



# **Hansard**

## **LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL**

**60th Parliament**

**Tuesday 20 February 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, Gaëlle	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 20 February 2024**

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

*Bills*

**Biosecurity Legislation Amendment (Incident Response) Bill 2023**

**Justice Legislation Amendment (Police and Other Matters) Bill 2023**

**Land (Revocation of Reservations) Bill 2023**

*Royal assent*

**The PRESIDENT (12:03):** I have received a message from the Governor, dated 13 February:

The Governor informs the Legislative Council that she has, on this day, given the Royal Assent to the undermentioned Act of the present Session presented to her by the Clerk of the Parliaments:

**1/2024** Biosecurity Legislation Amendment (Incident Response) Act 2024

I have received a further message from the Governor, dated 20 February:

The Governor informs the Legislative Council that she has, on this day, given the Royal Assent to the undermentioned Acts of the present Session presented to her by the Clerk of the Parliaments:

**2/2024** Justice Legislation Amendment (Police and Other Matters) Act 2024

**3/2024** Land (Revocation of Reservations) Act 2024

*Questions without notice and ministers statements*

**Storm recovery**

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (12:04): (414) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. It has been seven days since a devastating storm ripped a path of destruction through the town of Mirboo North and environs. Homes and community and sporting infrastructure were decimated by debris and fallen trees. Minister, when will your government roll out a comprehensive clean-up package for this natural disaster?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:05): I thank Ms Bath for her question and indeed her care, concern and action in supporting her community at a time of devastation. Much of Victoria was impacted by ferocious weather last week, whether it was fire out in the Grampians area or indeed storms that hit suburbs and country areas and caused the devastation that Ms Bath has alluded to. As we know, when you are confronted with emergencies there is an emergency response, and I want to thank all of our volunteers and personnel who responded on the day. That response is still active. As we transition into more of the relief and the recovery, foremost in terms of recovery from storms is obviously clean-up – clean-up of roadsides, clean-up of parks, clean-up of homes.

There are a variety of streams that will be activated, Ms Bath, and I will be very, very happy to brief you personally throughout the week as they come online. We have Parks Victoria and FFM Vic out there clearing now. I hate to say what is first and what is not, because there are lots of different streams – everything is a priority – but ensuring you can clear roads so that essential services could get in, whether it is water, whether it is food, whether it is access for people to repair powerlines and the like, is what we have been focused on.

Immediately as the fires hit in that region, and the storms, we registered the disasters with the federal government, as you would appreciate. Unfortunately, we are all quite familiar with the processes these days because they happen so regularly. We have sought agreement for joint funding arrangements for clean-up. Emergency Recovery Victoria were on the ground in Mirboo North and the region on the weekend, scoping out opportunities for local sorting facilities, because a lot of the waste that we will

be dealing with is green waste. I would also caveat that when you are dealing with properties that have suffered significant damage there are safety concerns in relation to asbestos removal and the like, so the term ‘clean-up’ is a very broad term that will be led by both me and Minister Dimopoulos in terms of his responsibilities and my responsibilities, obviously, that are coordinated by ERV in relation to supporting homes and councils – and I would probably add the issue for councils who are predominantly responsible very regularly for waste disposal is that we know that if they have not already, they are very close to capping out in relation to their capacity – and then obviously parks, tourism. Everybody is focused on this, Ms Bath, and as more and more details of the streams, programs and supports become available they will be communicated to the community, and I will personally communicate them to you.

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (12:08): I thank the minister for her response. The community, as you have rightly said, has rallied most magnificently. We have seen organised and spontaneous volunteers on the ground since day one and hour one. We also know that timber harvesters are ready and available to do the work. Fallen trees are a public safety and also, in the long term, bushfire hazard. Locals understand that the timber there on the ground, on homes and on infrastructure can have value – sawlog value or chip value or firewood value for the community. So as part of that emergency recovery, will your government commit to utilising that resource for community benefit?

**Jaelyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:09): Thank you, Ms Bath. These are really good issues that you have raised. These were topics that were discussed by the committee of cabinet last night that deals with emergencies. A head contractor will soon be appointed. Head contractors have responsibilities to engage with local contractors. I am very aware of people in your region that are well skilled – arborists and people that are familiar with the milling of timber and the like. The experience from the 2021 storms was that a lot of the material can be turned into fence posts, firewood and the like and be made available for the community. My approach and the government’s approach always in recovery is community-led recovery, so we will work closely with the South Gippsland council, who have been amazing, and also other locals that come to hand. Anyone that you have got that you want to connect to Emergency Recovery Victoria, please send it through, because we want this to be a community-led response and involve everyone who is happy to help.

### Supermarket prices

**Aiv PUGLIELLI** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:10): (415) My question today is to the Minister for Regional Development. Last night I think many of us here watched what was a scathing indictment of Coles and Woolworths on ABC’s *Four Corners*, showing just how they bully and strongarm their local competitors to maintain their market dominance while choking the margins of farmers and producers. In regional areas this often means that the only available supermarket option is a Coles or Woolies, exposing people to the worst instances of price gouging. Minister, how many Coles or Woolworths in regional Victoria have benefited from special treatment or funding from government programs such as the Investment Fast-Track Fund or the Regional Infrastructure Fund?

**Gayle TIERNEY** (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:11): President, I defer to your knowledge on this, but I am unclear as to whether that has anything much to do with the portfolio of regional development.

**The PRESIDENT:** I would envisage that the funds are administered by the minister’s department. Can you repeat the two funds?

**Aiv Puglielli:** Sure. The two funds are the Investment Fast-Track Fund and the Regional Infrastructure Fund – or any other funds.

**The PRESIDENT:** The question is: have the two supermarket chains received any funding from those two funds?



**Gayle TIERNEY:** Again, I do not believe that this pertains to my portfolio. Regardless, I am happy to take that on board and see whether I can get some information to you.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:12): Thank you, Minister. I understand these things do straddle multiple portfolios, but I have named specific funds from the regional development portfolio. As I am sure many will understand, what we saw last night went to air and has distressed many in the community, and I think many are eager to know that their state government is on the side of local communities and local producers and farmers and not the side of price-gouging Coles and Woolies. As we saw last night, farmers are particularly hurting from the profiteering practices of Coles and Woolworths, so what are you doing by way of regional development investment to support farmers in order to prevent them from leaving the industry due to Coles and Woolies rejecting their products and slashing their margins?

**The PRESIDENT:** The minister can answer questions as far as her responsibility for government administration goes, and I cannot see how that supplementary falls inside her administration. I am mindful the substantive question is on funds that Mr Puglielli believes are administered by the minister, but the minister seems to reject her responsibility for those funds. I appreciate that, Minister, you will get back to Mr Puglielli, and the answer might be that you are not responsible for the funds. I cannot put the supplementary. It is not her administration.

**Samantha Ratnam:** On a point of order, President, I am just seeking clarity on that ruling, given the question went to what the minister is doing to support farmers in the regions, which would pertain to the government's responsibility. I do not understand how that would not pertain to the minister's responsibility. Aren't farmers within the minister for regional Victoria's purview?

**The PRESIDENT:** My concern is part of the minister's responsibility is not the two major supermarket chains, and that is the crux of the question as far as what it pertains to goes. I am comfortable Mr Puglielli believes that those funds he mentioned in the substantive question come under the minister's department's responsibilities. The minister does not believe that, but she has committed to come back. The answer may be comprehensive, or it may be 'It doesn't come under my responsibility.' So I am not going to put the supplementary.

#### **Ministers statements: fire and storm events**

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:15): Carrying on from the question that I received from Ms Bath, it would be an appropriate time to update the house on the extreme weather events that impacted Victorians last week, and I know that many in the chamber have been directly impacted. We acknowledge at the outset that there are still almost 4000 households that are affected by power outages. Last week it was a catastrophic fire event. We warned people on the Monday that that is what we would likely see on Tuesday. It was the first such warning issued in Victoria under the new national warning system, and we experienced significant fires, wind gusts and storms – storms that were approaching almost a category 2 cyclone – and obviously power losses to more than half a million Victorians, with prolonged outages for many thousands. I would like to acknowledge also a dairy farmer in Mirboo North who sadly lost his life in the storm, someone that was a cherished member of that community.

On Wednesday the Premier and I visited Pomonal and Dadswells Bridge. In Pomonal there were 45 homes lost and a business. It is a devastation for that community. I want to thank the Horsham incident control centre, who coordinated response services to the fires, particularly Mark Gunning, who led the team up there. I also want to pay tribute to the many people who responded to the storms across Victoria, particularly emergency services, including SES, CFA, Forest Fire Management Victoria, FRV, Victoria Police and Ambulance Victoria, as well as numerous strike teams, responders and many community members who all pulled up their sleeves and lent a hand. Any major disaster is challenging, but our emergency services were incredible. I want to thank Rick Nugent, Jason Heffernan, Tim Wiebusch, Chris Hardman and their teams for their amazing efforts, which are

ongoing as we speak. SES have responded to more than 5660 requests for assistance since last Tuesday.

Storm impacts, as we know, are still being assessed, and there are focuses on what communities need right now. I would like to thank local members who have been on the ground feeding information, particularly Tom McIntosh, Melina Bath, Danny O'Brien, Daniela De Martino and Harriet Shing, among others. I know everyone is focused on helping their communities. Councils have been great. Many of them have opened relief locations for affected residents to use the internet, charge their phone or have a hot shower. We have also made emergency relief assistance payments available to those –  
(Time expired)

### Emergency communication services

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:17): (416) My question is also to the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, given that last Tuesday was the first catastrophic fire danger day to be declared since the 2019–20 Black Summer fires, why were there not enough call takers in Triple Zero to deal with the emergency situation?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:17): Ms Crozier, there were – there certainly were. Reports to the contrary are simply inaccurate. Triple Zero Victoria have contingencies in place. They have modelling in place. They were well prepared for the extreme weather forecast, and they rostered on additional staff as is appropriate. From 7 am Tuesday to 7 am Wednesday they had in excess of 200 operational staff, including 50 that were dedicated to the non-emergency VICSES 132 500 line. In this time Triple Zero Victoria received 15,455 calls across all of its service lines. For police it was a record day in their history. They had robust measures in place; any claims that they were not adequately resourced are simply inaccurate. I have been correcting those reports, and I am happy to continue to do so today.

I would welcome a genuine conversation about Triple Zero's preparedness for the extreme weather forecast last week, but it has to be based on facts, and the facts that you presented in your question – despite the fact that you may have read those reports – I can confirm were wrong and were false. I am more than happy to back our call takers and back Triple Zero Victoria, who did an amazing job on Tuesday, as they do every day.

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:19): Minister, did any of the delays in getting through to Triple Zero result in critical information not being conveyed or delays in the information being passed on to firefighters?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:19): Ms Crozier, as I indicated in my answer to your substantive question, on the day there were additional resources. There were an amazing amount of calls, and they managed to deal with those calls. When somebody calls through and the information is relayed, they are the front line of the front line, and that information is then passed on to the relevant emergency services. If you have a specific incident that you want to take up with me, I am more than happy to look at it, but again I reiterate: on Tuesday record calls were responded to by the hardworking call takers and dispatchers. Their job is to pass information on; they take the calls. That is their job, and I reiterate my support for an amazing organisation that did a fantastic job on the day.

### Homelessness

**Rachel PAYNE** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:21): (417) My question is for the Minister for Housing, Minister Shing. Forty-four years – that is the average age of death for homeless people in this country, almost 40 years lower than the average Australian. This was the finding from *Guardian Australia's* investigation into 10 years worth of coronial death notifications where homelessness was documented. These premature deaths reflect a population who are so often overlooked and who must deal with systemic failures in essential services like health, justice and housing. When you are

struggling to find somewhere safe to sleep, everything else becomes secondary and good health especially becomes a luxury. So my question is: would the minister consider prioritising access to social housing for those with chronic health conditions and at risk of premature death?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:21): Thank you, Ms Payne, for your question and for your ongoing interest in the often very complex causes of and contributors to homelessness and rough sleeping. It is really important that when we talk about rough sleeping and homelessness we understand the causes and the contributing factors that do often exacerbate a situation of vulnerable or insecure housing, whether that is a dependency on alcohol or other drugs, including prescription and non-prescription medication; challenges around mobility; being a victim or survivor of family violence; being within our youth cohort; or being somebody who is older. We know that the needs and the priorities of people in addressing root causes of homelessness are many and varied and that in order to provide support for people to move from precarious situations – whether they are accessing homelessness supports in crisis accommodation, in temporary housing or indeed in moving through to the social housing system – it takes not just a roof over people’s heads; it requires programs and services and supports.

One of the things that we are doing is investing in supports to provide measures of financial assistance to people, as well as a fixed address and making sure that we can respond to a growth in demand. Every year we see around 100,000 people accessing homelessness supports. In 2022–23, for example, there were around 40,900 people within that list who had experienced family violence; around 9000 people who were sleeping rough or in an inadequate dwelling when they first presented to services; around 11,200 people aged between 15 and 24 – within that age demographic you have referred to – presenting alone to services; and then also just under 12,000 people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and community.

The *Report on Government Services*, which has been referred to a number of times in this house, indicates that we have here in Victoria supported the largest number of homelessness support services and expenditure in comparison to other jurisdictions. Does that mean that we have done all we need to do? No. Does that mean that we understand what does work and what can work to alleviate those pressures? Yes. For every number that I refer to in these statistics and for the statistics that you have outlined in your question, we have a person and a family and a story and also an awful lot of potential and opportunity for people to be able to secure their own autonomy and their own prospects.

We have got new housing programs, such as Homes First. We have got the Sacred Heart Mission’s new Campus of Care. We have got a range of supports in From Homelessness to a Home programs. It is about making sure that they work together across a whole-of-government approach in order to develop those things, including with – (*Time expired*)

**Rachel PAYNE** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:25): I thank the minister for her detailed response. By way of supplementary, housing is just one part of the essential services people need to get back on their feet, and as you have mentioned, wraparound services that focus on things like mental health, family violence, youth services, rehabilitation, justice and education can be extremely beneficial. Will the minister commit to ensuring that social housing developments pursue a wraparound model that integrates support services wherever possible?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:25): Thank you, Ms Payne, for that supplementary question. The short answer is yes. We are working on a range of programs and initiatives, including the Housing First principles. I am very happy to take you through that work as it relates to providing that support to transition through to stable housing and to make sure that we have got that model of care around Homes First, which is intended to commence from about the middle of this year and to build on existing frameworks for support. That model itself, by way of an example, will provide 500 households with priority access to social housing and three years of wraparound support. That builds on the success of From Homelessness to a Home, which has allocated around 1845 housing and support packages since 2020,

and that assists people to recover from homelessness. We also recognise that preventing homelessness is a really important part of this work, and that is where the housing statement and being able to build, for example, a granny flat on a home block of at least 300 square metres is just one of the examples to take pressure off the system.

**Ministers statements: multicultural and multifaith communities**

**Ingrid STITT** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:26): I rise to update the house on the work that the Allan Labor government is doing to ensure our multicultural and our multifaith communities are supported and celebrated. Victoria is one of the most culturally diverse societies in the world, and as we know, our diversity is one of our greatest strengths. We do not just tolerate it; it is something we embrace. It is part of who we are as Victorians. We value the rich contributions our multicultural and multifaith communities make to our state to enrich our vibrant society, and there is much to be proud of.

On Saturday we saw the successful new year events in Box Hill and Footscray to wrap up our Lunar New Year season with a bang. This weekend the events continue, with vibrant street festivals celebrating heritage, tradition, music and food at the 36th running of the Antipodes Lonsdale Street Greek festival and the 45th Hispanic Latin American festival on Johnston Street. And in Geelong the Pako Festa continues the celebration of cultural diversity in the region. Last year the Pako Festa were recognised for their service to multicultural Victoria and were the recipients of the Premier’s Award for Community Harmony in 2023 at the Victorian Multicultural Awards for Excellence. Mosque open day also returns on Sunday and will continue to give Victorians opportunities to learn about our Islamic communities across 35 mosques across the state.

These events are all backed by government funding of more than \$3 million, because the Allan Labor government understands the significance of supporting a Victoria that is fair, inclusive and safe for all of our culturally diverse communities, and now more than ever it is important that we continue to come together and celebrate our diversity as a community.

**Emergency management**

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:28): (418) My question is for the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, I refer to section 5(1) of the Emergency Management Act 1986 and ask: in relation to the events of Tuesday 13 February, which saw 530,000 households blacked out and massive damage to industry, was there an emergency management plan in place, and if so, will the minister make it available to the house?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:29): I thank Mr Davis for his question. Mr Davis, I can assure you that the emergency management commissioner has a copy of the act on him basically at all times, because we know how important governance is, we know how important accountability is and we know how important it is for our agencies to know who is responsible for what and when. There is a state emergency management plan that applies to the state. All of our departments feed into that. There are responsibilities for critical infrastructure, supply of essential services and the like. So there is always a plan in place for the state. It is a plan that I sign off on in terms of the processes that we have under a cabinet committee. In relation to the particular document and what it looks like and whether I can make that available, I would have to take advice from the emergency management commissioner. But I am more than happy to provide you with any information that is available.

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:30): I think in the circumstances the house would want to see that plan and the aspects that relate to the electricity issues, but I ask a very specific question: in what year was the emergency management plan prepared and what year did you sign it off?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:30): I might take that on notice so I can be extremely specific with my answer.

### Shepparton rail line

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL** (Northern Victoria) (12:30): (419) My question is for the minister representing the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. For several years now the residents of Greater Shepparton have been patiently waiting for the completion of the stage 3 upgrades to the train line between Shepparton and Melbourne. They have been promised nine weekday return services between Shepparton and Melbourne. When will the people of Shepparton and the surrounding areas see this promise delivered?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:31): Thank you, Mrs Tyrrell, for that question. I will seek an answer from the minister for you in accordance with the standing orders.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL** (Northern Victoria) (12:31): I thank the minister for her response. Part of the stage 3 upgrade is the subsequent upgrade to the level crossing on Wyndham Street, Shepparton, next to the Shepparton Art Museum. No work has commenced on upgrading this level crossing, which is required to allow the installed traffic lights to begin operation. The government spent thousands of dollars installing these lights, which have been covered up and non-operational for the past three years, much to the frustration of the Greater Shepparton City Council and the local community. When will this level crossing upgrade be completed as part of the stage 3 works and these traffic lights be switched on?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:32): Thanks, Mrs Tyrrell. Again I will seek an answer for you in accordance with the standing orders.

### Ministers statements: Learn Local Awards

**Gayle TIERNEY** (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:32): I rise to inform the house that nominations are open for the 2024 Learn Local Awards. Our Learn Local providers are truly incredible. Over 200 grassroots community organisations right across Victoria are delivering essential pre-accredited training. From English to maths, digital skills and workplace skills, Learn Locals teach fundamental foundation skills so that every Victorian has the opportunity to reach their goals and move on to a job or further study. Providers are ingrained in local communities, delivering flexible, adaptable courses tailored to local community needs – from the 2023 winner Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services, who partnered with Spotless cleaning to teach foundation and workplace skills for cleaning in the Bendigo Hospital, supporting graduates to seamlessly move into jobs, to the Ro Allen Award winner Ayan Daher, who I had the pleasure of meeting at the Kensington Neighbourhood House recently. Ayan is remarkable, going from Learn Local student to co-designing Learn Local classes for her community to securing employment as a Learn Local teacher.

This is just a fraction of the incredible work that is happening daily in adult and community education. The Learn Local sector is ensuring every Victorian, especially those who have experienced disadvantages and barriers to education, can get the skills they need to thrive. The Learn Local Awards shine a much-deserved spotlight on this sector and make sure that the teachers, students and providers get the recognition they deserve. Nominations close on 31 May, so get out there and nominate your Learn Local heroes.

### Housing

**Bev McARTHUR** (Western Victoria) (12:34): (420) My question is for the Minister for Housing. Minister, yesterday the *Geelong Advertiser* reported on the truly awful case of a Department of Families, Fairness and Housing resident who had lived in utter squalor and stench among piles of garbage, faeces and urine with the decomposing body of her brother for more than two and possibly as long as five years. This news has shocked Geelong, but it has not shocked the neighbours. These unfortunate people, themselves public housing residents, have been comprehensively ignored. Reports

say up to six had complained about the stench, rats and utter filth around the unit, yet clearly no-one at DFFH took their complaints seriously. The man lay dead, his sister received no help and all the while the public housing asset became uninhabitable and its immediate neighbourhood was blighted. Minister, how could this ever happen in our society?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:35): Thanks, Mrs McArthur, for this question. It is such a tragic situation, and I am sure that there is nobody in this chamber or this Parliament who does not share the despair and the disappointment that so many of us have right now around these circumstances and the incident involved. I do want to place on record my sincerest condolences to the man’s family and to his friends. Departmental staff offered support at the time to neighbouring residents and to families involved.

There were several welfare checks that had been conducted at the premises since 2021 due to a number of growing concerns around a lack of contact and around a lack of access and some issues around the state of the property in question. There is a new system around escalating issues associated with welfare concerns – that has been implemented at the local housing office since that incident. I want to be a little bit careful here because of this particular matter being the subject of an investigation by Victoria Police and also by the coroner, so I will keep my remarks very general. The department has been in contact with Victoria Police and also the renter’s appointed guardian. We do want to make sure that we are keeping these frameworks for escalation and notification of renter welfare and of resident welfare front of mind.

Before these concerns were raised departmental staff had visited the premises back in 2021, and there was no-one home at the time of that visit. The Geelong housing office received a further complaint in October, and a breach-of-duty notice was issued at the end of that month. On 6 September 2022 and again on 28 September 2022 further visits were conducted. Then on 15 September, following further concerns raised about the renter’s welfare, departmental staff occasioned a police visit to perform a welfare check, and there was a notice issued by departmental staff on the 16th to enter the premises. The Geelong housing office has been involved in the investigation of this matter and in engagement with the neighbours, and that level of support and assistance will continue to be provided by the housing office, including to those people directly impacted in that community.

**Bev McARTHUR** (Western Victoria) (12:38): Minister, I thank you for your response. Minister, welfare checks were made by Department of Families, Fairness and Housing staff, but frankly that raises more questions than answers. How on earth did they leave that premises and allow the situation to continue?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:38): Thank you, Mrs McArthur. As I indicated in my substantive answer, there were a number of checks that were undertaken. A compliance notice was applied for by the housing office through VCAT and was in the process of awaiting a hearing date. This has also been something that the housing office and authorities have been discussing with neighbours, including in relation to whether the gentleman had been seen prior to the notification being received and prior to the deceased being discovered. Mrs McArthur, this is, as I said, something that has been the subject of multiple visits, and this is also a matter which is the subject of investigation. I would be pleased to provide you as a local member with further information on that matter when and as it becomes available, of course subject to any coronial environment and process that may be undertaken.

#### Social housing regulation review

**Samantha RATNAM** (Northern Metropolitan) (12:40): (421) My question is to the Minister for Housing. In 2021 the government conducted a review into the regulation of the social housing sector in Victoria. The interim report from this review made several significant recommendations for reform, including a proper complaints system and legislated rights for tenants. With your government’s increasing reliance on non-government housing providers, there is a clear need for regulation of this sector in order to protect the rights of tenants. Despite this, the final report from this review has not

been tabled, over three years since the review began, and throughout this time we are hearing more and more from community housing tenants who are unhappy with their housing providers but do not know where to turn. Minister, when will the report from the review into the regulation of the social housing sector be released to the public?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:41): Thanks, Dr Ratnam. I am going to take issue with, yet again, a number of the ways in which you have characterised social housing and with what I think you have referred to as an increasing reliance upon non-government providers to deliver social housing. Dr Ratnam, we rely, and rely with good reason and for a proper purpose and in a well-founded way, upon our community housing sector to develop and to deliver housing that meets critical need. In the course of making sure that we can respond to that need, we have made a record investment into social housing, which includes public and community housing. We are making sure that we have that investment in place in the areas where it is needed, in the configurations that it is needed, and with a regulatory approach that manages obligations and responsibilities across all levels of government. We also want to make sure, Dr Ratnam, that in delivering these benefits the Assistant Treasurer's work and my work in overseeing the review are targeted towards delivering those outcomes.

It is a really significant body of work that you have referred to. There are policy and operational administrative components to it, and obviously funding implications as well. We are in the process of undertaking work to deliver on the responses, to all of the review, to transform the sector and also to enable a greater focus on rental reforms, which is, as you would all know and hopefully respect and understand, a big part of the work that we are doing to transform the sector overall. We need to be able to incorporate developments that have occurred since receiving the final report itself, and that includes the Commonwealth announcements in relation to the Housing Australia Future Fund.

There has been an extensive body of work undertaken by the review panel, and contributions were made by numerous stakeholders who participated. We are taking action to address a number of the issues identified in the course of that review. The interim report, for example, highlighted numerous areas for more Aboriginal community controlled organisations to become registered housing providers, and we are also in the process of supporting Aboriginal organisations to become registered community housing providers and participate in the big build program. We are also undertaking a program to significantly reduce the outstanding maintenance requests that remain in the system – I have spoken about that at length – and we are trialling for local maintenance repair crews and establishing a statewide public housing renter consultative committee. All recommendations are being implemented – *(Time expired)*

**Samantha RATNAM** (Northern Metropolitan) (12:44): Thank you, Minister, for your response, but you did not actually answer the question that I asked about when the report will be released to the public. It has been sitting on various housing ministers' desks for the nearly two years since it was completed. Given Labor's housing statement commits to the mass privatisation of public housing and the outsourcing of its responsibilities to community housing, the fact that the government has refused to release the report from the social housing regulation review, or its response, nearly two years later – three years since it commenced – is really concerning. We know that community housing tenants pay more in rent than those in public housing. Some are being offered shorter term leases, and many do not know where to turn when things are going wrong – and more and more things are going wrong. So, Minister, given the government has had the social housing regulation review recommendations on hand for nearly two years, when will we see better and stronger protection for social housing tenants?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:45): Dr Ratnam, what is it about the clue in the title of 'community housing' that you do not seem to understand? Community housing is delivered by community organisations – for-purpose organisations that are in a process of providing wraparound services and care, whether that is Aboriginal community controlled housing organisations or organisations that support victims and survivors of family violence or organisations that support multicultural communities, that support

young people, that support older tenants or that make sure that we have the sorts of supports that people need. When you talk about mass privatisation, you do a massive disservice to your own understanding of the issue. If you actually cared about providing support for people who deserve access to modern, safe and fit-for-purpose accommodation, you would stop this ridiculous, misinformed, misleading narrative about housing and what it means in Victoria.

**Samantha Ratnam:** On a point of order, President, I asked a specific question. I will not repeat it, because you have asked me not to repeat the question, but I asked a specific question. The minister has not responded to any part of the question that I asked in my supplementary.

**The PRESIDENT:** I am happy to review the answer and the question, but in real time – and I hate paraphrasing, because this will get me into trouble with everyone – you asked her when there will be better progress in a positive way. The minister’s response was there has been progress in a positive way. Anyone can jump up and say, ‘You’re wrong,’ but that is me. At the end of question time, which is in 1 minute, can you make a point of order then? I am always open to everyone making a point of order.

#### Ministers statements: social services

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:47): Following the tabling of the *Community Visitors Annual Report 2022–2023* in the last sitting week, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge Dr Colleen Pearce for the work she undertakes as the public advocate and update the house on the work of hundreds of community visitors across Victoria providing a vital service in monitoring supported residential services and disability services across our community. For more than 35 years community visitors have reported on the good and the poor practices in the places where people with disability and mental health issues live and receive services in Victoria. I am pleased to report that the community visitors program continues to receive steady applications from across the state, and this reflects Victorians’ commitment to their community.

This year’s community visitors annual report again provides important insights into the vulnerabilities of people with disability as well as mental health issues living in facilities where they receive support. The report also documents those service providers with good practices across the state, despite continuing staffing shortages, and outlines recommendations for practice improvements and system reforms. We acknowledge those recommendations for reform, and we know that there is more work to do to support residential services and disability services in Victoria. That is why last year we passed the Disability and Social Services Regulation Amendment Bill 2023 to enact important reforms. This included, amongst numerous other changes, allowing the minister to declare an additional category of disability accommodation so that community visitors can inquire into the quality and standard of support provided to residents.

We also know there is a need to create a simple, streamlined one-stop shop for regulation, complaints and compliance for clients in the social services sector. That is why I was delighted to announce that Jonathan Kaplan will serve as the new independent social services regulator and be tasked with protecting people from harm in services. The social services regulator will have responsibility for the regulation of social services, including supported residential services and disability services outside of the NDIS. We also announced that as part of creating the new regulator we will establish a complaints division to cover all regulated social services. This will ensure that users of social services have a simple, easy-to-navigate process to raise complaints. Mr Kaplan has already started the work in preparing for the regulator’s commencement on 1 July 2024, and we look forward to him starting.

#### Written responses

**The PRESIDENT** (12:49): I said it would be over in 1 minute, and it was 2. I am a big enough man to admit when I am wrong. As far as today’s questions go: Minister Shing will get two answers



from the Minister for Transport Infrastructure for Mrs Tyrrell; Minister Symes has committed to Mr Davis in the supplementary question –

**Jaelyn Symes:** On a point of order, President, for the benefit of the house and Mr Davis I can confirm that the answer to his question, in terms of the date, was December 2023. I am more than happy to provide a written response to Mr Davis, but given the interest of the house, given that we are in the midst of an emergency, I thought it would benefit the remainder of the house. That is available on the [emv.vic.gov.au](http://emv.vic.gov.au) website, along with all of the subplans for emergency management.

**The PRESIDENT:** Thank you for your assistance.

**David Davis:** On the point of order, President, I wanted the minister to tell us which subplan was in operation.

**The PRESIDENT:** I think the minister just acquitted that. The question was the date.

**Jaelyn Symes:** All of them. Energy, tsunami, earthquake – all of them. They're all there.

**David Davis:** All of them. I just wanted you to say it on the record.

**The PRESIDENT:** See, this is the sort of chamber that we are. We go very well in here. Let us forget that one; it has been done.

Mr Puglielli, I know Minister Tierney was unsure whether those funds come under her responsibility, but she did commit to giving a response to you under the standing orders. That is I think all I have got.

**Samantha Ratnam:** On a point of order, President, I do not believe my question and supplementary were responded to by the Minister for Housing. I would like you to review that.

**The PRESIDENT:** I am happy to review, and I will get back to the house before the end of the day.

**Georgie Crozier:** On a point of order, President, in relation to the supplementary question I asked about delays in getting through to Triple Zero and whether there was critical information not being conveyed or delays occurring to firefighters last Tuesday, I do not believe the minister answered that question, and I would ask that to be also reinstated.

**The PRESIDENT:** Are you talking about the supplementary question?

**Georgie Crozier:** Yes, the supplementary.

**The PRESIDENT:** Once again, I am happy to review that. I will say, though –

**Jaelyn Symes** interjected.

**The PRESIDENT:** That is good, but I have a responsibility under the standing orders. I am happy to review that. But I will say there have been a few instances in recent question times when a question gets answered and the minister completely rejects the premise of the question; therefore it is very hard for a supplementary to be asked once the minister has done that – I will just say that. I will review it.

