetious attempt in giving money to schools. You can get \$400, I think, a school voucher – well, it is not really a voucher, because it is going to schools – and it is going to only public schools. Victoria is the most expensive state to send your child to a public school. They have ripped away programs like school camps. It is more expensive to get a uniform in Victoria, for textbooks, for additional curricular activities et cetera, and they are saying, ‘After we’ve taken away all of that and made all that more expensive, here’s \$400 to the public schools, and they will administer it.’ So you are creating more of an administrative burden for public schools. Certainly the principals I have spoken to do not even know how they are going to administer it. It seems to have been cooked up at the last minute because they might have realised, or some might have realised, there is a cost-of-living crisis.

But take this for an example – and this shows the discrimination going on over on that side for parents who value choice. It is not just the schools tax which they have flip-flopped on – and Tim Richardson is on one side and Labor members are on another, but it is not just that – it is the discrimination going on with this \$400 for each and every family in public schools. It is discrimination against parents who value choice. Parents who decides to send their child to a low-fee Catholic school like, say, Our Lady of the Way primary school in Wallan, where the average house price is around \$590,000 to \$600,000 – a huge cost-of-living crisis up in Wallan – do not get the voucher, they do not get the support, but a public school in Albert Park, where the average house price is well over \$1 million, they get the support from this Labor government.

This government have forgotten the outer suburbs, they are discriminating against parents who value choice, and we will not let them forget it. We will not let them forget it. This government wants to give money to public schools to administer and would rather have it go to a well-to-do area in the inner city than to parents who choose to send their children to a low-fee Catholic primary school in an area like Wallan. This is the discrimination that comes from that side, where decisions are made from within the tram tracks. It is showing contempt for parents and families who value choice, who value sending their children to our great independent schools and faith-based schools, in our growth areas in particular. But we see the government all over the place on a whole bunch of issues.

**Tom McIntosh** interjected.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** It is easy for me, Mr McIntosh, to stand here and speak about how cooked the budget is, but I thought I might let other people do that – people like the multiple Labor sources that have recently spoken on background. There is one who spoke to the ABC about the state budget before the budget, a Labor MP who said:

“The chickens are coming home to roost in this budget,” one Labor figure quipped this week, reflecting concerns that Andrews and his close allies in cabinet had borrowed too much money to pay for pet projects in the past.

**Sonja Terpstra:** On a point of order, I am not sure that the content that Mr Mulholland is referring to is relevant to the bill that we are actually dealing with at the moment. I think Mr Mulholland should confine his comments to the bill that is before the house.

**The PRESIDENT:** Ms Terpstra, I think they are comments relating to the budget.

**Sonja Terpstra:** No, it is just a newspaper article.

**The PRESIDENT:** He is the first speaker on the bill. The first speaker has latitude –

*Members interjecting.*

**The PRESIDENT:** I think it is related to the bill.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** We have got some others. We have got cabinet ministers, MPs and education sources in relation to all the school upgrades that they have delayed in this budget. They have moved them to the off years – they managed to save a lot in Labor electorates, but if your electorate is a Liberal electorate, a Nationals electorate or a Greens electorate, they popped it off to the out years: no school upgrades for you if you do not vote Labor. They treat the Victorian community with absolute contempt. A source said ‘It’s a bit of a bloodbath’ in regard to school funding in Victoria. Others say the budgeting is very bad. Someone said to the *Age*:

“It points to bad budgeting and potentially a poor reading to markets,”

That shows the faith people have in the Treasurer.

But we see yet again the government prioritising the Suburban Rail Loop – \$216 billion according to our independent Parliamentary Budget Office, so that gets all the money. But worthwhile projects like the Melton to Wyndham Vale train line electrification do not get a guernsey. We saw today the outer metropolitan ring road, which my constituents in the north have been advocating for for a very long time, has been put on ice almost permanently because the government has run out of money. We have today a situation where the government has now said it is backing the BIFT – the Beveridge intermodal freight terminal – which is great news, after great advocacy from my colleague Richard Welch in putting it on the national agenda. When the Morrison government provided the funding and came up with it, it was panned – it was panned by Jacinta Allan, it was panned by Catherine King. Jacinta Allan said that the western interstate freight terminal needed to come first and was prioritised. Countless state government spokespeople said that the western suburbs needed to be prioritised.

What has happened is, because Labor cannot manage money, it is people in the west who have paid the price, and people in the north have paid the price as well due to the scrapping of the outer metropolitan ring road. What was always proposed was that the state government would need to provide funding to Camerons Lane, a 50–50 split. The federal government, even Labor, had proposed \$150 million for that project. But then we get Albo up in Beveridge announcing that he will fund the whole thing. Why is that? Because the state government, Labor, have run out of money. They cannot manage money and so they have needed the federal government to bail them out on that.

The federal government spent two years doing some weird infrastructure review where they basically ended up recommitting what the Morrison government had already delivered. So you have got a situation where they said it was a press release announcement but then took two years to do a review that shows that it is the real deal and is going to deliver 20,000 jobs for my community in the northern suburbs. But it was panned, universally panned by Jacinta Allan, universally panned by Labor MPs. They refused to do permits for anything because they prioritised the western suburbs. They have now chosen the option where they basically have to do nothing outside of now prioritising the BIFT. They now acknowledge how good the inland rail is going to be. We have seen that they cannot manage money, and we have seen them neglect both the north and the west through their scrapping of the outer metropolitan ring road, but this is what we should come to expect when you have got a government that wastes and then it taxes, and somebody has to pay for that.

We have got an enormous amount of cost blowouts, and the really important thing for Victorians to remember is that at every decision where there has been a blowout, Jacinta Allan, the Premier, has been involved in it. She was the infrastructure minister. She was the Minister for the Commonwealth Games. She was the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. We have got North East Link promised at \$5 billion, the valuation at \$18 billion, current budget at \$26.2 billion. That is \$21.2 billion blowout. The West Gate Tunnel: promised, \$500 million; revised cost, \$5.5 billion; 2024–25 budget, \$10.2 billion. That is a cost blowout of \$4.7 billion, because Labor cannot manage money, and it is Victorians that are paying the price. You have got Metro Tunnel promised at \$9 billion; 2022–23 budget, \$12.36 billion; current budget, \$13.03 billion. That is a cost blowout of over \$4 billion. It literally means nothing to these people.

They are throwing Victorian taxpayers money down a pit, because they lie in part; they cannot stand up to the CFMEU bosses; we are seeing more trouble today in the paper, where they are wanting to take over garbos from local councils; they do not like who is being sworn in tomorrow night; there is an almighty war going on within the Labor Party in regard to the CFMEU takeover. They cannot stand up to them on our construction sites in Victoria. We will enforce the construction code. We will bring back construction enforcement Victoria to make sure there are no cost blowouts, because every single one of those cost blowouts there is – \$40 billion – means that things cannot get done in our community.

My rail line up to Wallan cannot be electrified – they are plunging hundreds of thousands of homes into my community, stealing the stamp duty out of that community to prop up this state budget and send it over to the eastern suburbs for the Suburban Rail Loop. There are hundreds of thousands of dollars and millions of homes going into the western suburbs, into Melton and Wyndham Vale. Labor promised at two separate elections that they would deliver that project. Now it is being put off into the never-never. They are stealing all the stamp duty money out of that community, putting it into the Suburban Rail Loop and putting it into other projects because Labor cannot manage money, and it is the people of Wyndham Vale, the people of Melton, the people of Wallan and the people of Greenvale that are paying the price – because they cannot manage money.

**Sonja TERPSTRA** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:58): It gives me great pleasure to rise to make a contribution on the Appropriation (2024–25) Bill 2024, and I am excited to rise to talk about some of these things our government is funding, because fundamentally what our government, the Allan Labor government, understands is what this budget has at the heart of it is to support families, because we know families are doing it tough. We understand there is a –

**The PRESIDENT:** Order! Ms Terpstra, sorry. Mr Mulholland sat down because he thought there was a point of order, so I am going to confuse the hell out of the house by resetting the clock at 14 minutes.

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (13:59): I am just getting started. I am not done. We have got a massive amount of blowouts because Labor are sinking everything into a tunnel. We know that there are a few good members of cabinet – but I think they are in the minority – that do not think we should be proceeding with the Suburban Rail Loop and think we should actually fund projects in the western suburbs and the northern suburbs for once, but we miss out. One of the projects that has missed out over and over again – I am sure Mr Erdogan knows about it because he probably drives on it – is the second stage of Mickleham Road in my electorate up in Greenvale and Kalkallo. It is a single-lane road. The government is only actually duplicating 1.6 kilometres of Mickleham Road, from Somerton Road to Dellamore Boulevard. I have been advocating over and over that this needs to be duplicated all the way to Craigieburn Road, which would make sense. This government, as I was saying before, approved, against the wishes of Hume City Council, against the wishes of the community, and railroaded through the *Craigieburn West Precinct Structure Plan*, wanting all the stamp duty from the 10,000 homes that are going to go in there to spend in the western suburbs. This is a single-lane road, that stretch, which means in the north in Greenvale, up to Mickleham and up to Craigieburn is going to end up like another Kalkallo, where people cannot get in and out of their housing estates because Labor have not funded the proper infrastructure required to keep pace with growth.

You would think if they were not committing \$216 billion to a Suburban Rail Loop, if they did not have \$40 billion of infrastructure projects, if they were able to stand up to the CFMEU bosses, we might actually be able to duplicate Mickleham Road all the way to Craigieburn Road or even all the way to Mount Ridley Road. It is costing \$222 million. The former federal Liberal government contributed 50 per cent to that project. It is \$222 million, but for only 1.6 kilometres. To put that into perspective, when 6.6 kilometres of Plenty Road was duplicated in around 2019 or 2020, that cost \$145 million for 6.6 kilometres. But now for \$222 million we can only do 1.6 kilometres. And we saw several front pages of the *Australian Financial Review* about the Mickleham Road site, about Indigenous labour hire firms being pushed out for the preferred ones of the CFMEU bosses. I get

several people complaining to me every day about the intersection of Somerton Road and Mickleham Road. There have been several crashes and several near misses, and it is a constant source of frustrations.

But I am trying to give examples in my community of all the things that could actually be funded. Maybe in the western suburbs maternal and child health services could actually get proper funding and support so they did not cut off maternal and child health services in Wyndham after eight weeks. But this is the consequence of a government that cannot manage money. It has wasted \$40 billion on infrastructure blowouts – \$40 billion of cash down the drain, set alight, by the Labor Party – because they cannot manage money, they cannot stand up to the CFMEU bosses, so maternal and child health services in Melton and in Wyndham Vale are cut off at eight weeks. As a young dad who still goes to maternal and child health services, I can tell you eight weeks is not long enough, and this government does not seem to understand that just because you live in a growth suburb does not mean you should not still have access to basic services that everyone else has access to.

I was talking about the vital electrifications that are needed in my community but also in Melton and Wyndham Vale because they are still stuck on V/Line services. I know that Mr Welch knows as well, as a former candidate in that area, that when the train gets to Donnybrook it is already full, which means people are standing clogged into V/Line trains all the way to Southern Cross. It is not a flash experience. But it also negatively affects people in Mrs Broad's electorate, because it is not a great experience for them either, particularly at peak hour. The same goes with Melton and Wyndham Vale. They do not have electrification, even though they were promised it by the Labor Party not one time at an election but twice. Twice at elections they were promised electrification. Geelong was promised a fast rail, and Daniel Andrews said that we could have both, that we could have hospitals and we could have infrastructure. Clearly he has gone now because he realised he could not do either, and the Labor Party has said that we cannot have one and not the other so we can have neither. That is what it seems like when it comes to this government.

You have got the government touting in media releases that V/Line is the fastest growing regional rail network in Australia, and they are proud of it. It is only the fastest growing because this government is ramming through precinct structure plans in growth areas and not upgrading the infrastructure around them. V/Line was never designed to cope with towns of hundreds of thousands of people, and this is what we are getting under this government. It is only the fastest growing rail network in Australia because this government has treated our growth areas – our former regional communities – with absolute contempt.

They are wasting \$216 billion on a suburban rail loop. There are \$40 billion of infrastructure blowouts that they have lit alight, and every single one of those infrastructure blowouts the Premier has had a hand in. She is a former Minister for Transport Infrastructure. Six hundred million dollars was set alight because she was the Minister for Commonwealth Games Delivery. Now that she is the Premier we are seeing an enormous amount of waste and mismanagement. She cannot stand up to the CFMEU bosses. She cannot manage money – this entire government cannot manage money. They have completely forgotten people in the growth areas of Melbourne that are desperate for services, that are desperate for maternal and child health services, that are desperate for basic infrastructure, that are desperate for new bus routes which, despite the government's announcements, they are not really getting – not to the same extent that some of our inner-city suburbs get.

I think people in growth areas are pretty darn sick of seeing signs out at their new homes that say 'Bus stop coming soon'. It is usually put up by the developer or the real estate agent, and then the bus stop does not come for about five or six years. We are seeing so many cases where like in Kalkallo the bus swivels in at the front of the estate and then swivels out, because it was designed a long time ago, but there is still housing several kilometres back. That is a sign of this government, and I think it shows neglect by this government.



I want to talk again about some reflections by not me but others on this government. I know Labor figures have said that the Premier is hamstrung by debt and a worsening cost-of-living crisis, which is apparently driving anti-government sentiment. You would think so. She only needs to travel out to Melton train station in the morning to see the contempt that they are showing this lot. We were out with the shadow cabinet in the south-western suburbs, out in Werribee, and I tell you the community are certainly frustrated with this government. They are angry at this government. Do you know how many times they have been promised a Melton hospital? Twice they have been promised electrification. We see it over and over again. Others – Labor MPs by the way – are saying:

I still don't know if there's a long-term strategy or if it's dealing day to day with the punches, administering in the moment ... I don't know where the narrative writers are.

It shows that under the previous Premier it was all about spin and no substance. Another MP said that the new Premier's time:

... had been chewed up clearing thorny problems left behind by Andrews, leaving no "clear air" for a new agenda or vision.

'Left behind by Andrews' – as I described it, she has been at the table in charge of every single decision they are responsible for. She is responsible for it. The Premier is responsible for it, the cabinet is responsible for it – that is how it happens in our Westminster system. Another Labor figure said:

... Andrews and his inner circle were not confident a majority was guaranteed in 2022 and had promised far-flung election commitments that were proving difficult to deliver.

"They threw the kitchen sink at it," they said. "I think some of that was always going to come apart," another said.

So Labor MPs are basically admitting that promises mean nothing in an election, that their word is trash. That is what they are saying – their own word is 'trash'. Yet again they blame Andrews and his inner circle. Who was in Daniel Andrews's inner circle? It was Premier Jacinta Allan. She was at every table. She promised the Arden precinct. She promised the Melton to Wyndham Vale rail line. She promised the Wallan diamond in my electorate, which still has no funding – southern-facing ramps onto the Hume. She promised all of these things. She, with Andrews, said we could have it all – we could have hospitals and we could have infrastructure. What she should have said: 'We can have hospitals, but we're going to merge a whole bunch of them into one; so it's still hospitals, there are just a whole lot less of them, so there are less services for people.' They know that it was always going to come apart. Another said the mantra of 'getting it done' was always going to be a challenge to that rhetoric. One said:

Delivery is your brand. No one cares about the Commonwealth Games, but its cancellation was the first visible chink in that armour and delays to projects like airport rail will continue to damage that reputation.

And they are all over the place on airport rail. You have got the Deputy Premier, after a long dispute, saying, 'We can't have it – we can't have the airport rail underground; it can't possibly be underground.' I remember when the government came out with a stunt up at the airport saying it was not called 'airport rail', it was called 'SRL airport'. The entire SRL is a tunnel, which will need to go underground, so you have got the government on one hand saying it cannot be underground but on the other hand saying, 'We will build a tunnel underground.' Then you have got this week the ridiculous shenanigans where you have got the Deputy Premier on one hand, Mr Galea's friend, saying that he was open to an underground rail line, and 'If the airport stacks up' – and I know he has worked very closely with the airport; he has a lot of friends at the airport – 'then let's do it. If they've got the \$7 billion, we're open to that.' Danny Pearson again comes in today and squashes that idea, says it is a ridiculous proposal – 'We can't do it.' The Deputy Premier then comes in and says, 'Oh, I think it might be able to be done.' So you have got enormous division within this government. You have got people in the cabinet supposedly saying we should hit 'Stop' on the SRL, maybe fund projects in the west, in the north. That would be nice, particularly for my community, if we get some people – I do think they are in a minority – actually paying attention to people in growth areas in my community

and in the western suburbs, because this government has done an awful job at the budget. They cannot manage money. They increase taxes, and Victorians are paying the price for Labor's mismanagement.

**Sonja TERPSTRA** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:13): I will have a reprise of my earlier false start in regard to this matter. It does give me great pleasure to rise to make a contribution on the Appropriation (2024–2025) Bill 2024. Of course this is our very important budget bill that we are debating today in this chamber, and as I said, it gives me great pleasure to rise to talk about this, because it means that I get to talk about all the great things that are going to be funded in this budget. Of course what is at the heart of this budget – and this is something that the Allan Labor government fundamentally understands – is that we are about helping families. We are about helping families and tackling the cost-of-living crisis, and a number of things that are germane to this budget are in fact designed to help families with some of these costs. Of course as a parent myself I can remember well that when I was putting my kids through school, and my kids are proudly public school educated, we had to buy things like uniforms and shoes. They are always growing out of shoes; I think every six months your kids need a new pair of shoes because they just grow so fast.

One of the really important measures that is part of this budget includes the \$400 school saving bonus, which will help families pay for uniforms, camps and excursions. As I said, public education is free in Victoria, but of course you have still got to find some money for all these things. This bonus is designed to and is going to help parents and carers of every child enrolled in a government school in 2025. I want to respond to something Mr Mulholland said; he read something into the record that was not right, so it is important that I correct it. As I said, the school saving bonus is open to parents and carers of every child enrolled in a government school in 2025. For non-government schools – which you do not like to hear about, but it is the truth and we have got to make sure we get this on the record properly – families that are eligible for the means-tested Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund, including healthcare and concession card holders, will also be eligible for the additional \$400 support. You do not like the facts. I know, never let the facts get in the way of a good story, Mr Mulholland. It is something you do not want to hear, but it is true, so we need to talk about that.

The other thing that I want to talk about is we are also tripling our free Glasses for Kids program and more vouchers to cover the cost of kids sport. Just on the glasses thing, I want to talk to the house about this. I had a young fellow staying with me. He actually was not so young, he was a teenager. I actually said to him – he was in year 12 – ‘Have you ever had your eyes tested?’ He had never had his eyes tested. For whatever reason, his parents did not get around to that. So I helped him and explained to him the process for going through and getting his eyes tested. Someone like him actually would have benefited from this program. The expansion of this program will mean that between 2024 and 2027, 108,000 prep to grade 3 students will be able to get a free eye screening and glasses, across 770 government schools. I know what it is like; I have got spectacles on. Funnily enough I did not need mine until I was about 21, but I could just imagine: if you are a kid in school and you do not know – if you have not had your eyes tested – and you are sitting in the back of the class and looking up at the board and it is a bit blurry, you might just assume that that is what it is, and it is only later on that you might turn to a friend or someone and say, ‘Hey, can you actually see what’s on the board?’ and they might say, ‘Yes, I can.’ This is critically important, because quite often if kids are having trouble seeing what is on the board then they are going to be having trouble studying, and they might find it all a bit disruptive. This is really important. I know myself, as someone who wears glasses – as I know Minister Shing, as a bespectacled person in here, will understand – that glasses can be expensive.

**Harriet Shing** interjected.

**Sonja TERPSTRA:** Glasses can be expensive, and your prescription can change with time, so having to go backwards and forwards to an optometrist to get that done costs a lot of money. This is going to be a really welcome change for kids who may need glasses, and it will help to pick them up early – like I said, not like the young fellow who was living with me for a while, who got into his late teens and was in year 12 before he realised that he actually needed glasses. Not only is it an important

cost-of-living measure to help families with those costs, it is going to help the kids study, it is going to help them engage more in the classroom. It really ticks a number of boxes. Like I said, family is really at the heart of this budget, and those are just two measures that are funded in this budget. They are very, very important.

We are continuing to upgrade our classrooms, invest in our teachers and give families confidence and our kids a great education. We are continuing our theme that we have had throughout the last government under Daniel Andrews; under the Allan Labor government we are going to continue to invest in our schools. We are rebuilding our schools. We are making sure the kids in Victoria, if they are in a public school, have got the most modern and fit-for-purpose facilities that they need to continue to learn and thrive in our public education system. We are going to continue to build more schools, particularly in growth areas. We are on track to continue to deliver. We have promised \$1.8 billion to build, maintain and upgrade schools across our state and to deliver on our promise to build 100 new schools by 2026. That is a really important commitment, because we know that people in Victoria have confidence in our public education system. We know that in growth areas where housing is being approved, we need to make sure that we have those services. That is \$1.8 billion to build, maintain and upgrade schools, and as I have said, we have promised to deliver 100 new schools by 2026.

There are so many things that I could talk about in here. I am going to focus on some of the things that are in my own electorate as well. There is \$996 million to switch on our Big Build transport projects, including the Metro Tunnel and the West Gate Tunnel. Neither of those things are in my electorate of course; however, the North East Link project is a fantastic project. This will mean so much to my community. I live in Heidelberg, and I know the communities of Heidelberg, Rosanna and Viewbank, and even Watsonia, Greensborough and many more, are all going to benefit from the North East Link. It is colloquially known – perhaps fondly or not so fondly – to those who live in those suburbs as the missing link. It is something that had been proposed for a long, long time, and I am really pleased and happy to say that so many people in my electorate support the building of this fantastic infrastructure project. North East Link will connect the end of the freeway through to the Eastern Freeway. It will return local roads to local communities, getting thousands of trucks off the roads every day, and that will make such a massive difference to my community. People have been talking about it for many, many years, so that is a really important project that I cannot wait to see delivered.

It is amazing. Every time I drive up the Greensborough Highway, if I am heading out to Bundoora or somewhere, I drive alongside the construction site there at Watsonia, and I just love looking at it. There is so much going on there. There are so many piling rigs there and there are cranes there, and it is a massive site. I drove back home the other day going through Bundoora, heading down the Greensborough Highway towards Heidelberg, and I could just see it. I was thinking, 'Right, that's where the portal is, and that's where the tunnel boring machines are going to go and get boring and go underground and make that tunnel happen.' It will go under the Banyule Flats, and that is a really important thing. The Banyule Flats are something that people were very, very clear about. They did not want to see a flyover through those flats, and the Banyule Flats and the really important environmental aspects – whether it is wildlife or whether it is the Yarra River, which goes through there as well – will all be protected. That is why Victorians, particularly in my electorate, embraced this project. They voted for it.

I will talk about the Suburban Rail Loop in a minute. I know those opposite want to pan it, but people voted in support of it. It is an amazing project that I cannot wait to see delivered. It is an amazing thing to see. I know having a rail link available for people who currently do not have a rail link is something that is going to be very welcomed by many, many people in my electorate. As I said, it is something we took to the election and it is something that people voted on. We have a mandate to deliver those programs, despite what those opposite might say.

I might also talk for a moment about – and I will come back to the Suburban Rail Loop – the state budget housing allocation as well. There is \$216 million extra in the housing portfolio, with \$197 million designed to address homelessness, \$18.7 million to deliver modern IT maintenance

systems for public housing and renters and \$1.1 million for food relief services for social housing renters, and it builds on our \$9.8 billion investment in housing and homelessness since 2014.

In my electorate, particularly in Croydon, I was really pleased to go and open with Minister Shing, the Minister for Housing, some fantastic housing on Lusher Road. I think there are 137 brand new homes. We had a fantastic visit there. We got to speak to some public housing tenants. I have to say I was so impressed with the quality and the standard of these apartments. It is what Labor governments do. We actually do what we say we are going to do: we fund it and we deliver on it. It is something that those opposite do not care about. When they were in government they did nothing, right? What they actually believe in is small government and no government and for government to just get out of the way and let the market rip. Well, we all know that that produces failures, and that is why this government, as I said at the beginning of this contribution, will fund the programs that make a difference to people who need governments to step in. Again, it is all very well if you are a wealthy business owner or you are a millionaire and you do not need to rely on the government – that is all very well and good – but we make sure in our budgets that families are at the heart of them. As I said, we will go on to deliver housing relief for many, many Victorians, and there is so much. Like I said, the landmark record-breaking \$5.3 billion investment in the Big Housing Build will deliver more than 12,000 new dwellings across the state. As I said, 137 new dwellings at Lusher Road, Croydon, was absolutely amazing. Community Housing Limited are the ones that are delivering those projects. Those projects are going to absolutely mean the world to so many people, and it is just amazing.

Just on the Suburban Rail Loop for a moment, the part of the Suburban Rail Loop that we are developing is known as Suburban Rail Loop East. It will run from a number of places. It will go from Box Hill right down to Clayton and cut through Glen Waverley and the like. It is so important to my community. Like I said, it will go from Cheltenham right up to Box Hill. It is known as Suburban Rail Loop East, and it will basically connect major employment, health, education and retail destinations in Melbourne's east and south-east. The line will slash travel times and connect people travelling on the Gippsland corridor, and building it will create up to 8000 direct jobs. Construction has already started, and trains will be running by 2035. That is why in this budget – and as I talked about in some of the funding for the Big Build projects and other projects that we are funding – these things will make a massive difference to people's lives, particularly in my region, the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region. I cannot wait to see these projects being delivered.

I mentioned Metro Tunnel before. I have had the benefit of going down and seeing some of the progress that has been made in the Metro Tunnel, and it is amazing to go down and see that we will actually have a modern train service, another inner loop, that means we can get more train services on train lines. Of course the other program that we are funding is the level crossing removal authority. We are removing those level crossings. Seventy-seven are already gone, and what that will mean is that we can put more services on and can then reduce congestion around roads as well. Obviously I talked about North East Link, so we are funding roads, but we are also funding public transport. Melbourne in particular is one of the fastest growing cities and communities in Australia. So we know that if we do not do anything, then our roads will just become gridlocked. We have got the planning and the foresight to make sure that people can get around, get to where they need to be, get to work on time and basically make sure that roads support the community in what they need to do in getting around.

