



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Wednesday 29 November 2023

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	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 ¹	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 ²	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Tyrrell, Rikkie-Lee	Northern Victoria	PHON
Lovell, Wendy	Northern Victoria	Lib	Watt, Sheena	Northern Metropolitan	ALP

¹ Lib until 27 March 2023

² LDP until 26 July 2023

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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Wednesday 29 November 2023

The PRESIDENT (Shaun Leane) took the chair at 9:33 am, read the prayer and made an acknowledgement of country.

*Announcements***Events**

The PRESIDENT (09:34): Can I just take advantage of this opportunity to give a plug. At lunchtime the Big Issue are going to have a presentation in Queen's Hall. I know everyone is busy, but if anyone gets a chance, drop in. On that note, the Bourke Street Salvos project 614 cookbook that we launched earlier this year won a big international award in Paris this morning, so there is pressure on the Big Issue, I think, if we are going to be launching their things.

*Papers***Papers****Tabled by Clerk:**

Auditor-General – Contractors and Consultants in the Victorian Public Service: Spending, November 2023
(*Ordered to be published*).

Confiscation Act 1997 – Reports under section 139A of the Act, by Victoria Police –

Report, 2021–22.

Report, 2022–23.

Crimes (Assumed Identities) Act 2004 – Reports, 2022–23, under section 31 of the Act, by –

Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission.

Victoria Police.

Evidence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1958 – Report, 2022–23, under section 42BI of the Act, by Victoria Police.

Fire Services Implementation Monitor – Report, 2022–23.

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

Casey Planning Scheme – Amendment C275.

Manningham, South Gippsland and Southern Grampians Planning Schemes – Amendment GC231.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – Documents under section 15 in respect of Statutory Rule Nos. 113, 114 and 122.

Surveillance Devices Act 1999 – Report, 2022–23, under section 30L of the Act, by the Office of the Special Investigator.

Terrorism (Community Protection) Act 2003 – Report, 2022–23, under section 37F of the Act, by Victoria Police.

Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrong) Act 2017 –

Birrarung Council Report on the implementation of Burndap Birrarung Burndap Umarkoo – Yarra Strategic Plan 2023.

Burndap Birrarung Burndap Umarkoo – Yarra Strategic Plan, Report 2022–23 – Reporting on implementation from 1 July 2022 to 30 June 2023.

*Business of the house***Notices**

Notices of motion given.

*Members statements***Sikh community**

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (09:39): I had the pleasure of attending events last week to mark the 554th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak, the inspired founder and first guru of Sikhism. I joined the Victorian Sikh Gurdwaras Council for celebrations here in Queen’s Hall on Friday, and on Saturday I was at the Gurdwara Siri Guru Nanak Darbar in Officer with the member for Pakenham and members for South-Eastern Metro Mr Tarlamis and Mr Galea. It was a day to reflect on the history of Sikhism and on the values and traditions that are synonymous with the faith. Sikhism’s principles of harmony, unity, equality and selflessness are values that we all aspire to hold here in Victoria. Thank you to Harpreet and the Siri Guru Nanak Darbar for hosting me at their celebrations and for all the work that they do in promoting harmony through emergency relief support and community environmental activities in their community.

Anatolian Alevi Festival

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (09:40): On Sunday I joined the members for Pascoe Vale, Broadmeadows, Northern Metro Mr Erdogan and Eastern Victoria Mr McIntosh and the federal member for Wills in Coburg to mark the 30th year of the Anatolian Alevi Festival, hosted by the Alevi Community Council of Australia. The annual Alevi festival is a vibrant celebration of Alevism, offering an opportunity for us to learn more about the community’s cultures, traditions, arts and cuisine. It was a wonderful experience and festival, and I commend the community for putting it on.

Diwali

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (09:41): The Diwali festival in Gippsland in the Latrobe Valley held by the Latrobe Indian Association was a fantastic event last Saturday night. It is a festival of lights, and after a traditional lamp lighting there were cultural performances, exquisite traditional dance and rich classical music, followed by the all-crowd-pleasing Bollywood dancing that not only appeared on the stage at the Gippsland Performing Arts Centre but also outside in the community. Colour, dancing, food, traditional works – it was fabulous, and I want to congratulate in particular Akash, Kunal and Geetha and all of the wonderful people at the Latrobe Indian Association for a truly spectacular event.

Road safety

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (09:42): As we move to the summer season, my one wish for all of us here is to return safely back to this place. My one wish for all Victorians is that they drive safely and arrive at their destination in one piece to their loved ones. We all are someone special in somebody else’s life. Unfortunately our road toll is now at 269 lives lost on Victorian roads this year – a 20 per cent increase on last year and a 15-year high, and indeed 34 per cent of fatalities occur on country roads. We must improve our road surfaces. The government must put more money back into road maintenance to get people where they need to be safely.

Western Metropolitan Region

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (09:43): Although my first year as an MP has been, let us just say, tumultuous, advocating for my constituents in this place has been an honour, whether it has been calling for fairer taxes; for fairer funding in the west for roads, schools and community centres; for fair laws that protect workers, parents and women and children; or for the government to be held to the same standards that ordinary people are when they go over budget or break promises or fail to do their jobs. I would like to say some thankyou to people in my community who have helped me to do this work. Inside and outside of Parliament, from the left and the right of politics, from the Western Metro Region and all around the world, it has been an absolute honour to meet and stand with

the mums and dads who love their kids and just want them to be healthy, get a good education and make a life for themselves. I absolutely could not possibly more deeply admire those volunteers who run all of our local sports clubs, just because they want to help kids develop their character and enjoy the thrill of the game. I have been so moved by the strength and vision of all the multicultural communities who cherish Australian democracy and proudly throw their lot in with ours – all these hardworking people doing their part to keep this state going. Thank you for standing with me, and I promise that I will keep standing for you.

Dingley Village

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:44): Last week I was fortunate enough to attend the Dingley Village annual community information night, along with other colleagues from this place. This meet and greet with local community members and community groups was a terrific exercise in local participation, and it was fantastic to see well over 100 – in fact almost 200 – people, from the Dingley Village community come along to this event to find out about various matters, things and projects happening, from council and state as well. It was a wonderful opportunity to meet with the local community for those of us there. Thank you to all of the locals who turned out and met with us. It was a real privilege and pleasure to speak with a lot of you on the night. I look forward – along with my colleague who was also in attendance Meng Heang Tak, the MP for Clarinda, who has done a brilliant job in that community – to continuing to work with you.

Mulgrave by-election

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:45): On another matter, we had a very busy Saturday a couple of weekends ago in Mulgrave, and I would like to officially congratulate the member-elect for Mulgrave Eden Foster. It was a privilege for me to join her at the polling booths on the day, along with other Labor MPs and lots of Labor volunteers, Premier Jacinta Allan and Deputy Premier Ben Carroll, as well as a few other colleagues and friends from across the aisle who we bumped into on the day. Eden will make a fantastic member for Mulgrave, and I cannot wait to see her sworn in, hopefully very soon.

Asylum seekers

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:45): Last week friends and I went along to Queenscliff to have a Tamil welcome feast. These events occur monthly, supported by Queenscliff Rural Australians for Refugees. At these events people can book a table and be served a delicious meal prepared by Tamil asylum seekers. During that meal we heard from a number of the asylum seekers who prepared our meal that evening, including a family – mum, dad and two young kids – and the story they told was just extraordinary. There were audible gasps from the people attending at some of the things that this family has been through, and they continue to live in unimaginable uncertainty on temporary protection visas. The eldest child has almost finished high school. She was six or seven when they arrived in 2013 by boat. She would love to go on to study psychology at university, but she cannot because she would have to pay international student fees. The youngest child was born in detention. That the government is willing to treat people like this is incredibly distressing, and it is largely for political purposes. There have been slight improvements in our asylum seeker policy with this current federal government, but there is a long way to go. We have at least 12,000 people in a similar situation to this family. I really look forward to the day when I can attend a welcome feast like this where those who prepared the meal are also truly welcome.

Summer safety

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (09:47): It is just about that time of year when we all wind down and get into the holiday spirit, when we talk about how quickly this year has gone by and spend time with our friends and family. As beautiful as this time of year is, whatever way you spend it we all need to remember to stay safe. That means when you are outside you slip on a shirt, slop on some sunscreen, slap on a hat, seek some shade and slide on some sunnies. It means when you are down at

the beach you swim between the flags. It means when you are driving you always remember to wear your seatbelt, obey the road rules and keep within the speed limit. It means you and your family being prepared in case of a bushfire or a grassfire. It means always keeping an eye on the kid in the swimming pool. Staying safe this summer can just mean that those simple things save a life. They may seem small, but they work.

Can I take a moment to wish all the constituents of the Northern Metropolitan Region a safe summer and a happy holiday season. I look forward to seeing you and continuing our good works into 2024.

Felicitations

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:48): There has been a noticeably different feeling around Parliament lately. It is all very mysterious. People seem happier. Government MPs in particular have a spring in their step, and there seems to be more consultation. They are talking in the hallways and negotiating about legislation. I have even seen a few people who were cast into the political wilderness catching up with their old friends in the cafe. It is like the government has woken up from a deep sleep and suddenly remembered how to be human again, which got me thinking about the legacy we leave as politicians.