**Bev McArthur:** On a point of order, President, I think Minister Shing confirmed that she will get back to me or the house on the detail of how she is processing that complaint.

**The PRESIDENT:** I have taken that undertaking as outside what is in the standing orders.

*Constituency questions*

**Eastern Victoria Region**

**Tom McINTOSH** (Eastern Victoria) (12:53): (663) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. Last week Victoria was hit with some of the worst storms in recent history, and Eastern Victoria was hit hardest. Winds well in excess of 100 kilometres brought down trees on houses and

across powerlines, roads and fences and removed roofs from houses. I joined the Premier on Friday to visit and hear stories from people across the town, and all of us want to acknowledge the emergency services workers, all the volunteers and the community, who came together to support each other. The community district foundation, South Gippsland shire – they have all pulled together to support each other over the last week. Talking to residents, it is clear that there is a long way to go in this recovery process. Minister, can you please outline what the government is doing to support Mirboo North after the horrific storms last week, both immediately and in coming months, to get the town back up on its feet and thriving?

#### **Eastern Victoria Region**

**Renee HEATH** (Eastern Victoria) (12:54): (664) The weather events of last week left over 500,000 houses with no power and no certainty around when it would be restored. This caused great disruption and stress to the people of Eastern Victoria Region – to homes, businesses and schools. But for those fortunate enough to have gas cooking appliances, at least they could still cook a meal. However, as of this year Labor's ban on gas connections in new homes means that many will not have this backup. This is absolutely outrageous. Last week's power outages are a perfect example of exactly why this policy will not work. Having a range of energy sources provides security for Victorians: if one source fails, we have a backup. My question is for the Minister for Energy and Resources. Victorians need energy security, and last week's events highlight the impracticality of your ban on gas. Will you repeal it?

#### **Western Metropolitan Region**

**David ETTERS HANK** (Western Metropolitan) (12:55): (665) My constituency question is to the Minister for Environment in the other place. My constituent volunteers for a conservation group in the west and is passionate about native temperate grasslands of Victoria's volcanic plains, which once covered a third of the state. Announced in 2010, the Melbourne Strategic Assessment promised to protect 15,000 hectares of grassland through the western grassland reserve. More than a decade later only 18 per cent of that land has been acquired. My constituent noted that multiple reports, including the parliamentary inquiry into ecosystem decline, a 2022 Victorian Auditor-General's Office report and a 2023 state of the environment report, all underscore that we must move quicker to protect our critically endangered grasslands and the threatened species that inhabit them. So my constituent asks: what is the government doing to accelerate the timely acquisition of western grassland reserve land, including sourcing alternate funding sources?

#### **Northern Victoria Region**

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (12:56): (666) My question is for the Minister for Energy and Resources. Minister, what is your government doing to ensure that soaring energy prices will not cause the closure of public facilities such as heated swimming pools, neighbourhood houses, community centres, libraries and other important community venues? This Labor government's disastrous energy policies are having a devastating impact on community facilities like local swimming pools. Bendigo East Swimming Pool, where Olympian Jenna Strauch got her start, is the only heated outdoor pool in Bendigo. Sadly, Jenna might be the last Olympic swimmer that pool will produce, because Greater Bendigo City Council have announced that they can no longer afford to keep this pool open during the winter months due to the soaring cost of gas. Heated swimming pools are vital to the health and wellbeing of the community, particularly for those who need to perform non-weight-bearing exercise and for those who participate in competition swimming that requires year-round training. Contrary to what the minister says, under Labor the price of energy is only going up, up and up.

#### **Northern Victoria Region**

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL** (Northern Victoria) (12:57): (667) My constituency question is for the Minister for Community Sport. The Shepparton Sports Stadium was originally built as a two-court

facility and opened in 1972. The additional courts were added to the existing structure in 1994. Despite the increase in participation rates of sports such as basketball in Greater Shepparton over the last 30 years, no further infrastructure upgrades to increase capacity have taken place since that time. An upgrade to the stadium will allow Greater Shepparton City Council to attract additional events to the city, creating local jobs and injecting more tourism dollars into the local economy. It is estimated that an expanded stadium would create an additional \$12.3 million per year in visitor spending. Just as importantly, this upgrade would provide local sporting associations with the infrastructure to cater for existing participation demand. Will the minister support the expansion of the Shepparton Sports Stadium from its existing four-court facility to help cater for the sporting needs of the Greater Shepparton community?

#### **Southern Metropolitan Region**

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:58): (668) My matter for constituency questions today is for the attention of the Minister for Education, and it concerns a matter I have raised with another minister before – but let me explain. In my electorate the Melbourne Youth Orchestras at Southbank Boulevard are being sent on a wild-goose chase. They have been sent to see creative industries and education, and everyone is pointing at each other as to who is responsible for the \$200,000 cut per year – the outrageous cut – for a very important orchestra group. So what I am asking the Minister for Education to do today is to stop the circle-go-round and actually restore the funding. I want him to meet them and restore the funding – \$200,000 per year to the Melbourne Youth Orchestras – and stop this absurd process that is occurring where no-one wants to take responsibility.

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

**Aiv PUGLIELLI** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:59): (669) My question today is to the Minister for Development Victoria. In Greensborough on the corner of Flintoff Street and Para Road there is a development underway to build a commuter car park and bus interchange. What does this have to do with you, you might ask? This has come up a bit today. Well, this development is an excellent opportunity to build more public and affordable housing in Greensborough and to ensure that people have access to high-quality homes in this thriving precinct. This is a well-connected site. It is just near the shops and the station, and I would like to ask you to work with your ministerial colleagues to make sure that this development is built in a way that makes the most of this prime location and increases housing in Greensborough.

Banyule council has been advocating strongly for this project to be completed in a way that would allow housing to be built on top of the car park. It is an excellent location – there is potential for 100 housing units to be accommodated on the site. Please work with your colleagues to make sure that the Greensborough car park and bus interchange is built in a way that would allow more housing to be built above this project.

#### **Western Victoria Region**

**Joe McCracken** (Western Victoria) (13:00): (670) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and it relates to a matter in Beaufort in my electorate. I had a constituent contact me with concerns about the Western Highway and the fact that there are potholes that are causing noise. My constituent contacted VicRoads to no avail. She then contacted the member for Ripon, and I have got her email correspondence here, which I know the member for Ripon followed up very, very briefly. But this is what it says: that she followed up in April last year with Regional Roads Victoria and that a site visit was conducted and found the road to be of acceptable quality and standards. She was also advised that the existing patch would need 12 months to settle and that as such

there is no further action that can be taken. So I ask the minister to step in and actually fix the road, because it is clear that the member for Ripon does not want to.

### Western Victoria Region

**Bev McARTHUR** (Western Victoria) (13:01): (671) My question for the Minister for Planning concerns Fyansford Paper Mill, a beautiful site on the Barwon River overlooking Buckley Falls and one of Victoria's few remaining heritage industrial precincts. It is now enjoyed by thousands of visitors annually. Highton Rotary Club volunteers run popular tours of the historic mill precincts, including the original paper production and World War II sea mine factory. They also hope to repair the millrace which once concentrated water from the Barwon into a smaller channel, in turn driving a waterwheel to power the mill. Now breached, the waterfall at the other end is dry. Minister, the volunteers who care for the site could raise the funds for the repair but have been unable to receive definitive permission for the works. They were encouraged by your recent letter stating the heritage-protected assets should be stabilised. So I ask: will you grant permission for a permanent repair?

### Northern Victoria Region

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (13:02): (672) My question on behalf of a constituent is to the Minister for Health regarding the former Sandhurst Centre in Finn Street, Bendigo. I ask the minister to explain why the government has let the site go to waste for eight years, because it is now in a state of disrepair. Locals are very concerned. A nearby resident wrote to me saying:

The place is covered in graffiti and significantly vandalised. We have had to call the police several times about drug deals occurring there.

Originally the Sandhurst Boys' Home site was managed by the Department of Health and Human Services and closed in 2016 when residents were moved to purpose-built residential homes. Since then the property has sat idle. The buildings are now dilapidated, vandalised and covered in graffiti. Police have been called to investigate drug deals at the site, and I understand squatters have been in the buildings. Local residents feel unsafe, and the government needs to take action to address this dangerous and wasteful situation.

### Northern Metropolitan Region

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (13:03): (673) My constituency question is for the Treasurer, and it concerns the land tax increase. Last week I brought the Shadow Treasurer Brad Rowswell to the electorate of Greenvale and visited Roxburgh Village to see the challenges that local businesses are facing. We met Rudi and Letty from Philmart Asian Groceries. The landlord has now passed Labor's increased land tax directly on to this small family-run business. They say they are just surviving and cannot pass on the already high rent charges to customers in a cost-of-living crisis. Rudi and Letty are facing soaring energy costs and a slowdown in sales, and businesses have already been bludgeoned by this tax when they can least afford it. Many businesses are struggling just to break even, and many in the shopping centre have shut down. Has the Treasurer had any briefings or undertaken any modelling on the impact this increased land tax has had on small and family businesses?

### South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

**Ann-Marie HERMANS** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:04): (674) My constituency question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, many schools are short staffed and have struggled to get trained teachers for their subject areas. Meanwhile, the Victorian Institute of Teaching is taking a long time to process simple teaching applications and provide final-year preservice teachers with permission to teach. Applicants are being told it will take four to six weeks to process their applications. Minister, my constituent is a fourth-year bachelor of education student. She has won Monash University awards for her teaching, she was trained in Melbourne, regional Victoria and a top international school and she was given a part-time teaching contract in December 2023 using her teaching area of expertise. She is now waiting, and actually coming into her eighth week of waiting,

for permission to teach at a local regional school. Minister, why are these applications taking so long, and what are you going to do to speed up this process so Victorian students can have teachers in their schools?

### *Petitions*

#### **Waste and recycling management**

**Sarah MANSFIELD** (Western Victoria) presented a petition bearing 2389 signatures:

##### **Grievance**

The Petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that there is a proposal by Prospect Hill International to construct and operate a massive waste-to-energy plant in Lara, Geelong.

The company is proposing to burn 400,000 tonnes of municipal, commercial and industrial waste annually for 25 years, equivalent to 10 million tonnes of waste. The construction is oversized and most feedstock would need to come from outside our region. The huge boiler room and 80-metre-high chimney that would need to be constructed would negatively impact the region's amenity.

Incinerators do not mitigate the need for landfill and are the most expensive way to treat waste. All waste incinerators emit deadly forever chemicals and toxic pollutants that travel long distances and bio-accumulate in the environment. The community fears the impacts on human health and the environment.

Lara's air pollution is already above safe World Health Organization levels. Seventeen schools or childcare centres are within 5km radius of the proposed construction site, and the Urban Growth Zone is 2.7km away. The community opposes the project. Of the 121 submission received by the Environment Protection Authority, 115 have already opposed the project.

##### **Action**

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to not impose an oversized, unsafe and unnecessary waste incinerator in the region and reject planning permit PA2001035 and development licence APP1004200.

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

### *Bills*

#### **Bail Amendment (Indictable Offences Whilst on Bail) Bill 2024**

##### *Introduction and first reading*

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (13:07): I introduce a bill for an act to amend the Bail Amendment Act 2023 so that the offence of committing an indictable offence whilst on bail is not repealed, or to amend the Bail Act 1977 to re-enact that offence if it is repealed, and to make consequential amendments to other acts and for other purposes, and I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read first time.**

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** I move:

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

**Motion agreed to.**

*Papers***Apology for past care leavers**

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (13:08): I move, by leave:

That a copy of the parliamentary apology to Victorians who experienced historical abuse and neglect as children in institutional care be tabled.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN**: I move, by leave:

That the parliamentary apology for past care leavers be taken into consideration later this day.

**Motion agreed to.***Committees***Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee***Alert Digest No. 2*

**Sheena WATT** (Northern Metropolitan) (13:08): Pursuant to section 35 of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, I table *Alert Digest No. 2* 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:**

Gambling Regulation Act 2003 – Electronic gaming machine tax review, under section 3.6.6D of the Act (*released on 12 February 2024 – a non-sitting day*) (*Ordered to be published*).

Planning and Environment Act 1987 – Notices of approval of the following amendments to planning schemes –

Boroondara Planning Scheme – Amendment C406.

Greater Geelong Planning Scheme – Amendment C464.

Hobsons Bay and Wyndham Planning Schemes – Amendment GC214.

Strathbogie Planning Scheme – Amendment C80.

Victoria Planning Provisions – Amendments VC244 and VC254.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule Nos. 5, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11.

*Committees***Legal and Social Issues Committee***Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria*

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

**Select Committee on Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements***Inquiry into Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements*

**The Clerk:** I have received the following paper for presentation to the house pursuant to standing orders: government response to the report from the Select Committee on Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements.

***Business of the house*****Notices****Notices of motion given.****General business**

**Sarah MANSFIELD** (Western Victoria) (13:22): I move, by leave:

That the following general business take precedence on Wednesday 21 February 2024:

- (1) order of the day made this day, second reading of the Bail Amendment (Indictable Offences Whilst on Bail) Bill 2024;
- (2) notice of motion 307, standing in Mr Puglielli's name, on the high cost of food and other essentials set by supermarkets;
- (3) order of the day 1, listed for a future day, resumption of debate on the second reading of the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pill Testing Pilot for Drug Harm Reduction) Bill 2023;
- (4) notice of motion given this day by Mr Davis establishing a select committee to inquire into Victoria's energy transmission; and
- (5) notice of motion given this day by Mr Davis referring the appointment of Jeroen Weimar as deputy secretary of housing implementation to the Ombudsman for investigation and report.

**Motion agreed to.*****Members statements*****All Things Equal**

**Ryan BATCHELOR** (Southern Metropolitan) (13:23): Recently I had the pleasure of visiting the All Things Equal cafe in Carlisle Street, Balaclava. All Things Equal is a social enterprise that provides award-rate paid employment to people with disability. The cafe uses NDIS funding to provide cafe staff with one-on-one support from hospitality professionals to learn how to prepare and serve food. This is the very model of improved economic participation that the NDIS was designed for. During my visit to the cafe I was served by Brinley, a young and enthusiastic staff member who has been working at the cafe for eight months. It was great to witness the impact that this enterprise has on Brinley and his co-workers, who are not only keen to work but fully capable.

Since opening in 2021 All Things Equal has been dedicated to celebrating and embracing all abilities and proudly employs 28 staff members. They make great coffee, great cake – and they run a catering service too if anyone is in need of some good sandwiches. I would like to thank Jess, the CEO of All Things Equal, and Bianca, the general manager, who took the time to speak with me and whose work is critical to keeping this community organisation going, with support obviously from many across the community, including philanthropy. It demonstrates that organisations like All Things Equal are so critical to creating spaces where everyone is included, and there is an obvious demand for more of this type of service – they have got more than 70 people on their waitlist. Go down, check it out, support them.

**Payroll tax**

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (13:25): I am imploring the government to not impose their health tax. Labor's health tax is a tax on patients. Labor's health tax will end bulk-billing. Under Labor's health tax it will cost patients \$100 to visit a GP. Labor's health tax is going to force

hundreds of thousands if not millions of Victorians into our already busy emergency departments, and Labor's health tax will close medical clinics. HotDoc, who engage with GPs around the country and here in particular in Victoria, have said that when they surveyed their doctors here in Victoria it was revealed that 95 per cent of clinics plan to increase fees in response to the government's health tax, and the survey of more than 300 clinics found that another 16.5 per cent would be forced to close. So it is not me saying this, it is GPs, it is other stakeholders like the AMA and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners and it is these patient engagement providers such as HotDoc who understand the impacts of Labor's health tax. It is a bad, unfair and insidious tax, and it needs to stop. The Treasurer, the Minister for Health and the Premier need to listen to these stakeholders and not impose this health tax, which will cost Victorians, end bulk-billing and force up costs for Victorian patients.

### **Climate change**

**Katherine COPSEY** (Southern Metropolitan) (13:26): Communities in Southern Metro, many of whom live near Port Phillip Bay, are now living and suffering through the climate crisis. The Port Phillip Bay coastal hazard assessment finally surfaced last month, and it maps the areas along our coastline which will face inundation when the sea level rises by 1.4 metres as projected by the CSIRO. This coastal inundation will come with an astronomical cost: hundreds of billions of dollars of damage, jeopardising public infrastructure and more than 80,000 homes, and a significant impact on our ecosystems, devastating the habitats of already threatened species.

For decades we have been warned about the impacts of climate change; we are now experiencing them. Every year brings more severe weather events, and sea level rise has begun. Councils are currently bound by woefully inadequate planning laws. It is now clear that sea level rise is currently on track to reach at least 1.4 metres, 60 per cent higher than what is currently built into our planning regulations. Victorian Labor must listen to the science, stop supporting new coal and gas, fix our planning system to reflect climate risks and start holding Victoria's big coal polluters to account by making them pay a coal climate levy, so big polluters, not Victorians, end up paying the bill for climate change.

### **Schools funding**

**Sheena WATT** (Northern Metropolitan) (13:28): I rise today to celebrate the achievements of the Allan Labor government in supporting students and teachers through building and improving our great schools. Firstly, can I take the opportunity to thank the wonderful student leaders, Ned, Isla, Albert and Beth, principal Bridget McLaughlin and her assistant principals for a personal tour recently of Kensington Primary School. It was a privilege to see the progress of the upgrades to the school and talk with the principal and students about what these improvements will mean for today's students and for many generations to come. We know that modern learning environments develop critical thinking, promote STEM literacy and inspire learning for life. That is why the Victorian government has invested \$14.9 billion in building and upgrading schools. This is so every child can get an education that supports them and their future careers and lives. Through transforming schools, not only is the government building critical skills for our kids' future success, but it is also transforming communities by sharing sports, cultural and health facilities. These schools are becoming important neighbourhood hubs. This means our government schools are now better equipped to prepare students for the 21st century and support the communities they are well and truly embedded in. Thanks again to Kensington Primary School. It was a pleasure and a delight to visit your school, and I look forward to hearing about your achievements and the conclusion of your upgrade works way into the future.

### **Emma Muir**

**Bev McARTHUR** (Western Victoria) (13:29): My members statement is a richly deserved congratulations to Emma Muir, Moorabool shire Citizen of the Year 2024. Emma has always supported her community through Little Athletics, Myrmiong Primary School and local football-netball clubs. She has constantly cared for the environment too – as a farmer, as treasurer of Pentland



Hills Landcare and through Grow West, which rejuvenates landscapes through voluntary restoration work by landowners. Recently, however, she has found a new focus for her community spirit: as the founding and current chair of the Regional Victoria Power Alliance. For nearly four years she has fought the Western Renewables Link high-voltage transmission project, which would do so much damage to her farm, community and region. Emma and others have been taken for granted, patronised and ignored by government. MPs and ministers have rarely shown them the courtesy of even talking to them. Despite the stress and effort, Emma has remained fair, kind and reasonable. She has been central to huge rallies, massive fundraising efforts, community information sessions and constant lobbying, and her calm and caring help has done much to keep together a community, despite project proponents who seem happy to set neighbour against neighbour. Congratulations, Emma. It is a privilege to work with you.

#### **Animal welfare**

**Georgie PURCELL** (Northern Victoria) (13:31): After 35 years of the outdated and primitive Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986, the time has now come for an overhaul of the protection provided to animals and the standards to which we hold ourselves as well. The new bill provides us with an opportunity to reimagine animal welfare consistent with our developed technology, our ecological understanding and the community's long-held expectations of animal welfare. While the draft is a step in the right direction, it continues to forsake protections for those who endure systemic cruelty: the industry animals in farming, racing and experimentation. The draft recognises the sentience of animals, yet its selective reduction of industry animals as well as the piecemeal application of mutilation practices are irreconcilable with this principle. Battery cages, mulesing and CO<sub>2</sub> pig gassing did not belong in 1986, and they still do not in 2024. The future of our beloved pets and industry and wild animals is now in the hands of Victorians, with submissions and regulation surveys open until 8 March. Now is our chance to implement binding bans on sow stalls, chick maceration and animal testing. So let us be ambitious in our compassion. Let us prove once and for all that we are indeed the progressive state.

#### **Storm recovery**

**Michael GALEA** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:32): I rise to acknowledge the tireless work of line workers who have worked around the clock to reconnect energy to constituents in my region. I also want to thank our amazing CFA volunteers, Triple Zero Victoria call takers, police, FRV and SES crews, including the Monash SES units, which served more than 1000 call-outs in the storm. Minister for Energy and Resources Lily D'Ambrosio has been very active on the ground and has been meeting regularly with the private energy distributors. I also acknowledge Minister Symes, the Premier and Deputy Premier and our local councils for their support for my communities.

There are still many pockets of my area without power, including Upper Beaconsfield, Knoxfield, Narre Warren North, Lysterfield and Harkaway, and I remain deeply concerned that not for the first time during a major outage AusNet's outage tracker website failed at the time it was most needed. I note the efforts to get some information up online in its place, albeit of extremely low accessibility and quality. I am also deeply concerned that, also not for the first time, many of my communities experienced complete mobile phone outages during the power outage. In times of crisis more than ever our communities need access to reliable communication, including emergency warnings. Whatever backup procedures our telcos have in place are clearly insufficient. They must do better. I acknowledge the work of ministers Williams and D'Ambrosio in raising these issues with the providers and with the federal government, who has regulatory oversight of our telco providers. I thank the many local residents and business owners who have raised these issues with me. I will continue to raise their concerns here in the Parliament.

#### **Fire and storm events**

**Joe McCracken** (Western Victoria) (13:34): I would firstly like to acknowledge all the first responders that have responded to a number of different crises over the last week – the fires particularly

in Pomonal, which is in my electorate, where we have had a number of properties lost and a lot of lives significantly impacted – and the first responders who were also in that situation with the storms and power outages. We can talk SES and we can talk CFA, but there are many, many volunteers that have supported the community, and that needs to be acknowledged and indeed applauded.

#### **Neil Mitchell**

**Joe McCracken** (Western Victoria) (13:35): In the second part of my members statement I want to acknowledge a man that has had a completely and utterly significant influence on Victorian politics for the last 30-odd years. Last Friday 9 February I was very honoured to attend the lunch for Mr Neil Mitchell. A number of colleagues went to that lunch as well. Neil was celebrated for his influence and for his getting to the root of what were the issues over a number of years. His influence on former premiers, current premiers and those of the past has been insurmountable. I want to acknowledge Neil for the time that he has spent in the media. He still has ongoing work to do, but he has been a voice for reason and common sense in Victoria. I want to pay tribute to Neil, and I wish him all the best in his future. Thank you for the work that you have done for this state.

#### **Climate change**

**Samantha Ratnam** (Northern Metropolitan) (13:35): Over the past week our state has endured disastrous bushfires and storms that have destroyed approximately 60 homes and devastated a number of communities. Our emergency services and volunteers have once again rallied and supported people, with courage and compassion. We know that some firefighters were injured too, and we send our best wishes for their recovery.

Nearly half the homes in Pomonal in the Grampians region have been lost, and thousands are still without power after damage to infrastructure. Warnings were issued for the Wimmera, Mallee, northern country and central districts, amongst a range of places across the state. We are especially thinking of every affected community member, and we hope that you are able to access the support that you need. We have already learned from the 2022 climate disaster flooding events that the systems we rely on for our safety need to be resourced and maintained or else people fall through the gaps.

Across the country, heatwaves are also gripping the west of Australia, with 15 of the maximum temperatures recorded in the world in the last 24-hour period all being in Western Australia, with Carnarvon being the hottest with 49.9 degrees. Just think about that for a moment: nearly 50 degrees Celsius.

Climate change is here, and it is frightening. It is already throwing our world into havoc, and our systems, our infrastructure and our communities are not ready. We should all be doing everything that we can to raise the alarm, prevent further global warming and prepare our communities for what we are in store for. We should be getting off coal and gas.

#### **Gippsland storms**

**Melina Bath** (Eastern Victoria) (13:37): I rise to pay homage to the people of Gippsland and in particular the good folk of Mirboo North, Darlimurla, Boolarra and Thorpdale, who experienced a wrecking ball of a storm on the 13th of this month. Two days prior there were 20,000 people at the Italian festa enjoying all things Italian with the beautiful Italian community that we have. Two days later homes were smashed with large trees – and community infrastructure and sporting infrastructure. The community just rallied like country communities do with both spontaneous and coordinated volunteers. We know the CFA, the SES and the school community rallied with brooms and shovels. The pool was decimated, and we are really sorry about that. We know that all people will pull together to make sure that it is open for next year.

I want to congratulate our business community for keeping open their doors and providing food where needed. The South Gippsland shire have been great, the local RSL is coordinating volunteers and the churches are open. I really call on the government to expedite this clean-up process as soon as possible,

because we have roofs off homes and we have a dangerous situation with that timber lying around. I pay homage to that community.

#### **Imagine estate, Strathfieldsaye**

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (13:39): Today I want to recognise a local initiative by residents of the Imagine estate in Strathfieldsaye in response to a crime spike in their area. In the Greater Bendigo area from 2022 to 2023 there was an almost 10 per cent increase in crime, including a 15 per cent increase in motor vehicle theft and a 40 per cent increase in aggravated burglaries. In response to this crime spike and the lack of leadership or interest from the state government to address it, the Imagine estate community has begun organising itself and taken steps to form a neighbourhood watch group.

I want to congratulate Alycia and Stacey, the organisers of a recent community discussion forum, for their vision and drive. This local neighbourhood forum was attended by over 200 concerned residents, who cared enough about their community to come out, talk together and find strategies for making their neighbourhood safer. Also attending were local police representatives Rob, Rod and Fleur and the deputy mayor Matt Evans. I thank them for responding to community concerns with their time and attention. Police gave advice to residents on how they can reduce the likelihood of thieves gaining access to their homes or cars. Residents are also taking steps to form a neighbourhood watch group, and I applaud their efforts. These initiatives will bring the community together and make their streets and homes safer for everyone.

#### **Colliers Shoes**

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (13:40): Today I would like to acknowledge small businesses across Victoria and make special mention of Colliers Shoes in Bendigo. After 94 years in business at the same site on the corner of Hargreaves Mall and Mitchell Street, the business will soon be closing its doors. I especially want to thank Kristian Wenckowski, who has owned the shop for 24 years with his wife, for their commitment to Bendigo and service to the local community. The store has been on the corner since 1930, making it one of the longest running retailers in Bendigo. I cannot remember back to 1930, but I can remember taking my kids to sit up on the platform inside the store to have their shoes properly fitted. I would like to acknowledge Marita, who has managed the store, offering professional and friendly service for 35 years.

Small businesses make up 98 per cent of all businesses in Victoria. Twenty-six per cent of these are located in regional Victoria and provide the majority of jobs in our regional cities. Across Victoria small businesses are the engine room of our economy. They provide goods and services and offer jobs for people of all ages, backgrounds, skills and abilities. To all those in small business who get up every day to supply goods and services, who work hard to provide local jobs and fill the gaps when there are staff shortages, who take a deep breath when they open their bills and search for ways to save money so they can pay their taxes and still make ends meet, thank you. We wish you every success and hope that your business will leave a lasting legacy like Colliers in Bendigo.

#### **Electricity infrastructure**

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (13:42): I join with others in the chamber in acknowledging the work of so many volunteers and our emergency services people in response to the events of the last week. In the early afternoon on the 13th we saw a dramatic set of events across Victoria, not only the bushfires up in the north but, importantly and tragically, also the loss of electricity across such an enormous sweep of our state. 530,000 households were out, including many more people, because that is households – it is not the number of people, it is much more than that – and a number of businesses were impacted too. The government was load-shedding as fast as it could, turning businesses off across the state.

It is very clear that the government was not fully prepared for this. It is clear that in fact the response is something that I think is very important to scrutinise closely. The government initially dismissed

our view about an inquiry and pooh-poohed it yesterday but has now accepted that there has to be a significant inquiry. Now it has of course ordered an inquiry into itself. So it has got its own people to do this; it is not independent at all.

But I say in my electorate in Middle Camberwell we saw the supermarket and the terrible amount of food thrown out and the same for so many people. In Clayton – (*Time expired*)

### ***Business of the house***

#### **Notices of motion**

**Lee TARLAMIS** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:43): I move:

That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 202 to 298, be postponed until later this day.

**Motion agreed to.**

### ***Bills***

#### **Service Victoria Amendment Bill 2023**

##### ***Second reading***

**Debate resumed on motion of Lizzie Blandthorn:**

That the bill be now read a second time.

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (13:44): I am pleased to rise and make a contribution – a brief contribution; I do not intend to drag this out – on the Service Victoria Amendment Bill 2023. I state at the outset that we will not be opposing this bill. It does make some minor changes. I will put on record some concerns we have, but I will also indicate that the general direction is something that we support.

To summarise, the main purposes of the bill are that it amends the Service Victoria Act 2018 to provide for the delivery of functions by Service Victoria's CEO either with or on behalf of non-government entities – so it broadens out those that can come into the Service Victoria arrangements – and provides for the delivery of functions by non-government entities either with Service Victoria's CEO or on behalf of the Service Victoria CEO or a service agency. It sharpens the purposes of the act and sets out other functions and powers of the Service Victoria CEO. It enables the identity verification standards to deal with processes governing applications for the issue of renewal, suspension and cancellation of electronic identity credentials. It ensures that information management requirements under the act are consistent with the equivalent requirements in other acts. This follows the Noone report – and people we will be aware of the report undertaken by Dr Claire Noone – that recommended minor and technical changes to the act that would help improve the operation of Service Victoria as well as provide a more end-to-end framework for users, essentially assisting the establishment of a one-stop shop for digital services.

I want to make some points here that Victoria has lagged – lagged badly – in this area of electronic service delivery. We have repeatedly seen New South Wales out-trump us and lead the way in this area. Victor Dominello, an enthusiastic and visionary minister in the previous New South Wales Liberal government, led the way nationally on establishing apps that would enable people and businesses in particular to undertake all their business online and to do so in a way that was swift, reliable and safe. I pay tribute to the work that he did. We were very aware of that work leading up to the last election. We continued to point to the fact that Victoria was behind in this area. Victoria has a problem, as we know, with excessive regulation – excessive layers of rigidity and regulation. That has been pointed to, and I draw the chamber's attention to the work that has been done by the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry in the last couple of years that makes it clear Victoria is the most

heavily regulated state. That we have got very large taxes too is another point that their examination made, but the regulation aspects are highlighted by reports like the VCCI report.

One way to smooth out the regulation without diminishing the checks and balances that government obviously needs for many things is to enable the use of IT to smooth the way forward, to make sure that businesses and individuals are able to access government services remotely, easily and smoothly. That is what we want to see, and I think most people in the chamber want to see that. I think the government wants to see that; I think the crossbench wants to see that. The question is: why has Victoria been so slow? What is the rigidity? What is the problem that has been here to stop us actually moving? We are still a long way behind where New South Wales is now, so we have got to catch up. This is actually an efficiency issue; it is an issue of productivity. This is one of the areas where new technology actually enables us to move and to reduce barriers to business activity. This is that happy sweet spot that we should be pushing for to ensure that Victoria is the leader rather than the laggard in this area.