We are making sure there is proper investment, thoughtful urban planning and local projects that build on the character and qualities of local communities with safe and attractive neighbourhoods as Melbourne grows. Look, there is so much more that I can talk about. Again, we have got \$41 million to deliver maternal and child health and fertility health care to more families and bubs. We have got \$700 million to extend the Victorian Homebuyer Fund. Importantly, and something that is close to my heart, there is \$555 million to build the workforces we need for the future, including supporting skills and TAFEs. We have got \$302 million to support fire- and flood-impacted communities, helping them recover and rebuild for the long term. There is \$273 million to support Aboriginal families and

communities. The list goes on and on and on. There is \$129 million to continue the statewide rollout of our early education reforms, including universal three-year-old kinder and supporting families with free kinder, and, importantly, there is \$211 million to help keep women and children safe and support victims of family violence as well.

I have got 1 second left on the clock, so I commend this bill to the house.

**Sarah MANSFIELD** (Western Victoria) (14:29): Right now people are looking to their government for support. They are asking: what are you doing to tackle the housing crisis? Are you taking action to ease the cost of living? They want to know how each and every member in this chamber is using their influence to relieve the daily stress of putting food on the table, of keeping a roof over their heads or of trying to decide if they can afford a healthcare visit or to turn the heating on. The reality is bleak. Life is tough for many in the community at the moment.

When we look at renters, there is not a single home on the private rental market that a person on Youth Allowance can afford – not even a share house. If you are on the minimum wage working full time, less than 1 per cent of homes are affordable. People are having to pay, on average, \$200 more rent a week than they did before the pandemic. Recent forecasts show that if governments continue with business as usual, like they are doing, things are set to get much worse over the coming years. Then we look at public housing. The public housing waiting list has grown to over 120,000 people. The most vulnerable, such as women fleeing family violence, are having to wait nearly two years. Thirty thousand Victorians are experiencing homelessness every single night, and yet this government is walking away from public housing.

Cost of living – people who have never faced food insecurity are now struggling to afford groceries, are skipping meals or going without. In the past year around a third of households experienced moderate or severe food insecurity at some point. That means they skipped a meal or went without food for a day. Community service organisations are overwhelmed with requests for food and material aid. Calls to Lifeline are going through the roof because of the cost-of-living pressures people are facing.

Then we look at the environment, which we all depend on for our health and wellbeing. We are losing biodiversity at an unprecedented rate, and the impacts of climate change are being lived by Victorians right now, particularly in rural, regional and coastal areas. The need to invest in protecting our environment, rapidly transition off fossil fuels and support communities to withstand the impacts of climate change that are already locked in is greater now than ever before, yet this Labor government not only massively underinvests in the environment already, they are cutting spending. This budget continues the trend of reducing funding for environmental protection and to the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action over the forward estimates.

Our economic system is failing people and the environment. For too long we have been led to believe that it is normal, that it is okay, to put the interests of those doing well – big corporations, the fossil fuel industry, wealthy investors who own multiple homes, property developers, the big supermarkets – ahead of the interests of everyday people and the environment. Governments have left essential services like supermarkets unregulated and private markets deciding how much people should pay for essentials. This country has been treating housing as a commodity rather than a human right. Just this week I was speaking to a worker at a service for people experiencing homelessness in my electorate, who told me about how council and the police went around clearing away tents right across the city, and sleeping bags, due to complaints about the growing number of tents and sleeping bags appearing on the streets. These people's possessions were cleared and chucked into the back of a truck. People are literally now being evicted from the streets. What sort of society is this? Is this who we really want to be?

For all the talk of debt and deficit – and we have heard a bit of that already – it is easy to forget that budgets are about priorities. They are about choices. This budget was the government's chance to

choose to stand with everyday people and to make sure that everyone has a safe and secure place to call home, to make sure that people can afford to feed their families, to improve access to basic public health services like dental care. The government could have acted with urgency, because the immediacy of these stresses is so real for so many. But this budget is more of the same – more of the status quo. It is a do-nothing budget.

The Greens have presented an alternative vision that reflects the real-life experiences of Victorians, and it is one we will continue to fight for. We will fight for real action for renters, like controls on rent to deliver immediate relief and make unlimited rent increases illegal; like a massive increase in genuine public housing; like regulating supermarkets to ensure that food is affordable. We can do all of this and more by making big companies, who are too often facilitated by government to profiteer from everyday Victorians, pay their fair share of tax. The so-called opposition is up in arms about debt and deficit, but their only response is to cut spending, to cut services. This is not an alternative vision that people need, especially not right now.

The Greens' revenue measures ensure greater equity and mean we can deliver more. The big banks are effectively subsidised currently, and if we taxed them, we could recoup \$5.3 billion over the forward estimates. That is a choice the government could make. The social housing levy that Labor, cowardly, walked away from, could raise \$760 million, while increasing the online gambling tax could raise \$600 million and a windfall profit tax could raise \$8.6 billion. These are all choices the government could be making. Imagine how much better life could be for Victorians if this was a vision shared by their government. A vision that prioritises people having a roof over their heads and food on the table is not one that should be revolutionary, but right now, compared to the vacuous offerings of Labor and the coalition, it is. For the Greens these are key priorities, and we will continue to fight for them every day.

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (14:35): I rise to speak to the Appropriation (2024–25) Bill 2024 that we are debating today, and what we have seen from Labor is a very high spending, high taxing government that will see generations of Victorians pay for the mismanagement of Victoria's budget. As we have seen in this budget there are cuts in areas that did not need to be cut in the areas of life-saving cancer treatments and research. The VCCC Alliance having 75 per cent of their funding cut in this budget just shows the priorities of the Allan Labor government. Their priorities are to spend on the suburban rail link, a project that not even the Deputy Premier supports. He is at odds with the Treasurer and the Premier –

**Michael Galea** interjected.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Well, your Deputy Premier, Mr Galea, does not support the government's approach on Suburban Rail Loop. You want to go and read the news today and go and speak to your Deputy Premier, because he does not support the Premier or the Treasurer on this.

**Michael Galea** interjected.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** Order! All right. Thank you.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Through you, Acting President, I know the backbench and Labor are very worried. They should be – this is a shocking budget, and the Suburban Rail Loop is a shocking project. No-one supports it – not Infrastructure Australia; not the Grattan Institute, their own think tank with their own people; or a whole range of people, and the government will not even release the contracts, so Victorians do not have full transparency on what their government has actually signed Victorians up to. This is going to be decades of debt that this government –

**Michael Galea** interjected.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Mr Galea, I know you are sensitive, but the Deputy Premier himself does not support the Suburban Rail Loop. He is at odds with the Premier and the Treasurer. Your own people – you are all fighting, you are all in angst and you are all over the place. He wants the airport rail link,

not the Suburban Rail Loop. That is what the Deputy Premier wants, yet the Premier and the Treasurer are saying, 'No, we're going ahead.' You are all over the place. The government is all over the place.

I want to just go back to what the government has done. They talk the big game constantly. They promise Victorians that they can do it all. Remember what former Premier Daniel Andrews did – he has gone off into the sunset. He knew it was spiralling out of control, because he set Victorians up to fail, and by God his legacy is one that I have banged on about for years and I will bang on for years about it, because he has set this state up in such a dire situation. He promised Victorians that we would have both hospitals and rail, and now the government is saying, 'No, you choose. Victorians have got to choose. They've got to do the hard yards. We've got to cut here.' And they are. They are amalgamating hospitals all over the state; the communities have not even been consulted, and what a disgrace that is. They are all up in arms about that. This government do not consult with the community, and they have not consulted on the Suburban Rail Loop. In my area around Cheltenham they do not want that. They do not understand the value of their properties and the taxes they will have to pay. You never explained that to them before you went to the 2022 election, Mr Galea, and so to say that the people voted for it is not true, because you never put the case to Victorians properly. You never –

**Michael Galea** interjected.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Well, your Deputy Premier does not support you or the Treasurer or the Premier, because he is at odds with you. The Deputy Premier is positioning himself to take over from Jacinta – she should be very worried. That is what Labor does – they put a woman in, and she has to wear all the garbage that Labor men leave her. Well, you know, John Cain did it with Joan Kirner, but I have got to tell you Jacinta Allan is a clone of Daniel Andrews.

*Members interjecting.*

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** Order! Minister Shing! I know it is tax time, but it is too early in the week for all this yelling. Can we keep it down, please?

**Georgie CROZIER:** Thank you, Acting President. I have got to say that the difference between Joan Kirner and Jacinta Allan is that Jacinta Allan is just a clone of Daniel Andrews. She has been around him and been tied to his hip, and she is identical. She was the minister for infrastructure, and the budget blowouts have blown out by billions of dollars. She made the decisions. The Arden precinct was sacked in this budget. They went to the Victorian public and spouted that they were going to have the biggest medical precinct in the nation and were going to provide a new home for the biomedical sector, a new home for the Women's and a new home for the Royal Melbourne. They cannot do it, and as a result, that investment for the biomedical sector has flooded out of this state. That is what they are telling me. It has been a disaster for the sector. And again, it is Labor lying to Victorians.

**Michael Galea** interjected.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Well, I asked in the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (PAEC), Mr Galea, where the Women's and the Royal Melbourne are going, and you could not answer it. Your government, your minister and department –

**Michael Galea:** That was answered, actually. It is on the site in Parkville.

**Georgie CROZIER:** No, they did not. We said, 'Where is the site?'

**Michael Galea:** On the site in Parkville, and you were tutting and muttering in the background. We could all hear you.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Through the Chair. I have got to say, this government says one thing to the Victorian public, then they con them. They did it with the Commonwealth Games. They have done it with this Arden medical precinct. They go to the public and say, 'We can do it all.' They said they could build hospitals and do the Suburban Rail Loop. They cannot. They are sending this state broke.

The debt is spiralling out of control. Victorians know it, and you know it. Members of the government know it. It is spiralling out of control. At \$187 billion, it is \$25 million a day in interest that Victorians will be paying in just a couple of years time. This is irresponsible. Let us not forget what Daniel Andrews said as well. He said in 2014, 'I give you my word – no new taxes.' Well, we have got 55 new or increased taxes: a tax on schools, a health tax –

**A member** interjected.

**Georgie CROZIER:** I do not care what he said. Are you interjecting that Daniel Andrews said he did not drink? Well, he drinks a lot. We all know that. We know that.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** Order! This is starting to get a bit personal now on a former Premier.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Well, you know what, that man is responsible for a lot. He conned Victorians. This government conned Victorians, and they have let Victorians down.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** I might just take a moment here. We have got wildly off track here. Let us keep it not personal to individuals, and let us move on and talk about tax.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Well, I say it because the former Premier made a multitude of promises to the Victorian public. In 2018 he promised 10 community hospitals. Now three have been scrapped. In 2022 he promised Australia's biggest medical precinct. That has been scrapped. He promised we could do the Commonwealth Games. That has been scrapped. And Jacinta Allan has been by his side the whole way, so I do think there is a problem with this government and what they are saying to Victorians and what they are actually delivering. What they are delivering Victorians is record debt, record taxes and unbelievable spending that is causing increased inflation, and that is a problem for not only Victorians but also Australians. It is reckless and it is irresponsible, and they seem not to understand how dire this situation is. I am completely frustrated when you have got people like the former Premier and the current Premier who think there is nothing wrong and they have done nothing wrong. Well, they have. They are setting generations of Victorians up for a decrease in the standard of living, and we are seeing that, whether it is access to health care or whether it is access to quality education.

We have got so many problems in this state that this government does not understand or just refuses to. What do they do? They throw more money at a problem. They are over-inflating it. They state, 'We're fixing that problem up.' I will give you an example – the Royal Children's Hospital and the doors in the emergency department. You know what, everybody knew that the trolleys could not go through those doors. They made a mistake. So what did they say? 'Oh, no, we've had a review process, and we've decided to throw more money,' another \$25 million, 'at the project and redesign it so it's better for all.' They never admit to their mistakes. Whether it is the Metro Tunnel and the rail lines, or the electrification stuff-ups – stuff-up after stuff-up after stuff-up – and the tens of billions of dollars that Victorians are now paying for with services they are now missing out on because of the project blowouts. The mismanagement is just extraordinary.

This is symptomatic of Labor. They are hopeless economic managers. They have no regard for taxpayers money. They do not understand that it is not their money. It is the taxpayers money that they have responsibility for and they should be accountable for how they spend that taxpayers money, but they are not. They do not care; instead they just spend. They con Victorians into believing that they can do things like the Suburban Rail Loop, they can build all these projects like the 10 community hospitals that they promised, the Arden medical precinct which they promised, and deliver the Commonwealth Games which they promised. What do they do? They have to rip up contracts, whether it is the Commonwealth Games, which has cost over \$600 million and rising, or foreign investments flooding out of the state in the biomedical sector, as I said before, because there is no confidence left in that sector. They are seriously worried about what the government says and what



they then actually do. This is a government that has no credibility when it comes to economic management and the Victorians public know. They actually know.

Now we have got projects like four-year-old kindergarten being pushed out. Urgent infrastructure rebuilding at the Alfred hospital, which was promised two years ago, is now being pushed out for another six years. How urgent is that? Not that urgent according to the Allan Labor government. Well, they are doing that for a reason, because the budget is so shot. That is what I am talking about – appalling economic management, appalling abuse of taxpayers money, appalling project management that has seen tens of billions of dollars in project overruns, and it is Victorians who are paying the price. They are paying the price for this government's failures, for this Premier's failures in particular. She is the Premier. All of those major issues that have caused so much grief for so many people have all blown out under the Premier's watch as Minister for Transport Infrastructure, and the Commonwealth Games, I might add. She is seriously out of her depth. She has got the Deputy Premier Ben Carroll breathing down her neck, at odds with her over the Suburban Rail Loop. He does not support it. He thinks the airport link should be done. She does not support that. They are all over the place. Yet Victorians are the ones that are suffering, and that is a disgrace.

This budget fails in so many areas. They have increased taxes, whether it is the bin levy or upping the fire services levy. We hear that from the minister. She cannot answer questions in PAEC. She fudges them in here. Where is the increase in services for the CFA? This is just failure after failure after failure. And the 800,000 homes that you promised, let us talk about that. I just listened to the Premier in question time. She could not answer. Another big policy they have been talking up and telling Victorians they can do it all: 'We are going to build 800,000 homes over the next decade.' They cannot even deliver 80,000 this year. She could not even answer that in question time. It is like the surgeries.

**Michael Galea** interjected.

**Georgie CROZIER:** No, no, no. What, are you going to do 10,000 this year and 150,000 next year? No, no, Mr Galea. You lot cannot count. It is like the elective surgery waitlist. You promised 240,000 elective surgeries, and the minister just six months ago, in November, said you would do this year in, year out. You promised it and you cannot even do it. You failed this year – 33,000 elective surgeries less than promised in last year's budget – and you are going backwards. You are delivering backwards. You are going backwards. Two hundred thousand – Mr Galea, you were in PAEC. You heard the questions, and you know that this government is going backwards on the delivery of the elective surgery waitlist. It is like your housing statement: you make these big promises and you do not deliver them. Victorians have woken up to the con. They know that your government cons them, and you have the whole time. Again, I say there is just list after list: Commonwealth Games – any of the projects that you say you will run on time and on budget have all blown out – the housing statement, elective surgeries, community hospitals, no new taxes. We have got 55 new taxes.

In my concluding 10 seconds I want to say again: Labor cannot manage money, and it is Victorians who are paying the price, and it is a very severe and big price that they are paying.

**Rachel PAYNE** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:50): I rise to make a contribution to the Appropriation (2024–2025) Bill 2024 on behalf of Legalise Cannabis Victoria. As a member of Legalise Cannabis Victoria I must start this speech by recognising the \$4.9 million in this budget for the medicinal cannabis driving trial. Why are we not up here jumping for joy? Well, when you think about how the Victorian government will have waited a decade from when it legalised medicinal cannabis in 2016 to complete a study that might lead to certainty in the law, this is why we are disappointed. Victoria's driving laws criminalise medicinal cannabis patients; they impact their right to freedom of movement and their right to live a life free from discrimination. Patients take their medication as prescribed and ensure they do not drive while impaired, but they can still return a positive roadside drug test. These patients are often barred from driving, are hit with heavy financial penalties and often make the difficult choice to stop taking their life-changing medication. You can

imagine for those with conditions like epilepsy, not taking their medication makes them a much greater safety risk on Victorian roads.

The studies have been done. The working groups have been completed. This trial is redundant. If this government was serious about impairment, it would have included other prescription drugs, like opioids, in this trial. But it did not. So while we welcome any investment in medicinal cannabis research, we are deeply troubled by how this trial will delay certainty for medicinal cannabis patients until at least 2026. I am not optimistic that even when we get given an outcome in an election year there will be any hope for change of legislation.

Before I turn to other investments in this bill, I implore this government to prioritise the health and wellbeing of medicinal cannabis patients and adopt the Tasmanian model of a legal defence for unimpaired drivers who have prescribed drugs detected in their system who have taken them in accordance with their prescription, like every other medication.

Speaking of health and wellbeing, it is troubling to see that this budget reveals delays in the rollout of the remaining 35 of the prioritised 50 local mental health and wellbeing hubs. These hubs would offer free support without the need of a GP referral. The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System showed just how critical these kinds of community supports are. If this government have done all they can, then workforce shortages causing delays to the rollout are understandable and corners should not be cut. But we fear that this is a blanket excuse for deeper issues. We implore the government to do all they can to have these services delivered as a matter of priority.

In this budget we saw a welcome commitment of \$211 million for family violence intervention, including continuing the Respectful Relationships program and greater funding for specialist support services for victim-survivors and therapeutic interventions. But stakeholders are telling us that community legal services are facing unprecedented and unsustainable levels of demand. This demand is often from victim-survivors of family and sexual violence dealing with police, child protection, Centrelink, creditors and the immigration system. In the absence of additional funding, little has been done to address this. If this government is serious about tackling this national crisis, it must give extra funding to these services. These services are critical to helping people leave violent relationships.

Similarly, in this budget I was disappointed to see that the submission by Southside Justice's statewide sex worker legal program was unsuccessful. They have been told by the Department of Justice and Community Safety that they do not fall within the priority commitment to fund lapsing community legal centre groups. There are so many legal issues that stem from the decriminalisation of sex work – planning law, equal opportunity, employment, criminal, personal safety and privacy law, just to name a few. This organisation has seen a tenfold increase in demand for their services over the last 18 months and anticipate this will only grow. Ongoing funding and support for this industry is so important. This government cannot just legalise a whole industry and then let it fend for itself. Independent workers will cop the brunt of these funding shortcomings. I urge the government to meet with Southside Justice, to support their work and to assist with their plans to engage with sex workers from migrant backgrounds.

It is further disappointing to see funding in this budget for a two-year youth justice bail supervision and support project to electronically monitor young people. We were promised youth justice reform. We were promised the repeal of reverse onus provisions for young people on bail. We were promised ambitious change. In the absence of any of this, we fear this government has gotten cold feet on these essential reforms.

On a lighter note, as someone with a history in the creative arts, I was pleased to see a \$6.5 million Victorian festivals package to support creative festivals and events across Victoria. Unfortunately this fell short, including the funding we advocated for on behalf of the Melbourne Fringe festival. This funding would have secured the program's viability into the future, ensuring the longevity of their socially inclusive projects. These include the First Nations program Deadly Fringe, disability arts

programming, CALD programming and LGBTIQ+ programs. As the arts community continues to bounce back from the impacts of the pandemic, support has never been more vital, and the government's response here was overwhelming.

This budget was a mixed bag when it came to housing. We saw investments in programs and providers to support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It was great to see funding that was about to lapse for services like Pride in Place, the homelessness after-hours service, and Better Health and Housing. Having stood in this place and asked the minister to ensure funding for Pride in Place, it was particularly great to see this funding delivered. Specialist homelessness services are an integral part of our state's response to homelessness. Pride in Place does incredible work for LGBTIQ+ people who are homeless, at risk of homelessness or living in housing that is unsafe, insecure or too expensive.

As I have previously raised in this place, I was troubled to see the transition out of the Victorian Homebuyer Fund and into the Commonwealth government's Help to Buy scheme. This will slash income and property value caps, preventing thousands of Victorians from being able to buy their first home. The \$1.2 million in this budget to support those facing rental stress to access advice and advocacy is essential given that this government has trapped more Victorians in the rental market.

Regardless of the merits of this bill, given the government's willingness to subject medicinal cannabis patients to what will now be a decade of discrimination on Victorian roads, we will be abstaining from voting.

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (14:59): I am pleased to rise today to make a contribution on the 2024–25 budget papers. In doing so I would like to prosecute the fact that this current government that has been in place, been in leadership, for 10 years is certainly one that cannot manage money. We have seen a government that is arrogant, that has driven policy based on ideology and overwhelmingly not on science, and regional and rural Victorians are paying the price for that. We have seen a government that cannot manage money, cannot manage major projects and cannot manage our health system, our education system and our infrastructure projects in Victoria. It is making a botch of what to do or not to do with our environment, our public land spaces and our road networks, and rural and regional Victorians are paying the price. I am sure – I know – that there are some very decent staff working in departments, but so many of them must be wringing their hands and shaking their heads in frustration.

Ten years ago the Labor Party took over. Ten years ago Victoria's debt was in the vicinity of \$22 billion – quite manageable, in fact slim, by today's standards. Yet now we see in the budget estimates that by 2028 there will be a budget deficit of \$188 billion. It is eye-watering, and there is fear throughout all of Victoria about the paying back, the paying down, of that debt. There are interest repayments of – and we have heard it before, but it is worth putting on record – \$26 million a day.

There is a quote from Elizabeth Dole; she is a senator from America. After a lifetime of public service, she set up foundations and she devoted herself to public service and the public good. She said:

The best public policy is made when you are listening to people who are going to be impacted.

Unfortunately, this budget represents from the government the exact opposite of that philosophy. People will know it is one of the topics that I am very focused on – our public environment and the closure of our native timber industry. There are inputs of the supposed payment of compensation packages, but the government did not listen to the community when they said, 'Don't lock it down.' They listened to a very small few – the ideologically driven Wilderness Society and others. They listened to them because they wanted their seats in the city.

We hear many times over that people are consultold rather than consulted. There are many of those things going on right now – people being consultold rather than the government listening to communities. We see it in terms of our energy transmission and the powerlines that are going to have

to go through – the VNI West, for example. Rural and regional Victorians – people with agricultural industries, with farms – feel like they are being consultold.

Let us look at the neglect of rural and regional Victoria. It is clearly visible that of the \$98 billion in infrastructure spending in the forward estimates, \$2 billion goes to the regions. Rounding it up, it is 2.5 per cent – 2.5 per cent in the forward estimates of all the infrastructure spend in this state goes to the regions. What does that say about the lack of appreciation, the lack of care, the lack of understanding and the arrogance of this 10-year-old government?

Now, Oscar Wilde said –

*Members interjecting.*

**Melina BATH:** There is lots of noise in here. I know I can activate people because what I am saying is true. Let me talk about a playwright. Oscar Wilde – one of his many famous quotes is:

Life under a good government is rarely dramatic; life under a bad government is always so.

What we know from this government is that they obfuscate. They say, ‘It’s not our fault; it’s somebody else’s – it’s the war in Ukraine or it’s the global pandemic.’ Well, I am sorry – the global pandemic, by its very nature, was a global pandemic, but what do we see in Victoria? We see that the debt in Victoria is larger than New South Wales – a comparable state with a similar population – Queensland and Tasmania combined in the forward estimates. Those states are not throwing their hands in the air and saying, ‘It’s the war in Ukraine. It’s the pandemic.’ This is dramatic government by a government which cannot manage money, and Victorians and regional Victorians are paying the price.

Let us look at this waste and mismanagement. There is \$40 billion in overspending, in blowouts, on this government’s mismanaged projects – \$40 billion extra. I am sorry – you do the costings, you do the business plan, you have the budget, and lo and behold it is \$40 billion. It is eye-watering. Let us look at it: North East Link, \$21 billion extra; West Gate Tunnel, almost \$5 billion extra; Metro Tunnel, \$4 billion extra; \$3.3 billion extra in level crossings; and away we go.

I am going to quote a very good example that my leader Peter Walsh gave in our recent state conference about what that \$40 billion could have been spent on. Let us look at it. If you google the state government, under Roads Victoria it is responsible for 23,000 kilometres of roads in Victoria. Any regional Victorian only has to drive down the road to see what an appalling state, what a dangerous state, our roads are in – potholes, the verges are disintegrating – and they are just not getting that maintenance. If every kilometre of that 23,000 kilometres of road that the state government has responsibility for cost a million dollars to renovate, to refresh and to resurface, you would spend \$23 billion and cover all of the roads. And with that you would still have \$17 billion left over to actually rejuvenate the multiple issues that need to be fixed in this state. These are the overruns – not the costs, the overruns – and this is a tired, arrogant, mismanaged government that cannot manage the budget.

Let us look at some of those things that need looking at. I will finish off on the road maintenance project and the maintenance of our roads. We see that, unfortunately, in the last year we had the highest death toll in so many years – in 15, 20 years. That means somebody has got a hole in their family where that human being used to be. Not all road deaths are because of improper roads or road surfaces, but in many cases they contribute to those deaths. We see the rehabilitation and resurfacing programs are slashed by 75 per cent in the next financial year. It is a dire situation for our roads. We see some roads which really should be upgraded in my region: Leongatha’s kamikaze corner, which if you know that – and I know Mr Welch knows that town very well – is a very dangerous intersection. The local council and everyone are on board to upgrade it. We know that there are roughly a thousand bridges that the Department of Transport and Planning said need to be upgraded, and there are four in my electorate that will be upgraded – they must be in a terrible, terrible state.

Let us look at some other things that this government has done. What a waste, almost \$600 million for the con games – to not hold a Commonwealth Games. We have seen that. Let us look at the other one, the con SEC. Only recently in the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee it was discovered through our Liberals and Nationals, through the very fantastic work that Danny O’Brien does, that the SEC has one part-time worker in the Latrobe Valley –

**David Davis:** Three days a week.

**Melina BATH:** three days a week in the GovHub. I saw at the time of the election commitment the Premier brought all of his fan club down, stood in the old Yallourn power station and said, ‘We will bring back the SEC.’ Well, they have brought one person three days a week to our region. By the way, Morwell did not want it. They did not vote for it, they did not want it and it is a con. We have got the con games.

**David Davis:** Did the electricity prices go down?

**Melina BATH:** No, they are skyrocketing – absolutely skyrocketing. Up, up, up – absolutely.

Let us talk about some other things that are near and dear to the people of West Gippsland.

*Members interjecting.*

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jacinta Ermacora):** I think the noise level in here is too high.