Some people seem to think political success means surviving politics for a long time and leaving on your own terms, but no matter how many tunnels or bridges a government builds, what people really remember is how they were treated. Calling people names, treating them like second-class citizens or pretending they do not even exist is not leadership. It is just poor behaviour, and there are consequences. Once you leave, the people that you thought were your friends will be glad you are gone and everyone else will just remember how you treated them. So as we end this year in Parliament, here is to new beginnings. I wish you all season's greetings, a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

Reserve Road, Camberwell, closure

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (09:49): Today I rise to call on the Boroondara City Council to partially close Reserve Road during school hours. Over the weekend I officially opened Camberwell Green, a new playground for Camberwell Primary School and the wider community. It was only possible due to the \$1.7 million investment by the Allan Labor government and the advocacy of the former member for Hawthorn John Kennedy, who I know the community dearly misses. When the idea for this playground was proposed, Boroondara City Council stood stubbornly against it. The council building is next door, and they wanted the car park. Thanks to the commitments of the community and people like Cr Victor Franco, Meg Boyle and the school council, it got done.

But now there is another issue: Camberwell Green lies on the side of Reserve Road, and half the school lies on the other side. It is putting our kids in danger. A few months ago Camberwell Primary School surveyed the community, and the vast majority supported a partial closure. As one parent put it, they have seen cars drive down the wrong side of that street. Last week I launched a petition to Boroondara council that I will table in the new year in support of a partial closure. In less than five days we received almost 500 signatures. I look forward to working with principal Janet Gale, school council members Stuart Lindsay and Kylie Ronalds and the wider community to get this done. Boroondara, you need to close the road.

Student political engagement

David ETTERSANK (Western Metropolitan) (09:51): Our democracy, rooted in the Westminster system, is most dear to us, but across the country the right to peaceful protest to exercise our democratic voice is being eroded. We saw laws passed in the previous Parliament outlawing peaceful protests against logging, with fines of up to \$21,000 or 12 months in prison. This year we had legislation designed to stop protests against the abuse of animals, including in the horseracing industry, with similarly punitive intent. Those of us amongst the three-quarters of a million cannabis consumers in Victoria also saw police powers arbitrarily abused as police searched, detained, arrested and harassed citizens at the otherwise peaceful 420 cannabis rally in April. We have seen governments

of both persuasions persecute whistleblowers like David McBride or wantonly ignore the persecution of heroes like Julian Assange. In this context I would like to shout out to the school strikers, be they fighting against climate change or the genocide in Palestine. To those young Australians I say: be critical, be sceptical, be loud, be angry, be united and most of all demand change. You are fighting for your country, for your democracy and for your future, and we are with you.

Felicitations

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (09:52): I will just take this opportunity to say this is my first term in this house and it has been a great privilege and a great honour to meet all my colleagues here in front of me and across the bench. It was great to meet you. I also want to say, we wish you all a merry Christmas and a safe holiday.

Matthew Bach

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (09:53): Also I will take this opportunity to say goodbye and farewell to a very good colleague of mine Dr Bach, who has given me great inspiration, great leadership and great personal mentoring through the last 12 months that I have been here. I wish him the best on his journey through his career and a very fruitful and successful career in relation to his education path in England.

Kindred Clubhouse

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (09:53): I recently joined the member for Hastings Paul Mercurio to attend Kindred Clubhouse, which is a fantastic organisation and place. There are 180 members there that come together to support each other with mental health issues that they have faced. Many have faced significant mental health issues. It is very much peer led. There are 2.5 FTE staff there that support what is an open place where people can come at any time of the day to be with other people and talk about the issues they have faced or the struggles they have faced and work through it together at their own pace in a very open, supportive and collaborative environment. We see that the majority of people there are not going back to hospital. It is a beautiful peer model, and I just want to congratulate everybody there.

Southern Peninsula Rescue Squad

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (09:54): I also attended the Southern Peninsula Rescue Squad in Blairgowrie the other day, which was fantastic. Murray Grey, the president, and Denis Baguley, the secretary, took us through, showed us the watchtower, talked us through the volunteers – the growth in volunteers that they are having and how they are there during the busy period right through the day. The big team involves two boats out on the water. This is volunteer led. The funds have been put together by volunteers, and they are keeping people safe out on the bay every week, whether that is saving lives or getting people from broken-down boats or whatever, they are making a huge impact.

Eco Park Active Hub Mount Martha

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (09:55): I just want to give a very quick shout-out to the new Eco Park Active Hub playground in Mount Martha, which, together with Mornington shire, we opened during the week.

Mulgrave by-election

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:55): I extend my heartfelt congratulations to Eden Foster, the newly elected member for Mulgrave. Eden's journey is testament to her lifelong commitment to making a positive difference in the lives of others. Her extensive background as a volunteer, including at Vinnies – having started the Vinnies branch in Noble Park – as a clinical psychologist, a counsellor and mayor reflects her values of fairness, equality and compassion. These values have guided her throughout her journey, which has now brought her to this place, driving her to serve her community tirelessly, with passion and determination. Whether counselling students and

those impacted by drugs and alcohol or taking up the local issues as a community advocate, Eden has always strived to help others.

During her campaign Eden shared with us her personal experiences and her deep-rooted connection to her community, which motivated her to put herself forward to be a strong local voice for the community. Eden has a profound understanding and appreciation of the role of governments and the impacts good governments can have on the lives of people every day. Growing up with a single mother showed her firsthand how Labor values can be lifelines for families facing challenges.

Having lived in the Springvale–Noble Park area for over four decades, she is not just another politician but a neighbour who intimately understands the needs and aspirations of the community she represents. Her track record of service and her ability to get things done are qualities that will undoubtedly make her a strong and effective voice for the people of Mulgrave in the Allan Labor government. As Eden steps into her new role as the member for Mulgrave, we can be confident that she will continue to serve her community with dedication, integrity and a deep commitment to the values that define her. I look forward to the positive impact she will continue to make in the lives of the people that she represents.

Women's health

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:56): In the 2023–24 state budget the Victorian government invested \$153 million to reform women's health care. That is why it was a pleasure to visit Box Hill Hospital last week with the Minister for Health Mary-Anne Thomas, and it was great to hear about how Eastern Health is improving access to women's health and reproductive services in the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region. Locally this means that funding has supported the commencement and recommencement of the following services: the surgical termination of pregnancy, STOP, service, Eastern Health's surgical termination service; the combined endometriosis and bowel involvement surgery service; the paediatric and adolescent gynaecology service; and the pregnancy elevated BMI antenatal risk reduction and lifestyle, PEARL, antenatal clinic. This will mean that women in the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region and the eastern catchment more broadly will now be able to access surgical termination services. I am really proud to work for a government that makes sure that women can get access to health care when they need it.

Felicitations

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:57): Just briefly, I want to take the opportunity, as we slide into the end of a busy sitting year, to thank everyone in this chamber, particularly the clerks, the security team, everyone in the papers and table office, the catering staff. I just want to take thank everyone for helping members to do what we do when we come into this chamber and for helping to keep our crazy show on the road. It is a bit of a wild ride in here sometimes. I would also just like to wish everyone a very happy and safe holiday season, whether it is merry Christmas, happy holidays – whatever you like to celebrate and however you like to, it is yours. I wish you all the very best. Stay safe and have happy holidays.

Felicitations

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:58): I rise today as well to wish all of the people in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region a very, very merry Christmas, and all of the multicultural communities that exist and operate within the area of the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region. I have thoroughly enjoyed celebrating Diwali with the many Indian communities that celebrate it throughout the south-east and have enjoyed celebrating it in other parts of Victoria as well.

Australian–Philippine friendship group

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:59): In the last little while I have had the great opportunity to attend many wonderful things, including the Australian–Philippine friendship

group, which was a celebration of colour. It was an opportunity to fundraise for people with dementia, and they looked after their senior citizens with a cultural show, which was just wonderful to attend.

National Survivors Day

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:59): I also had the opportunity to be part of National Survivors Day and really enjoyed the briefing and afternoon tea to understand these issues, because survivors of sexual assault and institutional abuse, their supporters and whistleblowers genuinely need our support. This is a major issue that we need to continue to prosecute and find ways to protect people in our society.

Emerson School

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:59): My Emerson School visit was amazing. This is an incredible school that has been doing fundamental work in the area of Dandenong and genuinely needs our support. The zoning for the bus is going to be very problematic for them to continue in the way that they have been, doing the good work for the young people. I wish them all the very best.

Production of documents

Kangaroo control

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (10:00): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes that the government commenced the commercial killing of kangaroos on 1 October 2019, under the *Victorian Kangaroo Harvest Management Plan*, and has consistently increased the shooting quota each year since;
- (2) requires the Leader of the Government, in accordance with standing order 10.01, to table in the Council, within 10 weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution, all documents relating to the kangaroo harvest management plan, including but not limited to:
 - (a) population modelling and counts for the development of the commercial quotas each year, including all information and data that informed the counts;
 - (b) assessment of the impact of floods, fires, road strike, development and urban sprawl and any other matters or events that may affect kangaroo populations;
 - (c) the number of joeys killed as a result of the kangaroo harvest management plan each year and the effect on short- and long-term population projections;
 - (d) the development and expansion of approved shooting zones across Victoria, including the consideration and reasons to expand zones onto public land;
 - (e) the reasoning for the decision to increase the quota by 30 per cent, as announced on 31 December 2022;
 - (f) any consultation, including the current federal consultation, on the 2024–28 kangaroo harvest management plan;
 - (g) professional shooter compliance and regulation processes, including the number of reports and investigations of alleged illegal kangaroo shooting; and
 - (h) the cost to the government to operate the program.

These documents are not something that I feel I should have to request. When it comes to the commercial slaughter of our native wildlife in what is the largest land-based massacre on the planet, transparency should not be retrospective. The outcomes of the public consultation on this program were due to be published in August this year. It is now December, and we are days away from the 2024 quota being set without any transparency on what Victorians truly think of this carnage. I have raised the issues wildlife face in Victoria every single week in this place, for the animals, the environment and the volunteer rescuers that risk their own safety doing free work to clean up the bloody mess left behind by this government's sickening commercial killing of kangaroos.