So to that extent we welcome this bill. It is a very modest set of changes. I am going to go through some of the main provisions. For the end-to-end service delivery part, the bill makes amendments to the principal act to allow for Service Victoria to deliver end-to-end services through the app. My goodness – thank God. They are catching up. They have got it – so, good. The bill gives appropriate provisions to access and issue various applications such as licences without having to pass off to VicRoads or another agency. This, as I say, will increase efficiency and reduce the number of agencies doing the same work.

There are obviously matters around identity verification and electronic ID. Changes in this section broadly relate to the end-to-end changes and give the Service Victoria CEO the power to make further inquiries around identity verification on behalf of various agencies. This will improve the identity verification standard and also streamline the processes. These changes will also give users the ability to consent to storage of data and documents on the platform for future use around ID or decline this for privacy and security reasons.

The bill also enables the establishment of partnerships with non-government entities. Again, this is entirely sensible, and we are open to this. The changes will open up a new method of interacting with government for businesses, with the legislation allowing Service Victoria to make agreements with non-government entities for the purpose of performing joint functions – the one-stop point of interaction with Victorian businesses when they require a government service, making the process less complicated and more streamlined.

I am going to put on record some caveats as well. There are a large group of people out there who are not digitally literate, and we need to make sure that they are protected. My father is one of those. I talk to him about the difficulty of getting things done online, and I could relate many stories. But he is not unique. People in his generation face this problem, and we need to be kind and thoughtful about people who have a different background or are from a different generation, where IT of this type is not the common background.

This is new, it is threatening and it is frightening to some people, and they are cut out of services. I am going to pick on the Commonwealth here; I do not always want to be negative about this government. I look at some of the Commonwealth services. People come into my office – again, people I know and people in the various loops that I deal with – and the stories of the aged care assessment services issues, stories of disability access and stories of pension access at a Commonwealth level are often horrific. People, desperate people, cannot get the services they need, because they cannot access them. They just cannot physically do the stuff online that they are required to do. If they do not have someone to help them, and some do not, they are left without those services. You are then told to ring. Well, you ring, and you are put on hold for a very, very long wait. Even when you get through to somebody, they are often not prepared to help you.

This is the difficulty for some, particularly older people, but it is also true of many in our multicultural communities, where language is not as robust, not as strong. We have to make sure that as well as streamlining the service and enabling people who can use their digital literacy to get further down the track quicker and cut the barriers that way – we need to make sure that that is happening – we must not forget and we must not leave behind those older people and the people from our multicultural communities who are thereby at risk. We do need to have that real commitment by government to make sure that there is a phone service that is properly answered, not the long wait where you go round and round in circles and they send you back here and over there: you do number 7, you go to number 7 and they send you across somewhere else. We have all had that long circle-go-round wait, which can be hours and hours long. That is not the way it should be. Parallel with the improvement in these electronic service access modes there should be that commitment to preserving access for older people, those who are not digitally literate and particularly our multicultural communities.

I also want to say that Victorians are cautious about this increasingly because we have had problems with data leaks and data mining that has gone on. We do want the highest standards so that people's data is not at risk. People's data cannot be at risk. We saw Optus and we have seen some of our health providers where there have been major leaks. I am not here to point the finger at anyone, because we actually need high standards here, and I am putting this on record and saying actually we cannot be ignoring this. I am far from confident that many parts of our Victorian public sector are as robust in this regard as they need to be. I just put that on the record. We have seen a number of health issues. When I was health minister I was always very, very nervous about centralising data in a way that meant it could be accessed centrally, where you might have lesser controls and lesser preventative measures to ensure that data is protected. We know the concerns about health records more generally, and we know that there is little confidence amongst many people. People are cautious and nervous about it. People do not want – and I am talking in a general sense here – their health records to be tipped out. They do not want their phone records to be tipped out. They do not want centralised databases of information to be tipped out. Parallel with this – we welcome some of the steps here, some of the catch-up that is going on here – we do need to have appropriate protections and controls.

I want to make another couple of points too. We did some work a little while ago which the *Herald Sun* put on the front page. We looked at some of the ICT projects across government. I just want to make a more general point here. The ICT website for the state government's digital strategy and transformation projects shows almost a third have been terminated, postponed or merged. We looked at this. Only 8.3 per cent of the Victorian government's digital strategy and transformation projects have been completed. Sixty-nine projects, 28.9 per cent of all projects, are postponed and merged. Collectively, these 28.9 per cent of all projects are, astonishingly, 28,000 days overdue. The same projects are collectively \$143.65 million over budget. So these ICT reform digital strategy and transformation projects are a long way behind, a long way over budget. One project, the Department of Justice and Community Safety's serious offenders reform ICT program, has been postponed and placed on hold due to technical and schedule uncertainty, despite being 547 days overdue and \$4.89 million, or 29 per cent, over budget. Another project, WorkSafe Victoria's data and analytics hub, is 357 days overdue and \$23.6 million, or 93 per cent, over budget. I am just picking some of these, and these are from the time we ran this story on the front page of the *Herald Sun*. Even the Department of Premier and Cabinet's common corporate platforms project is currently \$31 million, or 22 per cent, over budget. It has a revised 2026 delivery date because of delays due to stakeholder and resource availability. And it goes on. It is just a very serious mess.

On the IT dashboard, picking up many of these points and looking at things more recently – and I pay tribute to the work of my colleague Jess Wilson in picking up a number of these points – 18 projects, worth more than \$200 million in January this year, are classified red status, and 59 projects, worth just over \$1 billion, are classified amber status. Among the troubled projects is a new software program to support the implementation of Labor's windfall gains tax, which has suffered a \$3.71 million cost blowout. It will not be completed until mid-2024, a staggering 12 months after the tax came in. These are examples of programs that have not been administered well by this government.

The ICT dashboard is actually an important site, and I welcome the work in putting that material in the public domain. It does enable the community and it does enable businesses to monitor the progress of the government on a lot of its IT modernisation, but it is equally true to say it is a sorry tale. If you look across government, there is very little you can point to and say, 'Gee, that project's doing well. They're right on time, and they're holding to their budget.' This is not the experience in Victoria that we have seen. What we have seen is projects that have run late, projects that are delayed, projects that are massively over budget and projects in some cases that are completely and utterly stalled. So it is not surprising to me that Victoria, in this digital and IT strategy area, is so far behind New South Wales, other states and territories and other jurisdictions.

Victoria has really got to do a big job of catch-up, and to the extent that this bill takes a number of small baby steps in that direction, we welcome it. So we will not be opposing the bill, but we will be following carefully those matters, those caveats that I pointed to, particularly ensuring that older Victorians, multicultural Victorians and those who are not IT literate are actually taken care of. They should not be left behind, but we should have faster and smoother operations of our digital strategy and our digital systems.

**Ryan BATCHELOR** (Southern Metropolitan) (14:02): I am very pleased to rise and speak on the Service Victoria Amendment Bill 2023 and to not allow errant esses to creep into the title of the bill or the agency to which it refers. Service Victoria is an incredibly important part of the government's approach to making the practice of dealing with government simpler for citizens. It is an agency established to transform the way that services that government delivers to its citizens are handled and to provide to the citizens a much more seamless experience and a much more technology-focused, citizen-centric, technology-led approach to dealing with government.

In the way that members of our community engage with the various arms of government and the various departments and agencies of government, improving that practice we know will increase the level of trust and confidence that members of the community have in the services they receive. When they see us doing things well, when they see us engaging with them in the modes and channels that they use and that they want to be able to use, they are more likely to believe that the services that we provide are relevant and of value to them. Ensuring that we have high-quality, relevant services that people need delivered in the way that they have come to expect is fundamentally important to the Allan Labor government, because we are in the business of delivering good government services and we want people to understand that the services that we provide are not only high quality and relevant to their needs but also easy to use. That is the foundational question when it comes to considering things like Service Victoria, because as governments and as government agencies we have got to think about how citizens see government, not how government sees citizens, as our first call. I would take a punt, although I have not done any research of my own on this, that most people have no real understanding of the various acronyms of government departments and agencies, what they do and how they operate.

We as government should not expect that their view into us – the first call of their view into us – is to try and navigate such a maze of often changing letters, which is one of the things that Service Victoria was designed to deal with when it was set up and established by this government. It was designed to provide a consumer-facing and citizen-facing way into a range of government services. The second task was to actually try and ensure that those transactions were transformed to make them more citizen-centric and simpler and easier and to strip out the unnecessary complexity that often bedevils the way that customer-facing transactions occur within large organisations. Whether they be government or private sector, large organisations that deal with individuals at scale and in bulk often do not think too much – or at least the bad ones do not – about how these services are experienced by individuals who need to use them, and it is incumbent upon all well-thinking large organisations, whether they be government agencies or private sector organisations, to be continually trying to figure out how to make those systems work better to improve the customer experience. As I said earlier, improving the

customer experience and improving citizens' experience of dealing with government is a key part of our task in increasing their faith in our ability to deliver services to them.

Obviously, Service Victoria has been up and running for several years now. This legislation before us today seeks to make some necessary amendments to the legislative framework that underpins its operations. Obviously, there has been a real drive across government to improve service delivery to consumers and to citizens. I think sometimes events require us to accelerate that process, and certainly throughout the COVID-19 pandemic we very rapidly saw why it is important to have these sorts of platforms. During the pandemic the Service Victoria platform played an enormously important role in providing at the time what was required in terms of checking services and the ability to fast deploy that to millions of Victorians. At its peak the Service Victoria platform was downloaded onto 7 million devices across Victoria. But the experience of those years also demonstrates why it is important to have the capability within government to deliver on that in such a rapid way, so that when those challenges do emerge, sometimes unexpectedly, we can respond in the way that consumers want.

Since the pandemic obviously Service Victoria has continued to grow its digital service offering and now provides around a hundred different government services in a range of areas. I know many out in the community, for example, have a working with children check. Hopefully people have taken advantage of the new capability within the Service Victoria app to have an electronic version of their working with children check on the Service Victoria app on their phone. I was at a preschool in Cheltenham last week when that came in very handy for both me and my staff member. We were very easily able to pull out our phones and show that we had a valid working with children check. I know that is something that millions of Victorians could find beneficial in their day-to-day lives, and that is what Service Victoria is all about.

During the last full year that we have records for, 2022–23, Service Victoria was active in collecting consumer feedback. Nearly 200,000 pieces of feedback were given to Service Victoria during that time. The satisfaction score that people had – the way that we were measuring people's satisfaction with this service that Service Victoria is providing – overall was 96.7 per cent, which exceeds their budget paper 3 target of 95 per cent. What I think is really important and really gratifying for us when we are looking at whether this is working or not is not only the volume of people using it and their satisfaction but that the most common word used by customers in their feedback on their interactions with the Service Victoria app was 'easy' – it was easy to use. For those involved in customer-facing transactions, that should be one of the things we absolutely strive for: not only scoring well on their ratings but getting people to think that the way that they are engaging with this particular government service is easy. I think that is a credit to all the work that has gone into it.

As Mr Davis said in his contribution, this bill follows an independent review into the Service Victoria app, which was tabled in the Parliament in 2022. Obviously, the principal legislation, which was introduced in 2018, included a provision for the act to be independently reviewed after its commencement, and this review was conducted by Dr Claire Noone. The bill implements in its recommendations on Service Victoria the government's commitment to continuing to deliver digital transformation. It makes a few key amendments and broadens some of the definitions in the act to allow for end-to-end customer transactions so that, unlike the original framework under which Service Victoria was established in legislation, through the amendments that are proposed in this piece of legislation, the end-to-end transaction will be able to be done by Service Victoria itself, including things like the issuance of documents and the provision of certificates, approvals and grants for customers.

The legislation also amends the list of Service Victoria's functions to be more principles-based so that the platform can be more innovative and deliver more bundled-type service offerings. For example, it will allow the bundling of a range of outdoor recreation permits, like a fishing licence, a boat and trailer registration and a marine licence for renewal. If we do that in one single transaction, which is allowed for by this bill, for those people who need licences or permits from a range of different agencies to do the same type of thing their lives will be made a lot simpler. I know, Acting President



Bourman, you are absolutely concerned to make sure that people who enjoy the outdoors have an easier time of it from the government, and it is great to see the government delivering on that for people right across our community.

The legislation will also reduce back-office administration currently in the act, reducing the need to make regulations to deliver new services so that Service Victoria can respond more quickly to government priorities. I suppose this is a reflection on the rubber hitting the road between legislators and technologists, some of whom are very fond of extensive mechanisms for regulatory functions to be specified in pieces of delegated legislation. Sometimes it is more efficient and more effective to allow that to occur by other means so that the range of things which are required to be placed into legislation or subordinate legislation can be reduced to matters of important principle rather than unnecessary technical detail. Those sorts of changes will definitely speed up the ability of Service Victoria and government more broadly to deliver on the kinds of digital services that people want. It will enable more flexible options for identity verification and allow Victoria to align with the Commonwealth trusted digital identity framework. Currently there are very complex provisions about applications, processing and review, and the bill will support a more flexible and responsive approach. Obviously, as we move forward into an increasingly digital age things like identity frameworks and trusted identity sources will become even more important for consumers, and as government, as the provider of identity verification, it is important that our practices are robust, modern and efficient.

The last couple of minutes I will spend talking a bit more broadly about a few things raised in debate. I think Mr Davis did raise an important issue more broadly about cybersecurity. Information security is an incredibly important part of the way that all agencies need to do business these days. I think it is demonstrative of how seriously this government takes those issues that it has now been more than five or six years since Victoria appointed its first chief information security officer in 2017. This Labor government's first cybersecurity strategy was released that many years ago. It has always been an important part of the vigilance that this government shows towards the information that it holds.

I do agree that the range of services that government offers cannot only be the domain of those who may be digital natives. There are many in our community who do prefer other contact mechanisms. I do not necessarily think that, as Mr Davis would suggest, all members of multicultural communities are unable to use digital services, but certainly there are some who need those services provided in language, for example. But also – and I think this is an important point – some are not digital natives, some are not comfortable with digital channels, and moving those of us who are into those channels frees up resources and capacity for those who are not to be able to use more traditional means of customer contact. Being efficient in the allocation of government resources should be always something that we have an eye to.

This is important legislation to update the Service Victoria provisions to keep Victoria moving on the journey that we need to be on in terms of transforming digitally the interactions that our citizens have with government. It will make important improvements to the way Service Victoria operates. I am glad to see that, and I am pleased to support the bill on the floor today.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** In the absence of anyone that has not spoken from the opposition for the moment, Mr Berger, you are up.

**John BERGER** (Southern Metropolitan) (14:17): Thank you, Acting President Bourman, and welcome to the chair. I am sure you will be able to preside quite well in your capacity as Acting President.

I would like to take a moment just to talk about Service Victoria. It was the then Andrews Labor government that launched Service Victoria, an easy one-stop shop for some of the most important interactions we have with the government departments. This was in recognition of how difficult it can be sometimes to know exactly how to deal with multiple departments and agencies and the unfortunate case that it is often not a very user-friendly experience.

Service Victoria offers access to over 100 government services, saving everyday Victorians the hassle of cycling through a million websites and documents. These services include transport and driving, personal education and training, family, health care, employment, business, outdoor and recreation, housing and property, crime and the law and COVID-19. Service Victoria covers almost every aspect of Victorian lives through its assistance and programs. Through Service Victoria you can renew your licence or your vehicle rego, apply to work with children and access support and information on issues ranging from housing to health to law. You can even buy a Myki card through Service Victoria.

Service Victoria has also brought how we use everyday identification and concession cards into the 21st century. Thanks to the Allan Labor government, Victorians can make use of the digital wallet to store their essential documents right on their phone, ensuring that you never lose your cards. Through the Service Victoria app you can always have on hand your working with children check, your seniors card, your veterans card and more. There is even exciting news coming from Ballarat, where a pilot is being held to test the effectiveness of adopting digital drivers licences, and I look forward to seeing how that goes. This would allow for drivers to hold their licence in a more secure and easily accessible manner, and their licence would more quickly reflect important changes such as to their home address or licence conditions.

I would like to note my strong support for the proposed amendments to the Service Victoria Act 2018 to improve the user experience of digital government services for all Victorians by extending the capabilities of the chief executive officer and allowing for the delivery of services by and/or with non-government entities. As a highly complex application providing key services to Victorians across the state, it is integral that we maintain the due efficiency and clarity of services that are accessible to all.

Before I continue, I would also like to thank the Minister for Government Services Gabrielle Williams, the Minister for Local Government Melissa Horne and the countless experts and professionals involved in the independent review of the act in 2022 for the hard work they have put into continuously improving the user experience of Service Victoria. As a government we are all too aware that those who make the most use of our support services are the most vulnerable Victorians – those in crisis, struggling with their physical or mental health and the more difficult circumstances that could up-end their lives. A centralised and accessible point of contact for these services can be a lifesaver for many Victorians doing it tough, and this is what Service Victoria provides.

Let me outline for you the myriad of benefits and assistance this crucial service provides for Victorians. I am proud to say that last year the then Andrews Labor government extended its sick pay guarantee program to 400 more eligible jobs. Since its introduction in 2022 over 76,000 casuals and contract workers have signed up to the scheme, with over 1.8 million sick and carers leave hours covered with fair pay. Service Victoria handles applications from this key program, ensuring that casuals and contract workers never have to choose between recovery and paying their bills. This program highlights how crucial it is for Service Victoria to be efficient and accessible for Victorians doing it tough, and it is a big part of the reason I strongly support this amendment.

For eligible households running on solar energy, Service Victoria allows you to apply for a rebate of 50 per cent off your hot water bill for up to \$1000. That is up to \$500 you can get off your household bill – certainly not a number to turn your nose up at. Of course Service Victoria also provide rebates and loans for homes to access a solar panel system or battery, making these further savings more accessible to Victorians. Service Victoria can direct Victorians to a range of discounts and rebates available that are relevant to them through its savings finder. In what we know to be a time with cost-of-living pressures, this service is absolutely essential for Victorians who may be doing it tough.

Service Victoria also allows for automatic approvals of permits such as footpath trading and outdoor fitness with participating councils, streamlining the process to the benefit of small businesses and the community at large. They will process the application and pass it on to the local council and neighbouring businesses if you are intending to use a footpath trading zone, making the process much easier for businesses and recreational organisations.

Not only can Service Victoria assist you with accessing key government services but there are also countless benefits to be found and utilised. Get Active Kids is an incredible program that allows for families to apply for vouchers which can help Victorians afford club memberships, fees, uniforms and equipment. Just last year we also introduced the veterans card, which can be accessed through Service Victoria, with exclusive benefits including a \$100 car rego discount, free public transport on Anzac Day and Remembrance Day, free trailer and caravan rego, free boating licences, a fishing licence exemption and access to veterans employment programs. Service Victoria is a cornerstone of our support services, servicing over 15 million activities in the past financial year. The countless benefits that this service provides are clear through all those spoken about above.

For Service Victoria to achieve its full potential for Victorians in need, the digital interface must be efficient, straightforward and navigable. This amendment intends to more strongly clarify the purpose of Service Victoria and strengthen the service provision capabilities by extending the powers of the CEO and allowing collaboration with non-government entities. Dr Claire Noone has cited Australia Post as a possible collaborator, as mentioned by the member for Preston in the other place. I thank her for her invaluable insights on digital service provision, provided to the Parliament in 2022 through the independent review of the act. This review engaged over 40 stakeholders, analysed over 100 documents and provided detailed research through domestic and international case studies. This work is integral to the improvement that the Allan Labor government intends to make to Service Victoria through its amendment to the act. The basis of this amendment brought to the Council is on the recommendations of the independent review. Through this amendment Service Victoria will be able to deliver more digital services, provide more flexible and accessible identification verification, create pathways for more varied partnerships and service provisions and define information management practice in accordance with the revised act, key for a service provider that provides electronic identity documentation.

The bill clarifies the purpose of Service Victoria by amending the definition of ‘customer service function’, explicitly acknowledging Service Victoria’s ability to issue official information documents and to receive or make payments. Service Victoria can already perform these actions in accordance with the Service Victoria Act if defined as customer service functions, but this amendment is integral to recognising Service Victoria’s increasing relevance and role as a provider of end-to-end services to countless Victorians. It also crucially removes the requirement within the act to make regulations to perform particular functions, streamlining Service Victoria’s ability to adapt their operations in accordance with consumer needs. As noted by Minister Blandthorn last sitting week in the introduction of this bill, these amendments do not interfere with the consumer’s right to privacy, despite an increasing scope for access to information, and thus negate any potential concerns regarding these amendments. The Victorian government has come to an agreement with the other states and territories to align to a common standard of digital identification with verifiable credentials. This amendment bill would as such allow Service Victoria the flexibility to align identity verification with national and international standards as they evolve in the future. The amendment would also support potential future participation in the Australian government’s digital identity system by removing inconsistent provisions within the act and reforming the content to be more principle-based. More specifically, we would amend the current provisions within the act for application processing and reviewing and the issuing of temporary and ongoing electronic identity credentials, instead setting them out through the identification verification standards made under the act.

As we trend further toward a more interconnected country within a global sphere, allowing for adaptable and futureproof government services is integral to their success and relevance to consumers. Through allowing partnerships with non-government entities in relation to delivery of customer service functions, identity verification functions and other functions related to the delivery of government services set out in clause 15, Victorians will be able to use identity documents verified through Service Victoria with outside organisations requiring this information. This reduces the complexity and difficulty of navigating our highly digital world and reduces the amount of third-party storage containing our sensitive data. These legislative amendments highlight the implementation of

cybersecurity measures, data encryption standards and compliance frameworks and will strengthen Service Victoria against potential cybersecurity threats and vulnerabilities. These reforms will ensure that any partnerships with non-government entities maintain assurance of data privacy, setting out that non-government entities may comply with the terms of an agreement where their existing processes or systems do not comply with the best practice principles. Specifically, these entities may be required under sections 4, 6 and 38 of the charter to apply their services in a matter compatible with human rights when delivering their services in partnership with Service Victoria. This is necessary where the functions are or include functions of a public nature or are being implemented by a non-government entity on behalf of the Victorian government or a public authority, such as a Victorian government agency.

The Allan Labor government is committed to the highest standards of cybersecurity, and these amendments will ensure the protection of Victorian users and confidential information that they provide to our services. This amendment would allow for Service Victoria to collect changes from businesses benefiting from these services in line with government cost recovery guidelines. Of course all engagements with non-government organisations will be assured and designed to protect user information, including the use of enforceable provisions under the amended act. The amendments also create provisions for engagement with community representatives, industry stakeholders and end users to gain their insights and ensure the highest possible standard of operation and user-friendly services provided by Service Victoria.

Victorians accessing Service Victoria to make applications for permits or licences will be able to bundle relevant services, such as a suite of outdoor recreation permits, including a fishing licence, boat and trailer registration and marine licence renewal, all in one application. Service Victoria, through these capabilities, will be able to tailor and streamline their services in accordance with customer trends, increasing relevance to Victorian customer needs. For those Victorians unable to verify their identity online these proposed changes to the act will support more alternative processes and enable existing services to be moved to Service Victoria more quickly. The bill will repeal requirements to send formal letters with titles such as 'Interim refusal notice' if more information is required for processing – an unnecessary and stressful letter to receive for struggling Victorians trying to access government services. We will reduce the need for ministerial approval for operational matters and reduce the need to create further regulation, delivering new services, speeding up Service Victoria's ability to adapt their services to better fit the needs of the consumer and making processes easier for Service Victoria to service Victorians. In turn this makes the services more easily accessible for all Victorians.

Through this amendment to the act we as a government will better enable the implementation of the *Victorian Government Digital Strategy 2021–2026*, supporting the goals of our digital strategy of better, fairer and more accessible services, because this is what Victoria deserves. All Victorians, young and old and our most vulnerable, should be able to access all the services and benefits that Service Victoria offers. In 2022 we introduced amendments to the act to address technical issues arising in the COVID pandemic response, in 2023 we introduced a dedicated Department of Government Services with a singular focus to maintain and improve government services such as Service Victoria and in 2024 we are committed to building further on these reforms to keep progressing technical advances and increasing consumer expectations of government service delivery.

The Allan Labor government is committed to continuously improving the services. But there is always more work to do in improving these systems for everyone and making the services more user-friendly and accessible, and this is what the amendment proposes to achieve. I hope my fellow members in the Legislative Council will join me in supporting these crucial amendments for the benefit of all Victorians. We are changing the game for government service provision, and we must continue to set the standard as our technical world evolves. This amendment will do just that, ensuring that Service Victoria remains a constant and relevant government service now and into the future.

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (14:32): I rise to speak to the Service Victoria Amendment Bill 2023, and I do so acknowledging those that have spoken on this. I understand that this bill is largely following a recommendation from a report by Dr Claire Noone, who was looking at the act to improve the operation of Service Victoria – we know it has been plagued with problems for many years – with the ideal of having a more end-to-end framework for users and essentially enabling greater serviceability for businesses and individuals by using a digital component.

What the bill does is provide for the delivery of functions by Service Victoria, either with or on behalf of non-government entities, and provide for the delivery of functions by non-government entities, either with the Service Victoria CEO or on behalf of the Service Victoria CEO. It enables the identity verification standards to deal with the process of governing applications for and the issuing, renewal, suspension and cancellation of electronic identity credentials, and it ensures that information management requirements under the act are consistent with equivalent requirements in other acts. I have spoken of how it arose after the report undertaken by Dr Noone. It also is going to allow applications – and I know that you are a shooter, Acting President Bourman – in terms of shooters licences, and others have mentioned the ability to have that digital licensing on hand, to have greater reliability and accessibility but also be far more functional and far more easy to use. We are in 2024. Other states have this function, and it has worked exceptionally well.

Of course there are going to be concerns around cybersecurity, and I am sure that the government understands that. We and all Victorians will be watching that in terms of ensuring that cybersecurity checks are in place. The government does not have a great track record in that area – there have been many cybersecurity breaches – but given that, it is a real concern for governments right across the board in terms of cybersecurity issues. I think it is an emerging issue for all governments, particularly in Western countries, dealing with some of the attacks that are coming from foreign entities. Let us not bother about that – that is just in passing – but I do make the point around those concerns that many people have.

I want to draw attention to some of those issues around where Victoria has been. They have been slow to the party on this. As I said, New South Wales and Queensland have had business services apps in place for a number of years. It was a real contrast during COVID when New South Wales had a very good app that came into place, as part of their Service NSW app, around COVID contact tracing. God forbid we ever go back to those days – they were dark days and ones that I never want to return to, nor would I suggest anyone in the state of Victoria would, after what we suffered, but it does go to the point about why we suffered so significantly. New South Wales had a far more sophisticated app, as I said, and an ability for individuals and businesses to have that app and have that contact tracing. Ours was absolutely abysmal in this state, and as a result we had lockdown after lockdown because of the incompetence, the mismanagement and the absolute debacle of contact tracing.

We had massive implications that arose from hotel quarantine and then we had the Coate inquiry, which was a faux inquiry – no-one could remember or recall. While I am on faux inquiries, I am very concerned about the inquiry that the government have announced today, which is non-transparent and will not go to the issues that absolutely we need to address in this state about what happened last week. I have gone off on a bit of a tangent here, but I make the point because it is very important to ensure that Victorians have trust in government, and especially when it comes to something like this services app. They want to understand that their information is secure, that it is not going to be breached or used in a way that will compromise them, their businesses or indeed parts of the community.

I make that point because of Victoria's track record, which has been so appalling. As I said, when we had those issues around COVID and contact tracing, there was a stark contrast with the New South Wales app and what it was able to do. They had people actually getting about their communities and undertaking what they needed to do, whereas we had mass and widespread lockdowns because the government had no ability to manage the situation appropriately or properly. As I said, we are seeing those implications, and I read with some concern about the terrible truancy rates from children not going to school, the very real impacts to our health services, which are still recovering, and mental

health services, which still are not up to speed. There are so many issues. We had the harshest of restrictions with the worst outcomes and more deaths than anywhere around the country. I am not saying that has anything to do with the app, but I am just making the point that this government has a poor track record and needs to get this right.

While the intent is there in terms of having this bill be non-controversial in nature, we do need to ensure that it has the safety components in place, that it is aligning with those back-end systems, that it is complying with other parts of legislation to ensure that compliance is adhered to and that it does allow for a more flexible future for the user, whether that is the individual or businesses. That is the main purpose around having a look at those technological advances, ensuring that cybersecurity matters are addressed and that the Victorian public have total trust and feel they can use this app given the government's track record in the past.

I say again the opposition will not be opposing this bill, but I do hope the government takes into consideration some of those concerns highlighted by some of the many issues that arose out of that very good example in recent years with COVID and how it was managed by those other communities across the border in New South Wales and in Queensland – particularly New South Wales, which managed COVID far better than Victoria. It was just a pity that Victoria did not take heed of what was happening in New South Wales. This is one thing where individuals and the community had greater freedom and they were very willing to undertake what the government asked, whereas here in Victoria it was an absolute basket case and it is no wonder that many Victorians are very sceptical about this government's ability to implement such a system.

**Michael GALEA** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:40): Acting President Bourman, how wonderful it is to see you once again ascend to the rank of Acting President, and how good to see you in the chair today.

I also rise to speak on the Service Victoria Amendment Bill 2023, and I rise to speak very much in favour of this bill. This bill will aid the continued success of the Service Victoria app, making it easier to deliver digital services across a raft of policy areas and government services to all Victorians. It will provide greater flexibility going into the future, reforming the legislation so that Service Victoria can adapt itself more effectively. This app, as many members will know, was established to benefit customers based on the principle that access to services should not always require visiting multiple agencies and websites, nor should it require filling out and mailing paper applications. For that reason, the Service Victoria Act 2018 was passed by a previous Parliament. Since then the government services which this app covers have become easier to use and more convenient for all Victorians to engage with.

The app came into broader public attention and more widespread use during the COVID pandemic, as a few of our Liberal colleagues from across the aisle have commented on. They are quick to draw comparisons to other apps, but I do not seem to recall them mentioning the federal government's COVID app. I believe they brought an app out. I cannot actually remember the name of it now. There was a federal government app, apparently, and it was so atrocious that I think I remember downloading it and about a week later it was completely useless, which just goes to show what really happens when we put those opposite, those in blue, in charge of anything remotely to do with technology. I think they are falling asleep at the wheel over there. I am not sure if they have actually heard me.

But just as they are behind the eight ball when it comes to technology, so they are with many other things both in this place and of course more importantly when it comes to delivering for the people of Victoria. That is why it is so good that, despite the catastrophic failures – and I am not sure how many millions of dollars were spent on that federal app by the bumbling former Morrison government – what we are talking about here today, the Service Victoria app, is an example of an app that did work well and that did support Victorians through those dark and difficult times. That is what an effective government app such as Service Victoria's should always do.

But of course it is not just in times of crisis. There are many other areas where this app comes into play and where it helps people with their day-to-day transactions with government. There are all sorts of different services that it can be used for. I think the one that grabs my attention the most is the casual and contract workers sick pay guarantee and using the app to access that entitlement. This government – it was a COVID measure as well, in fact – trailblazed and led the nation. We are still hoping that our federal colleagues will catch up and implement a federally supported casual sick pay program, because the pilot in Victoria has proved to be very successful. It is saying to retail workers, to hospitality workers: if you are a casual employee, you do not have to choose between coming into work sick – running yourself down, getting your co-workers infected as well – and earning an income. It is a really, really important thing. It is a really important message to be sending as well, let alone an important service to provide for Victorians. There are hundreds of thousands of casual workers in this state, and unlike those opposite, this is a government that actually wants to support those workers and wants to say to them, ‘You shouldn’t be penalised if you do happen to fall sick.’ So that is a program that has been really good to see the rollout of, and the way in which you access that is through this very app, the Service Victoria app. Of course if anyone does wish to take advantage of it, if they have not done so already, you are entitled to five days pay per year under this program. Just open the app, the orange one with the white Victoria logo, and register your details in it, and then anytime that you do need to avail yourself of that casual sick pay guarantee, it is right there and ready for you.