**Melina BATH:** The government was also happy to say they want to build the West Gippsland Hospital. It was a Nationals and Liberals commitment at the 2022 election –

**David Davis** interjected.

**Melina BATH:** And 2018 – exactly. Also, the government said, ‘Yes, we’ll build it.’ Last year they did a little sliver that is called ‘planning’. It has been there ready for almost decades, and what we see is the government cannot be bothered building it. They are kicking that tin down the road. If you have been to the Warragul hospital, you know the fantastic staff who are there but you know its dilapidated state. My grandfather was born in that hospital in 1912, and I think there are parts of it that are that age.

Let us talk about some other things. The government was so pious, so conscientious, about the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System and made so many pledges. Now what is it doing? The 35 locals – the local mental health and wellbeing centres – which are really supposed to be this interconnector between hospitals and services do not matter. They are kicking the 35 of them down the road.

What do we also see in education? Let me count some of the ways that they have kicked the tin down the road. They have kicked the tin down the road with the San Remo Primary School. Ready to go that was. They have got the architect there ready to go. It is from 19-whatever – some of the buildings are 150 years old. That is on the backburner. We also see the Drouin secondary school, Lakes Entrance Primary School, the Leongatha secondary school, Mount Eliza Primary School and Foster Primary School still waiting for upgrades. This is how important schools are to people.

And what of it? When Labor made these promises in 2022, 70 per cent were in Labor seats. That sounds parochial, doesn’t it? Eighty per cent of those schools in Labor seats have received funding, whereas only 40 per cent in Liberal and National seats have received funding. Here are some quotes. Let me quote some members in relation to the early learning centres. Here on 6 March this year Mr McIntosh said:

... the need for more early learning education centres.

Done. Ms Ermacora said:

... to deliver the 50 early learning centres, the commitment we made in the 2022 election ...

Minister Blandthorn said:

... not delaying the delivery of this reform ...

Mr Berger said:

... speed in the establishment of early childcare services and service centres.

What have we got? What is this government doing? It is kicking the tin down the road once again. There is another five-year delay. The children who would be going to those centres will have cars and mortgages and three children by the time the rollout is complete. This is just some of their appalling nature. They can dish it up here, they can spruik it here, but it is not delivered.

Let us look at housing commitments. There are so many. I had a constituent in the other day who has seen people sleeping rough in my electorate and who has been not accosted but shocked by seeing people virtually nude sleeping under park benches. That is not we need.

We also see that there are levies up. We see the industrial and municipal waste levy – up. We see the fire services levy maxing out. Will that go to volunteers? No, it will not – it will go into metro Melbourne and to Mr UFU. This is a warped and disingenuous government. It is a tired government, it is a government that cannot manage money, and it needs to put a greater focus on rural and regional Victoria.

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (15:13): I am pleased to rise and make a contribution to this budget, which is in fact one of the worst budgets in the state's history. It is certainly a contender for that title, and I propose today to talk about some top-line issues around tax and around the issues of spending and the state government's debt that they have left us with.

There was a conversation that went around the press pack the other day that Tim Pallas was going to go. Now, that did not happen in recent days, but people have asked me, 'What would you say would be his epitaph?' I would say he would be the worst Treasurer in Victoria's history. He is the one who built the greatest debt in the state's history. Some of us remember what went on in 2014 – the promise that there would be no new taxes and the promise that they would treat the state properly and be honest about what they were doing. Just before the 2018 election the state government said, 'We're going to lift debt from 6 per cent of GSP to 12 per cent of GSP,' and it blew out massively. Somewhere deep in the COVID period they just washed aside any focus on controlling the debt, and now it is heading for more than 25 per cent of gross state product. These are enormous numbers. I want to distribute to the chamber a copy of some charts, as I did last year and the year before.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jacinta Ermacora):** Is leave granted?

**Leave granted and material incorporated at page 1786.**

**David DAVIS:** These charts make some things very, very clear. The sources are all from the state budget papers, with the exception of the comparative table, which draws on other state budget papers as well.

**Michael Galea:** Did you draw this yourself?

**David DAVIS:** Yes, we did these ourselves. That is right. I am not claiming to be a great graphical person, but these are very simple, straightforward graphs.

**A member** interjected.

**David DAVIS:** Yes, that is right. I make for the chamber the point that this will appear in *Hansard* in black and white, so that is to be quite clear. Victoria's debt goes from about \$19 billion or \$20 billion in 2013–14 up to \$187.8 billion in the estimates. Now, who knows whether the state government's estimates are right. The borrowings go up massively to \$226.9 billion at the end of the forward estimates period. Victoria's annual interest rate is important; this is where the rubber hits the road, as

the state has to pay more and more interest as its loans roll over and new borrowings have to be made as the new debts come in because the state government is spending at a huge rate, an uncontrolled rate.

**A member** interjected.

**David DAVIS:** Well, there is certainly a risk of a credit rating downgrade. Moody's and Standard & Poor's have been quite clear that the state government is all but on close watch.

Let us have a look at the interest rate bill going up from just over \$2 billion to \$9.375 billion by 2027–28. These are huge increases in the payments that are required. That is a massive payment that will be required. People in this chamber can break that down by month, by week or by day if they want. They can break it down by head of population, and they will see that the increase in debt is absolutely massive across that period. If you look at the next chart, you see net debt to GSP.

**John Berger:** What page?

**David DAVIS:** You can just follow me through, and you will see it in the charts. 'Vic – Net Debt to GSP (2024–25 Budget)' is the title of the page. As you will see, it goes again from 5.9 per cent, and this is the promise from just before the 2018 election that they would lift it from a cap of 6 per cent up to 12 per cent. Well, that did not last very long. I will make it clear here – people need to understand this – the debt surge began before COVID. BC – before COVID – the debt surge began. It began that long ago under this Labor government, which has been in power for 10 years now. The debt surge began before COVID. There is no doubt that COVID added to the debt, as it did right across the state, but it actually began before, and the state government had taken the decision to force debt to surge before COVID. They made the decision announcement in the week before the 2018 election, and the big projects were all committed – the big projects that have blown out of control. Whether it is the Metro or the West Gate Tunnel or the North East Link, all of these projects have blown out of control.

There are more than \$40 billion – more than \$40,000 million – in cost overruns under this government, more than \$40,000 million in cost overruns because of failed management of major projects, incompetent ministers and an incompetent Treasurer. Incompetent ministers, like Tim Pallas and like Jacinta Allan, who was the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, oversaw the massive surge in these projects. She should have been called the minister for surging project overruns; that is what she should have been called. That is what she has presided over, and a huge amount of the debt that has been built up is cost overruns, because Labor cannot manage money and they cannot manage projects. They do not know what they are doing. They are one of the most incompetent governments we have seen in this state's history. So the debt-to-GSP ratio is very relevant. On the comparative chart, the projected net debt on Australian states, you will notice that both our state and WA have got the updated figures. The others will be updated on my website for people who want to follow it as the states come in, but suffice to say that Victoria's debt at the end of the forward estimates period will be bigger than Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania combined. That is how big our debt will be. It will be far bigger than all of those combined, and that gives you some idea. The New South Wales economy is a bigger economy than ours, yet New South Wales will be a state with a lesser debt and a lesser debt-to-GSP ratio than Victoria.

These are very bad figures for Victoria. This is a scorecard on this state government's performance. This is a scorecard on how they have performed, how they have delivered for this state and how they have done so in a comparative sense. Some of the people want to go around and say the debt is due to COVID. We know the debt started well before COVID – BC – but actually I will give you the tip: COVID was all around the country. They had COVID, but actually they do not have as much debt as Victoria – not as much debt as Victoria. And our debt is going to be so great that it will be bigger than New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania combined. The whole east coast matched up against us – we will have a bigger debt than those three combined. That gives you some idea of the comparative performance of the Victorian government and the debt that it has left our kids and our grandchildren.

If you look at the chart on tax revenue, you will see it going from just about \$17 billion in 2013–14 to \$45 billion in 2027–28. It is a huge surge in total revenue collected. This is not the whole input money of the state – of course we get federal grants, and there are sales of goods and so forth – but this is the tax revenue. That is where the rubber hits the road, and Victorians know that the taxes are increasing. They can feel it. People are being sluggish with land tax. People are being sluggish with payroll tax. People are being sluggish on every turn. There are 55 new taxes under Labor – 55 new or increased taxes under Labor. It is a massive hit on businesses, on families, and so many people are deciding, ‘We’ll move our investments interstate.’ That is what they are doing, and that is very bad for Victoria. We have seen key groups like Seeley leave; we have seen the tomato manufacturers in Echuca begin to talk about leaving. All of these groups are leaving for a variety of reasons. Of course part of it is taxation. Part of it is excessive regulation, and I pay tribute to the work that the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry has done in exposing the high level of state regulation in Victoria compared to other states in Australia. If people doubt me, go and read VCCI’s own documents on their website.

At the same time we have got problems with gas supplies, so groups that want to invest and proceed with investments or who need security of gas supply are actually having to look at this very closely and say, ‘Can we proceed?’ Many of them are saying no. Then you look at the payroll tax, and this has got all the layers of surcharges that are clobbering people – \$5.1 billion in 2014–15 to \$10.446 billion in the estimated period of 2027–28. It is going nuts. It is going up and up and up, and businesses are paying, and that is a tax on employment – make no mistake.

With the Victorian government’s land tax, or land transfer duty – you see the inherent fluctuations in land transfer duty, but nonetheless – you see the massive increases. Through that period of 2010–11 you can actually see that we in government, the Baillieu–Napthine governments, tried to manage the land tax costs to keep them under control, to stop them surging out of control, to provide relief for businesses and for those who hold land. But you can see the increase under this government heading up well over \$10 billion by the end of that forward estimates period. Now you see the land tax revenue as well, from \$1.3 billion in 2010–11, and you can see the essential flatline across the period of the Baillieu and Napthine governments, the essential flatlining of land tax through that period. And you can see the surges start under Labor. The surges go up and up and up, and now the new surges, so-called COVID levies and all of that. They are all just another name for a three-letter word, and that is ‘tax’, and you are going to pay more under Labor, as you always do. Labor always hits people: they smack families, they smack businesses, they strip away their livelihood and they make it harder for them to live, harder to build a business and harder to employ people. This is the story of Labor – these huge, huge tax increases that are being laid out on every Victorian. They flow all the way through the economy. Whether you are in the tourist sector, you are paying it; if you are in any other sector, you are paying it. If you are in the manufacturing sector, you are paying these taxes, which are fed into the competitiveness – or lack of – of Victorian goods, and the same is true of the services sector.

I want to say something very quickly – and I have only got a short period of time – about my portfolio areas. It is true that in the resources sector the government cut – by almost 20 per cent, by about 18 per cent – spending to support the resources sector. In the case of energy I see they have sliced back spending there, and it is true that the support that was there in previous times for hard-suffering businesses and families with electricity and gas costs surging – and I hear from over the chamber there is a tiny little come-off of \$100. But let us be clear. The St Vincent’s figures are absolutely crystal clear. Last year electricity for households went up on average 28 per cent, and on gas it went up 22 per cent. There are similar sorts of figures for average small businesses too. These are huge increases, so it is going up and up and up, and then there is a tiny little tweak on the top. Well, I do not think that is anything to crow about. This government has allowed these costs to surge. This government, the Andrews government and the Allan government, has allowed these costs to surge. Labor has allowed the costs to surge. Labor has put the pressure on individual families, and individual families are suffering. Individual families have not had the outcomes that they deserve.



What is happening now is the government is beginning to walk away from so many of its commitments. We heard today the stories about the 80,000 homes that they promised per year. Well, that is not going to happen this year. That is not going to happen this year, nor next. We were hearing that at the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. We saw the performance at PAEC. We saw the bizarre performance of the energy minister at PAEC, who tried to say that there could not be any new energy found – any new gas found. Well, nothing could be further from the truth. We saw that today in the paper. Key energy sector people are indicating that there is energy to be got, energy to be achieved, energy to be found. Gas in particular – onshore conventional gas – is available, and we should get on and do it. I make the point that not one exploration licence has been granted by the Labor government over its period in government – not one. You wonder why the process of gas coming through is stalling –

*Members interjecting.*

**David DAVIS:** No, none. Not one.

*Members interjecting.*

**David DAVIS:** Did you? Well, that is not what your minister said this time. It is not what your minister said at PAEC. She admitted that not one has been granted. *(Time expired)*

**Lee TARLAMIS** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:29): I move:

That debate on the question that the budget papers 2024–25 be taken into consideration be adjourned until the next day of meeting.

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

### **Appropriation (2024–2025) Bill 2024**

*Second reading*

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read second time.**

**Committed.**

*Committee*

**Clause 1** (15:32)

**Richard WELCH:** Referring to budget paper 4, page 5, it states:

The Government would welcome additional Commonwealth commitments towards –

**Jaclyn Symes:** We are doing the bill.

**Richard WELCH:** Sorry?

**Jaclyn Symes:** We are doing the bill.

**A member** interjected.

**Jaclyn Symes:** All right. Sorry. It sounded like a Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (PAEC) question to me. But all right, let's go.

**Richard WELCH:** Okay. The 2024–25 federal budget provided \$3.3 billion for the North East Link but not a dollar for the Suburban Rail Loop (SRL). So the first question is: does the Suburban Rail Loop East still require an additional \$11.5 billion contribution from the Commonwealth?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I thank Mr Welch for his question and his interest in infrastructure projects here in Victoria, because obviously it is the Labor government that has a strong record of delivering the

necessary infrastructure projects for the community to ensure that they can get where they are going sooner. The Suburban Rail Loop is certainly one of those projects, and that is what you were referring to. Is that what I heard you say – Suburban Rail Loop?

**Richard WELCH:** Yes.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Yes. It of course is one of those significant state projects. In fact it will be state-shaping. It will ensure that we have a rail network on par with the world's biggest and best cities, and it is the expectation of the community that we do this. Early works are already well underway, and construction is to be complete by 2035. We have always been clear that it is our intention to fund this project through a range of funding streams, including state government contributions, Commonwealth government contributions and a mix of value capture opportunities. That position has not changed.

**Richard WELCH:** If the Commonwealth does not provide the full \$11.5 billion your government expects it to, will state contributions make up the difference?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Welch, we are focusing on this year's bill, the Appropriation (2024–2025) Bill 2024, and the question as posed is speculative. My answer stands. It is the commitment of the government to keep this project on track. We have always intended to fund the project through a range of measures.

**Richard WELCH:** What proportion of the funding do you expect value capture to incorporate, and if there is a funding shortfall from the Commonwealth will you intensify that development to increase the value capture component?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Welch, I can only refer to my previous answers. As I have indicated, early works are underway. This is a project that is state-shaping, state-significant and will take some time. The completion date is 2035, and as such the funding arrangements as I have said will be from a range of sources, through state government contributions, Commonwealth government contributions and a mix of value capture opportunities as they come to light. Your question is very much hypothetical in terms of if, when and what will happen, and today's debate – I know it is your first one – it is about the committee stage that is in connection to this year's budget and the question that you have asked is: what opportunities present themselves in the future, and I do not have a crystal ball.

**Georgie Crozier:** On a point of order, Deputy President, Mr Welch is asking the Attorney-General very relevant questions around this project that the government says is extremely important. She has talked about federal funding, she has talked about state funding and she has talked about value capture. The question was very simple in terms of: what percentage of value capture does the government think will be required? We are talking about budget, but the government is putting this onto the Victorian public.

**The DEPUTY PRESIDENT:** Ms Crozier, that is not actually a point of order, so what is your point of order?

**Georgie Crozier:** Well, my point of order is that I think the minister should be, when she is talking about these things, addressing those questions that she failed to answer.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I answered his questions.

**Georgie Crozier:** No, she did not. It was a percentage – surely you have done a business case.

**The DEPUTY PRESIDENT:** It is not a point of order, I am sorry. Mr Welch to continue.

**Richard WELCH:** Thank you, Deputy President, and thank you, Minister, for your reply. Given that the federal government is not providing any of the \$11.5 billion in this most recent budget, what are the implications for the appropriations required to fund the Suburban Rail Loop?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Welch, we are talking about a project that is underway and will be underway for some time. You are asking about –

**Richard WELCH:** How are you going to fund it, I am asking.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Well, I have explained to you there will be Commonwealth contributions, state contributions and value capture, and the question that you have proposed is a speculative question about future years, which is not under this year's budget. We have constraints in relation to the bill before us today. You are asking me about speculative future value capture.

**Georgie Crozier** interjected.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** It is not an SRL bill. It is a budget bill.

**The DEPUTY PRESIDENT:** The Attorney is correct – this is the budget for 2024–25 so the Attorney can only answer questions on what is included in this budget. If there is something across the forward estimates, that is fine, but we cannot just ask general questions about future funding or future budgets. Mr Welch.

**Richard WELCH:** Can we clarify that within this budget year there are no funding implications for the SRL as a result of the lack of federal funds provided?

**The DEPUTY PRESIDENT:** Yes, that is okay.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Welch, no change.

**The DEPUTY PRESIDENT:** Mr Welch, do you have any further questions? Do you want someone else to go? Ms Crozier?

**Georgie CROZIER:** If I can just follow on from that, budget paper 4, 'State Capital Program', has a graph. It talks about the Commonwealth infrastructure funding to the states in dollars per capita. And as you can see in the graph, that funding for Victoria is less than Queensland and New South Wales in the national partnership.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Could you say that a bit louder?

**Georgie CROZIER:** Well, it is. It is there in black and white. It is your budget papers.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Yes. It is poor, isn't it? Not getting our fair share, are we?

**Georgie CROZIER:** But the issue here is, Mr Welch was asking about the Suburban Rail Loop and the government has clearly said, 'We need federal funding,' so we are asking: what are those implications for the value capture to taxpayers and to those impacted around the Suburban Rail Loop, and what are the government's contingency plans if those value capture initiatives do not materialise? What does the government plan to do? I mean, I understand we do not have a business case, but it is all here around partnering with the Commonwealth, and the Commonwealth have not come up with the funds. We are just trying to get to an understanding of what the government is going to be doing in this budget and the forward estimates.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Thank you, Ms Crozier, for your further inquiry along similar lines to Mr Welch. Many of the questions are speculative, but I can point to the fact that the SRL project will be incredibly attractive for private investors when we are talking about value capture. There are going to be precincts that will be highly attractive for businesses and commercial properties. And it is not the first time that government has had experience in value capture methods. Even the city loop used a levy back in the day. We have got more work to do on this, and we have been up-front in the SRL business and investment case. Our value capture measures will be targeted to commercial properties. There is no intention to have a measure targeted at home owners or residents. This is going to be a world-class public transport option that produces doorstep convenience for Victorians, and a lot of Victorians are really excited about this, and I think it will generate a lot of interest in business. But this year's budget does not outline the specifics of that. I am also not the minister responsible for transport infrastructure. I am here today representing the Treasurer. Your questions are speculative, and I have given you all the answers that I am able to in relation to the future of a project that is going to take some time to do.

**Georgie CROZIER:** There lies the problem. The minister just said that she cannot answer the questions. It is actually outlined in the budget paper 4, page 187: the 'Suburban Rail Loop – airport', to be confirmed; there is the 'Suburban Rail Loop East – main', to be confirmed. There are a whole range of things in this around projects that need to be confirmed in this budget paper.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Which reflects my answer.

**Georgie CROZIER:** No, it does not, because what we are trying to get to is: what are the impacts to the taxpayer, given that there is that additional funding that is going to be required given that the Commonwealth has not provided any funding that the government thought was coming? And that is an implication to this budget. I mean, the federal budget was handed down a week after this budget, so whether you were expecting money to come out of that budget that would assist with this project, which I suspect is the case –

**Jaclyn SYMES:** We just got \$3.5 billion from the feds for other projects. You can shuffle money around.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Is that what you are going to do – you are going to shuffle money around? Could you explain that to the committee? You are going to shuffle the \$5 billion around. How?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** What we have said in relation to SRL is there will be a range of budget measures that will go to the delivery of that project, whether it is state, obviously – I have just outlined some of the value capture opportunities – and we would like the Commonwealth to come on board, but whether the Commonwealth come on board in relation to this project or North East Link, which they have demonstrated, there are always opportunities for partnerships with the Commonwealth government.

As you have indicated, we have not received our fair share. We particularly went down under the Morrison government, and we would like to see more of that come forward. So when we are in a position to present good projects that are of importance to the Victorian community, who also vote for members of Commonwealth Parliament, we would like to see greater investment across the board in Victorian projects. And of course the SRL project is a fantastic project that we are committed to, and we will fund it from a range of sources, which I have already outlined.

**Georgie CROZIER:** This is all speculative. You cannot give us the answers. You were expecting money to come from the Commonwealth. You are blaming a previous government from a few years ago. You are not even talking about your own mates in Canberra – Albanese, Chalmers and co. They are the ones with the Commonwealth chequebook, Minister – not Scott Morrison or Josh Frydenberg. They have gone. Your people are in power in the Commonwealth, and you are blaming others.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** No, I am not.

**Georgie CROZIER:** You are.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I am reflecting on you.

**Georgie CROZIER:** What I am saying, as Mr Welch was saying, is the value capture is going to impact communities where this project is and they do not have a clue what you have planned, because the Commonwealth is not putting the money in, the state has put in a little bit and it is all to be confirmed, so it is all on the never-never. No-one is the wiser and that is the point. Based on your answers, do you concede that this is purely speculative and this whole project, which you say is going to be delivered in 2035, I think you said – really? When you do not know where the funding is coming from? Really?

**Richard Welch:** But you are signing contracts.

**Georgie CROZIER:** But you are signing contracts, correct.

**Richard Welch:** That is not speculative. The contract is not speculative, the funding is.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Do we know how many contracts have been signed, Deputy President?

**The DEPUTY PRESIDENT:** Ms Crozier, was there a question?

**Georgie CROZIER:** Yes. How many contracts have been signed?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Ms Crozier, I have been reasonably generous in the conversations that we have been having in relation to the relevance to this year's budget. SRL East is 2035. I have gone through the value capture opportunities. I have gone through the commitment from the state government. There are plenty of opportunities for the federal government, regardless of who is in, to go through their own processes in respect to Infrastructure Australia's advice and the like and I would expect that there will be lots of opportunities for them to partner with us on a project that is really important to the Victorian community. That is why we have signed up to it, because Victorians want us to.

**Georgie CROZIER:** I would like an answer to the question: how many contracts have been signed?

**The DEPUTY PRESIDENT:** I am sorry, Ms Crozier, I cannot direct the Attorney in how to answer, but the Attorney looks like she is willing to answer.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Look, the contracts are publicly disclosed, and I would point Ms Crozier to financial reports. It is not a matter for today's committee. If she has more questions about SRL and the specifics, perhaps she should direct them to the relevant minister who can point her in the direction of any of the publicly available material.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Attorney, you have stated that the Victorian government is not receiving its fair share. The Treasurer has said something similar. In 2019 the Victorian government spent \$1.7 million on an Our Fair Share campaign to run taxpayer-funded ads and commercials during an election campaign. Why isn't there any money in the budget for such a campaign if the government still believes it is not getting its fair share?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I think he is seeking an opinion.

**The DEPUTY PRESIDENT:** Could you repeat the question, please?

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Attorney, you stated that the Victorian government is not receiving its fair share. The Treasurer has said something similar. In 2019 the Victorian government spent \$1.7 million on an Our Fair Share campaign to highlight that it is not getting its fair share and to run taxpayer-funded ads during an election campaign. Why isn't there any money in the budget for such a campaign? And is there any money in the budget in commitments not yet announced for such a campaign, given that you feel so strongly about it?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I think I was coming off the back of a contribution from Ms Crozier who had called out how compared to other states Victoria has not received its share of infrastructure funding. But that is improving. We welcome the North East Link contribution. People have been talking about that missing link for 60 years, so it is well overdue. We are certainly very happy that the federal government has joined with us to get on with that important project and what that will deliver for those local communities and the broader Victorian public. I do not think, Mr Mulholland, that your question warrants an opinion from me, apart from the fact that it is –

**Georgie Crozier:** That was the question: why didn't you?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** He is seeking an opinion, and I have said that I very much welcome investment from the federal government. Whether you are in the portfolio of Attorney-General or emergency services or whatever, we always welcome more investment from the federal government here for Victoria. They have got some catching up to do but we are seeing improvements across the board, and the North East Link contribution demonstrates that.

**Richard WELCH:** Minister, the funding required for the SRL is described in the 2024–25 budget as ‘to be confirmed’, as we all know. What will Victorian taxpayers pay for the SRL in 2024–25?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Welch, in relation to your question, there has been no change in the allocation or the estimates of the \$30 billion to \$34 billion in relation to the project. We do not outline the amounts to be expended each year because, as you have correctly identified, they are subject to negotiations in terms of tenders and contracts and as the work is let. As the tenders are awarded and the contracts become public, that is when each of the amounts would be disclosed. But obviously to protect the negotiation position of the state, the global figure is public but what is available in contingency each year or what would be expended each year becomes public when it is appropriate.

**Richard WELCH:** Given that the cost figure is unknown and is to be confirmed, as you have just described, it seems incongruent then that you are signing contracts with forward liability. Does that imply, or does that actually say, that the liability of any cost blowouts going forward will fall with the government rather than the supplier?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I would take your advice, Deputy President – but no, it is not. But the line of questioning is in relation to some specifics of contract that are related to a project that is – well, you know. We could spend weeks talking about everything that the government does, but this is about the appropriation bill, and we are getting to the specifics of contracts – whether it was a contract for anything. He has asked me about contract terms as opposed to the appropriation bill. There are numerous packages on a large project. Things become public in the ordinary way. There is no different approach to this project than there has been to numerous other large projects.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Can I say, before I go to community hospitals, that it is an important part of what we are trying to ascertain here, Minister, in relation to what the government has produced for the Victorian public around budget expenditure. I think the line of questioning by Mr Welch was completely in line, because –

**Jaclyn SYMES:** How did you go at PAEC with the relevant minister?

**Georgie CROZIER:** Well, with great difficulty – that is our problem. PAEC was not so great either with the answers that came out. It is like the FOIs; we never get anything out of you. This is important, as you see, because of these line items: total estimated investment (TEI) – to be confirmed; estimated expenditure to 30 June 2024 – to be confirmed; estimated expenditure 2024–25 – to be confirmed; remaining expenditure – to be confirmed; and estimated completion date – to be confirmed. The budget papers actually mean nothing when you just write ‘to be confirmed’ on the biggest project that you keep spruiking. Victorians do not actually know what you have signed them up for. That is why we are asking this line of questioning. Nevertheless, I will move on because we have got not very far. Unfortunately, you are not the Treasurer; I think we understandably would be grilling him. I mean, he signed us up for this, along with the Premier; she was the infrastructure minister.