Since the implementation of the commercial program in Victoria, Wildlife Victoria has reported a 50 per cent increase in rescuers responding to shotgun injuries. The quota was put up to 166,750 kangaroos this year, a staggering 30 per cent increase. The government proudly promotes that landholders can have a professional shooter attend their property to shoot kangaroos for free, but at what cost to the unknowing taxpayer? Victorians deserve to know just how much is spent on the massacre of our wildlife just so that their skin can be exported to Europe and America for sports shoes. Of most concern is that the quota increase outweighs the reported 21.7 per cent population increase that is occurring. In some shooting zones, such as the Mallee, north-east and upper Wimmera, the reported rate of increase claimed by this government is 2.5 times the biologically possible rate.

In 2022 all kangaroos and wildlife suffered through devastating floods, which are not mentioned in the population report despite occurring before, during and after the survey and killing potentially tens of thousands of kangaroos. This should also be taken into consideration in the decision on annual quotas, but it is not. I would expect also that the countless kangaroos killed on Victorian roads each day are considered when choosing to increase the quota by a shocking 30 per cent. Based on the percentage of female kangaroos killed under this program, researchers estimate that up to 5000 dependent young are killed each quarter. It is also predicted that, with no minimum wait for the kangaroos that are being killed, male adults that are getting killed are getting younger and smaller, altering the evolution of entire mobs, and it is something that we cannot take back.

Meanwhile seven species of macropod are already extinct in Australia and six more are critically endangered. The 2024–28 management plan has proposed expansion of shooting onto public land. National parks and state forests are areas where kangaroos should be protected. If kangaroos are everywhere and in such abundance, then why is the government seeking them out to meet their quotas? Kangaroos that are not killed instantly under this program suffer horrific injury and are left to suffer for days or even weeks. My office receives constant reports from distressed locals and rescuers of kangaroos with half of their faces blown off, their tongues hanging out the sides of their mouths, orphaned joeys and dismembered body parts. To this government, joeys are invisible. The legal way to kill them is through bludgeoning. Shooters will smash joeys against their car or with the end of their gun to kill them, but the number killed is not recorded. I want to know and Victorians want to know just how many joeys this government thinks are professionally bashed to death and if these are recorded in population projections.

The whole world is paying attention to our disgraceful kangaroo harvest management plan. Major brands like Nike, Puma and New Balance have all banned the use of kangaroo skins. Internationally this government spreads the narrative that kangaroos are pests in abundance, but these documents will help prove kangaroos are iconic animals worthy of our protection. They tread lightly on the environment, and they contribute to biodiversity. These documents are integral in providing transparency and oversight of the commercial killing of kangaroos in Victoria, highlighting the true state for our native icons, which I believe the government needs to be made aware of urgently so that we can work to give them a chance at survival and end their misery. I commend the production of documents motion to the house.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (10:06): I thank Ms Purcell for bringing this motion to the house. As is often the case, I am proud to stand here and talk to issues of environment and sustainability, something I am quite passionate about, whether that be looking at our climate or looking at our local environments. I would like to start with comments around the floods. I am not sure that some of the commentary around impacts on kangaroo numbers due to floods have been confirmed, and indeed it is my understanding that there has not been a major impact. I think it is very important that we are looking at this issue holistically, and absolutely, as Ms Purcell points out, we must be ensuring animal welfare in any activity we take on when dealing with animals in the wild and how we go about managing numbers. But it is important, as we talk about sustainability and talk about balance, to keep balance in mind.

A government spends the time and puts the science in to understand population numbers and the impacts those populations are having on our natural environment, plant species and other animals that will suffer through a degradation of the environment that they depend on. I think it is important to keep in mind that the government is putting the work in to holistically look at this environment in total. Something else I would really like to raise when we talk about that is climate change. The number of animals, the number of species, that we are going to lose if the climate from midway or further up north in Australia moves down across Victoria, whether that be through habitat loss, is going to be incredible over the next century.

Georgie Purcell interjected.

Tom McINTOSH: Ms Purcell I think just raised agriculture. Agriculture is something that is incredibly important to feed the people of the world. As the population of the world increases, we have to ensure this, and climate change is impacting on those populations, which I am sure is something the Greens would agree with me on. We have got to make sure that we are feeding those populations, and yes, we have got to do it in a way that ensures animal welfare, but we have got to do it in a way that ensures that we are feeding our populations. I do not know why you are finding that humorous, Ms Purcell, but it is incredibly important that everyone is fed.

To our farmers, our farmers do need to manage populations of animals that are going onto their properties. It is really important that those who are hunting do so in an ethical way that ensures that animals are not unnecessarily suffering, but it is something as a government that we need to do. As I said, in that holistic review of the animals that are out in our environment, there are the impacts they are having on that local environment, on other species and on their capacity to live but also on our farmers, our public lands and our road users' ability to use roads safely. We have to consider all of that in one.

I am very proudly a member of the Labor Party for the work this Labor Party has done over multiple decades ensuring the protection of environment and ensuring the protection and welfare of animals. And I welcome Ms Purcell's advocacy in the space of animal welfare, because we should always be looking at whether more can be done, but we should also always keep views balanced. We should work to science, we should work to data and we should make sure that opinions are kept to that science, and therefore the actions that we take with the evidence that informs the actions that we take will have a real and meaningful outcome for our natural environments and for the animals – all the animals that live within it.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (10:11): I rise to speak on Ms Purcell's motion, which she is obviously not terribly interested in at the moment. Anyway, the coalition have a convention of supporting documents motions, so we will not be opposing Ms Purcell's motion. And like so often with this government, there is obviously a failure to properly report on most activities, expenditure and programs subject to taxpayer expenditure. So in that we would agree: proper reporting should be available. And of course the reduction of numbers of kangaroos needs to be done humanely.

However, it is extremely disappointing that a rural MP should use this place to further attack the farming community. Let us not forget the Animal Justice Party are hell-bent on putting an end to all meat and livestock production in this state and across this nation. That is your agenda. Do not hide from it. The kangaroo harvest plan is an important tool in the armoury of farming in this state and should be supported, not questioned. Kangaroos do untold damage in the agriculture sector to fencing and in grazing, and they need to be controlled. Commercial harvesting is an integral part of the plan, and it is far better to use this high-protein product than to leave it to the ravages of wild dogs, foxes et cetera. And if the AJP were really concerned about kangaroo deaths, they would argue for roadsides to no longer be wildlife corridors. Roadkill is obvious for all to see. After all, kangaroos, as far as I know, do not look right and look left and look right again, so they end up slaughtered and caught up in our wire rope barriers as well. So let us get the priorities right. Let us put an end to roadsides being wildlife corridors; they should be safe places. No place for animals to breed on the roadsides.

It would be useful to know just how many kangaroos were burnt in the fires, dreadful fires that we have had in Victoria in the past. And I bet most people on that corner of the place do not agree with reducing fuel loads in state forests and parks and even on roadsides. If you have an intensive fire because you have got a fuel load, then you are going to actually burn to death every wild animal that exists, and you are going to burn the dirt to such an extent that it is difficult for it to be regenerated. So get on board and support the reduction of fuel loads in the forests and the parks and the roadsides so that we do not have intensive bushfires like the sort we have had in the past. The government has failed to manage fuel load reduction, and that is a major cause of fires.

We need to keep this whole thing in perspective. Yes, you are quite right, and you are quite entitled to ask for information, as you have done in this documents motion, but let us get to the crux of what you are really on about, and that is yet another attack on the farming and agriculture sector of this state. I stand here in support of farmers and the agriculture sector. They feed this nation. They might not want to produce your fake meat and fake milk to the extent that you might like, but the vast majority of Victorians and Australians want to eat meat and want to wear wool, and that is important, so kangaroos do need to be controlled. And, guess what, when we have a really good season, they breed well. They are very clever. They can work out what the temperature and the rainfall are going to be, and they breed according to the seasons – and they breed prolifically. That is great from their point of view; there is no point in breeding if you cannot feed your joeys. Kangaroos understand our weather conditions; they have survived for many thousands of years. We support, of course, the iconic nature of the kangaroo, which is an Australian icon, but they do need to be controlled and we need to look after the agricultural sector in this state.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (10:16): The Greens thank Ms Purcell for moving this motion today, which we are supporting for two clear and compelling reasons. First, it is longstanding Greens policy to support a ban on the nonsensical commercial killing of kangaroos and our other native wildlife. There are two separate programs in Victoria that allow for the legal killing of kangaroos. The authority to control wildlife is the older system and allows Victorian landholders, mostly farmers, to apply for permits to legally control wildlife on their land. The second, newer program that the motion addresses today is the kangaroo harvest management program. There has been commercial killing of kangaroos since 2010, but under this program introduced in 2019 licensed shooters can kill kangaroos on private land and then sell the carcasses for commercial purposes.

As we know, the cruel reality of this process has been exposed many times. Bullet wounds result in slow, painful deaths, and as has been stated in this debate, joeys can be legally bludgeoned to death. The videos of that are sickening. Members should be aware of it and watch those so we are crystal clear about the realities that have already been exposed and about what we are voting on today. Those joeys that do escape after their mothers are killed die slowly from exposure, starvation and predation, calling out for their mothers.

This kangaroo harvest program has set quotas for how many kangaroos can be killed in each region per year, but there are real questions about the accuracy of the state's counting upon which those quotas are based. Many scientists and other stakeholders have presented strong evidence that the kangaroo population numbers in Victoria are miscalculated or overinflated, which means that the harvesting quotas are only going to further harm dwindling populations.