One of my favourite examples of what this app can do, but of course it is not the only one, is if you are renewing or taking out a new membership for Ambulance Victoria – again, a very reasonable membership that you can pay for and a really, really good way to support yourself and your family. Again, you can do that all straight through the app, and you can update your details as well with Ambulance Victoria, which is really quite handy to have. I remember about five or six years ago I got a call from Ambulance Victoria. They very kindly called me to tell me that my membership was expiring that day, so I hastily renewed it. That can now be a thing of the past. It is all on the app, all on your phone. You can see what is there. You can renew that in time and have that right there at your fingertips.

It is also of course about supporting our small businesses, whether you are creating a business profile account, renewing a liquor licence or searching for various different business permits and licences – all of which you can do right there on the Service Victoria app. There is a general savings finder as well of course on top of that, which also links through to the many successful rounds of the power saving bonus that this government implemented. Again, it is right there for people to access. Also disability workers can apply for their disability worker registration and renew that registration as well. It has everything, right through to Get Active Kids vouchers, which you can apply for and redeem through the app as well.

You can verify your identity, and you can also use that verified Service Victoria identity with various other government agencies, such as Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria, Consumer Affairs Victoria, the Labour Hire Authority, the RTBA – the Residential Tenancies Bond Authority – the Victorian Building Authority and WorkSafe Victoria, as well as of course various local councils that have taken up the program. You can apply for all sorts of things through the Service Victoria app at various selected local councils – everything from pet registrations to bin orders to other permits and whatever else you might be seeking through councils.

Of course I know that outdoor recreation is something that is very close to your heart, Acting President Bourman, and if you are seeking a recreational fishing licence, again that is another thing that you can get quite easily through the Service Victoria app. Also you can register an interest to hunt pest animals on Crown land, something we have discussed various times in this chamber – and I have raised at various times as well the need to responsibly hunt some of these pest species, especially as they affect constituents such as mine in the outer suburban pockets of Melbourne that I am privileged to represent. It goes all the way through to kangaroo harvesting, miners rights and other things like that as well.

If you are a senior, you can also apply for a digital seniors card and get a digital seniors business discount card. You can also apply for various solar home rebates or offers or loans, apply for hot water rebates and apply for digital drivers licences too, which is another exciting thing that is coming on and is along the way. Those of us in the south-east are still having to wait a little bit, but the trial program is now underway in the Ballarat area. I am sure that will excite you, Mr McCracken. I am not sure if you have got a digital licence yet. I hope you do. You can, after my contribution today, show us how well it works. I have heard very good reports from others already, and I am sure you have taken that up, Mr McCracken.

**Harriet Shing** interjected.

**Michael GALEA:** A digital pen licence – what a good idea. This is probably the time where I confess to the house that I never got my pen licence in primary school, so I have been unauthorised, writing everything that I write in here unlicensed. Perhaps that is a good idea as well, Minister Shing: we should get some digital pen licences and perhaps some catch-up programs for those of us who missed out in school. That is the sort of example of day-to-day functions, where they do not happen every single day for every single Victorian, but when you do need to access those services, whether it is a car licence or down the track – in fact I think you can already renew your boat licence on the app as well – they are wonderful things that you can actually do. It makes your life easier. That is exactly what effective government services should be all about. They should be about making access to government simpler, more effective and more efficient for all Victorians so that we can be there to support Victorians with what they need when they need it.

At the end of the day that is what this bill is all about too, because by improving the various back-end processes of Service Victoria, which is what the amendments in this bill will actually allow us to do, we can actually focus more on delivering those services. I am sure there are many other things, aside from just pen licences, that we will be able to bring into these programs and to this app which will be of great benefit, whether it is to the entire Victorian community or to various particular things. Again, hunting is a very good example: it does not affect all Victorians, but for those it does, making it easier for hunters to, as I say, hunt pest animals can only be a good thing as well.

The bill today comes after an independent review of the original Service Victoria Act 2018. That act of course included a provision that the act be independently reviewed three years after commencement, and this bill today is here in response to that review, which was undertaken by Dr Claire Noone. Following that we have the bill which is before us today.

As I said, the back-end processes which will be simplified through the various mechanisms in this bill will help to ensure that those services can be delivered more effectively. It will also clarify that the Service Victoria app can issue documents, approvals and grants for customers. It will also ensure that the app responds to new priorities flexibly and that when demands for its use come up in perhaps unexpected ways, we are more agile and more flexible in what we can actually arrange for Service Victoria to do. As well as that, some various aspects of unnecessary back-office administration will be removed as part of this bill. An example of this is that the bill will reduce the need to make regulations to deliver new services and then also reduce the need to obtain ministerial approvals for operational matters, such as establishing the underlying technology for a new database to create an improved experience for people applying, for example, for a copy of a marriage certificate or the like.

The bill will also bolster flexibility around various identity verification options. This will be achieved by enabling more detailed information about processes to be set on identity verification standards under the act. We know of course that those standards are regularly updated, and ensuring that Service Victoria can respond to these updated standards as they happen is really quite important. This includes such things as keeping up with and adapting to various national standards as they change as well.

The amendments in this bill will allow Service Victoria to harmonise the information management requirements across all of government. It ensures that information will continue to be protected, which



is obviously very important. The current protections under the Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014 and the Health Records Act 2001 apply, as does the retention and disposal authority, which is of course under the Public Records Act 1973. That continues to apply and is an important safeguard as part of this system. The changes to information management requirements obviously will not impact how much information is retained, and this is due to the fact that Service Victoria will still be required to comply with those retention and disposal authorities as I just mentioned, which fall under the Public Records Act. So those safeguards apply now and will in the future under the act just as much as they have done in the past.

We know that the Service Victoria app has been very popular. I mentioned, I believe, that we have seen in the order of 7 million downloads of the app, but on top of that we have also seen some really good results from feedback. From people that have used it to claim their sick pay guarantee – in my view the best program available under this app – we had a 98.6 per cent satisfaction rate. Similarly, 97 per cent were favourable when they renewed their vehicle registration; renewing working with children checks, 96.3 per cent; checking vehicle registrations, 95 per cent; buying a fishing licence, also 95 per cent. So it is really good to see that the app is responding to what Victorians need, and hopefully those strong responses will continue and, as the app evolves and provides more services to Victorians, as this bill enables us to do, it will continue to be an app that is of genuine and practical value to people, as I said, whether it is going for your licence for something, whether a boat or car or something else, Ambulance Victoria membership, sick pay guarantee – whatever it is it may be.

I will conclude my comments there. This is a sensible, straightforward bill. It should be a non-controversial bill. For the various reasons I have gone through and for all the benefits that the Service Victoria app provides for Victorians, I do commend this bill to the house.

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (14:55): I would like to make a few brief comments today about the Service Victoria Amendment Bill 2023 in our second-reading debate, and as Mr Galea has just said, it is a largely, largely uncontroversial bill. I note this side of the house will not be opposing it. I thank my good friend Tim McCurdy in the other place for being our shadow minister in this space and for providing some good research and context to our knowledge in this debate. We know that this bill comes about through recommendations by Dr Claire Noone in her required investigation, or required review, commissioned by the minister on the third anniversary of the act.

I like the idea of a one-stop shop. It sounds good. There are always, I find, teething troubles in all of these sorts of events and procedures and programs, but the idea to streamline services certainly has merit. I understand that there are about 100 different agency functions, ranging from licence renewals to rebates and savings finders, that can be encompassed by Service Victoria. Indeed I might just put on record that I recently had to renew my licence. Every 10 years you have to renew your licence, and I had to go onto the VicRoads website and download the app and conduct that. I was quite pleased, though, that they said I did not have to renew my photo, so indeed for the next 10 years I will look like I looked 10 years ago. I am very pleased about that. But these sorts of expediencies can certainly be handy, rather than going to various different apps and downloading them.

I also note that during the course of the summer, my wonderful nephews and my son and I were out on the Gippsland Lakes. They decided to throw the fishing line in. We were out on Lake King in the Paynesville and Metung area, and they downloaded their fishing licence. So when we pulled up at Duck Arm at the end of the day and threw the line in, they were able to be legal and aboveboard. Suffice to say we had loads of fun – and no fish were caught. But the idea behind this sort of framework is to create a more seamless opportunity for people to have the required licences, to be legal, but also to cut out the overburden of doubling up.

I understand from the 2023–24 budget briefings that the Allan government have set aside \$3 million for this delivery of the digital services, but perplexingly, in anticipation, the cost could actually increase to \$60 million in that delivery in the 2024–25 financial year. Some of that discussion could be around the increased workload and doubling of those transactions and traffic to the website. Let us hope that

there are certainly some efficiencies and that we do not see doubling and doubling and doubling, as we have seen in other government-driven projects. I will just leave that there, because otherwise I will get started. The other thing is around that cost recovery basis. If it is a cost recovery basis, how does it seem to go into that \$60 million? These are some of the questions that I think people have raised and that have been raised with me.

One of the major components of the bill is certainly that seamless end-to-end service delivery – and I have just spoken about the need to reduce having to go to different websites et cetera – and the identity verification and electronic ID. I think probably one thing that I would like to put on record, and I know I was at a National Party meeting the other day in Sale and having our normal meeting as we do from time to time, is the concern that some citizens have about the digital platform holding personal information and the concerns they have around the breaches of that or that that can be shared – just the protection of personal ID and personal information. Indeed I think one very good comment that came out of those discussions was that they always need to be opt-in. They always need to be volunteer, we will call it, or non-compulsory. Certainly there are many pieces of information that are held in positions that I am sure I do not know – information in my particular space and size. I used to think that if you had a tax file number the government tended to know a lot about you anyway, but securing that electronic ID and providing some surety that it is not compulsory – that these are opt-in processes – can therefore reduce that concern around the sharing of information and the misappropriation of that information. We have seen cyberbreaches in recent times, which have certainly compromised I think people's medical history and financial banking as well, so there needs to be tight regulation around that. There need to be those black walls so that we can keep away from indeed the dark web, and these sorts of things should be voluntary.

The other thing, which I know my colleague Tim McCurdy raised and is very pertinent too, is about just making sure that when these digital platforms come on board there is inclusivity and accessibility for people, first of all where IT is not their first language, we will say, and they have concerns, where English is not their first language or for those who do have certain disabilities or who may be illiterate – there are indeed people who are illiterate, and in the past it was easy to walk in, take your form and get it stamped in an office in the various sectors – and just ensuring that the non tech savvy and those with difficulties with technology are served well and supported. I am just putting on record that the government still needs to be mindful about these sorts of issues and, again, for those multicultural people – the wonderful people that make up such a vast number in our state – where English is a concern for them, that there are those pathways that are able to make sure they can access these services. I really think that the digital pathways are not specifically addressed in this bill, and many in our ethnic communities may suffer a reduced delivery from the government due to lack of adequate transition and translation into their required language. So I am just putting that on the record.

Finally, I think it is important to create efficiencies. We all carry our phones with us – 90 per cent of us would carry our phones with us – and have access to the improvements and the specialisations that can occur with modern technology as long as those other protections are put in place, and with that I will happily end my contribution.

**Jacinta ERMACORA** (Western Victoria) (15:04): I appreciate the contributions by colleagues on all sides of the chamber so far. I wish to make my contribution, which will be partially unique and partially not quite so unique as what has already been contributed. I speak today in support of the Service Victoria Amendment Bill 2023. This bill enhances the capacity of Service Victoria to act as the central point of access for end-to-end government services. The bill will enable more government services to be provided online, enshrining simpler, faster and easier access to government services. It simplifies and modernises the identity verification process and improves administrative efficiency through the public sector. The bill supports the role of Service Victoria in furthering the digital transformation of the public sector in Victoria. This will ensure that government services are able to readily adapt to technical change.

The bill puts in place recommendations for legislative reform that came from the independent review into the Service Victoria Act 2018 in June 2022. It amends the Service Victoria Act 2018 to clarify the purposes of the act, and it will authorise partnerships between Service Victoria and non-government agencies to deliver services jointly or on behalf of other service agencies. It will bring the information management and privacy requirements for Service Victoria under the Service Victoria Act 2018 into line with broader Victorian government requirements.

This bill will enable the CEO of Service Victoria to make agreements with non-government entities to better provide services for all Victorians using Service Victoria and the digital platform. It will set out further powers for the Service Victoria CEO and ensure further support for digital delivery of services provided by government by establishing a centralised point of access for those government services. The bill ensures electronic identity credentials are managed and governed by identity verification standards made by the minister under section 41 of the Service Victoria Act 2018. It is about simplifying and modernising the delivery of government services. It is designed around the needs of people using the system and makes it more convenient to navigate, allowing users to interact with government online when it suits them. We saw the successful use of the Service Victoria app during the COVID-19 pandemic with QR code check-ins, and that soon expanded to paying for car registration and ambulance subscriptions and assistance for those struggling with the cost of living.

The Service Victoria app has a digital wallet where Victorians can securely store identification documents. This includes working with children cards, veterans cards, seniors cards and much more, as described by my colleagues already. Currently 7 million devices have the app installed, and more than 1 billion transactions have occurred through Service Victoria, with consistently high customer satisfaction ratings, as Mr Galea mentioned. This bill is about streamlining customer service to make a centralised place for customers' information and credentials. Although the service profile is different, the services offered will not be dissimilar to an Apple Wallet, for example. Like Apple Wallet, with these changes Service Victoria will be easier to navigate, more intuitive and likely to result in Victorians using the Service Victoria app for more convenience. For all of us, less passwords is much better than more passwords – I can personally vouch for that. This ensures that a customer does not need to continually provide the same information over and over to different agencies. This is achieved by allowing for a re-usable electronic identity through Service Victoria.

In June 2022 an independent review into the Service Victoria Act was conducted by Dr Claire Noone, as mentioned previously. The review brought about several legislative recommendations which this bill implements. The amendments will form the next steps in the government's digital strategy of better, fairer and more accessible services. It will ensure that the act keeps up with the ever-evolving technology landscape and keep government service delivery at the highest quality possible.

This bill is about removing the red tape and convoluted and complex processes that impact Service Victoria's ability to be flexible and deliver quality services. This will no doubt be a relief to customer service personnel in government agencies but also to customers. We all know that feeling when we are asked to fill out yet another form about ourselves when first accessing a service. In fact every time we fill out a separate form and hand it over the counter we do run the risk of information being inadvertently inaccurately recorded, and also we place ourselves at risk through the individual's cybersecurity capability. I was in a coffee shop yesterday. They were on day one of implementing their QR code system, and they were very curious about their customers' experience. Once I scanned their system I was asked for personal details. I was asked for my email address, and the person I was with was asked for even more information. We did not feel that comfortable. They asked us for feedback, so we let them know that we were not that comfortable. We had a good chat and sorted it through, but the reality is I think it is fair that I should know that cafe's capability around cybersecurity before I handed over my information, particularly my personal details, just to get a cup of coffee. We sorted it all out and we got it all fixed.

This bill brings amendments to end-to-end service delivery that address these challenges as they relate to Service Victoria services, as I described earlier. This is about removing the need for a customer to

be passed from government service to government service and instead centralising everything into one place. This bill will also result in reductions to back-office administration. I do not think it is very exciting for staff to be doing all this data entry over and over again either. It reduces the need for new regulations to be made when delivering new services or obtaining ministerial approval for operational matters. This is about making Service Victoria faster, efficient, cost effective and secure. This bill gives greater flexibility to Service Victoria to implement new services or support programs by removing legal instruments currently required by the act. When Service Victoria is setting up a support program in response to, say, an emergency scenario like the bushfires, storms and power outages we have had this week, it will make it much easier for those affected to access the services available to them nice and quickly. Of course we know only too well from this week just how important it is to respond quickly when disaster hits. I imagine you would not want to spend all your time filling in forms, when the fire is raging through your community, to validate your identity. It will mean those needing the support will get the help they need faster. Service Victoria will be able to bundle services like outdoor recreation licences and permits, for example, into a single application, meaning time saved when applying or renewing your fishing licence, boat or trailer registration and marine licence.

An extremely important part of these amendments is the ability for Service Victoria to work with businesses outside of government. This will see customers greatly benefit from being able to use their verified record of identity stored on the device, on the Service Victoria app, with other organisations. This means greater security for customers' sensitive data. It removes the requirement for the data to be stored in multiple places and third-party locations. It will also enable Service Victoria to collect charges from businesses that benefit from using the service. Importantly, any engagement with external organisations will be designed with data protection at the forefront. This would include using enforceable provisions under contracts. Charges obtained by Service Victoria would be set in line with government cost-recovery guidelines. Through agreement with other states and territories, the Victorian government will ensure that all digital identification and verifiable credentials are aligned to a common standard. This provides Service Victoria with greater flexibility to align to both national and international standards as they change. It also ensures that Service Victoria could potentially participate in the Australian government digital identity system by ensuring the act is principles based and that inconsistent provisions are removed.

This bill will repeal the requirement for formal letters to be sent if more identity information needs to be checked. It will also repeal the unused identity verification review pathway via the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal. Let us clear up their list, hey. The review pathway was introduced in 2018, and since that time Service Victoria has verified over 1.5 million identities with no VCAT reviews sought. The repeal will not change the right to seek a review via internal review, complain to integrity bodies or seek judicial review – all of those rights remain.

Currently the Service Victoria Act 2018 contains unique information management requirements. The bill removes those requirements and aligns information management protection to the Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014 and the Health Records Act 2001. Information will be held with a minimalistic approach in accordance with Victoria's retention and disposal authority under the Public Records Act 1973.

This bill implements the legislative recommendations coming from the independent review. By adopting these recommendations into the amendments discussed we will see a faster, more efficient delivery of government services online through Service Victoria. The bill will modernise and futureproof Service Victoria, giving access to more innovative, end-to-end delivery of services. It will greatly improve customer and business experience when interacting with government by providing a more consistent, centralised digital platform. I must say I really appreciate double-clicking when I pay with my Apple Wallet. This bill provides a really fantastic, simple approach to identity and to renewal, as has been described by many of my colleagues in the chamber today. Finally, it will reduce the regulatory red tape and obstacles to allow continued technological growth for Service Victoria. I commend this bill to the house.

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (15:18): I want to speak on the Service Victoria Amendment Bill 2023, an important bill. The government is a bit late to the party on digitisation of government services. We certainly saw during the pandemic how far behind we were in all sorts of ways, from contact tracing to regional travel voucher schemes and our interactions with businesses, which made Victorians' lives so much harder than everywhere else. This bill goes some way to addressing those issues but not nearly far enough.

I want to touch on a couple of issues, particularly the digital drivers licence. It has been long promised by this government but never really delivered. I look jealously at my wife, who is from New South Wales; when she lived there she could just have her digital licence wherever she went. Yet Victorians wait years and years and years, if not decades, to keep up with the rest of the country on digital drivers licences. Why is that – because this Labor government has not done the work. They have not invested in digital technologies that make government more efficient and easier for people. This government has a knack for focusing on what works best for the bureaucracy rather than what works best for each and every Victorian. They are very much an inward-facing government when it comes to digitisation of government and government services rather than outward facing and customer focused on actual people and their issues and what they need to make their lives that little bit easier, whether it be digital drivers licences, whether it be voucher schemes, whether it be contact tracing, whether it be dealing with Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria or whether it be dealing with different checks and IDs and access to government services.

I want to touch on the digital drivers licence rollout, because we know this whole process has been a bit of a bungle for this government. Another bungle we saw, which the Treasurer has apologised for, was a huge technical error that led to 57,000 motorists being incorrectly named in an email about new drivers licences. It was reported by several media outlets at the time, but a report by the *Herald Sun* said it was a major technical error:

It's understood about 57,000 motorists in Ballarat received an email from VicRoads, prompting them to register their interest for the trial.

But motorists were left confused when they were addressed by the wrong surname.

Craig Hughes told the *Herald Sun* he originally dismissed the email he received about 5pm on Wednesday.

“Dear Craig Taylor ...

It was absolutely botched, this scheme. You have to question whether Victorians' privacy was interfered with.

Treasurer Tim Pallas apologised for the bungle, acknowledging it was unnecessary and had caused a “degree of administrative burden”.

Everything is an administrative burden for the government. It appears they stuffed up at the first hurdle. They talk a big game when it comes to modernising digital government but cannot even get the basics right in an email. Clearly, if they had these processes right, they would not need to be using a mail merge, which they clearly stuffed up. In the process many people's names were incorrect and other people's names were exposed to people that should not have had them. That was a clear stuff-up and a clear failure.

No stuff-up was more stark than what we saw during the pandemic – failures with contact tracing, hotel quarantine and the way that government interacted with businesses. That whole process in the pandemic could have been a lot better for all Victorians had the government done the necessary work investing in digital infrastructure – investing in digital services that make Victorians' lives easier.

I want to quote a bit from an essay put together by my friend Matthew Lesh from the Institute of Public Affairs, who wrote in an essay on state capacity throughout the pandemic:

Whether countries took these steps ultimately came down to the underrated question of competence. A University of Munich study concluded that “government effectiveness is significantly associated with

decreased death rates”, after controlling for various factors including population age, health system capacity and government policy response.

‘State capacity’ means:

... the ability to effectively decide and implement good policy. State capacity is no easy task. Governments often lack skills, resources and knowledge. This leads to persistent and widespread ... failure.

One example of that failure really is on the recovery from COVID. If you look at New South Wales, they had Dine and Discover vouchers, where people on their Service NSW app could easily interact with businesses and the business would automatically get a discount on that transaction – fantastic. Then you had the government’s regional travel voucher scheme, where the government offered \$200 for people to get away to regional Victoria – a good idea in theory. They completely bungled the process. Their website crashed, I believe several times, and people were left without vouchers. They had to give out new vouchers. Of course it involved a system where people had to pay up-front and provide a receipt to government by various means of communication, including by fax, in order to get their money back well after the travel had actually taken place. I mean, compare the pain and the customer experience. If you were a small business wanting to take advantage of that opportunity, in a system like they had in New South Wales it would instantly be discounted once the QR code was scanned and the regional travel voucher scheme was shown, and then you had your remaining vouchers in your app. The businesses have a coordinating business side of that as well. In New South Wales they have business concierge services through Service NSW so they can set up new businesses and have all the forms there in one place. Victoria does not have anything near close to that, because as I said, Victoria is a bureaucracy-first state, where this government will allow and do what works best for the bureaucracy.

We saw that during the pandemic. Contact tracing was a perfect example of that. It was time sensitive and required data sharing, cross-agency coordination, rapid training and substantial community trust and knowledge to avoid lockdowns. Of course Victoria did not avoid those lockdowns as well as any other state. I mean, our contact tracing used pen and paper and fax machines. It was too slow. Contacts waited up to two weeks to be identified and notified about potential exposure, whereas people in New South Wales were contacted within hours of coming into close contact with someone who had COVID. The process was almost instant. And we wonder why we had the longest lockdowns – because this government had not done its work.

This government is too focused on what pleases and what works best for bureaucrats rather than what works best for Victorians. I think Victorians ought to be asking questions, and they do ask questions, about why Victoria is so far behind on this stuff. Why do we always get it wrong? If you look at the amount of lockdowns we had compared to New South Wales, people were waiting two weeks to find out if they were exposed. People were finding out as they already had COVID that they had already come into contact with someone, rather than before, so they could take themselves into isolation if they had been a close contact and therefore minimise the risk of passing COVID on to other people. But that never actually happened in Victoria because our system involved fax machines and pen and paper rather than a decentralised system where we put the power in place with our health services so that it all could be on one system. I mean, people were sending contact tracing reports by fax to different government services. It was an absolute stuff-up – a Labor-made stuff-up.

By contrast, New South Wales citizens could use Service NSW to apply for a cross-border permit. Officials worked overnight to ensure the system was in place in time. This was only possible due to a long-term investment in state capacity by the New South Wales government. For someone who used both sides of that border crossing permit, the Service NSW side was definitely easier. The Victorian side was, again, pen and paper rather than a digitised version that was easier for people. We had many workers on the Victorian side that had to cross that felt longer delays getting to and from work than people in New South Wales. It is no wonder all these regional independents who were backing in the government’s approach lost their seats. People found it really difficult to cross the border, and we know crossing the border in a timely way is very important to those communities.

Again, this was only possible due to long-term investment. Service NSW was established in 2013 to improve customer service using modern technology. It brought together dispersed functions, thousands of phone numbers and hundreds of websites into a one-stop shop by phone and at more than 100 retail fronts. It was an entirely new agency, whose leadership and front line largely came from private sector customer service roles. They got in, and I want to credit Dominic Perrottet and also Victor Dominello on the work they did. Government actually realised that government might not know best on this. They actually got the entire tech sector, all the big firms that specialise in digital technology, and brought them in to consult with government on how best to deliver this. One would think that would be a good idea on the other side, but I doubt they have even attempted to do that – and of course we face the consequences.

Again, Service NSW is way ahead of the game in terms of digital drivers licences, public transport card top-ups, tools to ease the cost of living – all in the one app – check-in for COVID-19 venue contact tracing and a free and dedicated business concierge to guide entrepreneurs through the process of applying to start a small business. You can say that Service NSW has saved the state billions by digitising transactions that previously required expensive manual processing. One very good example is the amount of forms that you fill out when a family member passes away. For a lot of people that is a devastating time in life; you just want as little government as possible. They reduced the amount of pages of forms from something like 30 to two. That is a government achievement in itself. It might not have the biggest economic impact, but in terms of the impact on someone's life, we should not have to contact five government departments and federal governments and local governments to notify them of this; government should be able to do that for the people.

Calls in regard to Service NSW are picked up within minutes by real humans, not machines, and Service NSW had a satisfaction rating of more than 95 per cent – 95 per cent. I wonder what the satisfaction rating is for Service Victoria. Many times you click on Service Victoria in the app and you go to a government service, and it will open up another browser. That is not the way that apps should work. I know it might suit the departments and agency heads and department secretaries for them to go to their website, because there are all these turf wars that I know go on within the bureaucracies, but people actually want all their services within one app. Service Victoria does not have any shopfronts; it takes you to other places. We know it had difficulties with the solar rebate public beta – a 40 per cent failure rate in facial identification. The government has monumentally failed in its duty to Victorian people to ensure we have state capacity, to ensure we have efficient government services and government delivery that is focused on customer service – not focused on the bureaucracy, like we always get from this Labor government, but focused on hardworking Victorians.

**David LIMBRICK** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:33): I also rise to speak on the Service Victoria Amendment Bill 2023. I would state from the outset that the Libertarian Party will not be opposing this bill. It does some good things. It removes some of the red tape and allows a digital transformation of Service Victoria, and we do not object to removing red tape or getting better value for taxpayers in delivery of government services. However, like all technology, these things are a double-edged sword. If you have a hammer, it can be used to build a house or hit someone over the head. If you use fire, another technology, you can use it to cook your dinner or keep warm or you can use it to burn down a tobacco shop. Also, if you have a Service Victoria app, you can use it to update your drivers licence details or you could use it to set up a dystopian limitation on human rights that stops people accessing businesses based on whether or not they refuse drugs mandated by the state – and that is exactly what we saw this app used for in the last term of Parliament.

The vaccine passport was one of the most shameful periods in this state's history, where we limited the right to freedom of movement – whether or not people can access buildings, whether or not they can enter government buildings and private businesses – based on this spurious notion of whether or not they decided to have vaccines mandated by the state. I hope that this sort of thing never, ever happens again. The only reason it was able to happen during the pandemic is because of the emergency powers that were enacted at the time, and pre the pandemic bill, these human rights assessments which

were supposedly happening were never released to the public. I have spoken at length many times about these human rights violations. I still do not feel that there has been a proper reckoning of this. The people were harmed by this; the children were harmed by this. If you recall, children were not allowed to go to a school uniform shop to try on their uniform because they had made a choice not to have the COVID vaccine. There was a teenage girl trying on clothes outside of the shop – if you remember, this happened – and there were many, many situations where children were denied access to shops. Many of these children are never going to trust the government again, I can tell you. This was a shocking application of this type of technology. It is absolutely imperative – and I will do everything that I can while I am a member of this Parliament to make sure of it – that any of these apps are actually taking into account the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities in Victoria, that human rights are respected and that we are using these technologies for good rather than evil, like we saw during the last term.

There is another consequence of this type of technology – less dramatic, but very dramatic for the people affected by it. I know – and I know I have spoken with many other MPs and they have the same issue – constituents come to my office who cannot navigate government services, either because they do not have a smartphone or because they do not have good English language skills. So my staff and I assume the staff of many other electorate offices help these people – many of them are elderly people – to navigate these services. I hope that the minister will provide some insight in her summing-up on how elderly people who are not proficient with technology may still be able to access these services. It would be helpful I think even if you could download a PDF of any form within the app so that electorate officers can download it and print it out and give it to people who need help with that. But it is a problem. We saw that that was a big problem during the pandemic, when lots of older people just did not have smartphones. That turned out to be a huge problem during the pandemic. With the centralisation and digitisation of government services, that could be a problem still in the future. I know that many people just assume that everyone has a smartphone and everyone has internet access and everyone knows how to use it, and I know from my experience that that is simply not the case. Those people should not be forgotten when the government is providing services, so I will be very interested to hear what the minister has to say about that in her summing-up.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read second time.**

*Third reading*

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability)  
(15:39): I move, by leave:

That the bill be now read a third time.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read third time.**

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

*Motions*

**Apology for past care leavers**

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability)  
(15:40): I move:

That the Council take note of the parliamentary apology to Victorians who experienced historical abuse and neglect as children in institutional care.



Last sitting week we met to apologise to people who, as children, lived in institutional care prior to 1990. As the Premier rightfully said, ‘This was a shameful chapter in our history.’ We were joined in Parliament by nearly 200 people who lived in state care as children and who experienced abuse and neglect as children in that institutional state care. People travelled from across Victoria and interstate to be here, and it was a great privilege to join fellow members of Parliament in welcoming them to Parliament House. It was also a great privilege to personally spend some hours with them following the apology, listening to their experiences and their reflections, as I have had the opportunity to do on many an occasion as an individual, as a member of Parliament and as a minister both inside and outside of this place over many years.

I am always touched by the gracious way in which often the gravest of experiences are shared so that we may promote a common understanding. As well as the people who joined us in Parliament House, many others watched from regional gatherings in Geelong, Ballarat and Sale and at other live stream events in Victoria or online. For many people it was an opportunity for personal reflection and for healing. For some people it was a chance to reconnect and a chance to catch up with others they had shared childhood experiences with. I also know from those who have spoken with us that some groups are planning future reunion events already where they will screen the apology and the speeches. This indeed itself is an important reminder that we need to keep having these conversations, we need to keep creating these opportunities for people to advance their own healing and we always need to be ready to listen.