But nevertheless, if I can go to community hospitals –

**Jaclyn Symes:** On a point of order, Deputy President, just in relation to that commentary, I would not mind having an opportunity to respond to some of the comments about the TBC elements of a budget. The way you have characterised that is that it is something new and it is something different and there is something to be hidden. It is normal practice. The 2024–25 budget capital contingencies are lower than previous budgets. This is not about hiding the information; this is about how projects need to be delivered. Capital contingencies have fallen by 30 per cent, which is the information that I have, since the 2022–23 budget, which reflects the maturity of projects and the fact that more and more money goes out the door as you are signing contracts and as you are signing up to construction companies and the like to deliver projects. The funding allocated to departments and the project’s TEIs are not mutually exclusive. It is progressively allocated to departments as milestones are achieved, and we have hit a lot of milestones recently. If you look at a couple of other budgets versus this one, that is what you will see more and more, time and time again. This is not new. This is the way governments

deliver projects. They allocate funding and they negotiate, and the money goes out the door as things are being built.

**Georgie CROZIER:** I will move on to community hospitals, but I do think there is a lack of transparency around the government's commitment in terms of taxpayers funding this project, and that is a huge concern. But if I could go to community hospitals –

**Jaclyn Symes** interjected.

**The DEPUTY PRESIDENT:** Sorry, Attorney, Ms Crozier has the call.

**Georgie CROZIER:** I am happy for you to respond. I think the frustration that we have is that you were expecting Commonwealth money to come in, and that has not come in. You want this value capture, but you cannot give us the details around that, so therefore those communities do not actually know what they are up for. What are they going to be taxed with that value capture? They do not know. There is just such a lack of detail – and that is not our fault, that is the government's fault. You actually have not explained to the public, with this Suburban Rail Loop, what the contracts and the money are that are assigned to it. The Parliamentary Budget Office has given a figure. The Grattan Institute is saying it is going to be way bigger than that. That is why we are asking these questions, to try to ascertain what on earth is going on here around the contracts and the money that has been allocated and that will be allocated, given that you say, 'Trust us, don't worry – this is how budgets are written. It's all in black and white, to be confirmed.' That is why we are asking these questions around what you have signed us up to. You still have not provided, I think, any assurances to the house or to the Victorian public through this questioning, but I will leave it at that. I will move on to community hospitals after you respond, if you like, Attorney.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I think the only point I would make, Ms Crozier, and I accept that we will just go back and forth a little bit, but I want to make the point that 'TBC' is standard protocol. It was a feature of the 2014 budget when the coalition were last in government and had the opportunity to do a budget, so I merely make the point that this is not an unusual practice. Governments of all colours, when they are negotiating, when they are delivering projects – this is how it is reflected in the budget papers.

I understand your questioning, I understand the information you want to seek, but to imply that it is somehow different to past practices – I just wanted to make the point that it is not. Transparency and accountability are of course important, but they cannot come at the expense of being able to negotiate good outcomes for the community.

**Georgie CROZIER:** I will move on. Attorney, the government announced 10 new community hospitals as an election commitment in 2018 – with great fanfare, I might add. None of them have been built. In this budget three of them – Torquay, Eltham and Emerald Hill – have all been scrapped. In fact there is confusion down in the Emerald Hill precinct; people do not know what is going on. My question is: why have these three community hospitals been cut when billions of taxpayer funds are being pumped into the Suburban Rail Loop?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I thank Ms Crozier for her question. I will just start at the outset by clarifying that to describe the projects as scrapped is not appropriate. They are under review, of course; that is correct.

**Georgie Crozier** interjected.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Well, let us not editorialise here. What I would point to is the community hospital program should be viewed alongside other investments such as priority primary care projects and investments in other hospitals, and what we want to do is ensure that we are responding to the needs of families and Victorians when they need health care. Obviously minor illnesses and injuries and the like that can be dealt with appropriately as opposed to by the emergency services is one of the benefits of being able to do this. Before I get into a bit more detail about the community hospitals, I would preface this by saying we all want to forget it, but after this announcement we had the pandemic, which obviously shook up the health sector enormously.

Community hospitals are something that the government is keen to deliver. This is just one part of the world-class Victorian healthcare system, and it is something that we want to get on and build. We are progressing Whittlesea, Craigieburn, Cranbourne, Pakenham, Phillip Island, Point Cook and Sunbury. The Craigieburn, Cranbourne, Phillip Island and Sunbury community hospitals are due to be completed this year. The Whittlesea, Pakenham and Point Cook community hospitals will be completed in 2025 and 2026.

As Ms Crozier has identified, one of those under review is Eltham, and I would point to investments in both the Austin Hospital and the Northern Hospital, which are no substitute because you want to consider making sure there are lots of avenues for people to access health care. But I would point to the fact that the benefits to the community, the Eltham community, of improvements or expansions to the Northern and the Austin cannot be viewed in isolation.

Torquay – we want to talk to the community and figure out the best possible care options for the community. Obviously there has been a lot of investment in Barwon Health, in their facilities as well, so really, as I said, it is under review and we are talking to those communities about that. Emerald Hill is also under review, and we are talking to the community about their needs as well. I hope that clarifies some of your concerns, Ms Crozier.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Attorney, the Northern Hospital and the Austin Hospital have been there for many years, long before the 2018 election commitment to build a community hospital in Eltham, so to say that you are actually now putting the money into the Austin makes no sense.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** That is not what I said. They benefit from that investment is what I said.

**Georgie CROZIER:** But they have been there, and then you promised the community you were going to build these hospitals. You are now saying they are under review. So could you provide to the committee when that review will be complete for each of them – Eltham, Torquay and Emerald Hill?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I do not have that information as part of –

**Georgie Crozier** interjected.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** The person in the box is not from the health minister's office. The person in the box is from the Treasurer's office.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Would the adviser please be able to take that on notice and get back to the committee when that review will be completed, because as you have just stated, 'They're not being scrapped. They're under review.' They are not in the budget paper – well, they are in the budget, I should say, but I think those communities need to understand. They were told they were going to be built and now they are saying they are under review, and I think they have an expectation that that timeframe be known. So if the Treasurer's office has understood that to be the case, then I am sure they will know when the review will be complete and whether there actually is going to be more money in the budget for next year or not.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Ms Crozier, I am reluctant to ask the Treasurer's office to take on notice questions for other ministers' responsibilities. My understanding in relation to the reviews of those three community hospitals is that they are separate projects. They are all very much independent of each other, because it is about those communities and the needs of those community members. So to suggest that there is a review of the policy intent is not correct. There is a review of what is best for each community, so in that respect there is not a review timeline that is one. This is my understanding. The information you seek would be best directed directly to the health minister's office, and there are a variety of ways to do that. I can let them know that it is coming, if you like, but I am certainly not proposing to load up the Treasurer's office with responsibilities that are very clearly in the remit of other ministers.



**Georgie CROZIER:** Just to clarify, it is the Department of Health that will be conducting those reviews independently?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I do not know.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Well, I am trying to work it out. You just said if you want the review, it is not out of the Treasurer's office; it is coming out of the Department of Health, and there are various ways –

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Ask the Minister for Health's office – they will know.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Well, I might say to myself, 'Good luck with that.' I get nothing out of them. Has a cost–benefit analysis been carried out on the three scrapped hospitals?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** It is impossible to answer a question that has no factual basis.

**Georgie CROZIER:** I will ask again: has a cost–benefit analysis been carried out on the Torquay, Eltham and Emerald Hill community hospitals that are now no longer in the budget – as you have just said, they are under review?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** In terms of what I have said, how I have received information in relation to those reviews is that they will be looking at the benefits and the needs of a community. The Victorian Health Building Authority will be well placed to assist the minister's office and the health department in relation to those inquiries.

**Georgie CROZIER:** So I take it, then, there has been no cost–benefit analysis on probably any of these community hospitals, given that answer, Attorney?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Ms Crozier, I am trying to be helpful by relaying to you information that I have at hand. You are getting into information that is best placed with the Minister for Health. I have outlined that there is a review of those three sites. We have been very transparent about this. My understanding is that there will be major consultations with the communities about what is best for them. I think I have been as helpful as possible. What I would ask you not to do is draw conclusions of your own based on the information that I am presenting to you, because you are incorrect in doing so. If you want to interrogate the detail of the information I have given you, I have given you an invitation to take that up with the Minister for Health.

**Georgie CROZIER:** I will endeavour to do that, Attorney. The 240,000 elective surgeries that failed to be delivered and the revised figure of 200,000 surgeries to be delivered – is there any modelling being done on that, given that the minister said in November that 20,000 surgeries would be delivered each and every month to get to 240,000 year on year? Just now, they have failed by 33,000 and the target has gone back to 200,000 elective surgeries – or in your government's terms, planned surgeries – to be delivered. Could you provide the committee with the modelling for those figures or an analysis of those figures, given that they got it so spectacularly wrong on the 240,000?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Just give me 2 secs to find some information.

I thank Ms Crozier for her question in relation to planned and elective surgery numbers. What I can provide the committee with information on is in relation to the Labor government's \$12 billion pandemic repair plan. It is certainly wanting to make an impact on Victorians who need health care, particularly where and when they need it. It includes the record \$1.5 billion COVID catch-up plan to boost surgical activity across the state. Since this significant investment through the dedication of our health sector – and we cannot underestimate those hardworking staff – waitlists have decreased by 30 per cent since March 2022. In relation to hitting the – I think you asked about the 240,000 planned surgery target revision. Is that correct?

**Georgie CROZIER:** Correct.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Yes. We are on track to do more planned surgeries than ever before, this financial year, despite the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on the system and also the well-publicised workforce shortages. When we announced the COVID catch-up plan in April 2022 the waitlist was over 88,000. It has been reduced by, as I said, 30 per cent, so we are now sitting around 62,000 as of the last quarter. Almost 80 per cent of all patients are treated within the clinical recommended period of time, and so far this financial year over 1,708,000 Victorians have been supported to receive the planned care they need. This includes over 153,000 surgeries, 10 per cent more than the same time last year, as well as diverting patients to non-surgical treatment pathways and optimisation to better prepare them for surgery and therefore get better outcomes and get people home sooner. We made the right investments at the right time in a really challenging environment as part of the COVID catch-up plan for not only recovery but also reform, and we have changed the way we deliver planned surgeries in Victoria to support people, predominantly around identifying the right time and the right place for as many patients as possible.

**Georgie CROZIER:** The COVID catch-up plan has been in place for a number of years, and you cut money from that because the pandemic was over. You said in last year's budget you would get 240,000 – you failed to do that by 33,000. You have decreased the number by a further 7000, to 200,000. Yet five months ago the minister said you would deliver 20,000 surgeries a month and 240,000 would be delivered year on year. A few months later she is blaming workforce shortages, and you mentioned workforce shortages. Where are the workforce shortages that have caused a decrease of 40,000 surgeries being provided to the Victorian community? Are they in metropolitan regions or they are in rural regions predominantly? What are the estimates from Treasury around that?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** The labour shortages are clear across the board. I know you visit hospitals – I certainly do in Northern Victoria – and everybody is looking for ideas to attract and retain all sorts of health professionals, from OTs to surgeons. We know that we need more and more health professionals, and that is only one contributor to not being able to reach what we had planned, and I explained that. But what I do want to detail is that the number of Victorians waiting for planned surgery is now at its lowest level since the pandemic began. We are certainly not trying to pat ourselves on the back – there is lots more work to do – but it is just a fact that I am putting on the table.

In 2023–24 the COVID catch-up plan supported over 178,000 Victorians to receive the planned care, and it obviously is important that it also includes non-surgical treatments. More than 50,000 patients have been treated every quarter since June 2023, and we are seeing more patients treated every quarter than before the pandemic, so we are getting back on track. Victoria's new public surgical centres in Blackburn and Frankston and our 10 rapid access hubs across the state are certainly also helping streamline services and free up theatres in our busy hospitals.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Just for the committee's benefit, I note that there were record numbers of Victorians on the elective surgery waitlist pre COVID.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I have just got a couple of questions on the growth areas infrastructure contribution (GAIC) funding in the budget. If you need a reference, it is budget paper 5, page 203, for those following at home – I am sure at least one is.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Your electorate office.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Yes. On 24 April the government reannounced a \$400 million package for growth areas. What is the period the funding will be spent over?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Just let me clarify something.

Mr Mulholland, I have just conversed with the box because I could not determine your connection to this year's budget. What you are referring to is GAIC. GAIC is effectively a tax, and the allocation

that you have referenced is the previous budget's, not this budget. I do not think that I can provide an answer. Can you rephrase the question, perhaps?

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** If I can refer you to budget paper 5 – supposedly budget paper 5 – page 203, in regard to the growth areas infrastructure contribution, can I ask how much of the GAIC the government intends to spend in the following financial year?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, I am happy to see if we can get you some material offline, but it is a little bit difficult, because you are asking how we will spend money that has not yet come in through a tax. So I can provide you the guidelines and things in relation to GAIC, but because it is not forecast in this budget, I cannot give you a figure because we do not know what we are going to bring in yet.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** According to budget paper 5, page 203, the government is expecting to receive another \$245 million in financial year 2024–25.

**Jaclyn Symes** interjected.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Yes, it is there. How much do you expect of that to be allocated to growth area projects?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, sorry, my understanding of the GAIC is that it can only apply to growth areas. But I cannot give you an outline of the projects that it will fund, because the projects that it funds are projects that are put up and applied for as part of the allocation. They invite project considerations and the like, so I cannot pre-empt what those communities are going to be seeking.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I understand that, but that is kind of the point – previously I know the 2022–23 Department of Transport and Planning annual report had the GAIC having \$535 million in uncommitted funding; \$400 million of that was allocated in the government's recent announcement of funding. So I am attempting to extrapolate how much of that \$245 million in the upcoming financial year will be allocated, given in the past there have been funds in the GAIC left uncommitted.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Again, my answer is the same, Mr Mulholland: unless there are projects sought, they are the ones that get funded. I do not have a list of proposed projects in the growth areas. All I can confirm is that the hypothecation rules of the GAIC fund require it to be spent in growth areas, and as you well know – and so do I, given it is the south end of my electorate that meets the north end of yours – there is a lot of need in growth areas. We welcome consideration of projects that are important to those communities.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** You touched on projects that are considered and put forward, and I want to see if I can ask on one particular one. Given the recommendations of the Auditor-General's 2020 report *Managing Development Contributions*, which recommends seeking greater council input into selecting GAIC-funded projects, the Wyndham City Council put forward quite a reasonable business case for a Tarneit indoor recreation centre, which has been actually endorsed by the council and includes a \$35 million contribution. If you look at the Department of Transport and Planning website, there appears to be around \$177 million of projects funded in Wyndham, but curiously around \$135 million worth, or 77 per cent, of these projects are actually located in the Werribee district, despite Tarneit's rapid growth and a lot of the collection coming from there. Can you, Attorney, explain either the selection process or the budget process under which these projects were funded in Wyndham – under the Growth Areas Public Transport Fund or the Building New Communities Fund – in regard to how they were selected through the budget process?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, I am not in a position to confirm the selection processes of those projects, nor is the Treasurer, because neither he nor I make determinations in relation to those matters.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I think the Treasurer would have had a big say given that 70 per cent of that area went to his electorate –

**Jaclyn Symes** interjected.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** It is 77 per cent. \$177 million collected from Wyndham council, but \$135 million to go to projects within the Werribee district. I do not believe it is appropriate in terms of selection process to go against the advice of the Victorian Auditor-General's recommendation, which was pretty clear about consulting with council. The councils do not seem to be too happy with it.

**Jaclyn Symes:** On a point of order, Deputy President, I would just like to point out that Mr Mulholland is reflecting on the massive investment in the west and would just like to congratulate him on attributing that to our government.

**The DEPUTY PRESIDENT:** That is not a point of order. Mr Mulholland to continue.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I think Mr Welch has a question.

**Richard WELCH:** Attorney, apologies, I want to go back to the SRL. It would bug me if I did not ask this question, so I want to ask it. We know significant contracts for the SRL are due to be signed in the next quarter – I think that is accurate. You say that the financial impost of these contracts is to be confirmed because they are in negotiation, and I can accept –

**Jaclyn SYMES:** That's one reason.

**Richard WELCH:** Okay, and maybe you can expand on what the other reasons are.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Because they're in the future.

**Richard WELCH:** That is reasonable if they are in negotiation, but will any of the budget allocations for the SRL currently listed as to be confirmed be updated when these contracts are signed? Because presumably that will crystallise the financial cost. Effectively, will there be a budget update, and if so, when?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** It is somewhat speculative, Mr Welch, which makes it difficult to provide any certainty – there are lots of contracts and work packages, and some of them interrelate and the like. I do not profess to be an expert in this regard, but if there is any information to be confirmed in the budget process, we would do that in the ordinary way in the budget update later this year.

**Richard WELCH:** I think it is late this year.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** We have a budget update in December.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** As stated in budget paper 2, chapter 1, on page 6:

Government infrastructure investment ... is expected to peak at \$24.0 billion in 2023–24 ...

before it starts to come down over the forward estimates. How is the government able to forecast this figure without having provided funding for major infrastructure projects, including the Arden precinct redevelopment, North East Link and the Suburban Rail Loop?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I do not agree with his question. It is in the papers, and it is funded.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** In budget paper 2, chapter 2, in the first table, the government proposes several external risks to the performance and growth of Victoria's economy. There are other risk factors within the government's control. Ahead of the budget it was acknowledged that one of these risks, the government's record-level spending on infrastructure, is indebting the state and crowding out private investment – that is what the Treasurer had said – and that it was time to recalibrate. Attorney, under the existing projects table in budget paper 4, many of the government's infrastructure projects are unfunded or only partially funded in this budget. Does the government acknowledge its unfunded infrastructure projects are a risk to Victoria's economic outlook?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I guess the short answer to that, Mr Mulholland, is that government infrastructure investment is coming down, and it says so in the budget paper that you have just referenced. Obviously

we have done a lot in a small amount of time, and productive investments are what get the economy going and responding to a growing community and demonstrate the strength of the Victorian economy as well. Its recovery from COVID has certainly been something of note from commentators. We want to have a steady, sustainable pipeline of infrastructure because that is important for jobs. Obviously the job-creating benefits of infrastructure projects cannot go understated. You do not want to go back to not investing in infrastructure. That is what effectively lost the coalition government when they were last in. When you do not do anything, the public do not appreciate the fact that you are not responding to their needs. So we certainly had a bit of catching up to do after a small stint in opposition. We got on with it, and we are continuing to deliver the projects that are important to Victorians.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I refer to budget paper 3, page 75. The government has previously described the suburban development portfolio as one that helps suburban communities to thrive and has in the past espoused the virtues of the metropolitan partnerships program. I know previously several Labor members have chaired metropolitan partnerships committees, including Mr McIntosh. Can you confirm that this program has ended?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, what I can confirm is that the government continues to partner with councils and continues to support projects that are important to local communities, whether that is CBD, metro or indeed rural and regional. There are so many projects on the go across the state and so many opportunities for MPs to go and visit the construction of thousands of projects. Some of them are at ribbon-cutting stage, others are at sod-turning stage, and there is massive investment across the board. You have mentioned the growth areas infrastructure contribution. There is a lot of funding in relation to the GAIC projects which benefit your outer-metropolitan growth areas. There are numerous projects and much investment going on across the board. In relation to the portfolio that you have mentioned, I will have to seek advice from that minister in relation to the list of projects and support funds that they have. I do not have it to hand.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** On page 71 of budget paper 3 it is indicated that in 2023–24 the Growing Suburbs Fund was funded for \$10 million. Additionally, the item listed supporting our suburbs, which was the funding for the metropolitan partnerships program, which is now not funded. Would you accept that this represents a 73 per cent reduction in funding for the entire suburban development portfolio?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, my ears pricked up in relation to the number of programs that you put under that portfolio. I think you mentioned some that were outside that minister's portfolio responsibility. I think some of them might be the responsibility of the regional development minister. In any event, the investments across Victoria are numerous and endless, and the Growing Suburbs Fund is only one fund. As you would appreciate, the minister for sports infrastructure, for example, partners with local councils and community groups in relation to sporting projects which do not necessarily come under the project title that you indicated. That does not mean that there is not a lot of investment and building and active projects all across metro Melbourne.

**Clause agreed to; clauses 2 to 10 agreed to; schedules agreed to.**

**Reported to house without amendment.**

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (16:37):  
I move:

That the report be now adopted.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Report adopted.**

*Third reading*

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (16:37): I move:

That the bill be now read a third time.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read third time.**

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

**State Taxation Amendment Bill 2024***Second reading*

**Debate resumed on motion of Harriet Shing:**

That the bill be now read a second time.

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (16:38): I rise to speak on the State Taxation Amendment Bill 2024. Here we are again bringing to the chamber new taxes and charges on all Victorians because we have a government that wastes, mismanages and cannot manage money, so Victorians are paying the price through higher taxes. It is targeted at people in my electorate that can least afford to pay, in particular with regard to its jacking up of the waste levy. I was stating earlier that the government might not realise it, but my community certainly faces quite a crisis when it comes to the illegal dumping of rubbish. You only have to drive down Mount Ridley Road or drive up Craigieburn Road East or drive up to the northern end of Mickleham Road to find yourself dealing with quite a bit of illegally dumped rubbish on the side of the road. At times it can contain things like asbestos. But in some cases, where you have got a lot of hard waste material, that can possibly end up in our waterways.

When we have a cost-of-living crisis, I fail to understand why the government would put further barriers in place for people to legally – actually legally – dump rubbish. It does not do anything for the amenity of our growing communities – to make them a more attractive place to live or a more vibrant community. This government is clearly sitting idle, not realising that we have a cost-of-living crisis when it comes to our growing communities, and leaving them to pick up the tab for its massive, massive debt problem. It is scheduled to reach almost \$190 billion of debt – more than Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania combined – yet they are passing it on to everyday Victorians. It is everyday Victorians that are paying the price for their waste and for their mismanagement.

I was at a great manufacturer, Sparkling Beverages, in Somerton up in the electorate of Greenvale, and spoke to Scott Edgley, the owner. They manufacture all sorts of beverages; in fact they do the home brand beverages for Woolworths. I went and visited him with the Shadow Treasurer Brad Rowswell and the Leader of the Opposition John Pesutto. Because of the government's addiction to tax, whether it be land tax, the new increase in the waste levy or payroll tax, they are going to have to look at increasing prices, which of course does affect people at the check-out – it directly affects people at the check-out. When Labor wastes, as it has, with \$40 billion of infrastructure blowouts and with \$600 million down the toilet on the Commonwealth Games, it is Victorians that pay the price. When Labor wastes, Labor increases taxes, and it fails to realise that somebody has to pay for that, and that is the Victorian people. It is good people, like my constituents, that it is passed on to.

We did see a glimmer of common sense from this government. The one thing that we stated in our response to the budget that we really wanted to see was a backdown on the government's insidious health tax. We have been out in the media quite a bit on this speaking to our communities. I know I have visited a number of health services and clinics in the northern suburbs talking about the impact

of this and talking about its impact on bulk-billing. Even the federal Labor minister has shamed the state government on the health tax. But the health tax was pushed against and was advocated for by this government for a year. They said there was no change on the health tax and there was no change to how they were applying payroll tax, but all of a sudden there was. It does not make any sense. As I said, this is a result of financial mismanagement. When Labor wastes, when Labor mismanages money, Victorians pay the price. You had a situation where the government was charging payroll tax to GPs, which would have a massive impact on bulk-billing. I know it has had a massive impact in my community. But we have got a government that have now backflipped on an issue they said there was no change to, which shows their tiredness – how exhausted this government is.

After 10 years of Labor, Victorians have had enough. While there is a welcome backflip, it still applies to good allied health services, like In One Healthcare up in Roxburgh Park in the electorate of Greenvale. It still applies to them. They are still having increased costs because this government cannot manage money. It is a welcome backdown. I am glad the outgoing Treasurer, who first said there was no change to how they applied payroll tax, has now realised there is. And I just want to point out: for something that both Mary-Anne Thomas and Tim Pallas have said there is no change to, they certainly fought tooth and nail to keep it there. They used the day of my colleague Ms Crozier's father's condolence motion to brief out to the paper smears about her advocacy on this issue, smears about her intent on this issue, which shows how low this government are willing to go. I know many people on that side – good people on that side – were absolutely appalled that either the Premier's office or the health minister's office would stoop that low. The people responsible for that, both the Premier's office media team and the health minister's office, should be absolutely ashamed. Imagine having to deal with that – having to deal with a parent's death and then having the Labor Party spread grubby smears on the same day as the condolence motion. I am glad after something that they fought so hard for they are now cleaning up after themselves, and shame on them for doing so in the first place and the grubby way in which they have decided to defend this shameful tax on people trying to visit a doctor.

I also wanted to talk about another issue the government has been all over the place on, and that is the payroll tax that applies to schools. I know originally the government had set a much lower threshold in regard to schools for its schools tax, making parents who value choice pay payroll tax, something that has not existed before – making the barriers harder for choice in terms of our great independent and faith-based schools. We have seen this government flip-flop. We saw, after a campaign from the Liberals and Nationals, the government back down, and I have to thank great independent schools like those in my electorate.

I want to shout out to Aitken College, a really great independent school in Greenvale, and thank the advocacy of its principal Josie Crisara, who advocated really strongly to me. I certainly listened to her, but she also advocated really strongly to parents. One of the things that she did which I think spooked quite a few Labor MPs in the north but was helpful for the parents was include all of the email addresses of all of the local representatives in the area, both lower house and upper house. After she did that I received hundreds of emails and calls to my office from parents at Aitken College concerned about this government's schools tax, about how the government wanted to paint this as a Scotch College tax. You could see it by the way they were briefing out about it, but they have clearly never visited the northern suburbs. I know they are in a flurry to get ministers to visit now, even though they have never done so before. Aitken College is a growth area school. It is a growth area school with modest fees of about \$7000, \$8000 or \$9000, and they wanted to include Aitken College in the new schools tax. That was their intent. You had the previous minister, who bungled it up and got booted out of the portfolio. The government then had to clean it up and raise the threshold. But you have still got Labor members that are very concerned about it, and I would say Labor members in my electorate are quite concerned about it.