With regard to the conflicting information we have about kangaroo population size, it does not seem to me common sense that our kangaroo population reportedly increased 40 per cent between 2018 to 2021. This was during the period that we had the catastrophic bushfires that the University of Sydney estimated killed or displaced 3 billion animals, of which 90 per cent died, but somehow, miraculously, Victoria's kangaroo population defied those fires and the years of drought and floods, which Ms Purcell mentioned, that preceded them and increased by 40 per cent. We need further scrutiny of the figures behind this program.

Community attitudes are also changing, and the social licence for this unscientific and very distressing slaughter is very quickly eroding. In response to strong community advocacy and campaigns, in shires across Victoria – from Mornington to Nillumbik and to Whittlesea – we will likely see a cessation of commercial kangaroo shooting in metro areas from 2025. The Greens want to see an end to the commercial killing of kangaroos across our state, and we also want to see a full review of the other wildlife shooting permits. The commercial exploitation of our kangaroos is entirely unnecessary.

The second reason we are supporting this motion – which is, as noted, something that we can probably find more agreement on across the chamber – is first principles around good public policy. Our government programs should be evidence based, they should be supported by reliable data and there should be transparent and regular publication of both of these. The fact that Ms Purcell needed to move this motion to get the data on kangaroo populations, modelling, costs, policy and decision-making and that it is not already on the public record is a matter of shame.

My Greens colleagues have been calling out this lack of transparency on the kangaroo program for decades, including my predecessor in Southern Metro Ms Pennicuik. In this place six years ago Mr Barber said:

We will continue to fight to reverse the nonsensical decision to introduce commercial kangaroo culling to Victoria. We know kangaroo shooting permits are handed out easily. There is close to zero supervision and no-one can even tell us how many kangaroos were killed last year.

As Ms Purcell has observed, we have got glaring holes, including in relation to the deaths of joeys under this program. More recently Dr Ratnam and Mr Puglielli have elevated community concerns. We hear those concerns and are proud to support the motion today.

Motion agreed to.

Melbourne Airport rail link

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (10:21): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes the Commonwealth government's review of national infrastructure projects and notes that this included a review of the Melbourne Airport rail link (MARL) and other Victorian infrastructure projects;
- (2) requires the Leader of the Government, in accordance with standing order 10.01, to table in the Council, within three weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution, copies of:
 - (a) all documents submitted to the Commonwealth infrastructure review by the Victorian government or its agencies;
 - (b) all studies and assessments on the MARL undertaken by or commissioned by the Victorian government or its agencies, including options considered, assessments of costs and benefits, any route analysis conducted and details of assessment of market-led proposals; and
 - (c) options for the location and model of the proposed airport railway station, including assessments of advantages and disadvantages of different models.

This is a very simple documents motion, a documents motion that goes to the heart of some of the debates that are occurring now about infrastructure. This is a request for the submissions and the materials provided to the Commonwealth by the Victorian government. It begins by noting the Commonwealth government's review of national infrastructure projects and notes that this included a review of the Melbourne Airport rail link and other Victorian infrastructure projects. It is a standard documents motion requiring the Leader of the Government to table within three weeks in the chamber the documents sought.

The first tranche of documents sought is very pertinent, very topical and very timely, and that is the materials provided to the Commonwealth by the Victorian government as part of its review. All of these large infrastructure projects, with one notable exception – and I note the exception of the Suburban Rail Loop; it was not reviewed by the Commonwealth government. It should have been, but

it was not. But in this circumstance the state government clearly provided submissions and materials and advice to the Commonwealth government review. It was meant to be a short 90-day review, and in the end it took more than 200 days. But leaving that aside, the point is that the state government has provided submissions on behalf of Victoria to the Commonwealth government, and I think Victorian taxpayers and Victorian transport users are entitled to know what the state government said.

The second point that it seeks is the matters all around the Melbourne Airport rail link, the MARL – the options considered, the costs and benefits, the route arrangements and the assessments of any market-led proposals. We know that different options were looked at, and we know that the Honourable Jacinta Allan, the then transport infrastructure minister, now Premier, was against a dedicated line and only wanted a line that fitted in with the Melbourne metro. So the state government has robbed the metro of significant capacity and in doing so got a suboptimal solution: 29 minutes from the airport to Flinders Street and Federation Square. We know that that is a suboptimal solution in many regards, but we want to see what options and what alternatives were considered by government.

Also a point of contention at the moment between the state and federal governments on one side and the airport on the other are the options for the location model of the proposed airport railway station, including assessments of advantages and disadvantages of different models. I have been briefed by the airport – many have – and there are clear advantages in what the airport is proposing, but the community should have some say in the future of its airport. The community should have some say in the future of the Melbourne Airport rail link, and the best way for the community to be informed is to see some of these options documents and decision-making documents of the state and other governments. So we have requested through this motion that those documents be made available. It should be easy in the first instance to provide the documents that were part of the infrastructure review. These are recent documents. They have all been handed over to the Commonwealth, and they should be in the public domain. We deserve to know as Victorians. It is in the public interest to see what the state government has advised the Commonwealth. If the state government has behaved less than satisfactorily in its recommendations, we deserve to see that. If the state government has advocated strongly for certain projects, that is reasonable to be seen as well. This is a very straightforward documents motion. It is clearly in the public interest. There are billions of dollars at stake.

We need to get on with the Melbourne Airport rail link. I remember being a candidate in 1991, 1992 in the seat of Niddrie, and there was discussion of a rapid transit link from the airport in those days. It goes back as far as Henry Bolte's days, when this Parliament debated options for a Melbourne Airport rail link, so the need to get a rail link is clear. But the Melbourne Airport rail link as considered in the recent period, the MARL as it is called, should be a significant focus through this documents motion.

The community, again, deserve to know. Melburnians and Victorians want rapid transit to the airport. They want a smooth way to get from the airport to our major rail system. All the information I have seen as former Shadow Minister for Transport Infrastructure and in other positions that has been presented by various groups suggests that the government's proposals are for a suboptimal outcome. But either way these options should be in the public domain, and in the first instance we should see those documents that have been presented to the Commonwealth.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:26): I am pleased to rise to speak on this short-form documents motion, principally because I had indicated on the speaking list that I was keen to speak on the last motion but the structure of the sessional order introduced by the opposition, with the support of the Greens and others on the crossbench, as I have mentioned previously in this place, does not allow a fulsome debate on these motions when they are moved. It restricts and gags the ability of members of this place to contribute to these motions. That is what we saw in the last debate, and depending on who wishes to speak in this debate, we may well see it again. I think it is important that we continue to point out that for the serious exercise of serious powers the sessional order that has been introduced by the opposition with the support of the Greens is in effect gagging members from making contributions on motions.

Katherine Copsey: You're speaking right now.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I did not get speak on the last one, Ms Copsey, and you were cut off from your allocation of 5 minutes.

This documents motion relates to documents in relation to the Commonwealth infrastructure review and also with respect to the Melbourne Airport rail link. One of the things that is useful to note in the context of these debates is that the basis of the powers to compel the production of documents that this chamber has obviously derives from the provisions in the Victorian constitution transferring the powers of the House of Commons that existed at responsible government on 21 July 1855 to the state Parliament. A lot of things have changed and a lot of things have remained the same in the context of parliamentary government and responsible government.

One of the things that have changed since 1855 is that Google is around now. A quick Google search that anyone could use – and if any member needs help figuring out how to use a search engine, I am sure we can provide that to them – would reveal that the entire business case for the Melbourne Airport rail link has been available online for over a year, along with all of its supporting documentation. Those documents, in great detail, go through various alignment options analysed through the planning process and go into a lot of depth about all of the issues and about how the determinations are made for things like route alignment, which is a topic that Mr Davis mentioned in his contribution, a lament he made about those decisions. If he wanted to find out more information about it, a quick google would have shown him exactly where that is. Also freely available to every member of the public, readily accessible, is the 2018 Sunshine route strategic appraisal, so there are a range of documents already in the public domain that technology invented since 1855 and available to members of this Parliament could provide to them.

The other thing that Mr Davis in his motion is concerned about is obviously related to the federal infrastructure review. I think it is important to reflect on why we needed a federal infrastructure review, and that is because after that near decade of the Morrison government, which not only ignored Victoria but treated it as some sort of foreign state where any grant to us was like some sort of overseas aid from Canberra to Victoria, the incoming federal government last year had to clean up their mess. They were fond of making announcements and not fond of actually providing enough money for things to get delivered, and that was the attitude of the previous coalition government in Canberra towards infrastructure. The federal infrastructure review was a thorough process undertaken by the Commonwealth to see which projects were capable of being delivered, because that is what Labor governments do: we deliver on projects.

There are other matters in the motion relating to airport rail and issues to do with the proposed location of the airport railway station. Again, unfortunately, due to the time limits imposed on this debate I am unable in the course of this contribution to reflect upon them. I think members should give consideration to whether this is an appropriate forum to conduct these debates.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (10:32): I am very mindful not to use a prop, so I am going to leave my phone just out of sight. But I did use this incredible tool. I think 'Google aide' is how it is pronounced; I am not too sure. My colleague Mr Galea was using some French yesterday, which has rubbed off on me. There we go – Google – a 288-page report and business case, a detailed outline and online for a year. Whether members or perhaps their staff or teams have time to look at these things – it does remind me that I have been known to quip on this side that those opposite are stuck in the 1950s. I was very impressed that they had a website for the Liberal Party. They may not have remembered to put in their federal redistribution boundary submission due to trying to hit send, but that is okay. True to the ideology of their social and public policies being stuck in the 1950s, so are their technological capabilities.

Moving on to another point that has been made –

David Davis: The actual motion.