I would like to reiterate that this important apology is due in no small part to the tireless advocacy of survivors and their supporters over many, many years. By telling their stories and sharing their experiences, survivors and their supporters have ensured that this dark chapter in our history is acknowledged and that it is addressed. Because of organisations like Care Leavers Australasia Network, Open Place, Alliance for Forgotten Australians, Child Migrants Trust, Connecting Home and many others as well as individuals, people have had a safe place to go for understanding, for care and for support. We are here today discussing the apology and moving this take-note motion because many people fought for recognition, and they fought for an apology – people like Leonie Sheedy, Sue Whittington-Stevens, Heather Bell, Robert House, Frank Golding and Joanna Penglase; people like Gordon Hill, Boris Kaspiev, Caroline Carroll, Ian Hamm, Andrew Bickerdike and Dr Margaret Humphreys. As the Premier said, just as the shame for past actions is ours, the pride in taking action towards restoration and healing belongs to these people and those who surround them.

I also want to acknowledge and remember the Victorians who died waiting for an apology. Many of the people who gathered at this place on 8 February wore an armband with the name of someone who was not able to be there. They are remembered, and we all hope and pray that they rest in peace.

This apology was a historic and powerful acknowledgement of a shameful chapter in our state’s history, when thousands of children experienced abuse and neglect after being entrusted to the state, to religious organisations and to charitable agencies. Before 1990 more than 90,000 children were placed in institutional care in Victoria. Many children experienced harm at the hands of those who were indeed trusted to protect them and care for them. The abuse and neglect of children was physical, it was psychological and it was emotional. The grief and the trauma stay with survivors as adults, with many experiencing disadvantage as a result of the abuse that they experienced as children. The burden is a weight carried through life, often impacting on relationships with partners, with children and with family. I have heard that one woman who attended the apology plans to keep a copy to show her family to help them understand her childhood. We know that for some their own experiences meant that they never actually had the opportunity to have their own family. Healing from childhood trauma will never be easy and it is never complete, but having the state apologise is indeed an important first step for people who have suffered abuse and neglect. People told me that they felt included by the apology offered by the Premier because it accurately described their childhood experiences and the impact that those experiences had on the rest of their lives.

One thing that we know about childhood trauma is that every person's healing journey is different, and sometimes it can take years before somebody is ready to talk about their past. I have been told about some people who attended the apology screenings who had not previously discussed their childhood trauma and were not aware of the various supports that could have been available to them. For these people and for others the apology may be the start of their journey towards peace.

The apology was more than just words read in this place. It reflects the real experiences of thousands of Victorian children last century, but really not that long ago, with impacts that continue to resonate throughout our society today, and the importance of this apology cannot be underestimated for people who were neglected, for people who were forgotten and for people who were excluded from society as children and then by extension as adults. Many people told me that they were particularly moved when the Premier said:

... the shame does not belong to you. It is ours. It was always ours, and it always will be ours. Today is about reclaiming that shame, lifting its weight from your shoulders and holding it up to the light – and in its place a sense of pride, pride in the bright and beautiful children that you were and pride in the strong and courageous adults that you have become, in the fight that you have led, in the heart that you have shown, in your determination to make sure it never happens again.

I think those words resonated with so many people not just because they are true but because they demonstrate the transformative opportunity that this apology represents. The apology is an opportunity for restorative engagement. It is an opportunity for healing and acknowledgement of those institutions that harmed children or indeed oversaw their harm.

To those Victorians who experienced this abuse and neglect our government has committed to providing ongoing support. We fund the Care Leavers Australasia Network and Open Place, who provide counselling, advocacy and other supports, and indeed the Victorian redress scheme is part of this commitment. The scheme is for people who experienced physical, psychological and emotional abuse and neglect in historical institutional care. The Victorian government has a commitment to co-designing this scheme with people with lived experience and to drawing on the models of other similar schemes.

Until the new scheme begins, advance redress payments of \$10,000 are available. These payments are for people who were physically, psychologically or emotionally abused or neglected as children in institutional care in Victoria before 1990 and who are now terminally or critically ill. Since applications opened on 17 November last year many payments have already been made. The co-design process for the Victorian redress scheme is set to begin soon, and until the scheme does begin the advance redress payments will continue to be available. This scheme will build on support currently available through the national redress scheme set up after the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The Victorian government continues to participate in the national redress scheme, which recognises children who were sexually abused.

In conclusion, we thank those who have shared their experiences with us, and personally I thank those who have shared their experiences with me as an individual, as a member of this place and as the minister. And as I said at the outset, I am always struck by the gracious way in which those experiences are shared so that we may all forge towards a common understanding.

We, the Parliament, unreservedly and unanimously apologise to those who suffered abuse in care. But apologies require action, and as the Premier stated, the next step requires a commitment to doing more, a commitment to doing better to protect Victoria's children, in the past, in the present and in the future. This is a commitment that as Minister for Children and as a mother I feel intensely, and I support the motion in the house.

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (15:49): I rise to speak in support of the government's motion. We did come as a Parliament and hear the apology and the words spoken by the Premier and by the Leader of the Opposition, and it was a very moving day for many, many people who were in the gallery and in Queen's Hall and who were watching online.

On 13 November 2013 I said in this house, in this place:

The criminal abuse of children is a fundamental breach of the values of our community. It involves unlawful physical assaults, sexual abuse offences and the criminal neglect of children. Children cannot be expected to protect themselves from crimes such as these within organisations, and it is up to us as a community to take greater responsibility in safeguarding their wellbeing.

That was over a decade ago, when I had the privilege of tabling *Betrayal of Trust*, the landmark inquiry that this Parliament undertook into child abuse in non-government organisations. Many of the people that came before that committee, which commenced in 2011 and which the Baillieu government instigated, were sitting in the gallery and in the hall last week. It was a moving moment in a number of ways for me, because it took me back to those times when we sat and we heard from so many people – hundreds – who came bravely forward and told of their abuse. Those people did come, in many instances, from orphanages, from within a church – abuse occurred within churches and other organisations – and from other voluntary organisations. The abuse was widespread. They wanted the acknowledgement. When I handed down the speech in this place over a decade ago, these seats and the gallery were full to the brim and Queen’s Hall was full. It evoked that memory again of what we achieved.

I went on to say when I delivered that speech, after this very extensive process that we undertook, that the recommendations were there to assist and that they were intended to provide an umbrella of protections. I said:

Our recommendations are intended to provide an umbrella of protections from the consequences of the heinous crime of child abuse that people in positions of authority have facilitated either through their actions or their inaction. While we acknowledge we cannot repair the irreparable damage that has beset so many, our recommendations are designed to create an easier path for victims in their pursuit of justice.

When I looked back on that report when I was looking at this motion – there was a lot of material that we uncovered and we spoke of and we wrote about – there was one part that struck me. We talked about the large number of victims of criminal abuse who came before the inquiry, and we titled this chapter ‘Unfinished business’:

The Committee found that victims, their families and communities felt they had not achieved justice and had unresolved issues with the organisation due to following factors:

- double betrayal – inconsistent approaches to victims and offenders
- hypocrisy – claims of moral authority
- lack of accountability – refusal to accept responsibility.

They were consistent themes that we heard, and last week, when I saw some of those people that came before our inquiry, I was reminded of all of those elements. There was somebody in that crowd who I particularly was thrilled to see there, understanding that his mother had been in an orphanage and he was there on her behalf to hear the apology. That was a wonderful moment. It was a very emotional moment, and it was wonderful to see that he was there. But there were many others that I spoke to throughout the day, as I know many members of Parliament did.

In my concluding remarks, I made the comments:

... I believe our inquiry marks the beginning. We have not only listened but we have heard. This is our report. I trust it gives the community an opportunity to set a new benchmark for the future protection of Victoria’s children.

I make that point because it was the beginning; it really started so much around this awful, awful issue that governments at both a federal and a state level and across the nation and across the world are grappling with. I was very proud of the work we did. It did spark the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse at a national level, and I was pleased to be able to speak to those commissioners who were undertaking that and for them to see the work that we did. They based a lot of their work on the findings from what this Parliament did.

I support the government's motion around this issue. As I said, our report marked the beginning. There is a lot of work that has been done. That was over a decade ago. The government is obviously lauding what they have brought into the Parliament. But let us not forget where this all started. It started largely with the work of this Parliament over a decade ago. I want to acknowledge all of those victims that came before that committee at that time and all of those people that have been greatly affected and were able to help us with the commencement of what has been some progress in this area. I think the community understands exactly the work that is being done and the very significant reforms that were recommended in our report and that have been implemented. Let us not forget there are many vulnerable children out there that are not getting the proper care or support, and they too are at risk of sliding off the edge if we do not as a government and community wrap our arms around them and protect them as well. Far too many are still being abused in care even whilst the government has that responsibility.

I again say to all those victims and to all those people, whether they are the forgotten Australians, those from Open Place, care leavers – all of those that were involved and have been working on this for many, many years with their tireless efforts – I am hoping this will give them some comfort with what was achieved over a decade ago to what was spoken about in the Parliament just last week.

**Sonja TERPSTRA** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:57): I rise to also speak on this motion in the chamber that was read in earlier this morning by the Honourable Lizzie Blandthorn, Minister for Children, in regard to this matter. It regards and relates to the many thousands of children that were taken into state care by various iterations of Victorian governments over many decades. Firstly, I would like to reflect on the Premier's apology given and delivered by the Honourable Jacinta Allan in the other place on 8 February, which recognised the hurt, abuse and neglect that many children suffered as a result of being placed into institutional care.

Before 1990 more than 90,000 children were placed into institutional care in Victoria. Many experienced abuse and neglect rather than the love and the care they were all so deserving to receive. There have been reported cases of abuse, neglect and often cruelty – acts towards children who were always powerless, not deserving of such treatment and completely at the whim of adults who perpetrated acts of what can only be described as psychological, sexual and/or physical violence upon those children who were placed into our care.

For that too I say I am deeply sorry to all children who suffered at the hands of abusers in Victorian state care. I say this: what happened to you was wrong. The things that happened to you should not have happened. Action should have been taken then and there to protect you when you were vulnerable and needed protection. It did not happen. Not only is the lack of action inexplicable and unacceptable, it highlights the historical closing of ranks that we too often see to protect institutions and perhaps even the reputations of the people running them at all costs rather than root out unspeakable acts of evil and those who perpetrate them. We also know that some of the children taken into state care were targeted simply because of their class or background: single mothers or mothers from a poor, working-class background, or fathers who were struggling to reacquaint themselves with civilian life after returning from acting service – all a shameful and disgraceful episode in Victoria's history. For all these reasons it is important that governments own this, and for this we say sorry.

The Premier in her speech gave voice to and shed light on just a few examples of children who experienced abuse and neglect at the hands of abusers who were responsible for providing state care for children. The stories were well articulated by the Premier, and I was moved to tears on hearing about the lived experiences of many. There are just a few that I want to repeat here, because they stood out to me as being heart-wrenching; they cannot be described as anything else. Heather ran away from St Catherine's girls home in Geelong when she was only nine years old just to be reunited with her mother after she was removed – nine years old, just nine. A child of this age should be playing with friends, exploring and doing all the things that nine-year-old children should be doing. But Heather displayed immense courage by running away and huddling under a bridge overnight before finding her way back to her mother's house. She was, sadly, returned to the home, because her mother did not

have a choice. The institutions had all the power, and so did the authorities. This is unspeakably sad. Simply because Heather's mother was regarded by authorities as a 'garrulous woman' – in other words, a poor, working-class person – she was targeted. Heather was told by the authorities 'You've come from the gutter' and 'You'll never amount to anything.' Sadly, Heather's sister Evelyn also died, from untreated rheumatic fever, when she was just eight years old. This is an unspeakable tragedy. It is inexplicable that this could happen to a young child in state care. But it did happen, and it is not the only story and example of this that happened.

As I said earlier, Heather and Evelyn's story is just one example of many. They are heart-wrenching. I do not have the time to go into all the other examples, but I do want to name just a few that the Premier spoke of. I want to give a name and a voice to those children who for so long had no name and no voice. There was Barry and his twin brother Graham. There was Sandra. There were Terry, Lenny, Beth, Lyn and so many others. Even just recounting these stories causes great distress, but it pales in comparison to that of those who suffered years of abuse and neglect.

As a human species we all evolve, as we should. We should continue to learn, grow and develop a better understanding and empathise with the plight of others who have suffered as a result of unspeakable acts. We are now better educated about the long-term and ongoing impacts that trauma has on people. It is not only about what happened at a particular point in time. We know that traumatic events can and often do impact young people and then affect them as adults for their lifetime. Trauma can be generational and intergenerational. It can be passed down to the next generation of family members and continue to cause ongoing pain for others. Abuse, neglect and violence leave an indelible mark on not only those that directly experience it but also their siblings and children, impacting immediate and extended families. That is why not only was it an important and historic occasion to sit in the chamber in the other place and be part of the Premier's apology to children who were in state care, but it was incredibly heartwarming and important to hear about the steps the Victorian government is taking, and will be taking, to ensure that people who suffered abuse, violence and neglect at the hands of institutions that were charged with caring for those children will ultimately be provided for by the state government.

By way of background, in October 2022 the Victorian Premier at that time announced a redress scheme for Victorians who were placed into state care, otherwise known as the pre-1990 care leavers scheme. But the Victorian government is now planning to do more, and as was previously advised, there will be a new Victorian care leavers redress scheme, which is currently under development and will be co-designed with Victorians who grew up in institutional care. The scheme will build on support available through the national redress scheme, which was set up after the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Until the new scheme begins, the Victorian government is providing advance redress payments of \$10,000 to people who were physically, psychologically or emotionally abused or neglected as children in institutional care in Victoria before 1990 and who are now critically or terminally ill. Whilst this scheme will go some way to addressing the needs of those people who suffer from ongoing trauma arising from being in state care by paying their way financially for medical and other expenses, it cannot rewrite history and it cannot right wrongs.

I want to pay tribute to the many Victorians who were in state care who spent many years advocating for their rights, which was often a thankless, frustrating and soul-destroying task, and the resilience many of you showed in persisting because you knew how important it was to find your voice. Even after so many years of being disbelieved, refused, disregarded, dismissed and forgotten, you found your voice, and for that I say thank you. You are making sure that all of the collective efforts you have made in bringing this issue to light are not in vain. The deaths of those who came before you, those who could not be here to share in this victory, should not be forgotten. Their stories and their lives are important, and they certainly count.

I have a few short minutes on the clock, but I will conclude by saying I thank those Victorians who persisted. As I said, it must have been incredibly difficult, and I know it has taken years if not decades to finally bring this matter to a conclusion. I do thank those Victorians. I am in awe of their resilience

after years of struggle – and in some cases those Victorians were unable to survive. Again, I say thank you. I am grateful for the work the Victorian government is doing in this space. I know it will go some way towards providing care for those Victorians who will need it in their time of need. It is an important lesson for all of us who are on the government benches and who may be in government in the future to ensure that we never again allow these sorts of circumstances to happen. I know we have put in place many things to actively prevent these sorts of things, but it is important when we have these sorts of complaints to ensure that we act on them and that these circumstances do not happen again.

**Ann-Marie HERMANS** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:07): Today I, along with my colleagues in the coalition, rise in the Legislative Council to acknowledge the heartfelt moment and join with the government and fellow parliamentarians in support of the historic apology given in the other place on 8 February. This apology is for the many Australians and Victorians who experienced abuse and neglect as children in institutional care, for the many lives that were impacted because they did not get the protection and care they deserved while in various forms of out-of-home care. On behalf of our coalition and all of us, we humbly acknowledge the apology without reservation. Thousands of vulnerable little ones and young people, unable to adequately defend or protect themselves, suffered abuse, exploitation and neglect, and for that, on behalf of all of us, I reiterate and extend a genuine, heartfelt apology.

Over 90,000 children were placed in institutions like orphanages and children's homes and the like. Many suffered terribly. Childhood traumas and experiences have a way of impacting who we are today. The suffering of so many who were raised in Victoria and lost contact with loved ones is innumerable. Single parents, mothers and fathers lost contact with their children. Children lost contact with their brothers and sisters because the family was poor or in difficult circumstances or unable to adequately provide for them. Records often cite neglect as grounds for removal, but what took place while in care for many was far more traumatic than the challenges of the identified neglect they experienced at home. Losing a parent or both can be challenging enough, but to be separated from siblings, a remaining parent, extended family members and the family home – for many, this was an additional torture. Many of the people I have talked to spoke about how it fragmented relationships or even prevented knowledge of siblings, and some – some of the lucky ones – were only able to find their siblings and re-establish their relationships with them in the later years of their life.

Even if grounds for removing children or placing them in care had been warranted, what was not and shall never be warranted is the abuse, exploitation and neglect that so many suffered. I remember one of the so-called orphanages or homes in a Melbourne suburb where a local camp bus dropped off fellow kids and fellow campers. One year I shared a camp cabin with a young girl from one of these homes. As a child I remember thinking that what was happening to this girl, as she shared in confidence a little of her life one night, was wrong. It was so different from the loving, protective home I lived in with my parents. I was younger than the girl, but as a child I remembered that the little girl in my cabin was highly sexualised, had no boundaries and demonstrated no sense of personal dignity, self-worth or self-respect. It never occurred to her that she could say no to anyone for anything. She was deeply unhappy, desperate for love but unwilling to let anyone close enough to truly befriend her. Her story is not an isolated circumstance.

After the apology motion in the other house a morning tea was provided for the guests, and I took the opportunity to meet and talk with many of the brave people who attended. Many survivors shared aspects of their life experiences and why they were in Parliament to hear the apology. Some attended on behalf of loved ones watching at home, and sadly others were there for those who are incapacitated or not alive today. Others still – many in fact – were there for themselves and their siblings.

This apology is important because we need to validate each victim as the precious human being that they are. I say to them on behalf of all of us: you are not forgotten. We need you to know that we see you, we have heard you, and we, representing Parliament, government policies, decisions and institutions under government watch, are genuinely sorry for the pain you endured.

I have heard testimonies of beatings, of humiliation and of exploitation. Many spoke of family separation, verbal, physical and even sexual abuse. Often they gave the stories of others. Some personal memories were too painful, and they spoke of how they had overcome the pain and what they were doing with their life. One lady became a writer and has received awards for her true stories of her institutionalised life, but she said she could not write about the most personal, the most abusive, stories for the memories were still too real and painful so many decades after they happened. Every story of human suffering – of our most vulnerable children and young people – tore at the fabric of my humanity and my instincts as a mother of four children. In fact when I tried to recall some of the stories for this speech, I found that with the trauma of what I had listened to I had blocked out different parts and I had not been able to write it down, so some of the stories became scrambled in my memory because it really was upsetting to listen to.

But there is a little bit of one that I can remember, and I asked the lady to please forgive me if I do not entirely get it exactly right. She told me the story of when she first entered into institutionalised care. She was a little girl, somewhere between 4 or 5, maybe 6 at most. It was her first week, and she wet the bed. She said that in this particular place of care when children wet the bed they were taken into the dining room and their sheets were hung out in front of everybody, where all the children in the room having their breakfast would cry out, ‘Shame! Shame! Shame!’ – on the little child that had wet the bed. Not wanting that to happen to her, having obviously witnessed it for another child, she clung onto everything she could and onto that sheet to prevent herself being dragged to that room. In the process she was continually beaten as she was taken into the dining room, but before she could get to the door preventing her from going in, having taken a lot of the beating, another person working there took pity on her and said she had suffered enough. That is one of the few stories that I can recount to you. There were so many that were so deep and so dramatic, and all of them show how these young people were made to feel ashamed of who they were. You know, I passed the tissue box more than once as I listened to the stories of these people and painfully marvelled at the ability of these survivors, who were incredible, just to have even turned up. Sadly, many were not able to be there. I can tell you that just being around these people and hearing their stories and having the compassion of a mother, or just a human being, my heart has never hurt so much.

So I want to say on behalf of all of us to all of you who needed to hear this apology that you are all remarkable people. Each one of you is unique. Each one of you is precious. You did not deserve the ill-treatment. I know what happened to so many of the abused – it destroyed large fabrics of your personality and of your life. You were wronged.

As an adult having worked in housing case management for young people, I worked in the space where organisations provide a safe place for our homeless youth and often fought for changes that were sometimes not considered or were perhaps considered too late. This apology does not compensate for the suffering of child abuse, exclusion, isolation, sexual abuse, exploitation or separation from siblings, and it does not give back a full life to the people who have been hurt. It does not fully compensate for how this has impacted their lives and the lives of those who they know and love or those who live with the survivors. But what would be tragic is if another Victorian government found they needed to apologise again one day – if we found there were not significant changes to protect the welfare of children, minors and young people in the care of our government. Without vigilant action, continuing reforms and input from those who suffered and shared their stories with us so that we could learn, there will continue to be more human suffering of our vulnerable young people. Changes need to be made. They need to be made often and with considerable transparency.

To the many whose lives were harmed while in care: my heart goes out to you, and we stand with you in your pain. I applaud your ability to be able to live as best you can. And to those who are reaching out to so many people in this situation and working to bring healing in this space, some of whom were victims themselves but have survived in ways that were perhaps better than their siblings, family members or friends or simply enough to have something left to be able to use their experience to help others, we say thank you – thank you on behalf of the Liberal–National coalition. And to those who

have suffered and those who continue to suffer, we in the Legislative Council acknowledge the apology made and support the apology motion.

**Jacinta ERMACORA** (Western Victoria) (16:18): I want to speak in support – and wholehearted support – of Premier Jacinta Allan’s apology to Victorians who experienced harm in state care, specifically between 1928 and 1990. I just have a few brief remarks, really.

Families come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Whilst our dominant cultural perceptions are of a family where there is a mum and a dad and children, the reality is that there are much more diverse scenarios – and joyful diversity – than that. We have individual parents and children; we have gay and lesbian couples and children; we have grandparents parenting grandchildren; and we have many other variations – even family units where no-one is actually a blood relative but they are a family unit absolutely. The breakdown or splitting up of any family unit can occur for a range of reasons. If we look back in history, we could look at war, natural disasters, the death of a family member, family violence, sexual assault or relationship breakdown; they are just a few examples. But during the period we are talking about some families were broken up due to poverty or even broken up on false pretences. Children were not told why, never knowing who they were related to or if their family was even still alive. Whilst the establishment of state care was perhaps well intended on the whole, it was often misguided – loaded, as others have said, with judgement about poverty, judgement about health status or judgement about homelessness or abuse and often loaded with care strategies that bore absolutely no relationship to the needs of the children impacted. I want to say unequivocally that in none of these circumstances is it or was it ever the fault of the child involved. Family break-up, whether voluntary or forced, is never the fault of the child.

In closing, we do owe an apology to people impacted negatively and harmfully by the provision of state care. I want to reiterate the absolute respect and awe that I have for the people who were in Queen’s Hall and in the lower house chamber during our joint sitting last sitting week, and I thank them for coming forward on that day and standing up and proudly saying that they were negatively affected. I also want to acknowledge the comments of Ms Crozier, because often with many, many achievements in a chamber such as this there is groundwork. You could certainly say that about train upgrades and a lot of the work that this government is doing; it is built on the Bracks–Brumby governments. But in this case I think that Ms Crozier raised a really good point: that these journeys start somewhere, and often there are many, many ingredients to achieving a form of acknowledgement and respect and many, many ingredients to restitution. That is the journey that we as a government and we as a Parliament start at this point, or started two weeks ago. I congratulate everybody who has spoken on this, I congratulate the Premier for her beautiful words of apology and I congratulate all of those impacted that we are talking about today.

**Moira DEEMING** (Western Metropolitan) (16:24): I rise to join my parliamentary colleagues today in acknowledging and apologising for a shameful chapter in the history of our state. All adults have a responsibility to ensure that our society is one where children are protected. If there is one job that we have as adults, that would be it – to ensure that children’s rights to enjoy their own childhoods and their own families are not trampled on by the state or allowed to be trampled upon by organisations driven by ideology rather than evidence. We have heard how the state government took thousands of children from their families, from their siblings and from their parents and then failed to protect them from neglectful and abusive situations in the kinship care system, state homes, religious organisations and charitable agencies. We have heard that all of these things may have started with good intentions, but when they were not followed up properly, devastation followed in their wake.

I would like to echo the words of Premier Allan, who did give a wonderful speech, and say to all of those children who were abused and neglected during their time in state-sanctioned so-called care, we humbly and unreservedly apologise. We acknowledge and apologise for the fact that so often your parents were unfairly demonised by the state so that so-called experts could take charge of your life. And yet, when the state failed to safeguard your bodies and your minds with lax policies, poor record keeping and wilful ignorance of evidence, you yourselves were often unfairly demonised as well,



rather than apologised to. The scars that you bore were not only physical but emotional and psychological. The traumas and the family separations and all the damage that was done are irreversible. We know that there are children in state care today under the expert guidance of other so-called experts who are also suffering and being harmed. We have heard about all the wonderful things this government is trying to do to catch up and make sure that these kinds of things do not happen again, but we must never let our guards down. I look forward to working together to make sure that nothing like this can never happen again.

**John BERGER** (Southern Metropolitan) (16:26): I rise to speak on the Premier's recent apology to Victorians who have endured historical abuse and neglect in institutional care, and in doing so I acknowledge the suffering that these Victorians have endured in state institutional care and acknowledge the experience of many survivors who have fought for so long to be heard.

Over the course of a century thousands of Victorian children were entrusted to the state and sent to orphanages, foster homes, children's homes, missions and other organisations. At the time, these children were taken from their families due to what the state determined to be neglect. More than 90,000 children were sent away to these places under the pretext of state care. What they experienced was anything but that. Instead, they were subjected to horrible abuse and neglect at the hands of these agencies, institutions and homes. No one story was the same. I recognise that categories are not overly helpful and words are not overly useful when talking about this. No one story was alike. There was physical abuse and emotional abuse. This ranged from physical abuse in the form of beatings to concerted efforts to humiliate children for natural behaviour. The Premier spoke of examples such as bedwetting, where the children were forced to wear their wet sheets as punishment, and instances of children being locked in closets and being starved or fed rotten food. It is gut-wrenching to hear testimonies, stories and other recounts of events from survivors, these cruel punishments that were inflicted on them.

These places where children were sent were entrusted by the state to care and look after children in need. The children were considered wards of the state, meaning that in many instances children were taken under the wing of the state and away from their parents. Behind these words was something more, something different, because the reality is that many of these Victorians were taken away from their families because they were struggling to put food on the table and struggling to make ends meet. Many of these children belonged to single-parent households, born to a single mother. Rather than help these struggling families, the state decided it knew better and determined that it was best to take the children away from them. The state then sent many of these children to institutions where they did not provide the love, care and parental guidance we expect out of our parents or guardians. They were instead met with neglect. Children were not treated with dignity and love. Many survivors bear scars from instances of abuse from their time in institutional care as children. It saddens me to know that many of them are no longer with us today and never received justice nor recognition in their lifetimes for what they endured. It is a shameful chapter in our state's history.

The Premier noted that one of the most common phrases used by children in these stories of abuse was the word 'shame', and I echo the Premier in emphasising to the victims and survivors that the shame sits with us, not you. These Victorians have fought hard every day to deal with the enormous trauma that was inflicted upon them as children in their most vulnerable time. It was not something they could escape from. It was the mandate of the state that these children were their ward, and by law the same enforcement agencies were to uphold their placement and retention in these institutions with a blind eye to the abuse at hand and the horrid conditions. It is our great shame that for so long the state not only considered it reasonable but instituted measures to enforce and uphold these practices. It did not matter if the child wanted to go back to their parents, nor did it matter if the parents loved and cared for their child the best they could. The state had legislated their separation, and that was that. There was no remorse and no justice. When the time came to leave, these children were left alone – no support, nothing. Often, as the Premier mentioned as well, children who had up until then spent every waking moment of their lives scrutinised, controlled, policed and directed in totality were thrown back

into the world with nothing more than the clothes on their back. They had endured hardship in these institutions under strict, brutal and humiliating control with no liberty or choice in matters, and then they were, once old enough, sent out into the world with no preparedness or effort to help them. They were then forced to make their own way without guidance and direction. Many of these survivors are still suffering from that abuse.

Last sitting week I attended the speech in the other place delivered by the Premier, the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Greens, and it was a moment that I will never forget. Between 1928 and 1990 this happened. I was alive for almost half this period. This is not some distant memory; this is a living memory, and the people in the gallery, tears flowing, were a living reminder of that. Many watched at live sites in Geelong, Ballarat and Sale with hundreds more online – people like John and Maureen Ellis, who I read about in my research for this speech; Benita Kolovos in the *Guardian* wrote about their experiences. John, aged 84, was too unwell to travel to Parliament to hear the apology, but I know he was listening at home.

In my research I also learned about the forgotten Australians and former child migrants oral history project. For those who have not heard of it, I would encourage you to do so. It is a remarkable project. It acknowledges that we cannot possibly know every perspective, so, engaging a small sample size, it goes to great depths on their stories. It is a history project that has been used to create many more and to tell stories that have been left untold. These Victorians, as we know, were often kept in the dark about their family history. Survivors were forced on a journey to piece together their family history bit by bit, uncovering documents and records that were incomplete, poorly kept, censored or entirely hidden, all for the basic information of knowing what had happened to their families and why they had been sent there. It is projects like this oral history project that will help bridge these gaps.

The apology to these Victorians will not undo the trauma and the hurt inflicted on them, but I hope that they know we are now finally listening. Saying sorry is not just about acknowledging but about ensuring something like this does not happen again. We as a state must do better going forward. We cannot let this type of ignorance that directed such policy come to command our laws again. These laws which designated many of these children as wards of the state were made with language of misguided moralising. The words ‘care’ and ‘child protection’ painted these programs as compassionate efforts to help the neglected, yet they were very different from that. We must do differently.

I do want to take a moment to draw focus on the state’s redress program, particularly for the terminally or critically ill. Hardship payments are open for those survivors in extraordinary circumstances – for eligible care leavers in exceptional circumstances like those who are terminally or critically ill and who experienced physical, psychological and emotional abuse or neglect while placed in orphanages, children’s homes, missions or other out-of-home care. It is vital that as a state we work day in, day out to make sure that these Victorians are listened to and supported as we work towards not just apologising but standing with every victim and helping them along the way. These injustices were as recent as 1990. I cannot name all of the victims and all of their circumstances and all of the abuse that they would have endured.

I am glad to see colleagues of mine from all sides of the chamber coming together to apologise collectively for the harm and pain imposed by successive governments in the name of child protection. It is a legacy that we share collectively as representatives of the state, and we must apologise and act as a collective too. It is beyond politics.

To the survivors who may be listening, my thoughts are with you. You should never have gone through that appalling treatment, and the fact that it went on for so long by the state and at the hands of the agencies and institutions is not okay.