Penleigh and Essendon Grammar School is a great school in my electorate that is quite upset about the schools tax. As you can imagine, they have written to every MP in our area, both in my electorate, in Essendon but also in Niddrie, and surrounding upper house MPs as well. I know that many MPs

have advocated on their behalf to the education minister in regard to this schools tax, and you would hate to be, say, an education minister and have advocated in the past against a policy which you are pursuing. Imagine advocating against a policy you are now having to defend. You have got people in this government on every issue – arguing against the SRL behind closed doors, arguing against the schools tax behind closed doors, arguing on behalf of Melbourne Airport behind closed doors, because this government is a rabble. It wastes, it mismanages, it taxes Victorians, and it is Victorians who pay the price for their incompetence.

They are probably not the only ones surrounding Penleigh and Essendon Grammar School, again a great school in my electorate, which I visited recently. The principal did pass on her concerns about the schools tax and the impact it will have on that school. Particularly around the Essendon area but even further north, the cost-of-living crisis is real, and for parents that do make that choice to send their kids to an independent school, we absolutely want to support them in doing so. We also have an interesting story that came out recently on the old schools tax, I think it was yesterday, that:

A Victorian Labor MP ... privately argued that a policy change stripping private schools of a payroll tax exemption, introduced by his own government, would have “detrimental consequences” for a school in his electorate, despite voting for it in parliament.

I did not vote for it in Parliament, and Mr Luu did not vote for it in Parliament, because we know in our communities that this is having a detrimental impact. Mr Tim Richardson thinks it is having a detrimental impact, but he argued that it would be extremely difficult for a school in his community and it could lead to high fees and job cuts, which is correct. Several sources have said that this tax has caused ‘considerable unease’ within Labor – ‘considerable unease’. I think, by and large, the whole tax should be repealed. We need to get rid of the schools tax. It is a tax on choice. It is saying to parents, ‘If you send your child to an independent school, we’re going to tax you for that, we’re going to punish you for that,’ which is not an approach we want to see in Victoria. We want to see a state that values choice. That being said, I will ask for my amendment to be circulated, which has the effect of getting rid of the schools tax, and I encourage all of my colleagues to join us in doing so.

#### **Amendments circulated pursuant to standing orders.**

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** But I also make this commitment: the Liberals and Nationals, if elected in 2026, will repeal the schools tax, because we think it is a tax on choice. We think if you are a parent and you are wanting to send your kid to an independent school – and I know many parents that do and they save and save and save, they read the *Barefoot Investor* back to front, they save all their money together to send their kids to independent schools, and we should not be punishing them for it because Labor has mismanaged the budget and Labor has wasted \$40 billion on infrastructure project overspend, \$600 million on the Commonwealth Games and \$1.1 billion not to build the east–west link. We should not be taxing parents and families because of Labor’s inability to manage money.

But we have got people like Tim Richardson who have basically disagreed with the government’s policy. We have other members who I know have disagreed with the government’s policy in regard to the schools tax. It is an insidious tax. It is a terrible tax. We know, when Labor cannot manage money, it is Victorians really that pay the price. Now is the time to reconsider imposing payroll tax on non-government schools. We would urge government MPs to perhaps listen to Mr Tim Richardson, the member for Mordialloc. They should maybe listen to him in regard to that or maybe listen to someone who, on a whole bunch of issues, is starting to set a different tone to the government – the Deputy Premier. I know he advocates on behalf of his community, and there might be more to come on that one. We are seeing it, whether it be the schools tax, whether it be the health tax, whether it be the increase in the fire services levy or whether it be the increase in the waste levy, and as I said, that has had a massive impact in my electorate, both on manufacturing businesses and on adding to the crisis with the illegal dumping of rubbish.

This government when it was elected in 2014 promised no new or increased taxes. No new or increased taxes was supposedly the line we were getting – no new or increased taxes. Do you think



we got no new or increased taxes? No, we have had 55 new or increased taxes and charges since that October. We have seen year after year after year new taxes introduced in regard to this government. There is not a week gone by you do not open up the *Age* to find the government floating a new tax, all the while with critical projects failing to be funded properly – critical projects like the Melton and Wyndham Vale rail electrification in Mr Luu’s electorate, which the Labor Party has promised at two separate elections – not one, two separate elections. It is now an evolving promise. You would think if they were going to increase taxes it would go to worthwhile projects – no, because it is going to the Suburban Rail Loop, which is going to cost \$216 billion for stages 1 and 2. It is not going to get to Broadmeadows until 2052. It is a dog of a project, and the Victorian people have figured this government out. They have figured this government out, because they have been promised that they could have both.

They were promised before the election they could have both health and infrastructure, and now they can have neither, because we know the government is planning to make multiple hospitals into fewer hospitals. So they cannot have health and they cannot have infrastructure, because the government is plunging all its money into the money sink that is the Suburban Rail Loop that it is going to affect the people of Cheltenham and Box Hill. But you would think if there was any equity about the Victorian government – remember how they said equality was non-negotiable? – and if there was any equality in the budget, even if you thought Suburban Rail Loop was a good project, surely it should be starting in Werribee, which is massively infrastructure starved and still on a V/Line service. But no, the west has missed out again today in the scrapping, putting on ice of the proposed outer metropolitan ring-road and no freight terminal for Truganina, because the government, after spending years prioritising Truganina in the west over Beveridge in the north, instead of pursuing both, has now backflipped and cancelled the outer metropolitan ring-road, so you are going to have all these trucks from Beveridge going onto the Hume and it is going to create an enormous amount of traffic.

For years it was proposed that the Camerons Lane interchange in Beveridge would be a 50–50 split between the federal government and the state government. How much has the state government contributed to that project? Nothing, because it does not deliver for growth area communities. We see that in my electorate. For years I have been speaking – I have done countless adjournments and constituency questions – on the Wallan diamond project. The good people of Wallan need southern-facing ramps onto the Hume, which I am a great advocate for, and this is a long and sorry saga. I know the Labor Party have taken it to several state and federal elections. The former federal government budgeted \$50 million for the construction of the Wallan diamond; that is acknowledged in Major Road Projects Victoria (MRPV) documents. That was a budgeted 2019 contribution. Now, Jacinta Allan before the election made her way up to Wallan to announce \$130 million for the Wallan diamond ramps, yet after the election deep in an MRPV document we discovered that it is not a \$130 million commitment; it is actually an \$80 million commitment, because it is inclusive of the former Liberal government’s \$50 million contribution. So they went to the election with a bald-faced lie that their contribution was \$130 million when it was not. So again they penny-pinched back their commitment to \$80 million and then failed to include it in this year’s budget.

If you open up the MRPV website and look at the document for the Watson Street interchange, you will find that planning works and a business case are due to be completed by early 2024. Is it early 2024? I do not think it is. We have not seen it, but we also have not seen any construction or any start date, finish date or construction schedule for the Wallan diamond. Is it going to cost \$130 million? Is it going to cost more? Is it just like the Upfield level crossings and the outer metropolitan ring road, which have been put on ice? How many elections do think the Labor Party are going to get away with saying, ‘We’re going to build the Wallan diamond’? Because they are not. They have put it off again, because they are sinking \$216 billion into the Suburban Rail Loop that the federal government have only committed \$2 billion to. The people of Wallan have been taken for granted.

They are not getting the construction started on the Wallan diamond any time soon, which they have been promised over and over again. In fact because there is no money in the budget for it, the only

real, serious money contributed towards the Wallan diamond is the \$50 million the former federal Liberal government have put in. Despite the member for McEwen's lies to the community – Major Roads Projects Victoria have actually contradicted the outgoing Labor member for McEwen in regard to his lies to the community that it was somehow not funded by the federal government. The only people that it has not been funded by are the Victorian state Labor government, because they have put all of their eggs into one basket – the Suburban Rail Loop. The people of Wallan have had enough. If they can get around all the potholes, they then have to drive all the way down the Northern Highway instead of having southern-facing ramps on to the Hume in this growing community.

Likewise the second stage of the Mickleham Road project. The government has been saying it has been looking into planning for stage 2, but so far it has not released a thing. I know my communities in the north, my growth areas in the north, do feel like they are being left behind. I get people coming up to me all the time at the regular listening post that I do in my community talking about how they do not get any funding up there, they do not get anything up there.

I know there were many in my community disappointed because of a mental health local that was supposed to be planned for Craigieburn. That has not happened. We know from stakeholders that funding needed to be included in this budget for that to eventuate, but that has not happened, so Craigieburn will miss out on its promised mental health local. That was promised after the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. So once again they have had their community hospital delayed for a year, the mental health local is not happening, roads are massively congested and the Craigieburn Road duplication is \$80 million dollars over budget.

The people of Craigieburn are getting left behind once again by this government. People in growth areas – I know people in growth areas in the west as well – are being left behind by this government. In the city of Wyndham Vale you cannot even get maternal and child health services beyond eight weeks because of the cost shifting that is going on at the local government. While you have got infrastructure-rich suburbs getting a train connection from existing stations that have much greater frequency than those in the north and the west, you have the north and the west neglected – a deliberate decision to neglect the north and the west. This government, which makes decisions within the tram tracks, has made deliberate decisions to neglect the west and to neglect the north, because they are putting all of their eggs into one basket: the Suburban Rail Loop. It is not good enough. When they do tax – and we know they do tax, because there are 55 new or increased taxes. They have wasted \$40 billion on infrastructure blowouts and \$600 million on the Commonwealth Games – down the toilet, a disgraceful decision, and just a sorry tale that Jacinta Allan was responsible for. The Premier was responsible for \$40 billion of infrastructure blowouts. The Premier was responsible for the Commonwealth Games – \$600 million down the toilet. For every major decision, the Premier has a reverse Midas touch. I think it is clear the Premier is out of touch with the community, because the decisions they have made are now having a consequential impact on the Victorian people. They are starting to hurt. You have just rank incompetence by this government, wasteful spending and infrastructure blowouts now over \$40 billion. Who is proud of that?

It is all because this government cannot stand up to the CFMEU bosses, who are now trying to get into local government as well. Are you serious? They are not very happy about this Senate vacancy that is happening tomorrow – I know that – but this is going to have a massive impact on local government as well. In regard to the infrastructure portfolio, the government has not been able to get on top of cost blowouts because it is not prepared to stand up to the union bosses. It has not, and if it had, we would not have \$40 billion of infrastructure blowouts. We know from several industry sources, even Labor sources themselves, quoted in newspapers, that since the abolition of the Australian Building and Construction Commission and the Fair Work Building and Construction costs have gone up. Who pays for that? The Victorian taxpayer. When you have got stop-go sign holders earning \$206,000 a year while nurses cannot even get a fair pay deal, that shows the choices of this – (*Time expired*)

**Ryan BATCHELOR** (Southern Metropolitan) (17:08): I am very pleased to speak on the State Taxation Amendment Bill 2024, which is implementing three tax-related changes that were made as

part of the 2024–25 budget. It is a budget which, if I can say at the outset, continues to deliver what Victorians expect of this Labor government, which is investment in high-quality services and investment in building infrastructure our state needs, supported, as this bill does, by a responsible revenue base that allows us to fund the services and build the infrastructure that Victorians expect their state government to deliver. That is the fundamental reason why we on this side of the house do support having a revenue base that is appropriately targeted and that provides revenues to the state government to enable it to do the things that Victorians want, need and expect: funding our hospitals, funding our schools, funding our emergency services and our police and building the infrastructure that they rely on to get to work and to travel around the city. That underpins the economic growth that this state is clearly delivering – the economic growth, the economic progress, that this state is delivering – that is underpinning exceptional jobs growth. The Treasurer has been at pains to talk about just how significant this budget is in terms of delivering jobs growth in Victoria, our record in which is unsurpassed, particularly when it comes to the record of jobs growth under those opposite when they were last in government. I will not go into all of those details now because there are other forums to do that, but in the context of a bill that is implementing tax arrangements from the budget, it is important to put this bill in that context.

Primarily this legislation seeks to implement three tax-related changes as part of the recent budget. They are to exempt social and emergency housing from land tax, and I will speak at length on this in my contribution today. Secondly, it will harmonise the Victorian waste levy rates with those in New South Wales and South Australia. Thirdly, it will establish a trust to support the Trust for Nature to set up more conservation covenants on privately owned land in metropolitan Melbourne, again a very important measure.

The area of the bill I want to spend the most time talking about today is at its core a tax measure designed to promote fairness, to support housing for some of the most in need members of the Victorian community and a central mission which this government believes strongly in, which is making sure that Victorians have a place to call home. The amendments that are being made to the Land Tax Act 2005 will provide standalone exemptions from land tax for land used for or available for use for social or emergency housing. The change will provide further certainty to the social and emergency housing sector, provide a broader range of social and emergency housing with a land tax exemption and better support improvements and innovation in service delivery with the assurance that social and emergency housing that satisfies the parameters will continue to receive a land tax exemption. It is a measure that will also incentivise owners of land which is suitable for social and emergency housing to make their land available to that purpose, fundamentally supporting the social housing sector.

Supporting landholders to facilitate their land being used by the social and emergency housing sector will lead to significant benefits to right across the Victorian community. Sarah Toohey, the chief executive of the Community Housing Industry Association of Victoria, said in response to the announcements in the budget that:

Securing a land tax exemption for social housing locks in the right system settings to grow the community housing sector and deliver more homes ...

I will just repeat that last bit: deliver more homes. The community housing sector says these are the sorts of changes that are going to deliver more homes. When you think about the importance that housing has right across the community, the importance that delivering more homes has right across the community, this government, this budget, this legislation, is helping to deliver more homes. It is just one example, setting aside the range of other initiatives that are contained in this and prior budgets, of how the Allan Labor government is investing in housing. The Big Housing Build, the biggest ever investment in public and community housing in this nation, is happening right here right now in Victoria under Labor. We are building more than 12,000 new homes under the Big Housing Build right throughout metropolitan and regional Victoria.

As I have done on previous occasions, I will spend a little bit of time talking about just how significant these new projects are in the Southern Metropolitan Region. I have had the absolute privilege of being at a number of these new social and community housing developments in the Southern Metropolitan Region. Recently I was in Cheltenham, where there are now 39 new affordable apartments near the train station in Cheltenham, refurbished modern apartments with outdoor spaces, filling the need for affordable housing in Melbourne. You go not far up the road to New Street in Brighton where, as part of our push to redevelop old walk-up flats, there is a new development of housing. The previous housing that was there has been demolished and rebuilt. Now there are 291 new homes on this site in New Street, Brighton, right next to the Yalukit Willam Nature Reserve near Elsternwick Park, minutes from the Elsternwick train station, which include 151 social homes and a further 140 market rental homes. We were there recently with the Minister for Housing talking to the new residents that had just moved in. Debbie in particular – we spoke to her on her balcony that looked out over the parkland through the trees. She could not believe how lucky she was to be in such high-quality accommodation – accommodation that is not only providing her with a roof over her head but lowering her power bills. All of these new pieces of social and affordable housing that are being built as part of the Big Housing Build in this complex in Brighton, but also in other places, now have a 7-star Nationwide House Energy Rating Scheme energy efficiency rating. They are highly energy efficient homes, which means that the power bills in these homes are going to be lower for the residents, delivering untold benefits.

I know, Acting President Berger, that in the other parts of Southern Metropolitan Region that you spend time in, up in Bangs Street, wonderful new homes have been built in Prahran. There is huge development as part of the Big Housing Build going on in parts of Prahran, in South Yarra, building lots and lots of new homes for Victorians. This government is absolutely committed to building more social and affordable housing as part of our broader plan to build more homes for Victorians. We can see in Southern Metropolitan Region developments like the ones in New Street; like the ones in Cheltenham; like the ones in Centre Road, Brighton, built in partnership with the Commonwealth; and the ones in Balaclava next to the train station, which have recently been opened, again built in partnership with the Commonwealth. Then there are the ones that are coming at Barak Beacon in Port Melbourne, on Bluff Road in Hampton East, on various sites in Prahran and on various sites in South Yarra as well as over in Ashburton at the Markham estate and at Bills Street in Hawthorn.

There is so much rebuilding of housing going on, particularly social and affordable housing, in Southern Metropolitan Region that it is an absolutely incredibly exciting time for those of us who are passionate about building more homes for those in our community that need support the most. I am absolutely proud to be part of a government that is delivering so much new social and affordable housing in Southern Metropolitan Melbourne. This legislation, the State Taxation Amendment Bill 2024, is putting in place the taxation settings that are going to help support that into the future both by providing, as I said, broader ranges of land tax exemptions for social and emergency housing but also by incentivising landholders who wish to make their land available for social and emergency housing to make their land available for that purpose, because the more land we have got available for social and emergency housing, the more we can build, and the government has an absolutely demonstrated track record in building more social and emergency housing.

The other part of the bill, which I will come to now, is the harmonisation of the waste levy rates with New South Wales and Victoria. One of the things that has developed is that the levies that the government has on waste going into landfill are out of line with what happens with our neighbouring states. Our landfill levies are an important part of protecting our environment by providing an economic incentive through additional costs to dispose of rubbish in landfill to try and help incentivise rubbish being diverted out of landfill. It is one of the reasons why we see so many innovative, nation-leading programs here in Victoria to make sure that materials that would otherwise go into landfill are being diverted into other purposes – reuse, recycling, repurposing – all part of our efforts to ensure that instead of ending up as waste in landfill, what can be reused, what can be recycled, is in fact being diverted. We do that in part by providing an economic incentive to undertake that diversion by way of

landfill charges. But one of the things that has evolved is that our rates have been out of whack with those of New South Wales and South Australia. What the legislation will do is harmonise those waste levies so that there is no cross-border incentive for making Victoria a cheaper place to put landfill. We think it is important that there is consistency so that those things which would otherwise have been disposed of in other jurisdictions do not find their way into Victoria, where the costs of putting them into landfill are lower. If we can harmonise those arrangements, we will remove that cross-border incentive to have that waste located in Victoria.

The changes, with a similar sort of economic logic, will also change the arrangements between metropolitan and rural landfills so that, again, there is consistency across the state, so that no matter where it comes from or where it is going, waste levy rates are consistent across the board. We want to see less waste dumped in landfill, and these changes are about getting the incentives in the right space so that we do not have incentives created in the system to move waste into places where it is easier and cheaper to put waste into landfill. One hundred per cent of the revenue that is generated from the waste levy will go towards creating a cleaner Victoria. The revenue raised from the waste levy will first go to fund the Environment Protection Authority Victoria, Sustainability Victoria and Recycling Victoria, so that these important agencies – which not only do the important work of environmental protection but also promote ways to better use, reuse and recycle waste here in Victoria – are funded. Also, any remaining funds go into the Sustainability Fund to be used to support climate change action and waste reduction programs. We think there is significant support for these changes across the board from waste and recycling industries.

The last part that I will mention briefly, the last measure in the bill, is to establish a trust to support Trust for Nature to set up more conservation covenants on privately owned land in metropolitan Melbourne. Trust for Nature acquires, conserves and maintains areas within Victoria that are ecologically significant or of natural interest, beauty or scientific interest to encourage and assist in the preservation of wildlife and native plants for public scientific and public educational purposes. The changes in here will help support those efforts by the Trust for Nature and, along with the provisions on waste and social housing, are important changes for a community.

**David LIMBRICK** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:23): I also rise to speak on the State Taxation Amendment Bill 2024. We had a good run. Last sitting week there was a government tax bill that I did not oppose, but unfortunately I am not in that position again today and I will be opposing this bill. I am glad there has been talk about incentives around this bill. I will start with one of the good things that the bill does, which, as was mentioned by Mr Batchelor, is the exemption for social and emergency housing from land tax. I agree with Mr Batchelor that that will incentivise that to exist and to be produced, but what is not said is the disincentive for other housing caused by the recent increases in land tax for all other houses that are liable for that. Nevertheless I am concerned a lot about this increase in the waste levy. I will tell you why.

Many people may be familiar with an economic concept called the Laffer curve, and if you are not familiar with it, it is very simple to understand: at 0 per cent tax the government raises zero tax and at a 100 per cent tax rate they also raise zero tax. Therefore the maximum revenue raised is a curve, and it sits somewhere in between this zero and 100 per cent rate. This manifests itself in real life when government taxes are raised too high; they incentivise activities which effectively avoid the tax. The federal government recently, in their budget, had an interesting manifestation of the Laffer curve. They raised tobacco excise so high that they ended up losing money on revenue raised, and they are projecting a lower tobacco excise raised. The reason is because organised crime have taken over the market and they are avoiding the tax that way. And now we have, by some estimates, half of the tobacco market being run by organised crime in Victoria, with something in the order of 73 fire bombings and another attempted assassination last week; it is totally out of control in this state. Organised crime effectively regulates tobacco and vaping in this state, not the government.

Another manifestation of the Laffer curve which this state government experienced last year was when it tried to raise taxes on berthing fees and, to the government's surprise, the cruise liners that would

otherwise dock in Melbourne said, 'We don't want to dock there anymore.' Of course they do not get the revenue if they do not dock, and then they lose.

What is more concerning is this waste levy. I hate it when I hear the term 'harmonisation': 'We're just raising our taxes because it's at the rate that everyone else is raising it.' I agree with Mr Batchelor and his assertion that it will disincentivise people bringing waste across the state to dump in our landfill because it would be cheaper – that would make sense – but again what the government is not acknowledging is the other incentive that it is causing, which is again for organised crime to get involved in waste dumping. I recently had a constituent bring to my attention an exact example of this. We believe, and I am not sure whether it is organised crime or just one-off crime or whatever, that someone was dumping barrels – three of them in fact – of unknown materials. It was brought to my attention by a constituent. I went out and checked out the barrels, and there will be more to say about this soon I imagine. But nevertheless my constituent contacted me and said he contacted the EPA, the local council and the police and no-one did anything. The barrels are still there – so much for that! The higher the waste levy goes, the more that this illegal dumping is incentivised and the more incentives that we create for organised crime to take over yet another market in Victoria all due to government taxes. This is a bad thing.

What I wish the government had have done with this bill and with the budget was take the opportunity to look at what it does, and the government does far too much – in fact it has grown to such a point now that it tries to do everything and does not do much of it very well. What I would love to see is the government focusing on the things that are important – you know, like courts and police and schools and things like that – and get out of everything else: start to downsize the size of the state, reduce the amount of taxes and regulations, make us competitive with other states and make us competitive with other countries so that people want to live here and want to work here and that sort of thing.

Another potential problem, again relating to the Laffer curve and land taxes, is unfortunately commercial properties and industrial properties may make the decision that they do not want to run a factory in Victoria anymore. I have spoken to many factory owners and operators who are very concerned about land tax. But they are not just concerned about land tax, they are concerned about electricity prices and they are concerned about gas. Many of them use gas; they need gas for their operations either as a feedstock or they need it as a heat source for their production processes. We are in a situation now where – although the government says we have got no gas, I note that in the last term of Parliament we banned fracking technology which would allow higher gas production – we have sort of tied our hands behind our backs again. Then we say, 'Well, there's no energy there because we've decided not to use this technology,' which seems to be a habit of this government.

Nevertheless the Libertarian Party will not be supporting this bill. I hope that some of these unintended consequences of high taxes will not come to pass, but I fear they will.

**Trung LUU** (Western Metropolitan) (17:30): I rise today to make my contribution addressing the State Taxation Amendment Bill 2024. As a Liberal I firmly believe that lower taxes pave the way to success, particularly for small business and working families. Regrettably, the provisions outlined in this bill fail to deliver the tax relief that my constituents require. Without immediate relief, I cannot in good faith and conscience lend my support to this bill. This legislation proposes several changes, including an increase in the waste levy and land tax. While it does include a modest exemption for social and emergency housing from land tax, this measure falls short of providing the immediate relief that working families need, especially during a cost-of-living crisis.

Sir Robert Menzies, the founder of the Liberal Party, devised the term 'forgotten people' to describe working families and small businesses. Forgotten people make up most of my electorate. They are hardworking families, suburban families, hardworking, self-reliant and driven by aspiration for a better future. Families of the west over decades have been marginalised and overlooked by this Labor government. Despite their pivotal role in our society and economy, they find themselves neglected by policies that fail to address their needs and concerns. Again and again the west is put on the backburner

under this Labor government. The Labor government has forgotten the hardworking Victorian families of the western suburbs. Only a Liberal government will ensure that all Victorians have a level playing field, and only under a Liberal government will the west get electrified railway lines to Melton and Wyndham. Only under a Liberal government will we see the Melbourne Airport rail line come to fruition. On this side of the chamber we stand apart from the party of the inner-city elites and activists who have forgotten the struggle of middle-class families in the suburbs. We have small business owners, educators, medical professionals and law enforcement officers, just to name a few. We are the party of ordinary Victorians, offering real solutions for the long-forgotten people in the western suburbs and the whole of the state of Victoria.

I remember when a former Premier went on national TV not so long ago and said there would be no new taxes. I remember the promise of the 2014 campaign. I ask: is our life better now than 10 years ago? Are the rent or mortgage payments easier to handle now? Do you feel more confident about your job security now than 10 years ago? Are the utility bills more reasonable than 10 years ago? Is accessing quality health care easier and more affordable than 10 years ago? Do we feel that our children's education is better supported now than 10 years ago? For most of the families in my electorate, the answer is simply no. Victorians cannot take any more. The 55 new taxes introduced by the then Andrews and now Allan government over their years in government are squeezing the life out of the household budgets of working families in my electorate.

As Benjamin Franklin, an advocate for liberty and one of the founding fathers of the United States, famously said, there are only two things certain in life: death and taxes. Under this Allan government nothing seems to be more certain than debt and higher taxes. These increases in tax have led to the closure of 8000 businesses in Victoria alone over the last 18 months, in a troubling trend threatening the livelihoods of many hardworking individuals and families.

Making things even harder now is the waste levy scheme, or the bin tax. The government says it makes families and small businesses more aware of the environment, but this is far from the truth. When taxes increase, families pay the price. When people are struggling to put bread on the table, people will do odd things to survive. The higher the tax, the more illegal dumping you will see, which will make the environment even worse than the current situation. The waste levy, often called the bin tax, is tough on small businesses and families. Yes, big supermarkets will eventually transfer the bin tax to product prices and then families will notice this at the check-out. However, mum-and-dad businesses and local stores like the IGA will find it hard to manage the 31 tax increases.

The only acceptable part of this bill is the exemption for social emergency housing from land tax. We must strive for tax regulation systems that are straightforward to navigate. However, upon close examination of this bill provision, one notable aspect of the vacant residential land tax is that the measure mandates home owners must utilise the holiday property for 30 days a year or face tax as a penalty. The latest property tax hike proposed by the Labor government will be a tipping point for most home owners, especially those in my electorate. It threatens to place a financial burden on families that may have no choice but to sell their own holiday homes. These holiday homes are often modest dwellings acquired over years of hard work for the family to enjoy. The increase in taxation would lead to high tax, with families forced to sell if they have to cough up tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of dollars in additional tax and fees. The situation echoes the Chinese punishment lingchi, death by a thousand cuts – slow and painful by this government. The recent introduction of 27 property taxes by Labor is death by a thousand taxes. It is tax slicing, slice by slice, home owners' financial wellbeing. This new tax smothers aspiration, punishes job creation and makes Victorians poorer each day. Higher tax undermines free markets and restricts Victorians' ability to buy property. Increased tax of property, in combination with excessive regulations, constricts property rights. These heavy-handed burdens will adversely impact property owners and the broader economy.