Tom McINTOSH: Indeed, the actual motion, which I am referring to. The 288-page business case is publicly available for anybody with internet access to view, and thankfully we have incredible devices in our pockets nowadays that do all wonder of things like that.

My colleague Mr Batchelor also talked through why we are where we are where the federal government is doing the work it is, and that is 10 years of money just – well, we will not use the ‘rort’ word of course – being spent purely for political purposes and money not being invested in community or in public assets that will benefit the community for generations to come. That is the intent and that is the purpose of the public investment of money. If we are talking about public transport, it is to move people for the purposes of their schooling or their work or to access health care. Our road network is so that people can drive from A to B as quickly and as safely as possible. It is to ensure that the assets that we invest in today benefit the generations and generations and generations to come, because this side is absolutely dedicated to ensuring that every generation has a better quality of life than those before, that Victorians can live to their hopes, their dreams, the Aussie fair go – that they can reach that. And when we invest in infrastructure that enables people to do that, that enables people to have access to all the things that make our state great, that is when we unlock the door to ensuring that equal opportunity for all Victorians, and that is something I am very proud of on this side.

We have 5 minutes, so I have got a minute and 25 left on the clock.

Bev McArthur interjected.

Tom McINTOSH: Well, I can say a lot more, Mrs McArthur, and I indeed will as we return today for the various motions that your side will put up that are not based or pegged in any purpose or ideology that is there to benefit the state and benefit the people of the state but are just ideas that are thrown up, that have probably been put together in the last 48 hours rather than being points of purpose, of vision, that deliver for all Victorians. The young students that we have here in the gallery right now – it is their future that we will work for, ensuring that they will be able to rent and buy houses, that they will get a world-class education and world-class health services and that they will be able to get jobs that enable them to do all of that and the training and skills that see them throughout their lives have opportunities for the employment they wish to get. We will ensure that the public infrastructure is there, as I have discussed, for them to get from A to B and that we do so in a sustainable way so that their children and grandchildren have all the opportunities that we have. And I would like to say more, but I have run out of time.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:37): Well, that was quick, wasn't it? I feel like Mr McIntosh had just got up and just got into the rhythm of his speech, and so, so suddenly he has been cut short, cut adrift, midway through, which is a very sad thing because I always enjoy contributions in this place from Mr McIntosh, as I do from Mr Batchelor as well. It is nice to have some sense injected into the debate, especially with some of the motions that we see thrust at us from those opposite.

We have a motion before us today, a short-form document motion, regarding Commonwealth infrastructure, and as my colleague Mr McIntosh rightly said just now, there is a website called Google where many of these documents can be readily accessed. Now, I am not sure about the French pronunciation – I think it might be Googlé, Mr McIntosh. And I can say that with the authority of being a co-convenor of the recently formed Parliamentary Friends of France, something I have done alongside the wonderful Liberal member for Evelyn Bridget Vallence. We look forward to extensive cultural engagement with our French community here in Melbourne and abroad. And indeed aside from some of the things that may have appealed to some people in joining our little group – aside from the wonderful croissants and coffee – most importantly, it is about the industry that French companies have in Victoria. There is a strong relationship between Victoria and the nation of France, and we look forward to developing and strengthening that friendship as we go.

This is a motion in relation to Commonwealth infrastructure, specifically in regard to the Melbourne Airport rail link, and I note that part (c) of this motion talks about discussion around the location for the airport railway station. I do hope that those opposite are not falling into the traps of those vested interests who certainly do have a strong point to say about this. I do hope that we are not falling into any sideshow traps when we could be talking about actually delivering an infrastructure project that Victorians have been calling for for generations. As with many things, other people, other parties, will talk and talk and talk, but this is a government that actually gets stuff done. And they say, 'No, no, no, you won't do it, you won't do it,' but 72 level crossings speak for themselves, and they show that whenever those opposite do say, 'No, no, no, you won't do it,' this is a government that actually gets on and delivers.

The Commonwealth infrastructure review covered many areas, and I would like to make one brief note as well. I was working extensively with one of my local councils, Cardinia Shire Council, along with the very hardworking member for Pakenham Emma Vulin, who has been a great member and who has been fighting for the Pakenham roads projects to be included as part of the federal government's recommitment as part of this review. The outstanding work that the member for Pakenham has done as well as the extensive lobbying that Cardinia Shire Council has done have locked in those projects for the future.

For the broader south-east region, including many of my constituents who will go through Pakenham frequently, that is a really critical project. To see that being put through is an absolute credit to Emma Vulin. It is an absolute credit to Cardinia Shire Council as well.

Evan Mulholland interjected.

Michael GALEA: As I said, Mr Mulholland, if you were listening, many constituents in my electorate do pass through the area quite frequently, and it will be of enormous benefit to them.

In terms of the Melbourne Airport rail link, this is another project that I am very excited to see will continue to happen. We know that the long-term plan is for airport trains to be run through the Metro Tunnel and straight through to the south-eastern suburbs, so you will be able to get on a train in Dandenong, in Hallam or in Lynbrook or Noble Park and go one stop straight to the airport. It will be fantastic for the south-eastern suburbs when this project happens, and it has now been reconfirmed by the federal infrastructure review.

Motion agreed to.

Committees

Economy and Infrastructure Committee

Reference

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (10:41): I move:

That this house requires the Economy and Infrastructure Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 5 March 2024, on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (WorkCover Scheme Modernisation) Bill 2023 and in undertaking this inquiry the committee is required to hold public hearings and is empowered, under the standing orders, to utilise a subcommittee.

It is now understood broadly across the Parliament and across the community that the WorkCover scheme is a basket case. It is a basket case financially, but it is also a basket case in the way it treats workers. We need to have a system, a scheme, that is sustainable and a system, a scheme, that is fair to employers but actually provides proper support for employees when they are injured. Workers should be able to presume and be safe in the presumption that if they are injured at work, they will have their medical needs and other treatments supported and they will have proper replacement of salary for the period that is required. They should also have a scheme that is focused on return to work, and the current scheme is not.

I will say more about that in a moment, but I do want to say that it is important for the context of this debate for the chamber and the community to understand that Labor knew the scheme was careering out of control. They knew that way back at least in December 2020, and they covered up the need for premium increases. We heard questions in this chamber about premium increases. I have seen via FOI requests very clearly that the government did not allow increases in premiums even though the WorkCover board said that for the sustainability of the scheme they needed those increases. It is clear when you look at the tables, and I will come to those in a moment, that the government did need that increase in premiums and the scheme did need to be made sustainable. You have a government that is refusing to be honest, refusing to be clear, refusing to be direct, covering it up or sweeping it under the carpet until after the state election, and then suddenly Danny Pearson and his crew in the department run into a flap about the sustainability of the scheme. Well, the government has sat on all of that information for all those times and has not acted properly and has not acted to make the scheme sustainable.

We heard in the lower house, in the consideration-in-detail stage there, Danny Pearson admit that premiums are going up no matter what. They have already gone up 42 per cent on average, although I must say when I move around and talk to private sector employers everywhere I am yet to meet someone whose premium has gone up 42 per cent. They are all greater, it seems to me. That is an inadequate sample, I accept. But leaving that aside, the official headline figure is that premiums are up by 42 per cent, and Danny Pearson says to us, 'It will go up no matter what, probably in March, probably in the new financial year as well. No matter what, the premiums are going to increase.' The public, employers, workers, this Parliament and taxpayers are entitled to ask questions about what is going on.

Meanwhile the claims experience has been terrible. We have seen an explosion in the number of long claims, particularly mental health claims, and they have obviously been mismanaged. They are actually not being managed properly to get the outcomes that are required. The performance of management of these claims has deteriorated in recent years. Before COVID it was clear that there was deterioration, after COVID there has been deterioration, and all of that is translating not just into cost, which it certainly does, but into bad outcomes for employees. Employees do not deserve to be left on the scrap heap; they deserve to have a proper return-to-work arrangement. They actually need early and active intervention to support them, to give them the background supports that are needed. They also need to have a proper outcome where there is a clear focus on return to work, and that is not the case.

The government has begun to talk about a return-to-work authority. We want details about that. None of that is in the bill that has been before the Parliament – none of it. In that circumstance I think it is important that the scheme be made sustainable, it is important that workers be supported and it is important that there is real transparency about this. This is why when the bill came to the chamber last sitting week we sought to move the reporting date to 5 March and to establish an inquiry. It is regrettable that the government did not allow an inquiry to be established quickly, and in fact the inquiry could be two weeks into its activities now. We could be having a short, sharp inquiry, and that is what we are proposing here.

I should say that the government knew about the problems with WorkSafe much earlier. One of the key documents is the financial sustainability review of WorkSafe Victoria from December 2020, the Finity report, which was commissioned by the board. Indeed when the Finity report was tabled at the WorkSafe board the government did not share this with the community but in a panic established an interdepartmental committee, chaired initially by the Premier and later by the Department of Treasury and Finance. The interdepartmental committee has met through that period. Again, the community is unaware of what is happening with the interdepartmental committee and the rising level of panic throughout the government.

It is very interesting to read the financial sustainability review, the Finity review. I am just going to read some short bits, but there are actually massive tables attached to it that show the deteriorating

financial position. As I say, this is not just about the financial position. I am going to read the overall conclusions, which are on page 6 of the Finity report, section 4:

In summary, the current financial trajectory is unsustainable over the longer term.

This is December 2020. It is three years ago.

While COVID related impacts have exacerbated this, including through volatility in the investment funds, it is changes in recurrent claim costs that needed to be addressed to fix the issues WorkSafe is facing.