**Ryan BATCHELOR** (Southern Metropolitan) (16:34): It is always an honour to speak in this chamber but particularly in moments like this when we have the opportunity to say just a few words –

and my contribution today will be brief – about the remarkable apology that the Parliament gave in the last sitting week to those Victorians who experienced historical abuse and neglect as children in institutional care. Obviously there have been many moving words said today on the subject, but I think in particular of the contribution that the Premier made on the floor of the joint sitting last sitting week. I did not maintain a dry eye through her contribution, and I am sure many others did not either. And also obviously I acknowledge the contributions that the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Greens similarly made on that day. I think it is important when we look at the apology to reflect on and remember the role that many who have advocated for the acknowledgement of those children who were abused in institutional care have made over decades. Their advocacy on behalf of the fellow children that they grew up with in institutions has been relentless – and I do not mean that in a negative sense; they have been persistent and dogged in their advocacy.

It is important I think to acknowledge the seminal role that a couple of parliamentary committees played in the course of the last 20 years in giving acknowledgement to that voice and amplifying their experiences to the state and to the nation. I think that perhaps in those instances we see the most noble expression of our role both as parliamentarians but as those who participate in parliamentary committee work, where we can give voice to the voiceless and we can lay bare for everyone to see, under the protections of the privileges of this institution with its storied history, and uncover the terrible history that has existed in places and parts of our state that have been free of scrutiny and oversight and care and love for so long. And that is what, as Ms Crozier mentioned in her contribution, particularly the *Betrayal of Trust* report initiated in 2011, tabled in 2013 – what that committee process demonstrated and uncovered. But also stretching back now 20 years to 2004 we had what was arguably the seminal parliamentary committee report of the Senate community affairs committee inquiry into children in institutional care, which was tabled in 2004. That really for the first time told the story of what happened to children in Australia who were placed in institutional care and those child migrants who were forced to come to these shores.

Those documents, that process, set us on the path that led us to the apology that was so graciously received by so many who listened to it either in the galleries or at home in the last sitting week – the extent to which their capacity for humanity shone through in how they responded to the graciousness that was expressed to them by the leaders in the debate, the absolute graciousness with which that was received by them. I think, to echo those words that the Premier spoke, that the shame of this episode is not with them but with us. Too many Australians, too many Victorians, suffered abuse when they were placed in institutional care during the last century, and the extent of that psychological, physical, emotional and sexual abuse is devastating. Too many children suffered. Many of these children grew up not knowing their family. The grief and trauma that they experienced continues through to this day, and the knock-on consequences of how they were mistreated have followed them into adulthood, whether that manifests with higher incidences of poverty or homelessness or substance abuse – some have suffered in those ways – because everyone in those circumstances suffered from the institutions that they were placed in the care of.

Part of the healing is the acknowledgement, and that is why these motions of apology are so important. They acknowledge and they allow the healing to take place at an individual level. They must also allow for the resolve of current legislators and policymakers to ensure that when the state does need to take necessary action to step in and do what is required to keep children safe today – and we still, regrettably, do need to take such action – we do so with models of care that are informed by the best interests of those children about their recovery and restoration and not with the kinds of attitudes that scarred the murky past. We have got to learn from what happened. We have got to resolve to not let it happen again.

As we are doing, we have got to show both contrition and that there is redress available, because that is an important part of the healing journey. It is the acknowledgement that comes with an apology but also the action that comes with things like redress schemes, which the government has initiated, and with the programs that go into supporting both the children who are currently in out-of-home care and

those who as adults are still suffering from this trauma. We are committed, the government is wholeheartedly committed, to acknowledging the historical abuse and neglect that too many Victorian children suffered – the apology does that for us – and to recommitting ourselves collectively to ensuring that the children who exist in our care now are looked after in the best way they possibly can be, because we must always commit ourselves to doing more and to doing better to protect Victoria's children, whether they be past, present or future.

**Sheena WATT** (Northern Metropolitan) (16:42): I stand here really in deep reflection on the apology made in that joint sitting by the Premier in our last sitting week. To the survivors who still grieve and to the families who were never reunited, the families who were lost to one another forever, I too say sorry. I reflect also on the burden that is still carried by your own children, your grandchildren, your partners and your friends, as well as the love and the depth of commitment that have helped carry you all towards this moment. I am also sorry to those who might have taken comfort from what we are saying on this important day but did not live to see it. I say sorry knowing that sorry requires action and it requires commitment to doing more and doing better to protect Victoria's children. We can do better, and we will, by listening to Victorians, create trauma-informed and survivor-led processes that sincerely seek to redress the injustices of the past and keep faith with all those harmed by the acts of the past.

I just want to take a moment to acknowledge Simon Pryor, an active and passionate community leader in the Northern Metro Region. He has many stories to tell about Victorians who survived institutional care. Some stories are his own; however, most are of those people he advocates on behalf of despite his own pain. I acknowledge Simon and all the survivors for their resilience and for their advocacy. Simon was present in this place when Premier Allan delivered her formal apology in that last sitting week. Simon and I had the chance to speak afterwards. He expressed that though there was so much work to do, he was grateful for this public acknowledgement of the harms caused and for the steps being taken to address those harms. He told me that he has hope that the future for survivors could be better as a result of the commitments that we made in this place.

You see, every day my mob walk around bearing the scars of intergenerational trauma as a result of forced removal practices. We know only too well that the path to healing and reconciliation is long, often heartbreaking, and sometimes you do not get to where you want to be. I know only too well the pain and the sorrow and the hurt of removal, of stories not told, of connections not made and of families never quite connected. I have spoken in this place about the power of the national apology to the stolen generations. I have spoken about the transformation it had in my life and in my commitment to my community. I also did not get to speak, and I have not yet spoken, about the people that I met that day in Canberra in 2008 – what is so many years ago now, it seems. But for those of us that share that story of being there at the apology, it is one that seems like just yesterday. For me and for those of us that connect, it reminds us that through struggle and hardship there is strength. There is strength in our resistance, there is strength in our story and there is strength in each other, and that is what we do as a community. I know that the survivors that came together on that day – some Aboriginal, many that were not – have found strength with each other. I found it, as I looked out upon them in the observers' gallery, so warming and so comforting – and I say to you that I kind of in a way wish that I was sitting with you, remembering the stories of my family and those that are no longer with us.

I hope that this apology means that as many Victorians as possible who have undergone this trauma can get closer to where they need to be. Really, that will be so different for every person, for every family and for their children in the years to come. The experiences of removal especially resonate with me and other First Nations people. You see, to right the injustices of the past and create a stronger, kinder future takes immense courage and resilience, and survivors have shown their resilience again and again in the face of immense odds. Can I just say it takes a lot to move past the enormous trauma of your own story and your own experience and then step up for those people that you do not know and that you may never meet and be an advocate on behalf of an entire community, especially when you are someone with lived experience. So to those survivors that are advocates, I hold the deepest

and most profound respect for you. As we begin the consultation and co-design process which will inform the establishment of the redress scheme, please be assured and reassured of my commitment to walk with you. Thank you to this chamber for providing me the opportunity to pay my respects and once again solemnly remember all the Victorian children taken from their families.

**Motion agreed to.**

### *Bills*

## **Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023**

### *Second reading*

#### **Debate resumed on motion of Lizzie Blandthorn:**

That the bill be now read a second time.

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (16:49): I am very pleased to rise to speak on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. I want to start off by thanking my colleague and friend in the other place Jess Wilson for the work she has done on this bill and the government for the briefings it provided to the opposition on this bill as well. The bill is a piece of omnibus legislation that amends 14 acts across 10 portfolios. The reforms contained in this bill are mostly minor technical clarifications in nature and do not represent substantive changes to the acts. The majority of amendments are aimed at streamlining requirements, rectifying specific instances where current provisions are not working as intended or have become impractical.

The coalition does not oppose the passage of this bill through Parliament, but we note the government's very poor record on regulatory reform and red tape reduction, which is woefully thin, resulting in Victoria being perceived as – it actually is – the single most expensive state to do business in, which of course means that businesses, like with the ANZ–Suncorp deal we saw today, and many other businesses and many other investors, are making decisions to invest away from Victoria. You have to wonder why that is. We are the highest taxing state in the nation, we have the highest property tax in the nation and we have the highest stamp duty in the nation. The government's response to everything is a new tax or increased regulation without thinking of the consequences for investment.

I know that in my electorate all too well. I was out in Greenvale, as I am often, only last week with my colleague the Shadow Treasurer Brad Rowswell. We went to Philmart Asian Groceries at Roxburgh Village. We in fact chatted to all the businesses at Roxburgh Village, some of which did not even know they had a local Labor member. We went to all those businesses and chatted to them about energy costs. Again, we went to Philmart Asian Groceries. As they said, and many of the other businesses said, the landlord has passed on the cost of the land tax directly to all the small businesses there, and that has had a really damaging impact. Rudi and Letty from Philmart Asian Groceries are long-time small business owners. They are a Filipino couple, migrants to Australia who have been quite aspirational and started a small business. I note that 74 per cent of new migrants in this state start a small business and really have a go at it, but this government is making it harder for them and harder for those migrant families and small business owners, because that increased cost that is passed on has meant that they are now just breaking even. They consider themselves employees rather than small business owners because they are not making any money and they can no longer afford to pass on those costs through higher costs for their goods or for their food because it is a cost-of-living crisis.

I know many in Roxburgh Park are feeling the cost-of-living crisis, so I was very sad to see that. A lot of them are also reporting the devastating cost of energy that they are facing. I was chatting to another Indian grocer there, who was reporting that as the number one issue. There are many drycleaners in the north actually. I was at Mr Thomastown Dry Cleaners in Thomastown – I love to shop local in my electorate; I send my suits there – and they have actually got a sign on their front counter from an article in the *Age* about Victoria having the most expensive energy prices. They are finding it really tough.

Is it any wonder that Victoria has the highest energy prices and is the toughest and worst place to do business? Investment is fleeing the state – big investors are choosing to invest elsewhere – and of course we are the highest taxing state. All government decisions have an effective consequence. You might just think you are upticking land tax for a COVID debt levy, but investors are not an endless piggy bank. And it does not just end with the investor – it gets passed on. Why do you think we are seeing some of the images on social media of queues going around the corner, for hundreds of metres, of people trying to get into a rental? It is because of the increased land tax, which is making it worse for people to get a roof over their head. These things have consequences.

Property Investment Professionals of Australia in their survey revealed that one in four investors are fleeing the market – 25 per cent appraisal rates across the state, across metropolitan Melbourne, in our growth areas – because investors have said that property is an uncertain investment. They have said it is an uncertain investment and are either choosing to invest elsewhere or getting out of the market completely because Labor have made property an unaffordable investment, and nothing is going to change until this government realises that 100 per cent of the private property market is made up of landlords and investors who choose to invest in property and rent out that property to people that need a roof over their head.

You can talk all you want about freezes, and I know that our friends the Greens do, but the answer to that is more supply, lower taxes and certainty. This government, we know, as the Treasurer has flagged, is going to bring out another horror budget, and we know horror budgets in the Treasurer's mind mean higher taxes, more regulations and more ways to make it harder for business, not easier. So when I see people like Rudi and Letty in Roxburgh Park having a go at a business and facing the real-life consequences of this Labor government, I am heartbroken for them. I am heartbroken for the families trying to have a go in a small business, and this government just does not care.

As I said, the coalition does not seek to oppose the passage of this bill, but we do note the government's record. It is similar to an omnibus bill passed by the Parliament in 2022 – again minor and technical arrangements that do not quite have enough oomph in them to form a standalone bill. This is a result of the government inviting departments to submit minor amendments to improve regulatory compliance to produce administrative efficiencies, and the key word here is 'invite': 'Would you please submit them – please, please?'

In a past life I was an adviser in the Abbott government which of course had a huge focus on red tape reduction, and it was not just a simple invitation to departments.

*Members interjecting.*

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** They are laughing at \$20 billion in savings for businesses across the country due to a reduction in red tape. But the government had two red-tape repeal days a year where an entire day of the Parliament would be spent on reducing red tape and compliance for businesses. And you know what, we did not just invite and simply send an invitation or maybe an email to departments: 'If you choose to reduce red tape'. We told them, 'You must reduce the red tape compliance burden on businesses, Australians and entrepreneurs by this much,' and I tell you what, with that mandate those secretaries coughed up and they put forward a suite of measures which in the tens of billions reduced the compliance burden for businesses across Australia. Those were very popular days because the government spent those days dedicated to repealing red tape and unnecessary regulation. Across Australia red tape costs about \$156 billion in lost economic output, in that economic opportunity, in businesses not started. I was chatting earlier on the Service Victoria Amendment Bill 2023 about Service NSW and a small-business concierge service in the app that gives you every single form you might need, which they have reduced by a massive amount, federal, state or local, to start a small business.

Try to get that on the Service Victoria app. It will probably take you to another window that opens another window that opens another window. That is what we get in Victoria. No wonder we have had the worst small business closures – that is 7000 businesses.

**Georgie Crozier:** How many?

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** About 7000 businesses across Victoria that have closed down. This government talks a big game with this bill, but it is barely touching the side. Let us have a look. The department identified the amendments below equating to \$2.6 million in annual savings by amending the Essential Services Commission Act 2001, amending the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 and amending the Gambling Regulation Act 2003, but again, the government's record on red tape reform is not good.

While any savings for Victorian small businesses at a time when many are struggling are certainly welcome, they are completely modest changes. They could go a lot further. The government estimates \$2.6 million in annual savings for Victorian businesses as a result of this bill. Given that there are over 710,000 small businesses in Victoria, this means businesses can expect an average saving of \$3.66 per year. Well done, Labor. \$3.66 per year you have saved every small business in this state, while increasing their energy costs by thousands of dollars, plus payroll tax and WorkCover premiums. But you have saved them \$3.66 – give yourselves all a pat on the back. Surely we can do better when it comes to cutting red tape and easing regulatory burdens on small businesses than \$3.66. It is not even a cup of coffee – which we know has increased at many places due to increased energy costs, increased logistics costs and port disputes jacking up the prices everywhere. But \$3.66 – jeez, is that all you can do? Is that all you can do for businesses across Victoria?

Just as households grapple with ever-increasing costs of living, so too do businesses struggle with economic headwinds and rising costs. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Victoria was the only state that went backwards in terms of the number of businesses in 2023. As I mentioned earlier – and I will correct my figure – we lost 7600 businesses in 2023, many of whom no doubt were forced to shut up shop due to unfavourable economic conditions that years of Labor mismanagement created. I know there are several at Roxburgh Village, Meadow Heights and Greenvale shopping centre and other small manufacturers across Campbellfield and Somerton that have shut up shop because it is too hard to do business in Victoria. But Labor does not care. What do they seek to do? They seek to provide savings of \$3.66. Like, really. They can do a lot better to support economic activity, to support people who have a go, to support those 74 per cent of new migrants that start a small business to make things easier for them – but no, their only solution is increasing red tape, higher energy costs and higher taxes. That is no solution for Victoria. Victorians are doing it really tough. People like Rudi and Letty and Philmart Asian Groceries in Roxburgh Village – they are doing it really tough. People are doing it really tough with this government's cost-of-living crisis and deserve better than this Labor government. According to Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry's *Cost and Ease of Doing Business in Victoria* report, Victoria is perceived as the most expensive place to do business. In fact it is the most expensive place to do business – we know that. We know that just through speaking to businesses in our electorate. We know that just through speaking to people that are trying to start a small business. The government is not giving them the tools or the regulatory environment to make that easier.

I know many businesses across the north – in Broadmeadows and up in Wallan, Beveridge as well as Greenvale – that have had to let go permanent employees and casual employees and have family members working in the business. They only do that because of increased costs – increased energy costs and increased taxes – like at Roxburgh Village where the landlord has passed on the increase in land tax directly to those small businesses.

The Treasurer's intention with the COVID credit card levy is to charge it to people who can afford to pay, but he clearly does not know anything about economics and does not know anything about the fact that all of these investors will seek to get a return and seek to pass on what they lose. The average

property investor in Victoria, who rents out one household, owns one additional property, earns between \$100,000 and \$120,000 a year. But this Labor government thinks that that is the top end of town. They love taxing them more and think they are a piggy bank. But I know many across my electorate that have sold up. They have sold up and another person has bought that house – and good on them for achieving the great Australian dream – but that home is no longer on the rental market. We know we have a rental availability crisis in Victoria, but the government’s decisions just in the last year have made it harder for people. They have made it harder for renters, they have made it harder for investors and they have made it harder for small and medium businesses. They have made it really hard, and this bill goes absolutely nowhere near fixing these issues.

Part 8 of the bill removes the present requirement for the Essential Services Commission to serve price determination notices to all commercial passenger services. It does not remove the requirement for the Essential Services Commission to provide these determinations to any regulated entity that requests them. This bill also ends an existing requirement that forces the Essential Services Commission to publish the entire codes of practice. Now it is changed within the codes, and the *Government Gazette* will replace that with the requirement to publish them on the website of the Essential Services Commission. Both seem like common sense.

It does address some recommendations which came out of the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into the closure of I Cook Foods. The coalition is pleased to finally see some action on this front. I know the Leader of the Opposition in the Council Ms Crozier will be particularly pleased, given how incredibly hard she worked on that committee inquiry as well as subsequently to pursue what was one of the most egregious persecutions of a small business and miscarriage of justice in the history of the state.

**Georgie Crozier** interjected.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** A disgraceful episode in our state’s history. We are pleased to finally be seeing some action on that. The Liberal–Nationals coalition is committed to regulatory reform to reduce red tape, enhance productivity and improve efficiencies across Victoria for people. I was saying this earlier in the Service Victoria Amendment Bill 2023 debate. This government is focused on a bureaucracy-first approach – whatever works best for the bureaucracy, whatever works best for Labor – and it needs to have a customer-first approach, a Victorian-first approach, to government services. As I said earlier, we know that during the pandemic while Victoria was using pens, paper and fax machines, New South Wales was using instant access technology, QR code technology and instant delivery of contact tracing data so that they could detect and trace cases of COVID and notify, within an hour or hours, of cases. Victorians were being notified that they had been in contact with someone who had COVID after they had already finished having COVID. Thanks, government; thanks, Labor. But this is the kind of technology we are forced to deal with.

The government cannot even get a mail merge right, with the digital drivers licence. They sent an email to 44,000 people in Ballarat. They got the names wrong and exposed data to people that did not need that data, and the Treasurer was forced to apologise. They cannot even get a mail merge right, because they are not focused on Victorians. They are not focused on easing the regulatory burden that businesses face, which I know businesses face, across the state. They are not focused on putting downward pressure on energy costs. I know many large manufacturers, particularly in the beverage industry, which is big in my electorate, in Broadmeadows and Campbellfield are really struggling with increased energy costs. For all the talk and gripe we hear on that side about manufacturing, we see nothing in regard to support for those businesses with the pressures that they are facing. In fact Labor only makes it harder for those businesses to keep their doors open and employ people in manufacturing in Victoria.

As I said, in a past life I was a proud adviser in the Abbott government, and those red tape repeal days were really important. We did not just, like Labor wants to do, invite departments to submit minor and technical arrangements. We forced them to provide substantial red tape reductions for all Australians,



which resulted in I think over \$20 billion in savings to businesses across Australia, whereas this government seems content with just inviting – you know, a ‘please, kindly; thank you’. I would be interested to know how many departments actually participated. There is clearly more to do on this front.

I would love for us to have our own red tape repeal day, where we spend an entire day up here, maybe even an entire week, repealing things and easing the pressure of doing business for small businesses across this state. That would be a logical step to take. This government seems content with providing every business with \$3.66 in savings. All the businesses that are doing it tough down Gippsland way I am sure would be absolutely stoked that they are receiving \$3.66 in savings while they are having to empty all their refrigerators because of blackouts – the same for those up in Berwick and across the state.

Even in my electorate, in Wallan, people were left in the dark for almost 24 hours. I am sure those businesses will be comforted to know that the government is providing them with \$3.66 in savings as a result of this bill. I mean, talk about the wrong priorities. Again, it goes some way to reducing red tape, but not nearly far enough. If Labor seems content with this kind of approach, it does not deserve to represent Victorians that are doing it tough – Victorians like Rudi and Letty at Philmart Asian Groceries, who are really struggling due to the increased land tax, due directly to decisions this government has made. We need to ease the cost of doing business in this state. We need to make Victoria an attractive place to invest. That is why my colleague in the other place the Shadow Treasurer Brad Rowswell and the Liberal–Nationals economic team have actually launched a tax discussion paper – so that we can have these conversations. We are out there speaking to businesses. I know the Shadow Treasurer held a forum with me last week at Greenvale Recreation Centre with several local businesses, who all talked about how tough it is to do business at the moment. He also came up last year to the town of Wallan, an outer suburban suburb. It used to be a regional town, but it has quite exploded in population. Of course the government is not delivering on anything in the town of Wallan. We had a really good discussion with local businesses about the next steps, about our approach to tax reform and about our approach to taking small businesses on the journey with us. The government is very good at listening to bureaucrats and the government has come up with this bill that does really very little. We are actually out there listening to businesses. The government would do well to do a bit more of that, to actually get out there and listen to businesses about the cost of doing business – listen to businesses like Mr Thomastown Dry Cleaners and listen to businesses like Philmart Asian Groceries. The government would do well to actually listen to the people they purport to represent, because they are not doing a very good job of representing them right now. They are not doing a very good job at all.

When you have 7600 business closures in one year, that is a pretty bad report card. That shows you something is going wrong, because those 7600 businesses are not just pieces of economic data. They are families who have mortgaged for their small business. They are families in my electorate and all of my colleagues’ electorates, and this government does not care about them. This government just thinks they are economic data on the map and maybe it will get better next year. It will not, especially with the effort the government has put into this bill. We are not opposing this bill, but the government could do a whole lot better.

**John BERGER** (Southern Metropolitan) (17:17): I am pleased to be contributing to the debate surrounding the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. This bill is yet another episode of the Allan Labor government’s exemplary reform agenda in regard to regulation. This is the second regulatory reform omnibus bill that the government has brought to this place. These reform bills also address the need for modernisation across the regulatory schemes and bodies. This one addresses a broad range of matters requiring reform from food industry regulation to technology neutrality.

I would like to touch on some of the rhetoric we have been hearing about the bill from those across the other side. They say this bill is not good enough for business and that it is not enough for business.

Frankly, I reject this. It is categorically untrue. I will speak later in my contribution on the nature of the Allan Labor government's reform and continuous amending of legislation, but until then I will just say this: this government's commitment to business is plain to see, and this bill is just one example of the very substantial business and regulation reform agenda. I know those across from me do not like to hear about it, the shocking mismanagement of government across the board, specifically when we remind them of how Kennett absolutely trashed this great state, so I will change it up for them today. The Baillieu–Napthine Liberal government left Victoria's business regulations in an absolute mess under the guise of what they dubbed the so-called 'cutting of red tape'. The Baillieu–Napthine Liberal government brutalised without discrimination a chunk of Victoria's essential business regulations and protections. When Dan Andrews succeeded Napthine in 2014 the regulatory bodies were crippled. The Liberal government had claimed that they would be making interactions with regulatory bodies and bureaucracies easier, but the shocking state they left Victoria's regulatory system in only served to remove protections and safeguards from small business.

It is this government that after inheriting the Baillieu–Napthine mess has streamlined, modernised and improved not just business regulations but countless other regulatory bodies that affect everyday life. Furthermore, these reforms to regulate do not leave small businesses and consumers worse off or more vulnerable, unlike the Baillieu–Napthine free-for-all, which did. Considering their track record, I do not think they have much right to say we are not doing enough for business.

This government is one that cares about small businesses, and luckily, the small businesses of Victoria have an exceptional minister in charge of the department designed to serve them. My good friend in the other place Minister Suleyman is passionate in her work and advocacy for small businesses. The minister has done a lot in her time as Minister for Small Business. Just last year she launched the second round of the mental wellbeing of business communities grants. The mental wellbeing of business communities grants were initially launched to empower business communities and collectives to seek training and support for their mental health. This is because we know how tough it is running a business and how vulnerable you can be. It is important that every business owner is able to ensure that their health and wellbeing is looked after.

It was also under Minister Suleyman that we saw the launch of Made by Many Minds, a digital platform designed by migrant women in business for the express purpose of connecting multicultural women in business. Thanks to the hard work of the women who established it, it was developed with the help of a \$150,000 grant from the Allan Labor government. Created for members of Migrant Women in Business, Made By Many Minds provides them with access to information and services from legal to merchandising to improve the functioning of their businesses. It is heartening to see multicultural women, one of the most disadvantaged cohorts in business, coming together to uplift each other, and I am proud to be a member of a government that believes in the interests of these women. Clearly anybody can see Victoria's Minister for Small Business is passionate about her work and that Victorian small businesses are certainly in good hands.

This government has delivered record investment and groundbreaking reforms for our beloved small businesses. To say that this government does nothing for small business is out and out just not true. The bill introduces reforms that will modernise and improve not just regulations surrounding small businesses in Victoria but much more. In all it introduces 54 amendments to a net 14 acts in total across 10 ministerial portfolios. The reforms that affect businesses are broad and wide reaching.

The bill could be approached by breaking it down into multiple sections defined by objectives. The first and primary objective seeks to slim down the regulatory requirements imposed on Victorian businesses and social services. Of course this is to be executed without sacrificing the protections that the regulations provide against the risk and harm. This includes a myriad of changes, including the following outlined amendments. There are amendments to allow the Secretary of the Department of Health to authorise a class of entity for medicines that will be achieved by reforming the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981. After section 20 of the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 the bill will amend the act to include new section 20A, which will provide the

act with a mechanism allowing the secretary authority to grant a class approval for entities. 'Entity' is defined as an entity belonging to a class that participates in activities involved in the manufacture, sale, supply, administration or use of schedule 2, 3, 4, 7 or 8 poisons or a controlled substance. The act seeks to allow the health secretary to grant class approval to these entities, which may otherwise require licences, permits and warrants. Currently entities must deal with medicines where it is appropriate without posing a risk. The introduction of this mechanism will largely improve services that require this practice. This will largely improve the functioning of many different services, like residential aged care facilities, that currently require the acquisition of a permit. Of course the bill accounts for risk management, requiring the health secretary to be responsible for risk assessments prior to class approval being issued and subsequent provisions to be outlined for services. Entities will also be held accountable for the appropriate acts that outline the standards for S medicines, administration, storage, recording and so on.

This bill introduces many amendments to the Meat Industry Act 1993. Firstly, it seeks to account for the sale of dried meat online. The act from 1993 did not account for the sale of food goods online and does not apply to the sale of dried meat online. This bill will clarify this but affirm that the sale of dried meat online is regulated by the Food Act 1984. Another amendment relating to the Meat Industry Act 1993 concurrently amends the Seafood Safety Act 2003 to streamline licensing to be more reflective of the fact that refrigerated vehicles are often used to transport different kinds of commodities, such as meat and seafood. This is for the purpose of lowering the time it takes for businesses to employ the operation and get it up and running.

The bill is further amending the Meat Industry Act 1993 to remove the requirement for poultry and game processing facilities to provide information to PrimeSafe that the organisation does not need. PrimeSafe is, for those that do not know, Victoria's state authority on regulation and safety for the consumption of meats, poultry, seafood and even pet food. It is important that PrimeSafe has access to businesses' information for general public safety, and there is presently duplication within information-gathering requirements. The bill seeks to remedy that, updating Commonwealth and Victorian licensee requirements to be more up to date with what is required to achieve the goals of licensing. The bill also amends the laws relating to PrimeSafe, specifically removing the requirement for PrimeSafe to refuse a licence for vehicle-based meat processing facilities where an application is consistent with planning schemes.

The bill also makes amendments to remove requirements for casino special employee licence applicants to provide evidence of former employment that is not relevant to the industry. This will be achieved through the amendments to the Casino Control Act 1991. Furthermore, it will enable the streamlining of mandatory notifications by registered social service providers to the social services regulator for improved functions of our state's social service providers. Finally, the bill will ensure that the Secretary of the Department of Health and local councils are adequately able to direct the business to undertake improvements to an inadequate food safety program.

To summarise the first set of reforms, they are each examples of reforms that streamline and modernise our regulatory bodies without leaving consumers out in the cold or endangering community health and wellbeing. This is classic Allan Labor government style reform, and in no way is it insignificant.

The second objective of this bill is in relation to the improvement of emergency preparedness. This will be achieved by explicitly introducing the ability of the Environment Protection Authority Victoria to manage and deal with waste management, transportation and removal in case of temporary emergency. Additionally, the bill will enable the EPA to provide temporary relief for public nuisance or a community hardship. Finally, with this bill the EPA will be able to commission, repair, decommission or even dismantle any plant or equipment. These three amendments will ensure that in case of emergencies the EPA is able to impose appropriate regulatory requirements for the transportation of hazardous waste. These emergency situations may include fires, floods or even animal disease situations. This will expand to promote community safety and ultimately protect the broader community.

The third and final objective of this bill is the establishment of clarity within several acts for the support of technology-neutral legislation. Technology neutrality in this case refers to ensuring that legislation does not bias or discriminate in favour of any specific technology as it seeks to achieve its objective. The bill seeks to achieve this in several ways within Victoria's regulation and legislation by amending three acts, the Gambling Regulation Act 2003, Food Act 1984 and Meat Industry Act 1993. Under amendments to the Gambling Regulation Act 2003, keno licensees will be given the ability to authorise the remote access use of keno systems. This will bring keno providers into the 21st century here in Victoria. Amendments are also made to allow for more effective approval processes in applying for linked jackpot machines. Additionally, the bill will update the notice requirements outlined in the relevant acts so as to modernise reporting requirements. This will include the allowing of electronic transmission and also publication of closure orders. This is achieved by amending the Food Act 1984 in response to the recommendations in the findings of the parliamentary inquiry into the closure of I Cook Foods Pty Ltd. The amendment also stipulate that closure orders may be issued via email. The final measure to achieve technology neutrality amends the Meat Industry Act 1993 to outline that the delegation of the chief executive officer of PrimeSafe will occur through electronic communication processes as opposed to under common seal, bringing the practices in line with modern government practices.

The bill also includes simple and non-controversial amendments to various acts for means of ensuring that reform systems are efficient and effective. These amendments will improve the strength of our state regulatory system like the three objectives previously outlined, modernising and improving regulatory requirements for businesses and social services that have the potential to act as a barrier for the smooth functioning of a business without sacrificing community or consumer protections, enabling the Environment Protection Authority to oversee waste management in the case of a temporary emergency or other measures that improve community health and safety and supporting technology-neutral legislation. Amended acts include the Essential Services Commission Act 2001, the Regional Development Victoria Act 2002, the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, the Sale of Land Act 1962, the Land (Goonawarra Golf Course) Act 1988, the Food Act 1984, the Meat Industry Act 1993, the Seafood Safety Act 2003, the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005, the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 and the Monetary Units Act 2004.

Finally, I will add that the amendments included in this bill are expected to provide Victoria with a benefit of up to \$2.6 million a year, mostly accounted for by the sheer amount of time that it will save businesses in following regulatory measures. It is only the Allan Labor government that will provide businesses with this kind of support, thanks to the strong business reform agenda.