To give you an example from my electorate, rent has surged 15 per cent over past years, impairing housing affordability in the region. This data reflects a significant hike in Werribee, highlighting the broader implications of tax policy on the housing market. The property sector is struggling because of

\$21.5 billion in taxes – the cost to Victorians is \$3175 per annum: \$7.8 billion from land tax, \$10 billion from stamp tax, \$1.34 billion from the COVID levy tax, \$1 billion from the fire levy tax, \$127 million from the congestion tax and \$221 million from the metropolitan improvement levy. It goes on. Let me make it clear: 27 of 55 new taxes introduced by Labor target the property sector. The more you tax property the more it will rise in rent and the more you will make it impossible for generations to own a new home.

Additionally, Labor scrapped \$24 million for the Melton South Primary School upgrade to recover its debt and make the cut service Victoria's debts. Not only did Labor scrap the major school upgrade, but they also added a school tax. The school tax is pricing middle-class families out of private school education for their children. There are 54 schools on Labor's hit list; government schools are excluded. However, Labor's backbenchers have now seen the light. They are revolting, with Labor's member for Mordialloc in the other place lobbying the senior minister to axe the tax. The member also warned Labor the school tax would have detrimental consequences. So I welcome my colleague Evan Mulholland's amendment to remove the payroll tax from schools. Furthermore, the member also notes the payroll tax would make it extremely difficult for schools and could lead to higher school fees and job cuts. The number of liable schools will rise to 50 within the next five years, with high fees for Catholic schools expected to be charged under this new tax.

Education is too important and should not be a tool to divide a community. Education should be equal for all students, all Victorians, and education at a Catholic school is something many families strive for for their children, whether they are rich, poor or struggling to make ends meet. They want a better life for their kids. Labor's tax on schools will make it almost impossible for aspirational, hardworking families, especially those families in the west who come from a migrant background and want the best for their children. The more debt there is, the more tax Victorians must pay, reducing choices in how to spend their money and live their lives. As a Liberal, I believe Victorians should have the freedom to decide how to spend their hard-earned money rather than having it dictated by a big-government, socialist agenda restricting family choices.

I note across the chamber they mentioned that this government is building new homes. If I could just refer to their statement in relation to building new homes, in their 2024–25 'Department Performance Statement' the target for 2023–24 was 91,248 social housing dwellings. That was the target. And guess what, the 2024–25 target is 91,148 for building new homes. It does not add up. They say they are building new homes, but next year the target is 100 less than this year's target. I am not sure whether they are saying it or actually their statement is true, or what is right and what is wrong – whether you can trust this Labor government. Are they building new homes, or are they just telling you they are building new homes and hoping for the best?

**John BERGER** (Southern Metropolitan) (17:41): I rise to speak on the State Taxation Amendment Bill 2024. This bill looks at the issues facing Victoria today and takes decisive action on how we will help tackle the big problems of the 21st century, whether it be building more homes – and I have seen it firsthand – as you know, my colleague in this place Minister Shing, in her capacity as Minister for Housing, has seen it as well. We have seen the work the Allan Labor government has done to build modern housing in my community of Prahran at Bangs Street, just a couple of hundred metres down from my electoral office.

This bill also tackles climate change and helps protect our environment and makes the appropriate changes to our taxation system to ensure we are best equipped to address these problems. The purpose of this bill is to implement three tax-related changes that were made as part of the 2024–25 Allan Labor government budget. They are (1) exempt social and emergency housing from land tax, (2) harmonise our laws with our friends in New South Wales and across the border in South Australia and (3) establish a trust to support Trust for Nature to set up more conservation covenants on privately owned land in metro.



Despite what those on the other side say, we want the people of Victoria to think this bill delivers sound economic reforms to Victorians, as I have said many times in this chamber. I am sure by this time the hardworking Hansard staff who work day in, day out diligently recording my words have memorised what I say about this, but I will say it again anyway – the Allan Labor government has cut or reduced taxes in this state around 64 times since coming into office, which is more than I can say about the opposition when they were in power. But thankfully for Victoria's sake it was only four years in the past 25. Nevertheless the opposition increased taxes or fees in this state 24 times in the four years they were in charge, but still they sit here and complain about any changes to the tax system, even though they did it.

Have a look through this bill. People will see just what the opposition is voting against here. For example, there are clear provisions for social and emergency housing to be exempted from the vacant residential land tax. The opposition love talking about taxes in Victoria, but when the opportunity comes to cut them for something as basic as social housing, they sit here with their arms folded. They love raising taxes. I hope you tell your rank-and-file members what you have been up to.

These commonsense changes to land tax, on close inspection, are a recognition of what needs to be done to ease the cost-of-living pressures on Victorians and particularly on housing. Boosting the state's housing supply is essential to making sure more Victorians can have access to a home. Boosting the numbers of social and affordable housing is a key to fixing these problems, which is why the Allan Labor government is building more of them under the Big Build as outlined in the housing statement. The Big Housing Build is Australia's biggest ever investment in public and community housing, with \$5.3 billion going directly to these projects. It is all happening here in Victoria. That is 12,000 more social and affordable homes for Victorians doing it tough under these plans, with over 700 more on the way with the Commonwealth's social housing accelerator.

There are more serious investments happening right now. It only makes sense that we exempt these types of properties from the vacant residency land tax to help encourage the construction of more housing in this state to house people in need at an affordable price. Just down my road in my electorate, on Bangs Street, the state government built 445 social and affordable homes – we got it done. Only Labor governments are committed to supporting projects like the Bangs Street housing by ensuring social and emergency housing projects are exempt from the vacant residency tax. We should expect more social housing to be built in this state, supported by a dedicated community ready to invest and a government that backs them in.

Ultimately, we are a government that is building social housing, and those opposite are the ones who want to tax it. We all know Victoria needs more homes to fit our growing population. By some estimates Melbourne alone should expect to have a population of 8 million by 2050. If you were sitting opposite, I reckon you could take this to the bank, because we were all saying just last sitting week that the Victorian Liberals would rather those new homes be built in New South Wales or Queensland. I have never seen a bigger bunch of cheerleaders for another state, selling Victorians out like they did last sitting week, attacking our tourism industry.

It is not a question of if we need more housing, it is undeniably the reality. Building more social housing is essential to our growing city, and we are making these investments in Victoria's future. Melbourne's population will grow to 8 million in the next few decades regardless of what the opposition says, and we will need more affordable homes to meet that. But it is not just social housing the opposition are standing against, they are opposing this bill which will also exclude emergency housing from the tax. Again, these are commonsense reforms which will spur investment in housing, especially in emergency housing, for the people that need it the most. But after all that, the opposition in the other place decided that they would vote against lifting the 1 per cent levy off emergency housing and social housing, after a debate in which they droned on about how high taxes are.

We need to build more homes in Victoria, especially emergency and social housing. Lifting the tax off these projects by exempting them from the levy will incentivise more investment into those homes

in Victoria and ensure more people can rely on emergency housing when they need it. Those opposite are not interested in building more social and affordable homes in Victoria, because they are not about backing in Victorians; they are just about saying no.

This bill also includes changes to the waste levy across the state, making modest changes to the metropolitan and regional rates to help encourage more environmentally friendly practices by the state's largest waste producers. It is a good measure which will help protect our environment and help meet our emissions targets by encouraging changes in waste disposal behaviour. And as I have said before, the proposal will also harmonise our waste levy with our border states. This is about protecting our environment. It is about fighting climate change. The chamber knows that the Allan Labor government has one of the most ambitious climate targets in the world. We have a goal of cutting our emissions by up to 50 per cent by 2030 and reaching net zero by 2045, meaning we will be meeting our targets alongside world leaders like Germany and California. We are serious about using measures to reduce waste by promoting recycling and reuse through the change in the waste levy. Coupled with our investment in our waste management system, we can meet our targets and protect our environment. We have a target of diverting up to 80 per cent of Victoria's waste product away from landfill by 2030 to complement those targets, and this change in the waste levy will help the state move towards that greener future.

While some of those opposite might protest the levy, it is worth remembering what this levy is for and why it is in place. The levy in its original form came into the picture in the early 1990s as a way of discouraging landfill waste. By attaching a price to the dumping practices of these large waste producing companies, we encourage companies to invest and innovate in how they manage their waste. We encourage Victorians to find a new way to recycle and reuse and to improve disposal practices. Despite this, nearly two-thirds of Victoria's waste-related emissions today come from landfill, primarily in the form of methane and carbon dioxide. This illustrates how important the management of our waste is, as landfills just omit more and more emissions and harm our environment more as we dump it away into these sites. While the amount of waste we produce has significantly fallen since the 1990s, when we introduced the levy, we need to do more if we want to fight climate change and protect our natural environment from damage at the hands of the waste that we could be avoiding producing. That is why the then Andrews Labor government invested \$515 million into delivering reform after reform, including the reform of our state's waste management system – helping us move towards a circular economy on recycling, as laid out in our *Recycling Victoria* plan. To help our transition along we issued \$84 million worth of grants and improved waste management, supported by the Commonwealth government's \$40 million investment. We thank them for that as well.

The Allan Labor government is committed to meeting our climate targets of net zero carbon emissions by 2045, and it is important that in our push towards that we include changes to waste management – such as this levy increase. Changes in the waste levy will help encourage Victorians to waste less and recycle more by encouraging our state's largest waste producers to do more when it comes to re-using, recycling and reducing waste and so forth. By harmonising our metropolitan levy and proportionally raising the regional levy we can make sure that we are not leaving any Victorians behind as we push towards a greener future which protects our environment and tackles climate change through these changes. We can help the state meet the landfill waste reduction target of 80 per cent and our goal of cutting per capita waste generation across Victoria by 15 per cent by 2030.

This is a rational and reasoned measure that will deliver better protections for our environment. It will cut our emissions and better manage our waste disposal system. It is a modest increase in the waste levy to ensure that we are doing our part to fight climate change by reducing our waste output, and we will be doing it over time. We will increase it from 1 July 2025, giving partners and businesses, local council and the community time to adjust. The waste levy will increase category C and category D to \$169.79 per tonne on 1 July 2025, and the rates for all other categories of priority waste will be

unchanged. We are doing this all after consultation, because we want to encourage the continued safe disposal of hazardous waste materials.

Overall, we want less waste dumped at landfill, and that is what the changes help us achieve. It is about behaviour, so that the big waste producers can create less waste and do more. We want communities to reduce, reuse and recycle. This government's efforts to cut emissions and reduce waste in favour of recycling has gained wide interest and support. Our investments in waste management reform itself are estimated to have as of last year attracted over \$254 million from the private sector to help our economy pivot towards a circular economy that works hard to cut waste and recycle materials as much as possible. This proposed change to the waste levy fits in that tradition. It will encourage these big waste producers to not just dump their waste into landfill after landfill but instead encourage them to invest in innovative solutions to lower their waste. They will be incentivised to focus on how they can recycle more, how they can reuse whatever waste they are dumping and reduce their waste throughput – and we are investing in that.

Take the revenue drawn from the landfill levy. It will go directly into Victoria's environmental agencies. Environment Protection Authority Victoria, Sustainability Victoria and Recycling Victoria will all feel the benefit of this increased levy, helping build a greener and more sustainable Victoria.

We are a government that is serious about climate change, serious about waste management reform and serious about reducing pollution and protecting our environment. We will hear lots, I am sure, from the opposition about tax rises, tax reform and taxes, but let me just point out that every time this government has proposed an amendment to the state's taxation arrangements, no matter how positive that change, it blocks. It happened last year; it happens every year. They know the exemption for social and emergency housing from vacant residential land tax will help build more homes – something only a Labor government will achieve. They know it will have to go onto those who need it most, but they will still oppose it. They know that this government is doing the right thing, they know that we are making the right calls on waste management and they know that this government has encouraged private investment, but they still they oppose it. It is about making sure that we encourage more investment, so more interest into social and affordable housing on top of the \$5.3 billion investment from this side of the chamber.

Before I wrap up today, this bill will also make a variety of changes that I will not have the time to go into more detail on, but I wanted to highlight a few in particular. It amends the Duties Act 2000 to add new classes of business insurance to the insurance duty provisions which will be eligible for a gradual reduction in duties to provide future a change to the classes of business insurance. It also amends the Gambling Taxation Act 2023 to provide the commissioner with the power to compel a casino operator to produce a document or information on a prospective basis for a period of up to six months, and we know how important that reform in gambling is.

It also tidies up the Payroll Tax Act 2007, the Land Tax Act 2005, the Planning and Environment Act 1987 and the Taxation Administration Act 1997. With that last one, I will note its importance in adding further criminal liabilities on the officers of the casino operator.

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (17:55): I rise to speak to the government's State Taxation Amendment Bill 2024. This bill is putting more taxes on hardworking Victorians and Victorian businesses. I have just been listening to Mr Berger, who made some pretty extraordinary claims in his contribution. He clearly is not listening to his electorate, who are absolutely screaming about the increased taxes this government is applying on their businesses and on their families in relation to what this government has done. He just said in his final few remarks to the house, and I quote, 'It's about encouraging more investment.' I do not know where you have been, Mr Berger, but investors and business are very concerned about your government's economic performance and what these taxes are doing to confidence to attract business and retain business here in Victoria.

I mentioned the Arden medical precinct earlier, the scrapping of that promise that you gave Victorians in 2022. You went to the election, as I said, and conned Victorians that you were going to have the biggest health precinct in Australia. You have scrapped that, and I note that the biomedical sector who were investing there, that foreign investment has flooded out of the state – not just tens of millions of dollars but several hundreds of millions of dollars. They are very worried about the message this government is sending about scrapping projects and the increased taxes that are being applied.

This does a number of things in relation to minor and technical changes around the Gambling Taxation Act 2023, the Duties Act 2000 and a few other things, but there are some real stinkers in this bill. The education tax – amending the payroll tax around schools – is a shocking tax, and I know that we will be moving an amendment to that to scrap that tax. I am really delighted, talking of scrapping taxes, that the government has seen sense in scrapping the health tax that was being applied onto GPs, and that was after the considerable campaign that the Liberals and Nationals and GPs combined on to champion why this was such an insidious tax, a retrospective bad tax that was going to end bulk-billing and drive up costs for patients during a cost-of-living crisis and in a health crisis as well, driving patients into already overburdened emergency departments – I mean, give me a break. These people have got no idea.

**Evan Mulholland** interjected.

**Georgie CROZIER:** And they said, Mr Mulholland, nothing has changed. In fact they said it on 20-odd occasions. On 21 March 2023 the Treasurer said:

... the payroll tax regime has not changed ...

He went on again:

... there was no intention to change the tax liability of GPs ...

On 29 August 2023 the Minister for Health said:

... there has been no change to the way in which payroll tax ...

She said:

... when it comes to payroll tax absolutely nothing has changed.

On the 30th, the day after:

But let me be clear: there has been no change.

The day after that, again from the health minister:

... when it comes to payroll tax legislation in this state, nothing has changed.

She said:

... again: there have been no changes made to the arrangements that are in place for the collection of payroll tax ...

Again she said:

... this tax – we have been through this ad infinitum – there has been no change to the way in which payroll tax legislation operates in this state.

Again:

... there has been no change to the legislation as it pertains to payroll tax and how it is applied to medical practices.

And then the Premier said two months later:

There is no change to these arrangements ...

She said:

The Treasurer's letter to the GP community was simply putting in place information of existing arrangements.

She said:

... there has been no change ...

And it goes on – month after month, excuse after excuse, saying there has been no change. But there was, and they backflipped last week. So there was a change, and you know what – it was a bad, unfair tax, and it was going to hurt Victorians and it was going hurt primary health care givers in this state. I will be waiting to see what else the government does, because dentists, physios and other allied health practitioners are now watching and saying, 'Well, why are we getting taxed when we are providing these services to Victorians who need our care and support as well?'

This government is addicted to taxes. All they know is to spend and to tax, to drive up debt to record levels and to tax us – 55 new or increased taxes. Now, Mr Berger, when I was listening to him, was talking about housing and home ownership and carrying on about how the opposition does not understand social housing and housing, but what he does not understand is –

**Michael Galea** interjected.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Yes, I am not reflecting on the Acting President, on the Chair. But I will say on the contribution the issue is that the literally dozens of property taxes that have been applied over the course of the last 10 years since Labor has taken charge of the budget have caused huge issues within our housing market. Of course those costs get passed on to the consumer, the renter, and now we are seeing land tax where people are selling their homes, and that is going to make the situation worse for renters. They are not going to be able to buy those homes, but they have now got nowhere to live, because they are going to be out of that rental market. I mean, this is what Labor do not understand – the impacts of the economic policies that they apply to Victorians. And it is a very simple tax grab, like I just described with the health tax – that was a tax grab to plug the bottom line after the most gross mismanagement, the waste and mismanagement of projects, the billions of dollars that have been wasted. The government have to get that money somehow, and they are going after hardworking Victorians. As we all know, when socialists run out of money, they come after yours, and that is exactly what this socialist government are doing – they are coming after your money, and they are taxing hardworking businesses and hardworking Victorians. It is literally driving confidence out of this state, investment out of this state and aspiration out of this state. That is not a good thing for Victoria.

There have been 55 new or increased taxes since Labor came to government in Victoria, and in the last few taxes we have had a new school tax on independent schools – the schools tax; a holiday and tourism tax; the expanded land tax on vacant residential land, or holiday house tax; expanded land tax on unimproved residential land; a new health tax on GPs and allied health professionals – well, they have sacked the GP bit, but allied health professionals are still getting taxed; an increase to the fire services property levy; and an increase in municipal and industrial waste levies. There are so many here. They increased the fire services property levy in 2015 and 2016, increased it in 2019 and 2020 and have again increased it in this latest budget. And where is that money going to? It is not going into our fire services; it is going into the government's big black debt hole.

This government is a failure. It is a failure in managing taxpayers money. It is a failure in administering taxpayers money in a responsible and prudent manner. This bill does nothing to advance causes for Victoria as a whole. It is taxing Victorians, as Labor love to do – they love to tax, they love to spend – and Victorians cannot take any more. They are waking up to the impacts of the government's huge taxation grabs across the board and the mismanagement. They can see it, they understand it, and with the increased debt and the increased taxes they know that is going to be hard to do business here. It is going to be harder to have choice, whether it is around sending your kids to a school of your choice or whether it is supporting our public health system and supporting our private health system in a way

that we can manage it and continue to deliver excellent health care in this state. It is getting harder, and when they amalgamate hospitals across the state it is going to be harder to access care. The minister says it is closer to home – no, it will not be. It is not now. People in Horsham who are going to Ballarat and who cannot get an appointment in Ballarat are not getting good quality health care closer to home. It is a furphy from the minister, and she knows it.

On this state taxation bill, there are just a couple of last things I would like to say. With the independent schools tax, they are taking away the choice, which I mentioned, for hardworking parents who want to have choice about where they send their children to school. The socialists do not agree with that, but a couple of their backbenchers do. Mr Richardson is very on it. He has been appointed. They have given him a bit of a shut-up job today and given him a nice little parliamentary position. I wish him all well in that, but he has been outspoken on this. As the *Age* wrote, he is not happy about the government's schools tax. I will read from the *Age*:

Leaked letters, obtained by *The Age*, reveal that Tim Richardson, member for Mordialloc, lobbied senior ministers to exempt a high-fee private school from the payroll tax, arguing that the tax would be "extremely difficult" for the school and could lead to higher school fees and job cuts.

He actually gets it. That is exactly what it will do. That is what taxes do: they drive up costs, so jobs go. I do not know why the rest of them do not, but he does, and he is obviously unhappy. But there you go, they have given him a little job to keep him busy for the time being and to say, 'Don't talk out about the schools tax.' There is the leaked letter. It is a bit like the Deputy Premier. He is saying one thing about the airport rail link and not supporting the suburban rail link, and the government is all over the place. They have got an unhappy backbench and they have got an unhappy front bench because they know the damage of the mismanagement and the economic ruin that this government is setting Victorians up for.

This state taxation bill is another bad bill introduced by this bad government, both in terms of economic management and how they are plying hardworking taxpayer funds into services that are not being delivered where they should be.

**Michael GALEA** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:07): I rise to share a few words on the State Taxation Amendment Bill 2024. This is obviously one of a suite of bills that we are debating this week in relation to the state budget this year. Indeed it was our Treasurer's 10th budget, which was very, very good to see. Indeed we have just had a robust week and a half of budget estimate hearings in the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee as well. It has been good to get a cross-section view of the budget across many different portfolios as well as of course from the Treasurer himself and the Premier herself too, which was very good see. Indeed we even had a few shadow ministers come along and grace us with their presence. Ms Crozier came along to watch the PAEC. She was one of a minority. I am not sure if many of them are actually interested enough in their portfolios to come out and watch it, but we did at least have Ms Crozier making herself very much known in the room in PAEC last week, which was good to see.

**Georgie Crozier** interjected.

**Michael GALEA**: Only once – it was a memorable impression that you left anyway, Ms Crozier. It would have been nice if some more of your shadow ministers had turned up.

But this is an important bill discussing state taxation. There are a number of things that this will cover, including various land tax exemptions, which will make things easier for community and social housing providers. Of course that is something that this government is very focused on, providing that social and community housing. I heard, I believe, Mr Luu finding a great big scandal. I know the Liberals were very excited that they thought they were onto something. They had not quite worked out that 800,000 divided by 10 is 80,000, and they think that doing 800,000 in 10 years means you are going to do an exact number every single year. They think they are onto something – good for them – but this government is resolutely committed to the 800,000 new homes in 10 years time. I note the

incredible work and advocacy of obviously Minister Shing in this place and Minister Kilkenny in the other place as well, as the government works towards that commitment. This initiative, which is going to have a blanket rule affecting social and community housing providers, is going to be a real benefit to that sector.

There are of course various exemptions already in place, but this is a single holistic measure that will actually give them the certainty that they need, whether it is in housing that they own themselves or indeed whether it is privately owned housing that is then managed through a proper arrangement by a community or social housing provider, which will actually mean that the land tax they are exempted from will be guaranteed. It will also cover them for vacant sites for up to two years to allow for appropriate things such as renovations and other such things as they need to take place. That is a very important measure, and it is one that has been welcomed by the sector. Indeed Sarah Toohey, the chief executive of the Community Housing Industry Association Victoria, welcomed this exemption, stating that:

Securing a land tax exemption for social housing locks in the right system settings to grow the community housing sector and deliver more homes ...

Another measure in this budget is the harmonisation of the waste levy scheme with our neighbouring states of New South Wales and South Australia. This is a measure that will change the waste levy for metropolitan municipal and industrial waste from \$129.27 per tonne to \$169.79 per tonne. As I say, that is in large part to harmonise with other states. It is also to encourage better recycling. We have also seen other measures such as the container deposit scheme, which has had a huge uptake from Victorians. Just the other day I was hearing from a constituent who was talking about how many containers she has put into the container deposit scheme, and frankly I was very, very impressed. It was a figure something like 10,000 containers that she has already deposited from going around to various construction sites and happily offering to take bottles from the workers and augmenting her other income in that way as well, which is good to see. It is what the scheme is for – obviously to support Victorians, but more importantly to really support that circular recycling economy, and we have seen those very encouraging early numbers. This adjustment to the waste levy will adjust what we expect to see coming into landfill, which is obviously going to help our environment as well, but it will match it with those other two states. We already subsidise South Australia with our GST and New South Wales with our federal infrastructure funding; we do not need to take their rubbish as well.

Another measure in this bill is to provide for a vacant land conservation covenants account for Trust for Nature. Trust for Nature is a wonderful non-profit that does great work in protecting Victoria's natural landscape. This new VLCC account, as it is called, will give them the financial certainty that they need to enter into various conservation covenants with private landowners in and across metropolitan Melbourne – these covenants of course being entirely voluntary on the part of the landowner – but also binding agreements that will lock in and really protect natural beauty and natural land with significant cultural, scientific or other environmental value. I actually have an acquaintance with one of these particular sites not too far from my region, the Harbury Trust for Nature site in Pakenham Upper. When I was in I believe grade 5 we had a family friend who was working for Trust for Nature at the time, and I was commandeered for an unpaid photo shoot on the site. I was looking up at the trees and pointing up at a big I think it was a gum tree – I am not sure what it was; I am not very botanical – in this covenant, and it ended up on the brochure for this park. I did just have a look earlier today, and the brochure has been updated, which is probably for the best. But it is a connection I do have to Trust for Nature. It is very good to see them getting this support as well, and certainly given the incredible work that they do.

We will also be making some adjustments to the vacant residential land tax, which is an important thing to improve the situation for those with a holiday house in metropolitan Melbourne where you are looking at multiple blocks that are actually one property but are titled as separate blocks. That will ensure that the exemptions, when and where they do apply, are applied evenly and consistently. This

is a state budget which, through the state taxation bill as well, is continuing to support businesses, particularly small businesses, in the state of Victoria.

We have of course seen that through having the lowest unemployment rate almost on record in regional Victoria, and indeed one of the lowest payroll tax rates, if not anywhere in the country, then very close to, in regional Victoria, that being just a quarter of the rate it was when we came into government. We are continuing to invest as much as we can into businesses, and you are seeing the result of that. You have seen the result that since September 2020 one in every three jobs that has been created in Australia has been created in Victoria. We have always kicked above our weight in this state, and in this measure we are clearly away and ahead in doing that as well. For a quarter of the population, one in every three jobs that has been created in this country has been in the state of Victoria, and that is across all sectors, including medical research of course which also continues to boom under this Allan Labor government. Melbourne is one of the top three cities in the world for medical research. We have achieved all of this despite being continually undermined by our GST allocations as well, although it is very good to see the Commonwealth Grants Commission afford a more fair and reasonable distribution to Victoria this year with 97 cents in the dollar as opposed to 84 cents in the dollar, I believe it was previously, taking into account the fact that we do not have mines. I do not think we had many more mines in the previous years either, but it is good to see that imbalance at least going some way towards being redressed, notwithstanding the fact that over a significant period from the 1950s when you take into account GST and other measures as well, the state of Victoria has been underfunded by our federal friends to the tune of well in excess of \$110 billion. It is very good to see that news from the Commonwealth Grants Commission as well, and I will continue to obviously, in this place and outside, advocate for this state to receive its fair share of GST income as well.