Required changes to 'right the ship' –

this is December 2020 –

could include:

- Material increases in premiums: we do not see a pathway back to a BEP of 1.272% (without benefit changes at least)
- Greater work on prevention of mental injury claims –

and I emphasise this –

and understanding of drivers of duration including secondary prevention and even so far as WorkSafe's role within a system of support: these types of claims are the largest (but by no means the only) driver of the scheme's recent adverse performance

So they are pointing to the serious deterioration in performance with mental injury claims. It goes on. Return-to-work improvement is one of the recommendations.

... RTW rates have been deteriorating over many years –

Again this just completely squashes the idea that it is COVID, it is COVID, it is COVID. It is not just COVID. It predates COVID, and the Finity report in December 2020 was reviewing material going back much longer than that.

... RTW rates have been deteriorating over many years, and unless these can be improved ... the end result is more claimants on benefits for longer

We actually need to listen to what these reports commissioned by the government itself have to say.

We need to work with a return-to-work framework, and I would say, talking to a number of employer groups and a number of WorkCover specialists in the last few weeks, an at-work focus – a support-at-work focus needs to be part of this, not only return to work. It needs to be even earlier up the chain, and that is one of the things that this parliamentary committee should focus on, in my humble view. We should be looking at what the Finity report has said, and we should be understanding what can be done to deal with the return-to-work focus, the at-work focus, and what can be done to manage the large spike in mental injury claims, what can be done to manage the long period that workers, regrettably and very sadly for them, are off work. None of this helps a person in any way with their future, with their family, with their community or with indeed their future professional steps. We need to have that early intervention, and one of the steps that the committee should focus on is doing these points. Unless these can be improved, the end result is more claimants on benefits for longer.

Termination use provisions – the government has got some of those in the bill. These provisions have been the single biggest enabler of low premium rates since the early 2000s because they have acted as a gateway to manage the number of claims going into long-term benefits.

They also talk about potential changes to scheme design. Put simply, pulling one lever will not be sufficient to rectify the current financial trajectory. Compounding the difficulty of managing this, the two biggest response levers, premium change and benefit design, are outside WorkSafe's direct control. Furthermore, the changes will need to be made in an environment with much distraction: COVID-19, uncertainty about the ongoing role of claims agents and how complex claims will be managed. This is another area – those difficult complex claims. Those people need support and proper

buttressing to move things forward. And a need to update IT systems at some point will make it harder to get things done.

If for any reason claims management slips or is disrupted, for example, through any change to the agent model, then things will only get worse, and the financial trajectory is shown in this report. I have circulated this to a number of people in the chamber, and I draw attention to figure 1, also on page 6, which lays out a number of the key points, the summary of key financial drivers and their outlooks on page 5 and the figure 1 projected insurance funding ratio base and break-even point scenarios. For those who are technically and financially minded, in the back of the paper, commissioned by the government itself, is a number of these scenarios, and you can look at these and see where things are heading.

We owe it to Victorians – we owe it to Victorian workers and Victorian employers – to get this on a sustainable footing, to make sure that the scheme is able to go forward in the long term without the massive government hits of money that have happened. Let us go back historically. For 25 years WorkSafe was paying a dividend to government, including through many of the years of this government from 2015 onwards, until the last three years when its financial position has become so parlous that now well over a billion dollars of public money – taxpayers money – has been injected into WorkSafe. There is a question about what is the way forward there. The community I think believe that an employment scheme of this type should pay for itself, and we should be aware of what cross-subsidies and problems there are in the scheme.

As I say, there is this vexed issue of early intervention and supporting workers with proper return-to-work programs, which we do not believe the government has grappled with. They have started to talk about it as a top-line talking point, but there is absolutely no detail in the public domain and there is absolutely no detail in the bill, and we think that that is one of the major things that the committee should focus on. How do you work with workers? How do you work inclusively with them in a constructive way to ensure that less go off sick, that when they do go off sick they get the early support and buttressing that they need and that proper programs are then in place to bring them back to work, because ultimately that is in everyone's interests. It is the financial basis of the scheme. It is in the competitiveness of the state in terms of premiums being struck. But it is also, frankly, in workers' interests. Nobody wants to be off work for a long period. Nobody wants to be unable to do their job, so we need to make sure that those workers get the support they need.

One of the key things the committee can do is to understand this and to actually make some recommendations. That is why we have moved this reference, to put WorkSafe on a sustainable position and to say that the Parliament has got to intervene. The government and Danny Pearson in particular are completely and utterly incompetent on this. I was going to use a piece of vernacular, but they have botched the management of WorkSafe, and this is to the detriment of the state's economy, employers and employees. In that circumstance we need a proper outcome.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (10:56): I am proud that the Allan government is getting on with new legislation for the future of Victorian workers. We need to modernise the WorkCover scheme, which was established back in 1985. We must refine and modernise the way WorkCover operates. We need to do this so that WorkCover cover can continue to help injured workers return to work now and into the future. That is the purpose of the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (WorkCover Scheme Modernisation) Bill 2023. We believe in the fundamental importance of a fair and well-functioning workers compensation scheme that supports Victorian workers. The introduction of this bill followed months of consultation with unions, businesses and other stakeholders. We have done the hard work and consultation to ensure the scheme is fit for purpose and reflects modern workplaces.

WorkCover is a very Labor thing. For the record, I have always been very proud that the Labor Party has consistently been a staunch advocate for injured workers and always a staunch advocate of workplace safety. This dates back to the significant milestone in 1985 when the Cain Labor

government passed the Occupational Health and Safety Act 1985 and Accident Compensation Act 1985. Since then WorkCover has provided financial support to cover expenses during recovery and eventual return to work. However, it must now be acknowledged that the WorkCover scheme conceived in 1985 is no longer meeting the needs of today's workforce.

The situation on the ground is that since 2010 WorkCover's claims liability has tripled. There are currently over 30,000 active WorkCover claims in total. There are over 9000 workers already on long tail and a further 8000 workers approaching long tail. WorkSafe supported 98,047 workers in the financial year 2022–23, paying benefits totalling \$3.1 billion. In 1986, when this scheme first started, mental health injury claims represented 2 per cent of new claims. That number has now increased to 16 per cent, which was never envisaged when the scheme was originally designed.

In the financial year 2022–23, WorkSafe supported 23,665 workers to return to work after injury. Return-to-work outcomes for physical injuries improved in the 2022–23 year. Return-to-work outcomes for primary mental injuries stabilised. Return-to-work rates are far lower for workers with mental injury, which increases the cost of these claims.

Performance from insurance operations incurred a loss of \$1.8 billion in the financial year 2022–23 compared to a \$1.6 billion loss in 2021–22. These losses reflect the shortfall between the premium revenues and the claims costs in these years. This is why the Allan government is committed to doing the hard work to keep WorkCover viable in the long term.

The challenges faced have been caused in the large by increased costs of weekly income support and many workers staying on the scheme long term. This increase takes into account that mental injury claims now constitute 16 or 17 per cent of new claims, something that was never envisaged, as I said. The reality is that WorkCover average premiums had not increased in over two decades until July this year, when they rose by 1.8 per cent. This brought Victoria into line with the average premium rates in other states and territories. Premiums have been kept low for employers, even during the pandemic, but now we must take responsible action. If the changes are delayed much longer, the government will simply have no choice but to increase premiums to an average of between 2.4 to 2.5 per cent of remuneration. This would constitute a huge cost on our small business community during a challenging cost-of-living period. This is the reality.

That is why the Allan Labor government is proactively implementing essential reforms needed to modernise and tailor the scheme to be better and fit for purpose for our times. We know that health outcomes for workers on compensation schemes are four times worse than for those with the same conditions outside these schemes. This can lead to prolonged injury and unemployment. We do not want to see workers languishing on WorkCover for years. Every Victorian worker deserves the dignity of safe and rewarding work, and everybody stands to gain on the resolution of a WorkCover case – the employee, the employer and the broader community – so the government is creating a new entity, Return to Work Victoria, to help people get back into the workforce as part of the new reforms to ensure Victoria's WorkCover scheme is sustainable and fit for purpose.

Return to Work Victoria will be established as a business unit within WorkSafe. The new entity will centralise the provision and oversight of existing and new return-to-work initiatives. Concurrently, through our track record of investing in mental health for Victorians, we are also investing in growing and supporting our skilled mental health workforce, putting our resources where needed and creating more than 2500 new workers and roles in the system, such as mental health nurses and psychiatrists.

We are putting renewed focus on injury recovery and return to work, because we know that the longer a person spends away from work, the harder it is for them to recover, and there are tangible benefits for people returning to work after a period of injury. We are social creatures by nature, and our social interaction is rated highly for good health and wellbeing. It is good for us to interact with co-workers, clients and customers, and this can help combat feelings of isolation and loneliness that may occur during periods of injury or absence. We also know that maintaining a sense of purpose through work

instead of languishing gives many a feeling of accomplishment and belongingness within our society. Having routine and structure is also a well-known strategy used by health professionals to help people recover and boost self-esteem. And of course having financial stability and a sense of control over your own destiny is powerful and helps people get back on track.

The passing of this bill will maintain WorkCover for future generations, and unnecessary delays are totally preventable. This government is not afraid to tackle reforms needed for the long-term wellbeing of Victorians, even when the changes are complex and not necessarily popular and even when it is easy for the opposition to play politics. I support the bill, with no particular position on the motion.

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (11:06): I rise to speak in support of the motion moved by Mr Davis to refer the WorkCover Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (WorkCover Scheme Modernisation) Bill 2023 to inquiry. The Greens are deeply concerned about this bill. The proposed changes to WorkCover would be a big step backwards in the way that we view and respond to mental health injury in the workplace.