I would like to acknowledge something about this bill that Minister Pearson in the other place noted in his second-reading speech on the bill. Minister Pearson noted that this, like many other Allan Labor government reforms, is an exercise in fine-tuning legislation. As with many other regulatory omnibus bills, we have introduced a collaborative effort across portfolios and departments to improve the functioning of our state's broad-ranging regulatory measures and bodies. These continuous efforts of simple and straightforward reformation are essential to ensuring a smooth, functioning system of regulations. This is a highly effective means of actualising the Allan Labor government's vision to create a regulatory system that not only makes business easy in Victoria but also promotes to the highest degree community safety, consumer protection and environmental health and safety. Government is not an episodic job but an ongoing responsibility that requires constant care and attention, just as the latest regulatory omnibus bill provides. I am proud to be a member of a government that recognises this and incorporates it into its practices. Ultimately Victoria is better off under the practices and the legislative habits of the Allan Labor government. Victoria will continue to benefit from a government that holds a close eye to examining what it can change to improve the lives of everyday Victorians, both business owners and consumers.

In summary, I would like to reaffirm that the bill will reintroduce effective regulatory change to many facets of Victorian businesses in everyday life. I commend the efforts of the 10 relevant ministers,

including my good friend in the other place the Minister for Small Business Minister Suleyman. I would also like to acknowledge this state's hardworking business owners. They are the backbone of our community, and I am sure I speak for everyone on this side of the house when I say that we are forever grateful for their contribution and will always be in their corner. I commend the bill to the house.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea):** At this point I would also like to acknowledge the presence of a former member in the gallery Mr Philip Davis.

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (17:32): I rise to speak to the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. I know that my colleague Mr Mulholland has gone through in detail what this bill is about and explained that it is a piece of omnibus legislation that seeks to amend 14 acts across 10 different portfolios. This is largely technical in nature; it is just looking at various aspects that different portfolios are affected by and then getting the department secretaries to have a look at those issues and really streamline and fix up some of the issues that have come to their attention. Therefore these are not substantive changes. The large majority of the amendments are aimed at streamlining requirements or rectifying specific instances where current acts' provisions are not working as intended or have become impractical. I think that is a good thing. You need to be looking at legislation. You need to be looking at reviewing what is required and understand that at times various pieces of legislation do need to be tweaked or amended so that you can have that streamlining effect. A couple of years ago, in 2022, the Parliament passed a similar omnibus-type bill around regulatory reform, and it was still looking at some pieces of legislation. Like that bill, this one brings together some of those technical elements.

The government itself has outlined that there are four main objectives to the bill. They are, one, to modernise and streamline requirements for business and social service providers without compromising the effective management of harms. I want to come back to that, as my colleague in the other place Ms Wilson so eloquently spoke about the issues. Mr Mulholland has pointed out the many issues facing small business around red tape and regulation and the actual impacts. The savings the government claims this bill will provide are in actual fact quite immaterial, and I will come back to that. The second point is to improve emergency preparedness, and of course this has been at the forefront for all Victorians with the devastating effects of fires and storms last week, knocking out power. There are still thousands of Victorians without power, and it is having a massive impact on their ability certainly to manage their businesses but also their day-to-day living. To support technology-neutral legislation and make simple and non-controversial amendments to support an effective and efficient regulatory system through amendments to a variety of acts – those are the main aims of this bill.

I want to go back to what Mr Mulholland said around business and red tape and the streamlining that we need to do. He, like Ms Wilson, made the point that if you look at what is actually occurring in Victoria, which is of huge concern when you have got the likes of the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry speaking about confidence and about the numbers of small businesses that are leaving or –

**Evan Mulholland** interjected.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Well, they should care, Mr Mulholland, because small business is the heart of our economy. They really are the engine room of what we need to do.

To provide services to the general Victorian community, you have to have taxation. Money does not grow on trees, but this government love to spend and they love to tax. They claim that this bill will have a grand total saving for small business of \$2.6 million in annual savings. As has been highlighted, Ms Wilson through the bill briefing really questioned the department officials on that and said, 'What will that mean? What does that look like for business?' As has been mentioned, it comes down to a total amount of \$3.66 in savings per business per year. So there is nothing for this government to crow

about with what they are doing to support small business when it is \$3.66. That does not even equate to a cup of coffee, as was highlighted before by Mr Mulholland. That is when businesses are being slugged with WorkCover costs, premiums are skyrocketing and that has been disgracefully allowed to go on and on where businesses are absolutely being smashed through WorkCover premium increases. It is not 42 per cent, as the government claims; for the most part it is up around 70 to 80 per cent. They are absolutely being smashed.

Payroll tax – I have said time and time again in this house: why on earth would the government be applying a payroll tax to GP clinics? They are effectively a small business. They are providing a necessary, vital service, an essential service in our communities, yet this government is going to apply a payroll tax. Well, what is that going to do? It is going to end bulk-billing. The cost to patients will be \$100 per visit to the GP, so every time a Victorian needs to take their family member or themselves to a GP it will cost them \$100 a visit, and that is as a result of the government's payroll tax. Those small businesses do not make a huge living, and I do not know what is wrong with the government if they think GPs are the top end of town. Maybe they should go and speak to some of their mates that they have done deals with and made a fortune for over recent years. They are at the top end of town, they are mates of Labor, not these hardworking small businesses. GPs, as I said – end of bulk-billing, closure of clinics, and what will that mean? Millions of Victorians will flood into our already overstretched emergency departments.

It is the most stupid decision by government to be taxing health. Not only is this health tax a tax on GPs, it is a tax on patients, and I cannot stress that enough. I keep saying the government must reverse their decision. It will have rolling implications for our health system, which is trying to get back from where it was – it was smashed through COVID and it is still recovering – and the outcomes for Victorian patients are not getting any better, they are getting worse. I said through COVID, if you shut off and stop elective surgery, then Victorians will get sicker – and they have. If you prevent them from going and getting their primary care, they will not have the ability to have that primary care and their conditions will worsen – and they have. And then you have got those ongoing implications for so many people that are just struggling to get the basics, to get their elective surgery done, and those wait times are still massive. Despite all the grandstanding by the government, we had a reduction of just 800 people in the waitlist. But there is a hidden waitlist, and that is getting bigger and longer.

I have digressed a little bit, but it is important to understand that those GP clinics are small businesses too, and they need the support. Whether it is WorkCover premiums across the state, whether it is payroll tax, whether it is utility costs – that is the thing that this government does not understand either: running a business, having overheads, whether it is rent, whether it is utility costs, whether it is salaries and wages or whether it is these insidious taxes that are being applied by the Labor government, all put pressure on businesses, and it is so hard to do business here in Victoria as a result. We need to reverse that. Labor has no plans to do that. It is only the Liberals and Nationals that understand and have a plan to do that, and that is looking at some of these taxes, as I said. For God's sake, do not put a health tax on patients.

**Ryan Batchelor** interjected.

**Georgie CROZIER:** We are not going to apply it, Mr Batchelor. You should go to your Treasurer, your minister and your Premier –

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger):** Order! Do not debate across the table.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Through you, Acting President –

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger):** Ms Crozier, get back to the topic, please.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Through you, Acting President, I am taking up the interjection. Mr Batchelor asked me if we would reverse it. We would never put such a stupid tax on in the first place. I have just outlined why, through you, Acting President –

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger):** Order!

**Georgie CROZIER:** I think it is important that Mr Batchelor understands the cost to small business, and GP clinics are small businesses largely. You guys do not get it. You have not got a clue about the implications. I suggest that you all go and speak to your Minister for Health, the Treasurer and the Premier and lobby them to stop applying the health tax.

To get back to the bill: as I said, \$2.6 million in savings for small business – what a joke. What a joke. Do something that will actually make a difference, for God's sake.

The other part of the bill I want to go to in the time I have left is around amending the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 to create a mechanism whereby the Secretary of the Department of Health can authorise a class of entity to obtain, possess and store medicines. Under this amendment the secretary will be required to conduct a risk assessment, and authorised entities will be required to comply with existing provisions relating to storage, record keeping, access and administration. I do not have a huge issue with that, although we need to obviously keep an eye on things in relation to what is going on in the Department of Health.

I want to get to the food and safety aspect of the bill, because it actually goes to the heart of an inquiry that Mr Mulholland mentioned and that I was involved with – the I Cook Foods closure. We did not have just one inquiry in this state about the disgraceful way this business was treated, we had two inquiries undertaken by this Parliament. This bill goes to one of the recommendations, recommendation 10:

That the Food Act 1984 be amended to allow for the addition of electronic transmission and publication of closure orders.

What we found through the inquiry was the shocking way that that matter was handled, undertaken by the then acting chief health officer Dr Sutton. The way that business was treated and the lack of integrity –

**A member** interjected.

**Georgie CROZIER:** No, he did not. He actually ballsed it up. That is why we made the recommendation, and that is why your government has put it in the bill.

**Sonja Terpstra** interjected.

**Georgie CROZIER:** He did not. He actually did not do it properly, and the inquiry found that. In fact he misled the inquiry, Ms Terpstra – through you, Acting President.

**Sonja Terpstra** interjected.

**Georgie CROZIER:** He did. I am not making it up. He actually came back. It is written in this report, where he said that I Cook Foods were the sole suppliers of Knox Private Hospital. It was completely misleading a parliamentary inquiry. He came back and corrected the record, so I would ask you to just understand exactly what went on, Ms Terpstra. He made some assertions in his evidence. It is in this report. Ian Cook and his family and those 40-odd employees lost their jobs through the absolutely disgraceful way they were treated, and I might say that for the woman in question, the results we were provided by Dr Sutton were not actually true and accurate. In fact, Mrs Painter was 38 kilos and 180 centimetres tall, and she went into that hospital in a very poor condition. We never got all of the results in our inquiry. There were many things that were kept from that inquiry, and I have to say that there were so many issues that arose out of the mishandling by the department of health and Dr Sutton at the time.

I want to commend Ian Cook, Ben Cook and their families for the tremendous efforts that they have made to correct the wrongs that occurred because of the department of health. As a result, we are debating this legislation today which goes to one of those recommendations. It goes to

recommendation 10 and refers to recommendation 13, and it looks at amending the Food Act 1984 to reflect the modernisation of communication and reporting to support the timely completion of reporting. They were the findings of this report of the inquiry. That is the recommendation, and that is what this legislation is addressing. So to say it was all wrong is absolute baloney. I say again, the Cooks and the way they have been handled I think is one of the most shameful periods – I have said it before – in this state’s history in relation to what they were subjected to. The loss of jobs by those people in that business and the findings – I mean, Mrs Painter when she died did not have listeria in her system. The post-mortem showed that. There were a whole range of issues, and yet this government spent millions of dollars in legal fees to fight the case. I commend the Cooks, and with those words I will conclude my contribution there.

**Ryan BATCHELOR** (Southern Metropolitan) (17:47): I am pleased to rise and continue the debate on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. The bill seeks to make a range of amendments to Victoria’s regulatory framework. It is the second of a regular series of omnibus bills on regulatory reform that the government has brought in, showing, I think, that the government takes a sensible and considered approach to ensuring that the suite of regulations that exist in Victoria are continuously monitored, that their application is thoughtfully considered, and that where those regulations can be improved the government through this legislation and legislation like it takes steps to improve the burdens – some may call them burdens – that exist or the rules to ensure safety and public health and good order, as others may.

In the range of amendments that are before us today, there is a range of 54 amendments that are being made across 14 acts across 10 different ministerial portfolios with three to four key objectives. The first of those key objectives is to modernise and streamline regulatory requirements for businesses but also for social services. We know that it is not just businesses in Victoria that are subject to regulation – a range of service providers also have various rules that apply to them. Another suite of the amendments will support emergency preparedness, and the last substantive group of amendments is to ensure technology neutrality.

The development of this legislation has occurred following a range of considered consultation and feedback across a range of portfolios with a range of stakeholders, businesses, regulators and social service providers who are affected by a range of current regulatory frameworks. The objectives of these changes, in the broadest sense, are to ensure an appropriate regulatory set of arrangements that are focused on outcomes for those who use those services or the products that those services provide and, I think most critically and importantly for a regulatory framework, that are looking at enhancing safety and public health, because that is ultimately what our regulatory frameworks are designed to do. It is also an important, if unglamorous, task often to be involved in the process of statutory law reform to keep legislation up to date with emergent and currently used technologies.

The way the bill seeks to modernise and streamline requirements for businesses and social service providers will be done in a number of ways, but overarchingly I think it is important to say that when we go about the task of regulatory reform, we do so not with some slavish devotion to attacking the bogeyperson of red tape, because fundamentally what some call red tape is what is protecting people in our community from certain harms. There are some who, in their slavish devotion to the ideological pursuit of attacking red tape, would seek to inflict further harm on communities by reducing those checks and balances and those requirements that exist, whether they be health or environmental regulations – they are just two such measures – and are designed to promote and support public safety.

The consequence when we do not have the systems that we need to protect public safety, the consequence that exists when our regulatory frameworks are probably not being monitored as effectively as they could be, is that we do not have enough scrutiny on businesses that are providing goods and services to the community. That means that occasionally, if those things are not up to scratch, you end up with the kind of situation and circumstance that is scaring families right across suburban Sydney, for example, where due to a breakdown in the way that important regulations have been adhered to and monitored, you have got asbestos being mixed with playground mulch in schools



and in parks, and those places are being shut down and people are being unable to use them because they are rightly concerned that fibrous asbestos that gives people mesothelioma is not the kind of substance that we should be including in mulched material, for example.

The framework that exists and the environmental protections that exist in the state of New South Wales to try and keep asbestos out of mulch and asbestos out of playgrounds in schools are exactly the kinds of regulations that are put in place, whether they be health or whether they be environmental, to help keep our community safe. So when people routinely in this chamber or in other forums get up and blithely rant about the burden of red tape on our community, those are the sorts of regulations that some call red tape and others call necessary components of public safety. If you want to go and attack the kinds of environmental regulations that stop asbestos being put in mulch, please stand up and do so, but you are not going to see that from us on this side of the house, because what we are interested in is taking a considered approach to regulatory reform, which is what this legislation before us does. It streamlines where we can, improves practice where we can and looks at updating regulatory and technological issues to make sure that they are modernised with current practice. But it is not something that we get up and celebrate by having what some in other places have called burning a bonfire of red tape. That is not the kind of approach that you will see from this government, because we do take a considered approach to looking at regulatory reform. We are conscientious, we are meticulous and we go through each of various provisions with stakeholders and do it in a responsible way. That is why you get better results. If you have a slavish way with a sort of –

**Sonja Terpstra:** Ideological.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** ideological haze as you cut through important protections for our community, then you run the risk of putting people at further risk, of exposing them to harm, and that is not something that I think any of us in good conscience should pursue.

As an example of what this legislation will do, in one instance it will seek to streamline the operation for businesses under the Meat Industry Act 1993, which means that the regulatory burden for businesses selling dried meat online will be reduced, without creating any greater risk to food safety or from an animal welfare perspective, ensuring that instead of being caught under the Meat Industry Act those will be regulated under the Food Act 1984. Additionally, the bill is going to streamline licence requirements to recognise that refrigerated vehicles are often used to transport multiple commodities such as meat and seafood. In an industry like agriculture, the food production sector, which is so critically important to the Victorian economy – I think last sitting week I talked about how they are employing nearly 150,000 Victorians in the broader food industries – these are the sorts of sensible approaches that we want to see to regulatory reform, not the ones that would expose Victorians to unnecessary harm that would arise as a result of taking an alternative approach.

In relation to emergency preparedness, which is one of the other themes of the bill, there are amendments proposed to the Environment Protection Act 2017, which will seek to enable the Environment Protection Authority to authorise the transportation of waste in an emergency situation. Obviously too many communities, in the last week in particular, have understood why we need to make sure that things like our preparedness for emergency response and recovery are as effective as they can be. The legislation, the bill before us today, will improve the EPA's response to an emergency animal disease situation, floods and fires. We know that with natural disasters, particularly certain types of natural disasters, livestock animals are unfortunately killed. There are circumstances where carcasses need to be transported to prevent the spread of different or further diseases. The legislation before us will give the EPA better capacity, from a regulatory point of view, to undertake the necessary response to the harm caused from natural disasters and to be better equipped and prepared to act in an emergency context – again, part of the sensible, considered changes that the government, through its efforts on regulatory reform, seeks to make.

The third thing I will mention very briefly is the objective to support technology-neutral legislation. Obviously whilst this Parliament, as it has demonstrated on many occasions, is a dynamic and

spontaneous place, sometimes the legislation that we pass may sit on the statute books for many years, and when certain provisions are written into legislation to govern the sets of circumstances that might exist at a particular point in time, often the world moves on faster than we bring that legislation up to date. Part of the legislative reform that this bill is taking seeks to improve the technology-neutral aspects of certain legislation. For example, keno licensees will be able to authorise remote access to keno systems under amendments to the Gambling Regulation Act 2003. It will better facilitate Victoria's 450 keno outlets remaining appropriately regulated while minimising operational burden. So we see that there are a range of things that we can do in various parts of this regulation to ensure that legislation and legislative frameworks remain technologically neutral.

We think the bill provides a range of simple and uncontroversial amendments to support an effective and efficient regulatory system through a range of alterations to a variety of acts. This is important to the broader Victorian economy, and by modernising these legislative frameworks Victorians can know that this government is taking a sensible and considered approach to having both an appropriate regulatory burden and regulatory arrangements and also a range of protections in place. With that I conclude these remarks.

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (18:00): I move:

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

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

### *Business of the house*

#### **Standing and sessional orders**

**Gayle TIERNEY** (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (18:01): I move, by leave:

That so much of standing and sessional orders be suspended to the extent necessary to allow Richard Welch to make his inaugural speech.

**Motion agreed to.**

### *Members*

#### **Richard Welch**

#### *Inaugural speech*

**Richard WELCH** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:03): I am honoured to speak to this house and to do so in the presence of family, colleagues and friends. Firstly, I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor Dr Matt Bach, whose work for the community of North-Eastern Metro and his contribution in this house were evident to all. I know he earned great respect in this place, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to continue the work he did.

I am proudly a country boy. I was born in Seymour. I grew up in Leongatha and Warragul. The idealistic child of idealistic parents Donald and Lesley, I am the fifth of six children. My parents taught me ideals by their actions, but my father in particular had a full intellectual framework for those ideals, and I marvelled at his grasp of the world, not just in the physical plane but in the metaphysical and sometimes truly surreal. For me, he was my *Encyclopedia Britannica*, my CS Lewis and my Lewis Carroll in one. What I saw in him was a kind of romantic longing to comprehend truth beyond the superficial, to infer the structures below the surface that hold up tall buildings and to spot the anomalous lie hidden within the cloak of virtue. It led him to express awe in nature, in language, duty, honour, in gentleness, in faith and in love. He was a Renaissance man with pride, embedded in a school principal's office, and he certainly was my greatest influence.

It is fair to say that in my journey from country boy to standing here today before you I have come the long way about. I came to Melbourne at 17, I worked at St Vincent's Hospital as an orderly and I

moonlighted in rock bands. In my 20s I worked in financial services with two of the leading asset management companies of the time, which provided me with valuable corporate training. I developed a skill in project management. It was a skill that took me to the UK, where I delivered large-scale projects across Luxembourg, Brussels, Madrid and New York, and I became increasingly involved in executive management.

But I felt something was missing. I undertook a master of business administration at Imperial College London, and enthralled by the idea of entrepreneurship, I broke away from corporate life. I founded a business of my own, a startup working out of a decommissioned RAF shed in an airfield in Oxford. Like any founder, my duties were simultaneously CEO and chief toilet cleaner. I invented a new form of motion-tracking technology involving sensors, neural networks and an early form of AI. I raised capital, I built a factory in India and I spent 15 years in India developing products, learning the hard skills of manufacturing, of supply chain, of import and export and traversing layers upon layers of government regulation, and managing a very diverse team across three continents. It was while working in India that I saw firsthand how economic development could help lift an entire community and provide opportunity, especially to women. I saw how airport and regional infrastructure could integrate even the most impoverished areas and allow the private sector to unlock the economic and creative and social potential.

Experience shapes our thinking, and these experiences layered on my upbringing have certainly shaped mine. I have concluded there is no freedom without economic freedom. Creators must be free to create, individuals must be free to choose. If the state over-regulates in either of those, it inevitably invites oppression, poverty and division. As a safeguard, a citizen's identity must never be purely digital, and services must never be made conditional on private beliefs. The choices of the citizen must be the primary driver of what is and is not made, consumed and valued.

I am a proud Liberal. I was attracted to the Liberal Party because I believe in the power of the individual and ensuring people receive reward for effort. I believe in the importance of volunteer work and the importance of family as a cornerstone of a successful society. I believe the private sector in a well-governed society is always better at delivering solutions than the state, but people will often ask, 'What does that mean in practice when you have to make a decision? What do I stand up for? How do I make a judgement?' It comes down to this – ultimately in any decision, in any judgement, I would ask three questions: 'Is it moral?', 'Is it ambitious?' and 'Is it patriotic?' By happy accident those three words – 'moral', 'ambitious' and 'patriotic' – spell out the word 'map'. What is a map? Well, it is a way to get from here to where you need to be, and if you intend to provide any leadership in a community, it is best that you have one.

So allow me to share with you a little of my map. Firstly, the M of my map is 'moral'. I believe we should seek to be a moral country – a moral state – a state that is a force for good in the world. A moral country knows when to be compassionate, to reach out to those who need a hand up, those facing challenges and to stand side by side in terms of natural disaster or personal tragedy to ensure all Victorians share equal rights to resources, infrastructure and quality of life. A moral country also has the courage to say no, to stand up to bullies, to defend rights, to reject intolerance and to resist populist trends when they do more harm than good or institutionalise difference and division. A moral state strives for equality of opportunity and respects the value of individual freedoms – freedom of speech, of association and of religion, equality before the law and an independent and objective public service. These are moral values. Our cornerstone institutions – Parliament, police, judiciary, public service – are themselves wholly and only sustained by our commitment to those values. However, I believe we live in times where these principles and therefore our institutions are under assault.

I could point to many concerns, but the one I would like to address today is the phenomenon of a creeping democratic deficit. What do I mean by democratic deficit? Well, over the past 30 years it has become the recourse of governments at all levels to create independent statutory bodies, advisory boards, commissions, authorities, each created to operate at arm's length from government with only high-level threads of accountability to a minister, far less to Parliament and many steps removed from

the authority of the voter. Initially, such bodies were created to ensure essential works and responsibilities were carried out objectively and without political influence or even corruption. But things have changed. We have empowered them to pursue their own priorities, make their own appointments, set by-laws and make rulings, take and dispense what advice they choose, deploy a form of shadow police force in the shape of authorised officers, levy taxes and spend and accumulate taxpayer debt with only the most tenuous reporting and accountability. The presumption that we removed political interference by removing politicians ignores the reality that that vulnerability applies equally if not more to unelected bodies. The essential difference is that the average citizen has no capacity to vote them out and no rights to visibility or transparency. That is what I mean by democratic deficit.

Not only have we diluted that accountability, in the process we have also permitted our elected representatives to abdicate their responsibility to materially direct the actions of government and the functions of its organs. To say 'I followed advice' is the same as saying 'I made a decision', but the moral quality of those two statements is very different. Of course there is a place for independence where independence is the core function of the role – for example, IBAC and the Ombudsman – but elsewhere in Victoria the democratic deficit has reached a critical point, and it is time we reflect whether we choose to live as a democracy led by the elected representatives, as flawed as they are, or under a powerful bureaucratic technocracy that will make our choices for us. This is a moral choice. The morality of a state is not written in the halls of academia. It is not handed down by think tanks. It is not bought and paid for by a union industrial complex or dictated by identity politics. It should not be abdicated to the advice of experts. The morality of the state lies in the lives and freedoms of the people, in the bonds of family, in the vision of the society our children will inherit and the common bonds as Melburnians and proud Victorians. I want Victoria to be a moral state, and I believe Victorians do too.

In my map A is for 'ambitious'. I believe we should be an ambitious state. The importance of ambition is that it gives us hope, and hope gives us purpose. We are a state that values aspiration. History has shown over and over again that when this state has purpose, a mission, it is unstoppable. An ambitious state observes what others have done and emulates the best the world has to offer. Other countries are landing on the moon, building car industries, developing microchip supply chains, so ambition goes further than simply keeping the lights on and having a health system worthy of a First World nation. Performing basic functions of government is not an achievement, rather a starting point from which we launch. An ambitious state aims to be the best in education and teach our children how to think, not what to think, because when information is a commodity, it is the ability to intellectually marshal knowledge that is valuable. Intellectual freedom leads to creativity that leads to innovation that leads to the creation of wealth.

We who inherited a society of home ownership – the infrastructure of back gardens, nature strips and plentiful sports facilities – should pass on this or better. The solution of locking future families up in tower blocks is not a solution at all. It is a compromise at best; it is a betrayal in reality. An ambitious state does not tinker with the future of the next generation and talk about home ownership as a series of policy settings or tell them that they should be satisfied to rent for the rest of their lives. To any young person listening, I believe that my generation has let yours down. We have failed in a basic duty to pass on home ownership to you, and it is our obligation to fix it. We do not need the Big Build. We need the great catch-up for those communities ignored, left behind and priced out of the Australian dream, especially those in my North-Eastern Metro, our outer suburbs and the regions, and we can.

We can also catch up on AI, automation, biotech and 3D printing. These are transformative economic disruptors that will change the face of the global economy. We will either participate in that wave and benefit from it, or we will be hit by it. An ambitious state knows that our productive capital must be orientated here and not locked up in nonproductive assets such as tunnels, and this includes energy and climate.

There are currently over 440 nuclear power stations in 33 countries, another 60 under construction and another 110 planned across the world, each of these countries capable of solving the logistics of location, waste and life span. COP28 says nuclear is now a key component of net zero. The UK, France and a plethora of other states have come to the realisation that nuclear power is not a pipedream but an imperative. Young people want our power grid decarbonised, and frankly they are sick of asking for it. If nuclear power is the way to achieve it and avoid the limitations of renewables, they are very happy to have it in the mix. If we are to provide this generation with genuine hope, then we must take up the hope of nuclear power in Victoria. It is time. I am convinced that sometime in the next five to six years one state in Australia will put up its hand and say, 'We are pursuing nuclear,' and the state that does that will attract all the expertise, all the investment, all the infrastructure and all the future revenues. I want that state to be Victoria. The nuclear moratoriums must go. Not only do they prevent us from joining the rest of the world in addressing climate change but their outdated Cold War era blanket prohibitions prevent Victoria from participating in literally hundreds of new industries and STEM research activities. An ambitious Victoria can achieve anything because the hope and purpose of the Victorian people is the most potent force in the nation. Victoria must be ambitious.

The P of my map is 'patriotic'. Now, I do not mean the American, flag-waving, tickertape parade style; I mean something deeper and more considered. My simple premise is that a society that feels good about itself, that believes it is a force for good in the world, is far more capable of addressing its shortcomings than a country that does not. I think this is a fundamental truth. Guilt is not and never has been a constructive motive for positive action, yet all too often that is our default. It is embedded in every approach that starts with the premise 'we must break down and destroy this because we are bad' versus 'we can do better because we are good'.

I recognise that patriotism is not now and never has been fashionable, especially when used by politicians. But to me, and perhaps it is because I am a country boy, patriotism and the love of country are rooted in the physical nature of our land. We are seeds planted deep into our soil, seeds originating from every background, yet as we grow, the fruit of this land, of this soil, is Australian. This is not a modern idea. The earliest pioneers and settlers recognised this. Within a generation of European arrival, the notion of being Australian as something distinct, uniquely part of and born from our landscape, was apparent in language, in art and in culture. We knew we were different, and we were different because this ancient land has an effect on all who come. Indigenous Australians have always known this, and their unique connection to and love of country is the kind that I respect and that we can all learn from. I believe we should celebrate that, because in denying society patriotism by watering it down, framing history in oppressor-versus-oppressed terms and seeing ourselves as, firstly, races, classes, colours and genders instead of Australians first, we are denying ourselves a spiritual relationship with our ancient land.

Our Shrine of Remembrance is a building designed for profound spiritual resonance. The shape, the purposeful use of light and shadow, the very footings speak in spiritual language of the love for the fallen, who fell for a country they loved. The designers Phillip Hudson and James Wardrop were two young war veterans, barely 30 years old, yet they had the ability to articulate something that speaks uniquely to the people of this land. They brought forth something timeless. Would we be even capable of such a spiritual vocabulary today? Our generation cuts down statues.

Patriotism is not an act of waving away our mistakes or failures. The tapestry of any nation is woven weft in tragedy and warp in triumph, but to suggest that only a truly blameless country can be loved is utopian and ahistorical. Patriotism is a contract that obligates us to pass on to our children a society that is better than the one we inherited. Be proud of Victoria. Celebrate and encourage the best of Victoria if for no other reason than that a patriotic country will have the strength to be moral and the courage to be ambitious. This is why patriotism completes my map. Let us be a state that is moral, ambitious and patriotic.

Before I lead onto some important thankyou's and acknowledgements, I would like to share something that many business owners in our state would be all too familiar with. One thing you learn in business

is that if you make a mistake, it costs you money – I mean it costs you your own personal money – so as a discipline you very quickly learn not to make that mistake again. Too often Victorians see that in government there is no consequence for mistakes and therefore no incentive to learn from them and no true appreciation of the effect of decisions because those making them will never have to bear the consequences themselves. This does not work in business, it does not work in the real world and it should not work in government. I will fight for that accountability because, yes, I believe in higher values, but I also believe in stone-cold realities in business, in government and in our state. You cannot tax your way to prosperity. You cannot borrow your way out of debt. Victoria must become a business state again.

I need to give credit and thanks to very many special people who have supported me through three campaigns and preselections. Politics is a team game, and I have always been fortunate to have amazing teammates around me. First, my really sincere thankyou to all the members in North-Eastern Metro Region for placing your faith in me to represent you and our great party in this place and without whom I would not be here today.

Right back at my very first small steps in politics there were those who helped me and guided me as a novice candidate: Robert Clark, Jacky Douglas, Emma and Theo Samuel, Kevan and Nola Hill and Julie Felchner.

To the Mulholland clan, all of whom I will be forever in debt to; to the Ivanhoe, Jagajaga, McEwen and Yan Yean ECs, this is as much your day as mine.

There are also some very important people who have provided great mentoring to me: Greg Mirabella, Simon Heggen, Darren and Suzanne Grevis-James, Amanda Millar, Laurie Cummin, Kim Kotas, Pam Guy, Richard Stockman, Malcolm McLean, Bikram Singh, Bob Cornish, Dom Bonanno, Renee Neubauer, Ken and Marilyn Bryce and Peter and Kerrie McWilliam.

Also, again, colleagues who have mentored me: Wendy Lovell, Cindy McLeish, Senator Jane Hume, Senator James Paterson, the incomparable Jason Wood, the insanely talented Ben Zerbe, Jack Cook and Lee Ellison, Thomas Burgess, Henry Davis and Louis Bland – and we will always back the BIFT.

Thank you so much to Fran Henderson and to my good friend Jason McClintock and family, Simone Cottom, Goldy Brar, Ty Moore, Rosanna Bains and Bernadette Khoury, Paige Yap and all those who stood in 2022. Thank you to Dean and Allison Troth, to Frank Greenstein and to Ian Quick.

And thank you to my colleagues – to my first state leader Matt Guy, to John Pesutto and Georgie Crozier, who will lead this party to government in 2026. Thank you to my regional colleagues Nick McGowan, Nicole Werner and David Hodgett, for all their help, and to the entire Liberal–National parliamentary team, who are continuing with their heroic struggle of getting me up to speed.