There will be much more to say on this budget, and much more I could go into on the matter of state taxation, but as I said, the measures outlined will significantly support a number of people in our community. Most particularly, though, the one to really emphasise for me I think is that community and social housing sector that this government is supporting and continues to support, and this tax change in the state taxation act is an example of that. I commend the bill to the house.

**Richard WELCH** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:17): I am pleased to rise and speak on this bill. First, let us note that the revenue over forward estimates is up 22 per cent, and that is bizarrely the same 22 per cent of the project overruns that we had as well. Coincidence? I think not. This government has found it necessary to raise revenue because it cannot spend it fast enough, frankly. In a time when we have inflationary pressures and record debt, it is another spending budget. Let me be absolutely clear: it takes absolutely no talent to spend other people's money, and it takes even less talent to spend money that you have borrowed, but it takes a very particular kind of talent to spend money that you cannot even access. That takes a kind of magician. It is a kind of fantasy. In the words of the Attorney-General just prior, it is speculation; the budget is speculation from a revenue and spending point of view. This chamber should take note now and into the future that every time the government says it is investing in something or it is funding something, it is in practice saying, 'We are borrowing for something,' though it is worse than that, because every time it is borrowing it also incorporates significant components that it cannot even borrow on. It is relying on property speculation and other measures to raise the money.

We will have to be ultimately bailed out by the federal government, and if not, then projects will fail, such as the western interstate freight terminal (WIFT), until very recently the Beveridge interstate freight terminal (BIFT) and certainly things like Yan Yean Road and Camerons Lane and Wallan diamond – all of these things that the state has not been able to fund. The fact is that this government could use Monopoly money – if it could, it would; if it could print its own money, it would. It would call it investment when it is borrowing and when in reality it is fantasy money. It is fantasy money, like all of its projects. Their housing target is a fantasy, their offshore wind generation is a fantasy, the social housing targets are a fantasy, ramping targets are a fantasy, elective surgery is a fantasy, school and educational performance is a fantasy and cost-of-living measures are a fantasy. It is a fantasy like



this budget because the money does not really exist. It is a fantasy with a bow on top, especially this insulting \$400 crumb to public schools, which is an excellent example. Independent schools now pay more in tax than they receive in funding – that is, independent schools are funding the government's debt program for the privilege of educating the state's children. Our schools are funding the government, and the cost? The cost goes back to parents, to families and ultimately to children. But you know who did get cost –

**Jaclyn Symes** interjected.

**Richard WELCH:** Don't trivialise it. It's true. You borrow –

**Jaclyn Symes** interjected.

**Richard WELCH:** Debt – debt means it. You have got to pay \$26 million to service the debt, and if we lose another credit rating, I have it on good authority that the interest payment will not be \$26 million. If we go from AAA down to AA or lower, it will be \$76 million a day. That means frontline services are cut. That means all these fantasy projects around school performance and around school trips for kids and things get cut. It means ramping gets worse. It means the emergency services and first responders get less. It means our regions get less. To pretend that this does not have an effect on the standard of living, that this does not have an effect on families, is absurd.

You had an opportunity to do some budget repair; you did not do it. You could not do it because you are intellectually and ideologically locked into projects that create no wealth. The SRL is a project that is a housing development speculation exercise. It will not create wealth for the next generation. In fact all of this generation's capital and all of our children's capital is being locked into contracts to fund a project that will not generate wealth. It will indebt us. This budget is a tragedy written in black and white. The community may not know the worst of it, because they did not know the worst of it before the last election. Before the last election they were not told, for instance, on the Suburban Rail Loop about 40-storey buildings. They were not told that the open space in their communities would be shrunk from 36 square metres to just 6 square metres in order to pay for a project.

This is an absurd budget, and it will have an effect on people's lives. We should not forget that, and we should not trivialise it here. It is a fantasy. This totally reckless approach to spending money and this reckless approach to borrowing have simply put our credit rating under further pressure, and major agencies have us under review. A 22 per cent increase in revenue is 22 per cent less in the hands of businesses. It is 22 per cent taken from the bottom line of those who create wealth to fund fantasy projects – headlines that will never be delivered.

I draw particular attention to the fact that there is no funding for the WIFT. The WIFT would have been an investment of capital that generated wealth. It would have improved the efficiency of our freight system through Victoria. It would have connected up our ports to the west. It would have taken 40 per cent off the cost of freight, as will the BIFT, along with all the other benefits. But we did not invest in that because we had to quarantine nonproductive projects.

I will simply reiterate: the wealth of the state is determined by our ability to direct capital to its most productive purposes. The welfare of the state is generated by our ability to take that wealth and apportion it where it is most needed. We are doing neither of those things in this budget. Therefore I think, as many others have already said, this is possibly the worst budget in Victoria's history.

**Jaclyn Symes:** You know we are doing the state tax bill, right?

**Richard WELCH:** Appropriation.

**Jaclyn Symes:** No, we're doing the state tax bill. Your speech is clearly your budget speech.

**Richard WELCH:** Okay. Well, however you want to take it, the message would be the same.

**Sitting suspended 6:25 pm until 7:33 pm.**

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (19:32): Thank you, everyone, for your contributions on the State Taxation Amendment Bill 2024. One of the amendments in relation to this bill amends section 88A of the Land Tax Act 2005 to extend the vacant residential land tax holiday home exemption to property owners by a trust or company as of 28 November 2023. I want to take the opportunity, following conversations with stakeholders, to provide some information just to make sure that this section is clarified, because a few questions have been asked, so I just wanted to put a few things on the record.

This is in relation to two matters in connection to the administration of the exemption that, as I said, may require just a little bit of further clarification: (1) it is intended that the principal place of residency requirement would be satisfied if at least 50 per cent of the shares or beneficial interest in a landholding company or trust is held by a natural person or persons, either directly or indirectly, who use and occupy other land in Australia as their principal place of residence – that is, indirect interests held by a natural person can satisfy the requirement and (2) the term ‘a natural person’ for the definition of a specified person allows the four-week test to be satisfied by aggregating the periods of use of land by multiple specified persons, provided the periods of use are not simultaneous. For example, two people separately using the property as a holiday home for two weeks each in each relevant year would satisfy the test.

We believe that those words of clarification should satisfy the concerns that have been raised or more the questions that have been asked. However, we will continue to engage further with stakeholders, and if there is any further clarification required, we would have an opportunity to put any further information into the spring tax bill, which will indeed come into effect before the operation, which is on 1 January 2025. With that I am very happy to go into committee and address any questions that members may have.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read second time.**

**Committed.**

*Committee*

**Clause 1 (19:36)**

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I have a question on clause 1 – a few actually. Just on the vacant residential land tax expansion, what is the rationale behind extending the holiday home exemption to properties held in family trusts?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** The main intention, Mr Mulholland, is that it is intended to apply to holiday homes. That is the intention of that amendment.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** How will the expansion of the holiday home exemption impact revenue from vacant residential land tax?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, the government has not been able to determine the number of companies or trusts that will be affected by the change as there is no data available regarding the number of companies and trusts which own holiday-home land in Victoria. But the measure is expected to result in less revenue being collected from the vacant residential and land tax than if holiday homes owned by companies or trusts did not receive the exemption. As I said, we have not been able to accurately forecast that. However, I can put on the record that in total the expansion of the vacant residential land tax to outer Melbourne and regional Victoria legislated in 2023 was estimated to raise \$6 million per year once it came into effect. We might be able to provide information once it comes into effect, but we do not have that data today.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Would you be able to provide that data on notice?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Well, it does not currently exist.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** What are the specific criteria that must be met for a property held in a family trust to qualify for the exemption?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, I think that you will find that is currently in the legislation. I know that we are on clause 1, but the holiday home exemption sections are outlined in clause 13 of the bill.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I am happy to ask the question there, Attorney, but –

**Jaclyn SYMES:** To clarify, it would mean me reading out clause 13 to answer your question.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** What measures are in place to prevent misuse or exploitation of the holiday home exemption, especially concerning family trusts?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, again, it specifies the requirements in the legislation. However, compliance would be a matter for the State Revenue Office (SRO) under the Taxation Administration Act 1997, and there is no change to that.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** How do these changes align with the government's stated plans that are still on the housing statement website to build 80,000 homes per year?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, any homes that fall into the definition of the amendments could be captured, and the vacant residential land tax aims to bring more homes onto the market as well. That is part of the benefit of ensuring that we are promoting home owners that are not living in their homes to make them available, particularly for rental accommodation. That is hopefully an outcome of this measure. That is indeed what we would like to see. When we have so many people looking for residential properties to rent and finding that difficult, knowing that there is a vacant home in the street is pretty despairing for those that would like to rent it out on a full-time basis.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I am not sure that adequate reasoning has been given to the investment side of that.

Can I ask on the land tax assessment changes: what prompted the retrospective adjustment to land tax assessments for joint-owned land and certain trusts?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, the amendment that you refer to is a technical amendment, and amendments that are being made in relation to that matter address an unintended consequence of the introduction of the temporary land tax surcharge, which is that certain joint owners and beneficiaries of trusts may incur a land tax liability in particular circumstances which is unintended, and the changes will ensure that land tax is not assessed in these circumstances.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Given your comments on the vacant land tax in response to my question on the 80,000 homes, how many homes of the 80,000 does the government expect will eventuate as a result of this change?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Which change are you referring to?

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** The vacant residential land tax exemption.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, I think you are conflating two different policies of the government. This is about getting more homes into the market – more homes into particularly the residential market. This is not about generating construction.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I will put it a different way. You have acknowledged that the intent of these changes, particularly the vacant residential land tax expansion, is to get more people out of those rental queues and into homes. How many more people, as a result of this change, does the government expect to be in those homes?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, that is why I want to make it clear that conflating this policy with the housing statement commitment in relation to additional new homes – they are separate policies but obviously have similar policy intent. We do not know how many vacant homes are necessarily out there. That is the point of ensuring that we can help identify them and help incentivise. If they are vacant and unused, putting them into the market is certainly something that is going to be beneficial because it means that particularly those seeking in the rental market have more choices and it puts downward pressure on rental prices, which we know are at extreme levels at the moment.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** On the land tax assessment changes, we spoke before about the retrospective adjustment to land tax assessment for jointly owned and certain trusts. How will this change impact the administration of land tax assessments in Victoria moving forward?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** You are talking about the retrospectivity element, is that it?

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Yes, the land tax assessment changes.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** The amendment commences retrospectively to apply to 2024 land tax assessment notices, being the first year in which the temporary land tax surcharge applies. So it will not adversely affect anyone paying land tax, because the amendment is to stop an additional unintended liability from being assessed. It is about ensuring that for anybody that was impacted we can amend that, and then going forward it will apply as intended.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Just on the payroll tax changes for non-government schools, what prompted this change to ensure that undeclared schools classed as not-for-profit or religious institutions are ineligible for the payroll tax exemption?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** In relation to the amendments in this bill and the questions that you have raised, obviously we did spend a fair bit of time in last year's state tax bill debate talking about the removal of the tax exemption for undeclared schools. To ensure that these schools pay payroll tax as per the government's announcement last year, undeclared schools will be unable to avoid payroll tax by claiming an exemption as a religious institution from 1 July 2024. We are also making sure that it operates as intended and there is no incentive to seek to structure organisations to avoid paying payroll tax by outsourcing to another organisation to provide educational services, for example, because we will ensure that other organisations will be unable to claim payroll tax exemption for services provided to an undeclared school.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** If this change was not being legislated, how many schools would have fallen into this category and otherwise been eligible for a payroll tax exemption?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, we do not know if any schools are currently doing this, and many would not seek to bring about changes in their structure as a way to avoid this payroll tax responsibility. We just want to make sure that it is clear, that the intended purpose is met and that there are not ways to get around it effectively. That is not to presume that schools would do that, but we want to make sure that it is very clear. Therefore it is a relatively technical amendment not designed to target anyone in particular. We have not identified poor practices or people that are gearing up to try and avoid the tax obligations.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Has the government consulted with schools that will be impacted by these changes?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Can you just be more specific considering we were just talking about schools that potentially contract out – or are you talking about all schools? I am a little bit unclear about your question.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** It is about schools that would have been otherwise affected by the current changes on undeclared schools classed as not-for-profits.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Consulted on what?

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** On the changes in this state tax bill.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Broadly?

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Yes.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, as you would appreciate, the changes in this bill build on – basically, they are predominantly around ensuring the policy intent of the changes that we announced last year. And yes, there has been consultation with affected schools.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Will the government guarantee that more schools will not be added to the government's schools tax hit list?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, as I have articulated on many occasions, this is about removing an exemption that was a privilege to non-government schools. They are now coming to align with state government schools. It is removing an exemption, as I have indicated. Government schools across the state have long been required to pay payroll tax, and these new changes are now ensuring that some of our wealthiest private schools will also contribute their fair share. You have asked about certainty and changes, and I can provide the information that the threshold that has been set will remain in place until at least 1 January 2029, when it will be reviewed ahead of the 2029 school year. All non-government schools will be assessed on an annual basis against the \$15,000 threshold. If a school's total income per student exceeds the threshold at any time, the school will become subject to payroll, and obviously the reverse – if a school's total income per student falls below the threshold, at that time the school will no longer be subject to the tax.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Has the government sought any advice or done any modelling on whether there is either any intent or ability for schools to fall under or over that \$15,000 threshold within a school year to avoid the tax, or not go over it?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** It is not a specific matter for this bill, Mr Mulholland, but obviously the Minister for Education has been in conversations, particularly with schools that are abutting the threshold in relation to their obligations or otherwise.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I am very aware of the Minister for Education's conversations with schools. Will the government adopt the Liberals and Nationals policy to scrap payroll tax obligations for Victorian schools, including public schools?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, that is not a matter for the bill at hand, nor is it a matter for me as Attorney-General or Minister for Emergency Services to provide a lot of commentary around in relation to a commitment that you have given today. Therefore I will refrain from any commentary that is outside my lane.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I just want to talk about the contiguous exempt land expansion. Why is it necessary to extend the holiday home exemption to contiguous land?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** In relation to the contiguous-land-to-a-holiday-home issue, from 1 January 2026 vacant residential land tax will apply to unimproved land in metropolitan Melbourne that has remained undeveloped for at least five years. In metro Melbourne situations may arise where land used and occupied as a holiday home is exempt from the vacant residential land tax under existing exemption provisions but the adjoining contiguous unimproved land, such as land used for a tennis court, a garden or a bush block preserved for conservation purposes, on a separate title is subject to vacant residential land tax from January 2026 due to it being residential land that has been unimproved for five years or more. This is an unintended consequence and results in inconsistent treatment of land that is used as a holiday home and land that is contiguous to that holiday home which enhances the use of the occupation of the holiday home, and so we are proposing to remove that inconsistency through that amendment.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Would you be able to expand on – I know you briefly touched on them – the types of land use that will qualify for the contiguous exempt land expansion and provide some examples?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, I have given you three, and I will repeat them because I did speak quickly, I acknowledge that. The examples that I have been provided are things like a tennis court, a bush block or a garden, or you could have – I do not know, what is another sport that people have – a bowling green or you could have a basketball court. I am out of examples off the top of my head, but you get the vibe of it. But what I do want to say is that we have not been able to determine the number of affected landowners as there is no data available regarding holiday homes with contiguous unimproved land. We do not think there are heaps and heaps, but we wanted to make sure that the inconsistencies were rectified – better laws when they are consistent – so that is why we are fixing it. If people benefit from it, along the lines that I have said, for their adjoining land, then that is a good outcome.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Would the Attorney be able to advise the reasons and outline why the government has made this change?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I thought I answered that in the previous question. Do you want me to repeat the answer?

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** If you like.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** It is if you like, because I am just going to say exactly what I said to you two questions ago.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Yes, please.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** All right. What we have identified is that there may be situations where land used and occupied as a holiday home is exempt from the vacant residential land tax under the existing exemption provisions but the adjoining tennis court, bush block – whatever the block is used for – is unimproved land on a separate title so it can be subject to vacant residential land tax due to it being residential land that has been unimproved for five years or more. We want you in one or the other, not both. I am just butchering it now. The first answer was better. I am trying to help. I will go back to my previous answer. It was an unintended consequence to have inconsistent treatment of land, and without this change, there is the ability for the one parcel of land to have two treatments, and we want to make sure it has only got one, kind of.

**Richard WELCH:** Attorney, just turning to the waste levy scheme, what factors drove the decision to increase metropolitan municipal and industrial waste levy rates?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I thank Mr Welch for the question. I do believe that the rationale has been well canvassed throughout the debate, particularly the second-reading speech, but for the purposes of today's committee I want to put on the record that the government is committed to protecting and improving Victoria's environment. Our waste levy has for a long time been out of step with our neighbouring states and not reflective of the true environmental cost of diverting stuff to landfill.

It is about driving behavioural change. We want to encourage business and households to create less waste that has to be dumped into landfill. We want people to reduce, reuse and recycle, and there is a lot of appetite for this in the community. Certainly my local container deposit scheme depot is well utilised – in fact it has had a waiting line every time that my kids have wanted to bring their bottles down there – so we know that this type of behavioural change is happening, but we want to put some more oomph behind that. One hundred per cent of waste levy revenue goes towards creating better environmental outcomes for Victoria, and the changes to the waste levy from July 2025, as I said, will bring us into line with our neighbouring jurisdictions.

**Richard WELCH:** How much waste per year does the government expect will be reduced?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Welch, we do not have those figures to hand. As I identified in the answer to your previous question, this is about behavioural change. This is about motivating businesses, councils and householders to reduce, reuse and recycle. The less waste the better, which means that there would be less revenue coming in, and we would be happy with that.

**Richard WELCH:** Are there any plans to accompany the levy increase with additional measures to support waste reduction and recycling initiatives?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Policy positions that are outside the remit of this bill are matters that the Minister for Climate Action and the Minister for Environment would be well placed to provide you with further information on, but the government is always open to policies that are about recycling and reusing – we have got the circular economy strategy – so therefore it is always a work in progress. We have got obviously our emissions targets and the like, so there are always environmental policies that are coming out of various parts of government, predominantly the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. But as I said before, in terms of the revenue raised, 100 per cent of it will go back into creating a cleaner, greener Victoria, and therefore there will be opportunities for initiatives that come out of the EPA, for example, who will be beneficiaries of any of the funding. It will also top up the Sustainability Fund, which has pretty clear criteria for eligibility for the types of programs that it would fund, but it would meet the definition of how you characterised your question.

**Richard WELCH:** Are there any plans for, or has consideration been given to, the unintended and undesirable outcome of an increased levy, that there is likely to be increased dumping as a consequence of the increase?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Look, I heard Mr Mulholland's contribution, and he certainly mentioned areas of the state that I am familiar with as well. There are existing problems with people dumping. We certainly take this seriously, and we want to work towards preventing and responding to illegal dumping. Action that is doing that includes increased monitoring, investigation and prosecution of illegal waste disposal; enhanced capability of the EPA to combat waste crime using surveillance intelligence and special investigative teams; improved intelligence-sharing coordination between regulatory and emergency management agencies for effective action on unsafe or illegal waste management; and more disposal points for asbestos across the state through development and implementation of an asbestos disposal management plan. Obviously we have regular conversations with councils, who are often at the forefront of dealing with the consequences or having to respond to concerns from community about illegal dumping.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Based on the premise that is the justification for the waste levy, that Victoria is out of step with other states, why is Victoria so out of step on other tax measures, having the highest taxed citizens in the nation?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Thank you for asking about the harmonisation with New South Wales and South Australia as it connects to this bill. I am more than happy to provide you a response to that, because the waste levy is out of step with neighbouring states and does not reflect the true environmental cost of dumping stuff in landfill. If we do not make any changes, it could encourage big waste producers across the border to send their waste to Victorian landfills, so we want to make sure that that is not an incentive. We want less waste dumped at landfill. Changes to the waste levy, as I said, are about changing behaviour so that big waste producers create less waste and do more to reduce, reuse and recycle. As I said, this is about generating revenue that goes towards creating better environmental outcomes for the state of Victoria.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I want to jump around a little bit. Just on the new exemption for social and emerging housing, reference part 4, division 2: what motivated the introduction of a new land tax exemption for social and emergency housing?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** The motivation is to provide certainty to the sector, to provide a broader range of social and emergency housing with a land tax exemption and to encourage innovation in service

delivery with the assurance that social and emergency housing that satisfies these parameters will receive a land tax exemption. So a good policy outcome is what is driving that decision.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** How will the exemption be implemented and monitored to ensure it benefits those in need?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, as I said, this is good government policy; I think that you would agree. There is expected minimal revenue impact – we have been up-front about that – because social and emergency housing is typically already land-exempt under existing exemptions, but this is ensuring that it can be slightly more broadly applied. In relation to compliance activities, that still remains standard SRO activity. Hopefully that answers your question.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Were there any cases that motivated this exemption, this change?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, as I said, it is to provide further certainty to the sector, and we certainly want to see increased innovation and provision of social emergency housing, so that is some of the motivation. But we did have advocacy from the Community Housing Industry Association in relation to these changes.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** So I assume that is a yes. What is the anticipated cost of providing this exemption?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** As I think I indicated in one of my previous responses, Mr Mulholland, the change is expected to have minimal revenue impact, as social and emergency housing are typically already exempt. But we do want to send a strong message that innovation and provision of social and emergency housing is something that we support. We want to make sure that we give certainty and comfort that these exemptions are there. That is why making standalone exemptions really calls that out, and there is a real call to arms to the sector.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** What oversight mechanisms will be in place regarding this new exemption?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Just the standard State Revenue Office compliance activities, and Homes Victoria already watch closely the provision of social and emergency housing, so there will be a crossover between the agencies.

**Richard WELCH:** Just turning to stamp duty amendments for business insurance, Attorney, what is the rationale behind the phased elimination of business insurance duty?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Welch, you might have to be a bit more specific than clause 1 to draw my attention to the specific measure of the bill you are referring to.

**Richard WELCH:** Clause 2.1

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Clause 2.1? Okay. There is nothing new in relation to that, Mr Welch. That is in last year's budget, and the change in this bill is a technical change to carry through the intention of the change in last year's budget, so no change, just making sure that it is carried through.

**Richard WELCH:** How would the Treasurer's discretionary power to declare or exclude classes of business insurance be exercised, and what safeguards are in place to prevent misuse of this power?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** As I indicated in my previous answer, Mr Welch, there is not a specific matter for this bill, but let me seek some advice from the box.

I am just seeking some further information from the box, but in the meantime, I can give you some high-level information when I find the right page. You were asking about the discretion to make a declaration in relation to business insurance. The Treasurer does have the ability to exercise a discretion. Once the bill is passed, the Treasurer intends to declare public liability cover attaching to household insurance, which is otherwise part of the public and product liability class of business, to



be excluded from the definition of business insurance as it was never intended to be business insurance, which goes to my former answer about the fact that this was about the implementation of changes last year. The declaration that the Treasurer intends to make will be effective from 1 July 2024. In relation to some of your questions about his ability and declaration, he only has the ability to add classes of business insurance or take out certain classes of business insurance. Subordinate legislation requirements will govern any such changes to that.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Just to jump you around again, I am going to compelling casino operators. What necessitated the amendment to grant the commissioner the power to compel casino operators to produce documents or information?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** The existing investigative powers of the commissioner of state revenue are not suited to requiring a casino operator to produce records or information on a regular and ongoing basis. For example, records of casinos are generally daily as appropriate. The change enables the commissioner to issue notices to a casino operator to require it to produce information on an ongoing basis for a prospective period of up to six months. This is about strengthening casino tax compliance, and that has been a key area of reform as part of the government's ongoing response to the Royal Commission into the Casino Operator and Licence.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Just a follow-up from that, can you explain the significance of extending this power for periods of up to six months?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Yes. I can certainly add some information as to why we believe that the existing legislative powers are not adequate. The commissioner of state revenue can only issue notices under the Taxation Administration Act 1997, which requires a person to produce information, documents or things for investigative purposes. The power is used by the commissioner to compel the production of a document or information that is already in existence. The notice covers information, documents or a thing that is of a class specified in the notice, and the information, document or a thing must either be in the possession or be going to come into the possession of a casino operator during the period specified in the notice. That is where the 'up to six months' comes in. Furthermore, there must be an additional record that a casino operator has been required to keep in accordance with the notice that the commissioner has issued under the Taxation Administration Act 1997.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Are there any safeguards in place to ensure that the power to compel information is exercised appropriately and fairly?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** In response to your question, I have got more information about if the casino operator does not comply. But in terms of the specifics of your question, I think what I would point to is the fact that a casino operator does not commit an offence if they have a reasonable excuse for not providing the required information or document within the timeframe specified in the notice. You were looking for some safeguards; there is some flexibility in that regard.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Just moving on to Trust for Nature.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Is there anything you're not going to touch on?

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Maybe. I will think about it. I might be nice. What drove the establishment of the vacant land conservation covenants account?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I would hope that a lot of these questions about why we are doing things were covered off by previous speakers, namely, the Treasurer in his second-reading speech, but I am more than happy to clarify for the purposes of the committee, and I think that is an important process. Therefore in relation to your question, from 1 January 2026 vacant residential land tax will apply to unimproved land in metropolitan Melbourne that has remained undeveloped for at least five years. This provision is the opportunity to better protect land of high conservation value. Land with a conservation covenant is exempt from land tax and from the vacant residential land tax. The new trust account is being set up to provide more transparency about how the funding for the new vacant land

conservation covenants is being applied. Money paid to the new trust account will facilitate and enable Trust for Nature to enter into conservation covenants.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** How will the vacant land conservation covenants account support Trust for Nature's efforts to enter into conservation covenants with landowners?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Mr Mulholland, we anticipate that \$2 million will be available to Trust for Nature to establish vacant land conservation covenants, because that is money that was allocated as part of the budget and therefore is available, and we will be seeking take-up of that. The conservation covenant is a voluntary, legally binding agreement made between private landholders and Trust for Nature to permanently protect and conserve private land with natural, cultural or scientific value. We certainly know that there is a lot of interest in this area of government intervention, and therefore I can go further, in that the money paid out to the new trust account will facilitate and enable Trust for Nature to enter into conservation covenants – for example, registration fees and assessment and documentation costs – with funding provided on a per-property basis. We are expecting that this \$2 million will be spread across up to 50 properties depending on demand, but as I said, there is a fair bit of interest in this funding availability.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** How will the reimbursement process for Trust for Nature's costs be managed and overseen?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** The Secretary of the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action will administer the fund and authorise payments for the Trust for Nature, providing a mechanism for oversight of the fund and reimbursement of the trust's reasonable costs in line with that intent.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Has it always been government policy to include land of cultural value?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** In relation to when conservation covenants came into existence?