The government is proposing to remove support for workers who have suffered a mental injury as a result of stress and burnout. This is in the face of many unions – including the Community and Public Sector Union, the National Tertiary Education Union and the Health and Community Services Union – and Trades Hall Council overall strongly opposing the changes. For too long mental illness has been stigmatised and ignored. However, in recent years we have finally started to dissolve these misunderstandings through open conversations and mental health system reform. Societally and organisationally, awareness of people’s mental health has meant more people are acknowledging stress and seeking the support that they need. We cannot expect people who are suffering mental injuries to continue working, just as we would not expect people to work while recovering from a physical injury.

The other key change in the bill that deserves much greater scrutiny is the introduction of a whole-person impairment test after someone has been receiving support for 130 weeks. We have heard this test is not an appropriate test and will see people genuinely unable to work thrown off WorkCover. The test applies separately to physical and mental health injury, so a person could have a 15 per cent impairment for physical injuries and a 15 per cent impairment for mental injuries and have their WorkCover payments ended. When that happens, where do they go? Onto the utterly inadequate Newstart – and what does that mean for their life? It is cruel.

We appreciate that reform of WorkCover is needed to ensure this scheme’s sustainability but are deeply disappointed the government is intent on making workers bear the brunt of changes instead of addressing the heart of the issue by focusing on preventing injuries, facilitating rehabilitation and improving the efficiency of the scheme’s operations. This bill instead proposes to cost save by limiting eligibility, throwing people off the scheme and penalising workers. The government have ignored repeated calls for proper reform of WorkCover for years, having underfunded the scheme, and are now proposing workers lose out to cover the government’s mistakes. Meaningful and effective reform requires us to take a broader look at WorkCover and to heed the advice of unions and their members. Numerous reviews of WorkCover have made clear recommendations for improving the scheme. These include, for example, better oversight of WorkSafe agents for improved transparency and to stop profit-seeking behaviours and improving access to support for injured workers by establishing an internal mental health workforce. The focus needs to be on how workplaces can be made safer, how injured workers can get back to work sooner and how they can get treatment sooner.

I would also note that by the government’s own admission one of the drivers in the increasing number of mental health claims is from the public sector – their own workforce. Maybe reforming the workplaces they are responsible for would be a good place to start instead of slashing public sector jobs and deliberately keeping public sector wages low. This bill will have a significant impact on the lives of thousands of Victorian workers. The government has attempted to rush it through the Parliament right at the end of the year. Their engagement with stakeholders has left a lot to be desired.

This is exactly the type of bill that the Council should scrutinise in committee. A committee inquiry provides the opportunity for us to hear directly from stakeholders on the implications of the changes contained in the bill and whether there are amendments or other approaches that we as legislators as well as the government should consider. The government's proposed reforms are hasty and will hurt workers. The Greens are eager to support reform of WorkCover, but we call on the government to rethink its approach. It is for these reasons that we support the WorkCover scheme modernisation bill being referred to committee.

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:10): Well, what claptrap we have heard from those opposite today. I do not know whether the private office of the Premier can even be bothered doing talking notes of any substance these days or they simply think you are just going to plough on through with these draconian laws – that is what they are; they are draconian. Let us call them what they are. And while I am at it I will also look at the website. I love the website: 'WorkCover modernisation'. What a joke – 'modernisation'. And it starts not dissimilarly to some of the contributions opposite there today. Part of that says, in this so-called WorkCover modernisation:

WorkCover was designed in 1985 principally to support workers with physical injuries – but is clearly no longer meeting the needs of the Victorian workforce.

So they are talking about 1985. That was 40 years ago – a couple of years short, but 40 years ago. So suddenly in the history of this government and how they think, we have gone from 1985 to 'Now it's not working'. Well, that is just complete garbage – complete garbage. When Cain and Kirner lost in 1992, from memory the scheme then as it was called, WorkCare, because that is what they started, had a \$1.8 billion unfunded liability – \$1.8 billion. That was equivalent to 48 per cent of the total funding requirement. It was a disaster. They had monumentally cocked it up, absolutely stuffed it. And that is what they left the people of Victoria with in 1992.

And here we are again: same party, same story. And what is worse is – and I would encourage those opposite to engage on this on any level with the workers of Victoria – that you are going to stare the workers of Victoria in the face and tell them, as the Greens have rightly pointed out, 'We're going to cut you off when you need it most, because your injury is not an injury that we can see.' And Labor members of Parliament run around this state talking about the need to support people and their mental health, virtue signalling everywhere. And why do I say it is virtue signalling? Because it is if what you are going to do is then use the mechanisms of this Parliament and the laws of this state to actually cut them off at their knees when they need it the most. It is draconian, and I cannot believe those opposite are actually abiding by this.

And it is retrospective. It even gets worse – it is retrospective. So if you have got a claim now and you are still receiving a benefit, if this legislation goes through as is proposed – and this is what the committee will look at – for those who are sitting there waiting there is 130 weeks retrospectivity. That is 2½ years almost. That is just grotesque. You know, if the government wanted to go away – and I know they want to save money – then they could talk to the committee and they could talk to the crossbench, they could talk to the Greens, they could talk to the Nats and they could talk to the Liberals. But this is not the way to do it. This is an attack on workers.

And for the record, life did not begin in 1985, boys and girls and anyone in the public who ever dares to look at this *Hansard* or look at the video. It just simply did not. Despite what the government website says, despite the contributions from those opposite today, there were schemes in this country, it is true to say, probably before 1914. But 1914 was the first time we actually had some sort of cover in the state of Victoria, and it was not dissimilar across the rest of the country at that point in history. It was then followed later on by what was a workers compensation board that came in 1937. So step one was the Workers' Compensation Act 1914. Step two, 1937, was the Workers' Compensation Board. That was expanded in 1953, and then it went all the way to 1974. By 1974 we had 69 providers plus the State Accident Insurance Office, and the State Accident Insurance Office was formed all the way back in 1914. But let us not worry about history. Let us not worry about the facts. Let us not let them get in

the way of a cracking yarn by the Labor Party, who are here to save the day on their horse – white knight, shining armour, all this sort of stuff – and it is just complete nonsense.

They even talk about bringing in a motion today or tomorrow or having us stay on Friday to rescind this Parliament's very wise decision through Mr Davis's motion – with the support of the Greens and the Nats and the crossbench and the Libs – to look at this properly and actually try and understand the damage they are about to do to Victorian workers, the contempt they have for those who already have a claim that has been accepted. The claim has been accepted, so you want to make it retrospective and rip their rights away. And do you know what the minister refers to them as? The long tail – what a disgusting, despicable term. I hope I do not hear that term again, because what you are actually talking about is humans, and you want to cut their benefits off (a) because you cannot see their injury and (b) you have determined that it costs too much. Sorry, Victorians, it costs too much. We do care about your mental health, blah, blah, blah. But sorry, we do not want to foot the bill.

It was interesting. Last week we had a Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearing, and in that hearing I actually asked for a breakdown by department of mental injury claims, because what we were told in the bill brief some weeks ago was that the majority of the claims in this space – wait for it – are coming from the government sector, not the non-government sector. So we cannot blame the employers in Victoria, other than the single biggest employer, which is the state. Here is the complete irony: the worst offender, being the state and the way it obviously clearly treats its employees, is now seeking to limit the claims of those very employees it is treating so badly or has oversight of and responsibility for.

I do not know whether the other members of caucus and the members of the government are listening in their offices as we speak, but are they seriously going to stand by and let this happen to workers in Victoria? You need to rename the party. It is not the labour party; that is a joke. I know we spell it differently in this country, but thank God you do not have the 'u' in Labor in this country, because that is clearly not the case.

Let us go through this list, because I got a response to this, a timely response, today. The department of education and training, let us start with them – teachers, principals, those educating our future generations. In 2022–23 they had 337 mental injury claims. That is the worst in the last five years: in 2018–19, 267; in 2019–20, 254; in 2020–21, 244; in 2021–22, 266; and as I have already said, in 2022–23 there were 337 claims. That is just one department. The department of environment, land and water, 16; the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, 43 – so much for fairness; the Department of Health, 13; the Department of Justice and Community Safety, 117; the Department of Premier and Cabinet, two – this touches on the Premier's own department; the department of jobs, precincts and regions, 12; and the department of transport, 11.

Those are the government's figures, and that does not include the statutory bodies. They are not represented in the data we have been provided, so I have gone back and said, 'We need that data,' because we are not even scratching the surface. We are not looking at nurses. We are not looking at police. You can be sure there will be a lot more to come. We are not looking at our firefighters. Who cares about all these people? Where are those figures? As Mr Davis has already pointed out today, just for the record, the government sector has 43 per cent of claims, the non-government sector 38 per cent. The greatest offender here is the state government of Victoria. The greatest offender here is the Labor Party, the people running that government.

What a disgusting turn of events. They wanted to sit here and push this legislation through this week, in the last week of Parliament. And do you know why? Because they are so concerned about the money it is going to cost them, not the individuals, not the workers – not their rights, not their claims, not their mental health, God forbid. No, they are worried about how much it is going to cost them in December and January until they come back in February or March. That is what they are really worried about – the dollars. It is all about the dollars, because they have mismanaged this now for the better part of a decade, and they know it. They know they have. Successive ministers have been asleep at the

wheel. In caucus I would encourage you to get up and talk about those ministers and their failings. They have put you and the rest of Victoria in this terrible position, because yet again you have a scheme which is unmanageable.