I want to make special mention of our multicultural communities and the many community groups I have had the pleasure of working with – all valuable, all amazing. Thank you to Bhavna and Kali Mata Mandir, to the BAPS Mill Park and all the BAPS temples across Melbourne, to the Shri Durga temple in Rockbank and the Gurudwara in Blackburn. And great respect to the Doreen RSL, who are still waiting for a home, and to the wildlife rescue community all across Victoria, whom I had the privilege of learning so much from over the last three years.

Sadly for me my mum passed away just three weeks before I was preselected but is no doubt watching on with Dad and probably thinks this is a bit too much fuss. To Dad, thank you for many things but especially for teaching me everything I know about fatherhood. And to my siblings David, Debbie, Greg, Robert and Alison: I cherish our childhoods, but I think perhaps I cherish our adult relationships even more. In recent years I think we have all come to appreciate how short life is and that in the end family is home. The most important thing to point out to you now is that by law I now automatically win all dinner table political arguments – but look at the lengths I had to go to.

And lastly, to my own family, to my children Molly and Donald: you are the greatest gifts any man can receive, and we are a tight little nation with a language all our own. The strengths that you have shown since you came to Australia and the maturity and wisdom you possess are incredible. You teach me something every day. Our love for each other gives me strength and purpose, and any good I might hope to do here is underwritten in part by you two. And to my wife Mandy, my soulmate, strength, supporter, teammate, co-conspirator and defender against the black arts, the one who has allowed me to take every risk, kept our feet firmly on the ground and certainly kept their feet firmly outside the political bubble, long ago we promised each other that we would have a spectacular marriage, and today joins a long list of spectacular moments that we have shared across the last 24 years – thank you.

So, President, I conclude by paying my respects to you and to your office in particular and to all my new colleagues of all parties and beliefs. I respect you and indeed as human beings I love you, but I hope you lose every election going forward. While we may or may not have the opportunity to agree on everything, I promise you that I will always seek the moral, the ambitious and the patriotic in what we collectively produce, and that the interests of our state, our citizens and our families will always come first. I am grateful for my journey, hand in hand with those who shared it and grateful to those who have carried me when I stumbled.

I look around at those who have come to hear this speech – I aim to honour your hopes. And to the communities of North-East Metro, in Mill Park, Bundoora, Ivanhoe, Eltham, Bulleen, Warrandyte, Ringwood, Croydon, Bayswater, Box Hill and Glen Waverley, I will serve you with hard work and sincerity. It is the best place in Victoria to live, to work and raise a family, and I am so fortunate to be a member and leader of this community.

So for me this speech in this moment arrived, and now it passes. It is not the end – it is not even the beginning of the end – but it is, for me, just the end of the beginning.

*Members applauded.*

### *Adjournment*

**Enver ERDOGAN** (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (18:32): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

### **The Vineyard Restaurant and Bar**

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (18:32): (700) I want to raise a matter for the attention of the Minister for Environment. It is a matter that I raised last year, but I have had no response to this important matter. It concerns the Vineyard bar in St Kilda, an important repository and support for many people in the arts sector. Clearly many bands and many musicians use the Vineyard, and it has provided a very strong support for people in this sector.

The state government owns the land. The land is the responsibility of the Minister for Environment under the administrative arrangements. The day-to-day responsibility has been handed to the City of Port Phillip. I have spoken to people at the City of Port Phillip both before and since the issues have come to the fore of the Vineyard's future, but what I would say is it is time for the minister to become involved. The minister is ultimately responsible for the use of this piece of public land, and the minister has not responded to earlier adjournment questions that were raised concerning this important site. It is an emblematic site, and it has an emblematic history in the City of Port Phillip and in St Kilda, right on the end of Acland Street opposite Luna Park. It is a very important site, as I say, for the future of the music industry and the sector more broadly.

I do want to say that I have met with people at the Vineyard, and it is time for the City of Port Phillip and the state government, through the Minister for Environment, to step back and to work with the managers of the Vineyard, who have got a long-term lease, and provide a solution that goes forward. I know there were meant to be greater works done than have been done in this recent period, but

nonetheless given the difficulty that has been experienced by the whole music industry and indeed so many small businesses across the COVID period and since, with the increased taxes that have been placed on many of these venues, it is not surprising that the venue would struggle. But what I can tell the Minister for Environment today is there is huge public support and it is time that he got involved. He is the minister responsible for this piece of land. Yes, there is a committee of management, but the minister has the capacity to intervene and the minister has the capacity to find a solution. So I ask the Minister for Environment to get involved, talk to the Vineyard and its proprietors, talk to the City of Port Phillip and find a solution to protect this important venue.

**Debate interrupted.**

*Questions without notice and ministers statements*

**Written responses**

**The PRESIDENT** (18:35): I apologise, members; I meant to do this before the adjournment. In relation to the two points of order after question time, I did review Ms Crozier's supplementary question again and I believe that the question was answered. That was the view that I put at the end of question time. In relation to Dr Ratnam's supplementary question to the Minister for Housing, I will ask for a written response – but, given the time of day, in two days rather than one.

*Adjournment*

**Debate resumed.**

**Supermarket prices**

**Sarah MANSFIELD** (Western Victoria) (18:36): (701) My adjournment matter is for the Assistant Treasurer, and I am calling for him to require the Essential Services Commission to take action to stop price gouging by supermarkets in Victoria. Last night's *Four Corners* episode highlighted outrageous practices by the two major supermarket chains Coles and Woolworths, who made \$1.1 billion and \$1.62 billion respectively in the last financial year. These practices include supermarket design that makes it difficult for people to leave stores and influences their spending, misleading products and specials labelling, and ripping off producers and crippling their long-term viability.

There are those, including in this chamber, who like to put it back on the consumer. They say that consumers can just flex their choice muscles and go elsewhere or select different products. In the current system dominated by Coles and Woolworths, consumer choice is a mirage. Behind the supermarket duopoly there are also a range of mega food and beverage companies that pay the big supermarkets to promote their products and ensure high-prominence placements to influence our purchases. This reinforces the power of the supermarket duopoly in dominating our food supply chain, from dictating what our farmers grow and how much they get paid to what ends up at eye level on store shelves and what consumers pay for them. The duopoly and these mega corporations are adept at political lobbying, evidenced by the incredibly weak regulation of supermarkets and pricing. This has allowed profits to be concentrated in the hands of a few big players at the expense of farmers and everyday citizens' fundamental right to food security.

Forty-eight per cent of our population now feel anxious about or struggle to consistently access adequate food, and almost all food-insecure households have had to cut back on food in the past year. Supermarkets' predatory practices and pricing also drive people to make poorer food choices, encouraging increased consumption of ultraprocessed, high-sugar, low-nutrient food. Any parent who has taken their child to a supermarket knows that the check-outs are not lined with broccoli and carrots. It is junk food, with so-called 'specials' labels to attract attention. This is having enormously detrimental effects on population health, driving chronic disease, dental disease and poor mental health. The Victorian Labor government has the power to act, but they do not. Labor, it is time you



stepped up and did more to stamp out supermarket profiteering at the expense of Victoria's health and wellbeing.

### **Electricity infrastructure**

**Bev McARTHUR** (Western Victoria) (18:38): (702) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Energy and Resources and concerns the recent storms, the interruption to Victoria's grid and the enormous disruption the resulting blackouts caused. I first want to recognise, however, the much greater immediate damage caused by bushfires. In my own electorate 45 homes were lost at Pomonal. I pay tribute to the firefighters, including volunteers, who worked so hard to halt the fires, and I praise the community for coming together to help those in need. I know that this is just the beginning of the process of rebuilding and call on all agencies involved to provide support and assistance for as long as it is needed.

On the matter of transmission, the failure was clear. Six towers collapsed near Anakie. The Loy Yang A power station tripped off the grid and AEMO commenced load-shedding to keep the power system operational. Even by 9 pm more than 470,000 customers, which equates to a far greater number of individuals, remained without power.

Sadly, this failure is far from unique. In January 2020 six transmission towers came down near Cressy, taking down two lines and causing the Alcoa smelter to be disconnected and the Heywood interconnector to be cut, which isolated South Australia from the national electricity market. Repairing the infrastructure cost \$25 million, directly passed on to electricity bill payers, but to my knowledge the economic cost of the blackout has never been properly calculated. It has certainly never been publicised. It is absolutely vital that this omission is not repeated. The disruption to all aspects of life is obvious to us, as is the safety consequence of losing phone signal in an emergency, but how much did it cost in lost productivity from businesses forced to stop production or close their doors, in spoiled food, medical supplies and perishable goods, in reduced consumer spending? The list goes on.

Why does it matter? It is simple. The latest network failure brings into question whether the reliability and security of power as well as the economic cost of mass outages has been properly priced into the government's plan to massively expand overhead electrical power transmission. With climate change, we are told storms will become more frequent. So, Minister, the action I seek in the review you commission today is a full calculation and public release of the economic cost of electrical blackouts. Only then can we fairly compare the single-tower double-circuit 500-kilovolt lines, which will make up the Western Renewables Link and VNI West, with the inherently safer underground infrastructure and more resilient, greater redundancy of the plan B network option.

### **Breast screening**

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL** (Northern Victoria) (18:42): (703) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Health in the other place. Every day three women under the age of 40 are diagnosed with breast cancer. Every week one of those young women passes away. These are mothers, wives, daughters and friends. Their lives are turned upside down, if not destroyed. In many cases, sadly, these diagnoses come when this cancer is in its latest stages, making treatment longer, more harrowing and more devastating to these women and their families.

For years women over the age of 50 have been able to get mammograms – one of the most reliable ways to diagnose breast cancer – for free. Unfortunately, women under the age of 50 are not afforded the same life-saving opportunity unless they have a family history. In fact young women often have to pay in excess of \$400 to access these scans. The action I seek from the minister is for the government to subsidise these life-saving scans for women under the age of 50 years and save the lives of mothers, wives and daughters in Victoria.

### Electoral reform

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (18:43): (704) My adjournment is for the Minister for Local Government. I seek the action of the minister to urgently review the final structures for Whittlesea City Council, put forward by the Whittlesea electoral representation advisory panel, that she recently accepted. The boundaries of the proposed north ward fail to adequately reflect and accommodate forecast population growth. I submitted to the Victorian Electoral Commission review with my colleague member for Northern Victoria Wendy Lovell.

From the Informed Decisions demographic report commissioned by the City of Whittlesea, the Donnybrook locality at the heart of the north ward is projected to grow rapidly at an average annual rate of 16.97 per cent, reaching a population of over 7000 by 1 July 2024. The number of electors within the north ward boundary across all three proposed models is projected to approach the plus or minus 10 per cent electors cap provided for by section 15(2)(b) of the Local Government Act 2020 by the time of the October 2024 elections. It is inevitable that the north ward will grow well over the section 15 requirements of the LGA throughout the four-year term. This will ultimately fail to ensure that the concerns of residents at a local level are addressed adequately and will leave that north ward severely underrepresented. It includes Donnybrook, Eden Park, parts of Beveridge, Woodstock, Whittlesea, Yan Yean, the northern part of Doreen, Humevale and Kinglake West. It is in fact so big you could fit all other 10 proposed wards within the City of Whittlesea inside the north ward, and we know that the councils of Hume and Whittlesea and Mitchell shire have all had the team together on the construction of the new Cloverton city, which is going to be a city the size of Canberra, because really the state government has not come to the table in supporting growth in those communities. The growth of those communities is enormous. The number of electors will not meet the requirements set by the act and will actually outstrip them almost at the start of the four-year term. So I am urging the minister and seeking action from the minister to urgently review her decision, take another look at Whittlesea City Council boundary structures, perhaps read the submission that Ms Lovell and I made to the electoral review and review these proposals.

I in fact want to mention and shout out the process for the City of Hume's review. It sensibly set boundaries which are actually forecast for when that population grows. I am not sure what has happened with the City of Whittlesea review, which has not done that. We need to make sure if we are going to move to single wards that people are going to be adequately represented. That is what I am seeking for the minister to do.

### Fur industry

**Georgie PURCELL** (Northern Victoria) (18:46): (705) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Consumer Affairs, and the action I seek is for her to provide an update on the taskforce into mislabelled fur products in Victoria. For the past four years the Animal Justice Party has led investigations into fur products sold across Melbourne. Samples purchased from popular Melbourne markets have consistently revealed the labelling on fashion and accessory items to be wildly misleading. DNA testing revealed that it is common for fur products to list incorrect species and, most shockingly, masquerade as faux fur. The fact that someone who walks into a store with the intention to purchase ethically could walk out unknowingly wearing a raccoon, dog or mink is beyond disturbing.

In 2019 the then minister committed to working with Consumer Affairs Victoria on their own investigations. Soon after the government revealed that, to the date, 100 per cent of the samples they independently tested were incorrectly labelled. Every single item was misleading consumers. In 2022 a pair of unlabelled gloves purchased from Queen Victoria Market was found by the Animal Justice Party and Collective Fashion Justice to be made from domestic cat – fibres from a barbaric industry, which are rightly banned from entering Australia. Our animal protection laws prohibit the kind of cruelty that takes place on fur farms, but in selling these products in Victoria we are undeniably complicit in it. The fur industry permits the beating, suffocation and electrocution of fully conscious

animals. Ninety-five per cent of them are intensively farmed, and the rest are caught in the wild and killed using wire snares or foothold traps.

In recent years we have learned more about the risks of intensively farmed wildlife. Importantly, these environments are both a source and a hotbed for global pandemics. Animals are housed in such proximity that disease spreads dangerously fast, producing limitless carnage. In 2020 across Europe and the US the mink fur industry collapsed following extensive COVID outbreaks in animals. Denmark ordered the slaughter of over 17 million animals after mutations of the virus were found to be transmittable to humans. We have seen a huge move away from the sale and production of fur, with countries such as Austria, Belgium and France leading the way.

Fashion is all but done with real fur. Trends have clearly moved away from full-length coats and shawls with fox heads still attached. What remains are fur trimmings on a handful of hats, shoes or bags, and even those are losing steam. But we must understand the role Victoria plays internationally. Not only does fur harm animals but it also significantly harms people and our environment. I hope the minister will provide an update on Victoria's labelling investigation as a first step to ending this cruel and outdated trade.

### **Meningococcal B vaccination**

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (18:49): (706) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, and it is in relation to meningococcal B vaccination. I have raised this issue on two previous occasions over the last two years, and I am yet again calling on the government to add this vaccination to Victoria's immunisation schedule to protect those most at risk from this devastating disease. There is a particular cohort – obviously babies, young people, adolescents and young adults – very much at risk. Recently I had a conversation with Paul Wright, whose 18-year-old son Lachy has been in the media recently owing to his very significant case of meningococcal, which was just an absolute living nightmare for the entire family. Lachy nearly died from meningococcal B, which started with mild symptoms, including a sore throat. Lachy's condition deteriorated rapidly within two days. He was placed in a coma and given a slim chance of survival. Fortunately for Lachy he survived and is on the path to recovery, albeit with months of rehabilitation and having had that dreadful experience just a few months ago.

Lachy's ordeal was preventable, with a vaccine available for this awful illness, yet many people do not know about the gap in immunisation coverage for meningococcal. Strains A, C, W and Y are provided for free under the Commonwealth's national immunisation program, while meningococcal B is only free for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and people with certain medical conditions. I know the government has written to the Wrights and explained that meningococcal B is funded through the NIP, the program I have just mentioned, but that is not good enough. We need to be doing more because of what is happening with the rise of meningococcal disease in the community. There is a cost of around \$240 for two required doses plus out-of-pocket consultation fees when somebody goes to ask for a meningococcal vaccine, so there are real barriers. This awful disease could be prevented if this vaccine was provided as other vaccinations are in this state. As we know, vaccination is the best way to prevent some of these awful diseases such as meningococcal B.

I could say more, but South Australia has been funding meningococcal B for babies at 12 months and teenagers since 2018, and I have raised that before in the house around what is happening around the country and in other states. It has resulted in a 60 per cent reduction in meningococcal B cases for the infant age group and a 73 per cent drop in cases for adolescents in the program's first two years, so it is having results. Lachy's family are calling on the Victorian government to do more, and the action I seek therefore is for the minister to take this request of the Wright family seriously, to speak with her federal colleagues if need be and put meningococcal B vaccination onto the vaccination program here in Victoria.

### Middle East conflict

**Samantha RATNAM** (Northern Metropolitan) (18:52): (707) My adjournment matter is for the Premier. My ask is for the government to provide urgent funding and material aid to Palestinian refugees who have arrived in Victoria fleeing Israel's war on Gaza. The world is bearing witness to the brutal massacre of the Palestinian people. We know this plight began long before October last year, but what we are now seeing unfold, as many foretold, is the indiscriminate slaughter of thousands of innocent civilians, many of them children. In the wake of the 7 October Hamas attack on Israeli citizens, which was rightly condemned by the international community, parliaments like this one passed motions about standing with Israel, which many of us warned could provide permission for retaliation without restraint, and that is what has occurred. Since then over 100,000 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed, injured or are missing. There is a growing humanitarian catastrophe caused by Israel's blockade, bombing and invasion of Gaza. There is no hiding behind the hollow rhetoric when you are intentionally targeting civilians. There is no justification and there is absolutely no morality.

There are some of us in this place and in other parliaments across the world who will continue to call for an immediate and permanent ceasefire. There are some of us who will not relent in trying to get our governments to act with humanity. We will keep asking the questions that make you uncomfortable but have to be asked. We will ask you about your relationships with the Israeli defence ministry and we will keep asking about deals that have been made with weapons manufacturers that are arming an unfolding genocide. To stay silent, to refuse to answer and to refuse to act is not a neutral position, and it is sending a message to the community. That is why thousands upon thousands of Victorians are taking to the streets each and every week.

Millions of Palestinians need our help right now. They need us to keep caring and keep finding ways to help them, and we cannot give up. Australia has allowed some people seeking refuge and asylum from Gaza to enter, but, sadly, the numbers remain small, and tragically many do not have the means to find shelter or access the basic necessities of life. Most have not been granted refugee status, which means they are ineligible for many social supports. Most people are on restrictive bridging visas, so they are finding themselves entirely dependent on the community to stay afloat.

Where the government has failed, individuals and organisations, including the Muslim Women's Council of Victoria, have been working around the clock to make sure those arriving from Gaza have access to the basics like housing, food and English lessons. It is a matter of conscience that the Victorian government provides help. We did it before in 2019 when a group of asylum seekers who were detained offshore came to the mainland to receive medical support. The state government at that time provided housing and material aid when the federal government failed. Minister, my ask is for the government to commit to providing material aid to the Palestinian people who have arrived in Victoria fleeing Israel's war on Gaza.

### Literacy education

**Renee HEATH** (Eastern Victoria) (18:55): (708) My adjournment is for the Minister for Education, and the action that I seek is for the minister to release the findings of the buried La Trobe University study into evidence-based literacy approaches in Victorian schools. Victoria's failing literacy outcomes were once again highlighted with the release of Grattan Institute's report *The Reading Guarantee* last week. The report finds that a staggering one in four Victorian schoolchildren are unable to read properly. In regional and rural areas this number rises to half. Representing an electorate that takes in many regional and rural communities, I find this tragic and completely unacceptable.

Unsurprisingly, the report puts these poor results down to a confusing mix of failed literacy theories promoted by the Victorian Department of Education and a lack of guidance for schools. While other Australian states are now adopting a national phonics-based approach to reading and writing, the Victorian government persists with ineffective teaching theories that have been thoroughly discredited throughout the US, the UK and Australia. Yet a handful of Victorian schools have courageously turned

the tide on literacy underperformance. Through their own initiative, six schools adopted a structured phonics-based approach called the science of reading and completely transformed their results. The Andrews government commissioned La Trobe University to undertake a study into these schools. Shockingly, the findings of this study were suppressed by the Department of Education. It seems that the success of these schools has inadvertently highlighted the failure of this government. As a result, powerful information that could reform literacy teaching and change the school experience for tens of thousands of struggling students remains buried.

With Victoria's disappointing Programme for International Student Assessment and NAPLAN results in 2023 and the Grattan report this year, it has become abundantly clear that we are facing a literacy crisis in this state, so I am calling on the Minister for Education to make the findings of this taxpayer-funded report available so that we can learn from these schools and implement the science-based literacy methods to improve outcomes for all Victorian students.

#### **Vacant residential land tax**

**David LIMBRICK** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:58): (709) My adjournment matter is for the Treasurer. My office was contacted by a person who owns a second property in Carlton. The property is vacant for various reasons, including the fact it was impossible for her to maintain it to the standard she wanted during the pandemic because of government restrictions. Not long after this the property was one of about 500 damaged by flooding. Then it became subject to ever-tightening mandatory requirements for rental properties. Now this landowner is being threatened with the vacant residential land tax. When she investigated the various reasons to be exempt from the tax, she said damage from natural disasters was not one of them. It seems unfair that victims should be further punished with this tax. My request for action from the Treasurer is to advise if it is possible for victims of natural disasters to receive exemptions from the vacant residential land tax.

#### **Storm recovery**

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (18:58): (710) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Premier, and it relates to a timely response for the personal hardship payments. The action I seek is for the Premier to guarantee that individuals who contact the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing seeking these payments are responded to on the same day that they actually put in the request or put in the phone call. This house will certainly know that Mirboo North and surrounding communities have been left decimated by a storm cell that moved through on a front of about a kilometre a half and a 7-kilometre tail. It absolutely smashed the township. It left at least 20 homes uninhabitable, and some of those members of that community have contacted me with their frustration about seeking these personal hardship payments. The Premier came last Friday, and she mentioned these personal hardship payments. She made a commitment that they would be available, and that is all well and good. There are quite strict criteria for those payments to be allocated. They are \$640 per person and up to \$2240 per family unit.

One of my constituents contacted me today just so frustrated. For the emergency relief payments you ring the 1800 number and you receive an operator message saying, 'You can wait for 3 hours, or we'll call you back.' To date, the time frame is over 24 hours, and their call has not yet been returned. You can say that there are a lot of requests, but for a civilised government when there is a time of crisis – when there has been a significant flood or fire, in this case in my region a storm event – it is the responsibility of that government department to actually meet the needs of people in crisis. As I said, it is important that there is a timely response, so I ask the Premier to guarantee that calls made by individuals and families seeking these personal hardship payments are responded to, funnily enough, in a 24-hour period.

#### **Police resources**

**Aiv PUGLIELLI** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (19:01): (711) My adjournment matter tonight is to the Minister for Police, and the action that I seek is that he reconsider the rollout of tasers to more

police officers and PSOs. It is not going to make the community safer, and in fact it will make things more unsafe for many people. We just do not need more tasers. The Federation of Community Legal Centres has long argued that tasers should not be used as a panacea for police firearm use. We have seen that they are often misused and that when they are used they bring significant risks to vulnerable groups who are already over-represented in statistics on the use of lethal force by police in Victoria, including First Nations people. The reality is that with this additional less lethal weaponry comes more of a chance that it will be deployed instead of trying other tactics such as de-escalation, negotiation or other nonviolent means. There is also the risk of usage creep, where instances of authorised usage are further and further expanded and again more people are put at risk of harm or death from these weapons.

Without a police ombudsman to provide independent oversight of the inevitable misuse of these weapons there cannot be meaningful investigation into these incidents. The Australian Lawyers Alliance, Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, Human Rights Law Centre and the Police Accountability Project have jointly written to the Attorney-General expressing their concern about this rollout of more tasers. They have suggested that the money would be better spent on prevention strategies, on mental health resources and on training police in de-escalation, and I wholeheartedly agree. We should all agree. Minister, please reconsider this decision and invest instead in less violent ways of policing.

### Neighbourhood houses

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (19:03): (712) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Carers and Volunteers, and it concerns a looming funding shortfall in the neighbourhood house coordination program, which could threaten the program's ongoing viability. The action that I seek is for the minister to commit to delivering the requested additional \$2.5 million in funding that Neighbourhood Houses Victoria have asked for in the upcoming budget, as well as committing to having a growth fund that would fund five new neighbourhood houses per year for the next four years.

There are over 400 neighbourhood houses in Victoria, and they provide a vital service across our state, especially in the regions. I witnessed this firsthand during the October 2022 floods, when the Mooroopna Education and Activity Centre and the Rochester Community House were central points of contact and support during the early crisis phase. They have continued to be central to the recovery in their communities. Neighbourhood houses offer a space where the community can meet, socialise, develop connections, find help and discover purpose. They provide toy libraries and book swaps, English classes and internet access, men's sheds and child care, community gardens and communal lunches, arts and crafts and food banks. These services are delivered by over 5000 staff and almost 7000 dedicated volunteers, who receive 10 million visits a year and give out 2000 tons of food relief.

But the future of neighbourhood houses is under a cloud. For a service that already runs on a shoestring budget, cost increases and a shortfall of funding together seriously threaten the long-term sustainability of the program. The funding shortfall is the result of many factors, but at the heart of the issue is the gap between real inflation and the agreed-upon consumer price indexation of funding. Put simply, in the real economy food and energy and wages are all getting more expensive, but planned increases in funding to neighbourhood houses are not keeping pace. Without urgent support, the food banks will soon have to start turning people away.

Neighbourhood Houses Victoria have appealed for additional funding in the order of \$2.5 million, and I wholeheartedly support their request because of the fantastic services that neighbourhood houses provide. They provide invaluable benefit to the community, and the government must do whatever it can to ensure these houses remain sustainable into the future. Funding is also required to support the growth of new neighbourhood houses in areas where there are obvious needs. I urge the minister to commit to funding the neighbourhood houses.

### Home building industry

**Trung LUU** (Western Metropolitan) (19:06): (713) My question is for the Assistant Treasurer, and the action I seek is for the Allan government to step in and extend the liquidated builders scheme to help families who are in financial ruin from the collapse of Chatham Homes and those in similar situations. My constituents the Strachan family, primary teachers with a combination of 20 years, with two kids, a three-year-old and a six-month-old baby, had saved to build their family home. But when Chatham Homes went bankrupt in October 2023, they had not taken out insurance for dozens of homes that they were in the process of building. Like many other Victorian families, the Strachan family lost their deposit, leaving them tens of thousands of dollars out of pocket. It may not be much compared to the billions of dollars Victorians are in debt, but to families like the Strachans it is their life savings.

This is not the first time that the building industry has left Victorians at great risk. After the collapse of Porter Davis Homes the government instituted a bailout for all victims of collapsed builders within 12 months, ending on 30 June. Victims of the Chatham Homes collapse have not been offered this assistance from the government. In a cost-of-living crisis and a housing crisis it is no longer a financial burden but a great mental health and wellbeing concern to families in these situations. The longer the government sits on its hands, the longer my constituents continue to suffer and struggle to make ends meet. So my question is: will the government extend the financial relief to these Victorian victims of the collapsed Chatham Homes and make a circumstance in which they can survive during their hardship?

### Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union

**Joe McCracken** (Western Victoria) (19:08): (714) My adjournment matter is to the minister for employment and industrial relations, and it relates to an article that came out titled 'Labourers on 36-hour week to earn \$120,000 under proposed CFMEU pay deal'. The action that I seek is very simple from the minister: do not sign it.

I think about all the people in my electorate of Western Victoria who work very hard for their money. When we think about teachers, for example, the top pay for a teacher in the public or the Catholic system is not \$120,000. Nurses working more than 36 hours a week do not earn that much. Tradies, many of them small business owners themselves, do not even earn this much. So this deal that the CFMEU is trying to tie up with the government is actually completely wrong and totally immoral because it is completely inflated. To quote from the article:

Labourers and junior stop-sign holders working 36-hour weeks on construction sites will soon earn \$120,000 a year under a new union pay deal.

That is just for a basic 36-hour week – there is more if you have extra hours, overtime and that sort of thing – and that also includes a \$260 travel allowance. Now, I can tell you no teacher gets that. And this is on all Big Build sites and those sorts of things, so it is quite a big concern what is actually going on there. This is in the same sentence as we talk about cost overruns on major projects, and it has been reported recently that there was \$74 million on cost overruns in just a recent project that has been completed in the works by the government. Now, who pays for that? It is the Victorian taxpayer that pays for that.

I thought maybe I would help the government, because they need it, and I went online and had a look at some quotes for some stop-go machines just to help out the government a bit. There is one quote for \$34,995 – a 12- to 14-week wait, mind you – and there is another quote I have got here for \$13,200; that wait is only four to six weeks. So maybe the government could consider putting money into that and redeploying these stop-go workers into other more productive areas. It might actually save the taxpayers some money, but I guess the government does not really care about that when they are looking after their union mates.

### Neighbourhood houses

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (19:11): (715) My request is for the Treasurer to work with the Minister for Carers and Volunteers to provide increased recurrent funding to secure the future of Victoria's neighbourhood houses. Over the last year I have met with coordinators from neighbourhood houses in northern Victoria and seen firsthand the excellent work that they do. Their workload has increased dramatically as local residents battle the cost-of-living pressures and recover after natural disasters. They do great work at the coalface, supporting anyone who comes in the door across a very broad range of issues.

But in the last week I have received correspondence from neighbourhood houses across northern Victoria, including Birchip, Nathalia and Mooroopna. They have raised concerns about current funding levels, the increased demand for emergency food relief and a lack of funding to establish new neighbourhood houses in growth areas with obvious needs. There is now a serious threat to their viability under the current neighbourhood house coordination program.

Their correspondence outlines several concerns. The program has suffered more than 10 years of indexation which is well below the cost increases they have incurred. They have experienced a dramatic increase in community demand for food and material relief, which has placed an unsustainable cost burden on neighbourhood houses, and there is no funding within the program to support new neighbourhood houses despite a growing population.

Our neighbourhood houses are currently fighting an uphill battle when it comes to funding and now face having to cut programs, including the provision of emergency food relief, which is not funded. Neighbourhood houses and community centres provide a valuable service to local communities right across Victoria, yet local coordinators spend valuable time applying for grants just to cover costs, because they are on tight budgets and have limited resources.

More than half of Victoria's neighbourhood houses are located in regional Victoria, and they provide a range of services, including child care, maternal child health, skills development, libraries, seniors groups, wellbeing activities, food banks and government support services. Our neighbourhood houses are running on the smell of an oily rag, and together with my Nationals colleagues the action I seek is for the Treasurer to ensure that the coming state budget provides increased recurrent funding to secure their future.

### Responses

**Enver ERDOGAN** (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (19:13): There were 16 matters raised today: Mr Davis for the Minister for Environment, Dr Mansfield to the Assistant Treasurer, Mrs McArthur to the Minister for Energy and Resources, Mrs Tyrrell to the Minister for Health, Mr Mulholland to the Minister for Local Government, Ms Purcell to the Minister for Consumer Affairs, Ms Crozier to the Minister for Health, Dr Ratnam to the Premier, Dr Heath to the Minister for Education, Mr Limbrick to the Treasurer, Ms Bath to the Premier, Mr Puglielli to the Minister for Police, Ms Lovell to the Minister for Carers and Volunteers, Mr Luu to the Assistant Treasurer, Mr McCracken to the minister for employment and industrial relations and Mrs Broad to the Treasurer. I will make sure that all those matters are passed on for an appropriate response.

**The PRESIDENT:** The house stands adjourned.

**House adjourned 7:13 pm.**