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Yes. What I mean is 'or has it been expanded from environmental value', and if so, when did this change occur?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I am not aware of any change to definition. It is obviously outside the remit of this bill, and from my experience in dealing with this policy area, which is not extensive, I must say I just know of the interest and the different people that have got these types of properties. As far as I am aware it has always included those definitions. It would be best to seek advice from the Minister for Environment about the timing of definitions, whether they evolved et cetera, but certainly in relation to where it stands today, it picks up natural, cultural and scientific values.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** What outcomes are expected from these amendments in terms of conservation and biodiversity protection?

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Well, it is kind of in the name. I think just coming back to the Trust for Nature and its aim, it is a non-profit organisation with a specific focus on private land. It is established under the act, and what they do is acquire, conserve and maintain areas within Victoria that are ecologically significant or of natural interest or beauty or scientific interest. It also encourages and assists in the preservation of wildlife and native plants for public, scientific and public educational purposes. We would like more properties to fall into this remit. We want more people to be encouraged to ensure that land is put aside for permanent conservation. It is a good, balanced outcome to ensure that there is incentive for landowners to produce that outcome. As I said, I have met a couple of these landowners, and they are pretty passionate people. I think they are a growing community.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I have got another page, but I will be nice and finish there.

**The DEPUTY PRESIDENT:** Mr Mulholland, I invite you to move your amendment 1, which tests all of your remaining amendments. Just before I do so, I remind members that under sections 62 to 64 of the Constitution Act 1975, the Council does not have the power to make amendments to parts of this bill. No question will be put on the affected clauses, and any proposed amendments to those

clauses must be in the form of a suggested amendment to the Assembly. Standing order 14.16 sets out the procedure for dealing with suggested amendments. The proposed amendments are tested by Mr Mulholland's amendment 1 to clause 1, but we will deal with his first amendment, which tests all of the others anyway.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I move my amendment:

1. Clause 1, page 2, lines 14 to 16, omit "and non-profit organisations providing educational services to those schools".

It seeks to remove payroll tax changes from schools. As the Deputy President has made members aware, it is a suggested amendment to the Assembly.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I think the government's position on this matter is well versed, and we will not be supporting the suggested amendment.

**Council divided on amendment:**

*Ayes (15):* Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

*Noes (19):* Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Samantha Ratnam, Adem Somyurek, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Sheena Watt

**Amendment negatived.**

**Clause agreed to; clauses 2 to 5 agreed to.**

**Clauses 6 to 17 – no question put pursuant to standing order 14.16(2).**

**Clauses 18 and 19 agreed to.**

**Clauses 20 and 21 – no question put pursuant to standing order 14.16(2).**

**Clauses 22 and 23 agreed to.**

**Clause 24 – no question put pursuant to standing order 14.16(2).**

**Clauses 25 to 27 agreed to.**

**Reported to house without amendment.**

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (20:36):  
I move:

That the report be now adopted.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Report adopted.**

*Third reading*

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (20:36):  
I move:

That the bill be now read a third time.

**The PRESIDENT:** The question is:

That the bill be now read a third time and do pass.

**Council divided on question:**

*Ayes (20):* Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Samantha Ratnam, Adem Somyurek, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Sheena Watt

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

**Question agreed to.**

**Read third time.**

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

*Adjournment*

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (20:39): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

**Hospital funding**

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (20:39): (905) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for Health, and it is in relation to the reviews of the three community hospitals that have been scrapped from the Victorian budget. Today during the debate we were having a discussion – I was having the discussion with the Attorney-General at the table – around the 10 community hospitals that had been promised by Labor in 2018. In that discussion it was confirmed that reviews of those three sites, Eltham, Torquay and Emerald Hill, were taking place. It was suggested that that be followed up through the Department of Health in relation to where those projects are at. I know there is some concern in the Emerald Hill precinct around what will happen to the buildings that had been identified, and now there is nothing happening around those buildings and around the social housing and other areas in South Melbourne. Nevertheless it does affect the communities of Eltham and Torquay as well, who were promised by Labor that they would have a community hospital. We keep hearing from the minister that she is committed to delivering health care closer to home, but this is another broken promise, another con job, by Labor to the Victorian community. The action I am seeking is for the minister to provide to the community a clear explanation as to when the reviews of those three community hospitals will be completed and made public.

**Women's sexual and reproductive health**

**Sarah MANSFIELD** (Western Victoria) (20:41): (906) The action I am seeking from the Minister for Health is to compel all state-funded health services to provide essential reproductive and sexual health care, including contraception and abortion. Right now health practitioners, pharmacists and entire hospitals can deny a whole host of health care, including medical and surgical termination of pregnancy, if they have a conscientious objection to its provision. With respect to termination of pregnancy, there are laws that exist which place a positive obligation on objectors to provide an effective onward referral – that is, to ensure that someone seeking an abortion can get the care they need elsewhere. But too often this is not occurring, and women are being let down. I have heard it directly from community members who have had this experience. I have heard it from providers of reproductive health care, where this problem is widely acknowledged, and it has also been identified in research undertaken in Victoria.

While the government protects the rights of individual practitioners to not participate in certain aspects of their profession, people are being denied basic health care not only by the individual providers but

by entire institutions. Under this Labor government, denominational hospitals continue to receive public funds to open new health services despite the fact that they refuse to provide the whole suite of women's health care. This is essential, often critical, health care, yet women and gender-diverse people are being left to be further stigmatised, left to suffer and left unable to access care. For many women, being turned away from receiving the care that they need not only makes a stressful situation more difficult, it also delays care, adding additional complications and limiting options, especially in the case of terminations. In fact in the case of abortion, accessing care quickly can mean the difference between paying \$42.50 for a medical termination or up to \$8000 to access surgery in the later stages of a pregnancy.

I have said it before in this place, but I am compelled to repeat myself: equity for women, especially in health care, has been hard fought for by a legacy of courageous and persistent women, but it is clear that the fight is not over. Despite years of attempted reforms there remain many parts of the state in which women cannot be sure that they will be able to access abortion care from a public hospital, and it is about time this ended.

### Daylesford hospital

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (20:43): (907) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health. The action that I seek is for the minister to allocate a minimum of \$75 million in funding from the 2024–25 budget for redevelopment of the Daylesford hospital. In the lead-up to the 2022 Victorian election the Liberal Party committed to investing \$75 million to redevelop Daylesford hospital if elected to government. In response a generous community bank pledged to add \$750,000 of their own towards the hospital on the condition that whoever was elected followed through with an investment of \$75 million. Unfortunately, Labor was elected and has failed to make any significant investment in the Daylesford hospital. Labor has so neglected this health service that the community had to fundraise \$100,000 themselves to pay for a master plan for the hospital's redevelopment.

I applaud the generosity of the local community, who have an incredible reputation for actively supporting local health services with frequent donations and bequests. Not only did they fund their own master plan, but they have also raised money to pay for new medical equipment and expanded services – that is an incredible effort by the local community. But what a shame the Labor government will not properly fund this health service in the health minister's own electorate. The chair of the Daylesford Hospital upgrade appeal committee expressed her dismay with the condition of the hospital, saying that:

... in 2022 we have a hospital facility ... where the staff is great, the services are terrific ... that has a roof that leaks in poor weather.

The existing facilities at Daylesford Hospital have not been upgraded for well over 20 years and are in desperate need of refurbishment and improvement. \$4.5 million was announced three years ago for an upgraded operating theatre, but over a year later nothing had been done – they needed more money. Then another \$1.6 million of top-up funding was announced in March 2023, with the Minister for Health and local member Mary-Anne Thomas saying the theatre upgrade would be complete in March 2024.

But the real issue is not the long delay in getting the operating theatre finished, the issue is that in the latest budget the state Labor government has once again overlooked the need for investment in the Daylesford Hospital. This is despite the hospital having a well-designed redevelopment master plan, which has wide community support and was seen and approved with changes by the Victorian Health Building Authority. The master plan is there waiting to be implemented, with staged upgrades for the gradual improvement of the hospital over time, and yet no new money has been allocated for this vital health service. The *Age* reported that the budget contains \$6.4 billion that has been set aside for future promises but not allocated to a specific purpose, and I urge the minister to allocate a minimum of \$75 million of this to the redevelopment of the Daylesford Hospital.

**Budget 2024–25**

**Sheena WATT** (Northern Metropolitan) (20:47): (908) President, I am sure that you and many others in this place know that I love the footy, in particular my beloved Carlton Football Club.

*Members interjecting.*

**Sheena WATT:** That is right. I also love Rugby League, netball, swimming and round-ball football – it was a bit of a shame about the results for Victory on the weekend, I have got to say. I love tennis; the truth is that I just love sport. That is why, when I saw the extra funding for the Get Active Kids vouchers in the 2024 budget, I was absolutely ecstatic. You see, the Allan Labor government has already provided over almost 150,000 vouchers to kids all around Victoria so that they can play the sports that they love. That is 150,000 opportunities for kids all around Victoria to stay happy, healthy and involved in our community. That is 150,000 opportunities for Victorian children to become the next Eddie Betts or the next Ash Barty – yes, they are my two favourites. These vouchers have helped so many Victorian families cover the cost of sports, whether it is boots, balls, rackets, jerseys, helmets, mouthguards or more, these vouchers ensure that families do not need to sacrifice sport to cost-of-living pressures.

This budget also had an investment of \$116 million for the active schools program, which does not just look after the physical health of students but also benefits their classroom behaviour, brain function, motivation and concentration. \$76 million of that will go to swimming lessons and water safety programs so Victorian school kids are set up and safe for the summer swims we all look forward to. Maybe it is the next Emma McKeon or Ian Thorpe – they should come from Victoria, I reckon. We know that Victoria is the undisputed home of sport. No other state even comes close to what we have got, whether it is the F1, the Aussie open, the Melbourne Cup or the most beloved AFL Grand Final, just to name a few. Investments like this into the athletes of the future will keep Victoria the sporting capital. Today my adjournment matter is for the Minister for Community Sport in the other place, and I ask the minister to provide information to explain how the true voucher and reimbursement models in this program help families to achieve sport and active recreation.

**Police conduct**

**Georgie PURCELL** (Northern Victoria) (20:49): (909) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Attorney-General, and the action I seek is for the release of the final report on the systemic review of police oversight or, if that is not yet available, any draft versions of its findings and recommendations. In response to recommendation 61 of the Royal Commission into the Management of Police Informants, the Department of Justice and Community Safety in 2021 was tasked with undertaking the systemic review of police oversight. This followed the disclosure that the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission currently investigates only around 2 per cent of police misconduct complaints, allowing officers abusing their powers to go unchecked and without consequence. IBAC's review highlighted evidence of cover-ups by police officers, failures to address investigating officers' conflicts of interest and failures to contact key witnesses. The Attorney-General claimed in the 2022 annual progress report that this work was completed and that the government was considering options for reform, yet these options have still not seen the light of day and have been deliberately concealed from the public. The government said in 2021 it was committed to learning from the IBAC committee and ensuring the highest oversight system for the Victorian police force. Consultations for this review closed in February 2022. During that year 28 women were murdered in this state due to family violence. The government then told us two years later this April – only after 35 women had been murdered – they would act on the epidemic of violence against women in this country.

We know that the police system is a substantial part of the problem. The process of complaints of violence or threats of violence begins, and all too often ends, at police stations. We also know that contact with the justice system is detrimental to our youth and their futures. Instead of raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 and addressing the systemic racism and over-policing of First Nations

children, the government wants to provide police with new, expansive powers in the youth justice reforms without releasing the findings of police oversight and misconduct in this state. The Yoorrook Justice Commission recommended in September 2023 that the government establish a new, independent police oversight authority, and if this government wants to change male violence against women and youth crime then it needs to hold Victorian police to account, and I seek for the Attorney-General to release the final report of the systemic review of police oversight.

### **Schools funding**

**Richard WELCH** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (20:52): (910) The action I seek is from the Minister for Education. In the lead-up to the 2022 state election Labor promised to deliver \$850 million in upgrades to at least 89 schools across Victoria. However, in the May state budget the Allan Labor government have failed to fund 29 schools – that is 30 per cent of them – that were promised upgrades in 2022. This government is denying our students the world-class education they deserve in Victoria. Furthermore, early childhood sector supports and regulation have also been cut by \$79 million.

I have met with many schools in my electorate whose facilities have been neglected for decades and are becoming unsafe and unfit for student use and are certainly providing a diminished environment for learning. At many of these schools multiple classes have been crammed into the same room or into the gym, which is unfit for learning. In Box Hill students take their lunches in the hallway because there is no open space at all. Camelot Rise Primary School in Glen Waverley has exposed gas pipes – you can smell the toilets from inside the classrooms – and the oval turns into a giant puddle in winter where ducks nest. Schools such as Camelot Rise have been neglected by this government for far too long, and the minister must step in. Schools are struggling to find teachers to fill positions, and absenteeism has risen on an average to 29.2 days per year for students in years 7 to 10. Local principals I have met with have raised concerns with Labor's school tax hurting their students' education. One school I have spoken to mentioned that they pay more in schools tax than funding they receive from the government. Meanwhile, the Minister for Education refuses to meet with principals to discuss educational issues. The minister held 25 education-related meetings in the three months between January and March this year – an average of 8.3 a month. Not a single one of those meetings was with a school itself. There is no wonder that the education system is worsening under this government, as the minister only meets with educational bodies and bureaucrats. The minister should instead be meeting with those teachers and principals who interact with students daily.

Cuts to education are letting down our children, who deserve quality education to set them up to succeed. Providing \$400 as a one-off payment, which does not apply to the vast majority of students at independent schools, is not enough to make up for years of neglect of education by this government. It is time for the minister to prioritise the needs of our students and schools, not just bureaucratic meetings. The action I seek is for the minister to get out of their bubble and meet with principals, reverse these brutal cuts to education and ensure our students have the best education that they are entitled to.

### **Eastfield Road–Railway Avenue, Ringwood East**

**Nick McGOWAN** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (20:55): (911) My adjournment debate matter is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and specifically what I ask the minister to do in this particular case is to provide an urgent allocation of funding to make safe a very important intersection in my electorate in Ringwood. It is an area that many locals will be familiar with, and that is Eastfield Road and Railway Avenue. This has been complicated in recent times because we have the Level Crossing Removal Project at Dublin Road. Those familiar with the Level Crossing Removal Project will know that as you head due east, where you intersect with the Eastfield Road bridge it is a T-intersection. At the best of times it is a dangerous T-intersection. With the recent closure of one lane along Railway Avenue, it has become even more complicated, even more congested and, dare I say it, even more unsafe. Even today I was on the phone here in Parliament speaking with local residents

in their homes in Ringwood and Ringwood East. They have noted, seen and even filmed not only the cars that are coming in and out of Railway Avenue and Eastfield Road but also numerous children, because there are a number of schools in this area and they have had to cross at or around that intersection. It is a very dangerous intersection.

This problem predates the Level Crossing Removal Project, so in this case it is not a matter for the minister for the level crossing project, it is for the minister for roads. It has been there way too long – for very many years – and it is high time that this government gives it the attention it deserves before a serious incident occurs there either with a vehicle or with a pedestrian. We all know that when we look at the road toll as it currently stands year on year the averages are not great. We want to make sure that we are doing everything possible to identify these locations where works are needed and where they are urgent. The locals know that that is the case. I have seen it for myself. It is appropriate that this government step in as quickly as possible.

You cannot simply leave it to the council. Maroondah council, like so many councils, are overwhelmed with the expectations that we all have of them, because it is at the very same time that this government are depriving them of much-needed funds and are also obviously offsetting their costs – that is, the state government's costs – onto local council. Councils are increasingly being asked to do more with less. The math simply does not add up. For those locals in Maroondah in particular, they cannot look to the council alone. This is something that absolutely warrants state government intervention. I urge the minister to act with haste and to act with the degree of urgency that is deserved for an intersection that is unsafe and absolutely warrants every cent that we can afford to improve not only the vehicle access and the traffic flow but, most importantly of all, pedestrian and road safety.

### **Cooks' Cottage**

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (20:58): (912) My matter for the adjournment tonight is for the attention of the Minister for Environment. The environment portfolio manages important tracts of public land, including ones quite close to here in the Fitzroy Gardens, and I am particularly interested in the land around Captain Cook's cottage. This land is managed under delegation by the City of Melbourne, and I can indicate to the chamber I have FOI-ed the City of Melbourne, who have been very unresponsive.

**A member** interjected.

**David DAVIS**: No, they have taken more than six months to give me just a few figures and to deny a series of important documents about their plans and proposals for Captain Cook's cottage. They have said that the documents are too sensitive to release, Minister, but I am concerned given the attacks by leftists and hooligans on Captain Cook statues and the propensity of the City of Melbourne to move into, let us just say, ideological territory. I am concerned that the City of Melbourne does have unfortunate plans for Captain Cook's cottage.

Bear in mind this is actually the Cook family's cottage. It was brought here in 1934 in celebration of 100 years of Victoria, and it is a link back to the fact that Captain Cook was the first European – and I hasten to add that word 'European' – to sight Victoria and Australia's east coast in the place of Point Hicks in April 1770. It is meaningful for Victoria and a meaningful part of our history, and the Cooks' Cottage should be protected. I am deeply troubled about what I have heard informally out of the bureaucracy but also this resistance to actually bringing the community into their confidence, and it is in that circumstance that I ask the Minister for Environment to intervene. The land is public land. It ultimately is the responsibility of the Minister for Environment. If the City of Melbourne has some harebrained scheme to move Cooks' Cottage, to close Cooks' Cottage, to make it more difficult to access, to put obscure and strange requirements on it, well, I think the Minister for Environment should stand up to them and should say no and, if necessary, take back control from the City of Melbourne.

I do not actually think the City of Melbourne can be trusted with this important land. I mean, they have gone on a whole series of ideological frolics, and we need to stop that. So the action I am seeking from



the Minister for Environment is to intervene to examine what is going on, to find out what proposals the City of Melbourne has and to protect Captain Cook's cottage, if necessary by taking back control.

### **Newhaven Jetty**

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (21:01): (913) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Ports and Freight, and it relates to the Newhaven Jetty, which has been deemed unsafe and is in a condemned status. The action I seek from the minister is for them to urgently meet with the community and local businesses and stakeholders to plot a timeline for urgent upgrades and a reopening of the Newhaven Jetty. It is a gorgeous location on Phillip Island, and it is best known for fishing off the pier. But it has suddenly been completely closed, completely cut off indefinitely by Parks Victoria due to stated structural failures. It holds a historical significance as being at the oldest settlement on Phillip Island, with a rich maritime history, and it plays an important role in the community and the visitor economy, where people can fish, walk, take photos and be out in nature. It is a magnificent place.

In 2020, four years ago, an engineering structural assessment revealed that this 50-year-old structure was in need of urgent upgrades. Over the past several years the community has witnessed degradation and neglect of the jetty, with the south arm already being closed and now this recent installation of barricades directly obstructing the view right outside the Saltwater restaurant, which is a fantastic restaurant which actually employs 30 young people in the region and is often booked for weddings. At the moment the restaurant proprietor has had cancellations of these weddings because, clearly, rather than a beautiful picture, you have got walled off fences and padlocks, and this is just a blight on this most beautiful attraction.

The Labor government is supposed to collect fishing licence and registration fees to improve fishing, boating, jetties and piers. However, the question remains for the community: why has this jetty been neglected to the point it is lost off the priority list and is now condemned? This is unacceptable. It is unacceptable from an amenity point of view, from a public access and community view and from a mental health and wellbeing view but also for the visitor economy. So again, I call on the minister to come, meet with the community and work out a timeline to reopen this beautiful asset.

### **Cultural heritage management plans**

**Renee HEATH** (Eastern Victoria) (21:04): (914) My adjournment is for the Minister for Treaty and First Peoples, and the action that I seek is for an urgent review of cultural heritage planning processes that are unnecessarily holding up building and developments. An example of this is a constituent of mine in Leongatha. In 2021 Ben, together with three small business owners, bought 12 acres of industrial zoned low-density land with minor cultural heritage overlay. The Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006 requires landowners with this overlay to consult cultural heritage advisers and a registered Aboriginal party, or RAP, to provide a plan. According to the act, this process should be timely and efficient while providing mechanisms enabling dispute resolutions.

Unfortunately, the opposite has occurred. The RAP in this instance was the Bunurong Land Council, who in the last decade have been put under administration twice for alleged fraud, theft and tax evasion, and yet they continue to operate, a decision the federal investigator called a sham. Initial digging on Ben's property found minimal artefacts, which were agreed to be sectioned off and preserved – a decision quickly, and without justification, overturned when an elder glancing at a map allegedly said, 'Make them dig' and walked out. So far this process has cost nearly \$54,000 and has caused enormous stress. With field representatives due back sometime in 2025, there is no end date to these delays and the costs, with potentially 12 acres having to be dug up by hand. There are no clues provided as to what they are looking for, and that is not a surprise given the amount of secrecy around these situations. The Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register is not publicly accessible due to culturally sensitive information, so an urgent review of the cultural heritage planning cannot be overstated considering the level of secrecy, autonomy and broad-based scope provided for RAPs under the government's First Nations treaty. So I ask for this action.

### COVID-19 vaccination

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (21:06): (915) My adjournment matter is to the Minister for Health regarding the absurd consequences of the government's ongoing COVID-19 vaccine mandates in Victoria. Given our workforce shortages, especially in regional Victoria, the action I seek is for the government to remove the COVID vaccine requirement. Victoria is lagging behind other states, and the Labor government is stopping qualified people from working in the industry.

I have spoken to paramedics, nurses, doctors and businesses who want the rules updated so they can return to work. Victorians are unable to actually do the job they have been trained for because the government continues to apply rules around these vaccinations. Victoria is facing workforce shortages, and it is time for Victoria to move on. The Treasurer even said in his budget speech:

We're also winding up COVID-era programs that are no longer needed, as we move into a new phase.

I was speaking with a doctor in Bendigo, who referred to many local nurses and doctors who are unable to work. This doctor was very disappointed that the vaccination for healthcare workers on the Department of Health's website was recently reviewed, on 2 April 2024, but there has been no change. Just this week I spoke with Sue, a trained nurse from Bendigo, who would be working as a nurse in a regional hospital if the rules were updated. Victoria cannot afford to have valuable professionals out of the workforce. After a decade of Labor our health system is stretched, hospitals are under financial pressure, patients are facing long surgery waitlists and many hospital staff are working double shifts. We need to remove the barriers so our health professionals can return to work.

Our ambulance service is also struggling. I spoke with a lady in Bendigo who called 000 was told to get a taxi because no ambulances were available. Just recently there were up to 10 ambulances ramped outside the Bendigo Hospital. We need to remove the barriers for more paramedics to return to work.

The COVID vaccine mandate also affects businesses. I have spoken with a gardening service in Bendigo that works with NDIS clients, and the vaccine requirements still apply to their service as well. If this vaccination requirement were removed, they could employ more people. But is not just in health alone, the vaccine mandate impacts Fire Rescue Victoria personnel as well. Victoria is the only state which still imposes this restriction, and I ask the government to get a move on and remove the COVID vaccine mandate so more Victorians can get back to work.

### Transport infrastructure

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (21:09): (916) My adjournment is for the Minister for Ports and Freight, and I seek the action of the minister to explain its extraordinary backflip today on the Beveridge intermodal freight terminal (BIFT) and its abandonment of the Western freight terminal (WIFT) and to explain the economic consequences of dithering and delaying for so many years. The Labor Party have been dragged kicking and screaming to back the Beveridge intermodal freight terminal and are only supporting this critical project now due to the federal Labor government finally adopting the former federal Liberal government's policy that was criticised at both a federal level and a state level.

I have to say, it is good to finally see sense from the federal government after they put it in review for a couple of years and to finally see sense from the Victorian government. I reckon they should rename this terminal the Richard Welch intermodal freight terminal, because Richard Welch was up against it as the former candidate for McEwen. He backed the BIFT because he knew it was going to create 20,000 jobs for our region up in Beveridge and the surrounding northern and north-east suburbs. It is going to be a winner for jobs in our communities, where there is a distinct lack of jobs because this government has not done any economic planning whatsoever. But I wanted to talk about and get the minister to explain the backflip, because there is so much evidence that this government tried to kill

the BIFT. This government does not really support the BIFT but is only doing it because it has run out of money and the feds are paying for everything. The Premier said:

The Victorian government made it very clear, and has made it very clear on a number of occasions, that our priority for the establishment of an intermodal freight terminal for our city and state is in the western suburbs of Melbourne ...

There's a very good logical reason for this ... because the western suburbs of Melbourne is the heart of Australia's freight and logistics industry ...

So there is a backflip there. They understood the need for both terminals, but the priority is in the west. The Victorian government spokesperson in 2022 during the election said it would not be lectured by the Commonwealth about the state's infrastructure priorities and argued the freight industry supported the western facility because it is the project that stacks up.

Minister, why does it no longer stack up? Because Labor have run out of money. Labor have wasted billions – \$40 billion on infrastructure blowouts, \$600 million on the Commonwealth Games. They have run out of money, so the feds have come in and prioritised Beveridge. They did not have any money for the outer metro ring-road, they did not have any money for the WIFT and they did not have any money to fund 50 per cent of Camerons Lane in Beveridge, so they are just getting the feds to pay for it all. Well, Richard Welch and the Liberal Party at a state and federal level are completely vindicated, and federal and state Labor have come to the party.

### Responses

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (21:12): Look at you guys all hanging out. You did not ask me any questions, though, so I have got no answers for you guys – and the person who did ask me a question has left. I have answered that vaccine mandate question about 20 times. I reckon you have had enough of me today, surely. There are 11 matters for ministers that I will refer all of your questions to. I was going to acquit Ms Purcell's question, but she did not hang around for the answer. So in that regard, I will just put it in writing to save everyone who did not ask that question.

**Melina Bath:** On a point of order, President, adjournment 684 – I spoke about the adjournment on 7 February. It is well overdue. I have written to the Minister for Environment reminding him, and I ask you to remind him once more.

**The PRESIDENT:** I am sure the minister will.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I got through some of mine today; I will ask other ministers to do the same.

**The PRESIDENT:** Very good. The house stands adjourned.

**House adjourned 9:13 pm.**

Following material incorporated by David Davis (see page 1732):