Recall, despite the mess you left us with in 1992, by the time the Kennett government was defeated we actually left you with a scheme that was financially sustainable. They are the facts. We can argue about its coverage. We can argue about whether parts of it were good or bad – I think that is a good and constructive argument to have – but it was financially sustainable. How in such a short period of time have you already managed to cock it up to such an extent that you are now cutting off the payments to workers, the very people we are supposed to represent and defend at their most vulnerable? I honestly hope the backbench of the Labor Party and the caucus overturn this ridiculous attack on workers.

Then, as Mr Davis has already given his attention to today, there is this report which they tried to keep secret. They knew before the last election. This is a dark day for this place. I would encourage everyone to support the motion and to support the workers of Victoria. I only hope the Labor Party comes to its senses.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:20): I rise to make a contribution on this motion in Mr Davis's name, which is effectively seeking a referral for the Economy and Infrastructure Committee to inquire into and report on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (WorkCover Scheme Modernisation) Bill 2023. I have had the benefit of listening to Mr Davis's contribution and also other members' contributions in this place.

What I wanted to do was start my contribution on the basis of being someone who represented workers, before coming to this place, for about 25 years. I have sat with workers who have suffered physical and mental injuries as a consequence of their employment. It is a really difficult thing to listen to workers talk through what they are experiencing with their physical injuries. One case that certainly stuck with me as a young union official was a man who was a plant and equipment operator and was suffering a degenerative condition in his back. Despite all of his best efforts at rehabilitation and his willingness to return to work, the reality was that being able to return to that job was just not possible for him.

The reason why I put that story in my contribution is that what we are hearing from those opposite is a glossing-over of how complex workplace injuries often are and can be. There is no cookie-cutter approach to this. There is no silver or magic bullet to say that an approach to someone's recovery from injury could be the same as somebody else's, and oftentimes people's recoveries are quite unique. The other part to this is as a union official I would often say to employers, 'Can we please negotiate around reasonable adjustments? This person may not be able to do the job that they were doing, but they're still ready, willing and able to work for you as the employer.' Guess what would often happen: 'No, we can't do that.' Honestly, the rhetoric from those opposite is quite breathtaking.

Nick McGowan interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: I want to take up the interjection from Mr McGowan, because I sat in silence and let him continue his contribution in silence, and I am fed up to the back teeth with the constant stream of interjections from Mr McGowan. I would ask that I be allowed to continue my contribution in silence.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Ms Terpstra to continue without interruption.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Thank you. This is a very sensitive matter. It is a very serious matter. I am concerned about the tone of this debate where people are talking about people as if they do not matter. There has been a lot of focus on –

Nick McGowan interjected.

Tom McIntosh: On a point of order, Acting President, I think Ms Terpstra has made clear that she would like to be able to make her contribution without being interrupted, and you have asked for that to occur, so I think that could be respected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Ms Terpstra to continue without assistance.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Thank you. As I said, there are people involved in these claims. You can talk about the finances, the money, the structure of the claim and all those sorts of things, but what we have all got to remember is we have got to try and assist people to get back to work, and in some cases, as in the example that I gave, it is just not possible. As I said, my role as a union official would be to try and negotiate with the employer to say, 'Well, what other options are there? This person wants to continue working for you, wants to make a contribution, is capable, ready, willing and able to continue to make a contribution for your business, it just requires a little bit of adjustment.' It would not happen. I highlight that as somebody who has been a practitioner in this space for 25 years. It frustrates me to hear those opposite and members of the crossbench talk about this in a very academic sense, because they are pretty light on some of the intricate detail about what actually goes on and how workers are affected.

I will talk about another sector that I was engaged in representing workers in. I would like to hear from anybody in this place – I know I certainly could not do it – about some of our workers in the healthcare sector who work with some of the most vulnerable people in our state, some of our people who have very severe and lifelong mental health conditions or disabilities. Working with people like that in a healthcare setting can actually put your life at risk. What do you do when somebody threatens your life or you are physically attacked? Are you saying that somebody like that should not go on workers comp? I know I would. I know I would absolutely have to have time out of the workplace and have treatment for psychological distress or injury.

This is what we are dealing with. There is no cookie-cutter approach to how somebody may deal with and be confronted with a traumatic injury in the workplace. These are some of the most complex and complicated roles that Victorians do in the workplace – in the healthcare setting, in our juvenile justice setting, in our corrections facilities. Then we also have people who work in construction, for example. You might think, 'Oh, construction.' Well, construction has inherent dangers in it. Mr McIntosh was a former electrician. I reckon Mr McIntosh can talk about many things that he might have seen in his workplace where people were working with electricity – 240 volts. If you touch it, you are either going to die –

Tom McIntosh: All the dangers through construction.

Sonja TERPSTRA: All the dangers through construction. Again, there is no cookie-cutter approach to this. There are many and varied and a range of ways in which people can be injured. I have got 3 minutes on the clock, but the point of this is that the referral to the committee will just mean that we are going to hold this up for workers. Workers actually need our assistance right now. Obviously there is an issue around mental injury claims, and the point I make about it is this: everyone's recovery from mental injury can be quite different and unique, from one person to the next, but at some point though there needs to be an end point, I accept that, and that can be difficult for some people. I know that under the New South Wales scheme, a scheme that I worked in a long time ago, there was an opportunity where, once you had gone through the payment system and you could demonstrate that you had recovered from your injury or illness, you could actually ask to have your job back – two years later. What we are dealing with here is financial assistance and the treatment of an illness or injury, but under the scheme there are opportunities where someone can say, 'Actually, it's two years later. I've now recovered and I want my job back.'

We are only talking about certain things here, in a vacuum, and not talking about how the whole scheme operates and the assistance available, but having a committee referral is not going to help workers; it is actually not. That is why it is heartening to see that the government is looking at Return

to Work Victoria, because that is what we need to focus on – getting people back to work. But there are weird structural impediments to some of this. For example, say I was a teacher and I had a bullying complaint in the workplace. I may not want to go back to that workplace, I might want to go somewhere else, but there may be structural impediments to why I cannot go somewhere else, and these might be related to industrial arrangements. Part of Return to Work Victoria can go into looking at some of those things and facilitating appropriate return-to-work arrangements for workers that are negotiated with workers.

Mr Davis, I listened to your contribution and you saying ‘Oh, we’ve just got to get back to work’ and all this sort of stuff. It is not that simple. I have heard this before; I have been a union official when we have had Liberal governments in power. You are not the workers’ friend, because I will tell you right now, whenever –

Nick McGowan interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Order! Mr McGowan!

Tom McIntosh: On a point of order, Acting President, as –

Nick McGowan interjected.

Tom McIntosh: I cannot even get a point of order in.

Nick McGowan interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Mr McGowan, please stop interjecting.

Tom McIntosh: Can I continue with my –

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Thank you, Mr McIntosh. I know what your point of order was going to be.

Sonja TERPSTRA: In the minute that I have left – because Mr McGowan deliberately ran down my clock with the constant interjections, and I think Mr McGowan should be called to account for reflecting on the Chair and not upholding your orders – what I will say is that the point that Mr Davis made about making sure people return to work was nastiness cloaked in concern, because what we see is a cut-off and then people are left to languish. They say, ‘I need more assistance and attention.’ That is why we often have a personalised plan for workers, which is done in consultation with them and the return-to-work rehabilitation provider and is tailored to account for their particular needs, and they are not just cut off at the end of that plan and told, ‘Well, that’s it. You’re out’, and then left to languish on their own.

The point I make is that it is not simple. This committee referral is really not going to help one worker one bit, and I know it is about the opposition and Greens working together to cause us maximum political pain. Shame on all of you. We should be focusing on workers and their return to work.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:30): I have spent much of the last five years since I got elected railing against this government’s excessive spending, waste, increased taxes and increased debt, and all of a sudden I get presented with a bill from the government basically acknowledging that one of their schemes, the WorkCover scheme, is financially unsustainable. I do not think anyone here agrees that it does not need reform. It is running on a trajectory which will see it turn into a financial catastrophe. The government has recognised this, and they have done something which I think is actually quite modest: they have said for the spiralling mental health claims the main feature is that they need to be diagnosed by a doctor and be recognised under the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the DSM-5. This seems like a quite reasonable thing to get these claims under control. I am absolutely certain that the government is not doing this for popularity. They are copping a lot of heat from the union movement. They are copping a lot of heat from the left.

They are sort of being forced into this by financial reality, which sooner or later is going to bite you on the bum when you spend too much money and let things run out of control.

I welcome what I see as a financially responsible decision. I am highly supportive of these changes. I was hoping that the bill would go through this week, and it will not, but what has surprised me the most is the opposition's reaction to this. Rather than support it, what they have done is team up with the Greens and kick it out to March next year. I am very, very concerned about the consequences of doing this, because it is my understanding that there needs to be a new premium order around April next year. If the government does not have certainty on this, I am very concerned that there have been massive premium rises already that are sending businesses under, that the businesses that can survive will have to absorb those costs and push up inflation or they will have to sack workers. None of these are good for the Victorian economy. We cannot let these premium rises run out of control. I will not be responsible for delaying these changes that are going to potentially help these premiums not be as high as they otherwise would have been.

I have said to the opposition and I have said to the government I am very supportive of some sort of inquiry to look at more changes to WorkCover, things that can be improved and this sort of thing, but the problem I have got with this inquiry is it is specifically related to this bill. Let us say that the inquiry comes up with all these wonderful recommendations and wonderful things that are going to be good for this state. There is no way that they can be implemented in time. The idea that the inquiry is going to come back in March and somehow we are going to draft amendments and things to pass it in March in time to be rolled out – the government is going to need time even for the existing bill to be able to roll out these changes. I just do not think that it is feasible. I do encourage the government to look at further reforms to WorkCover, and I hope that the opposition and the rest of the crossbench will be also interested in doing that, because I do not think that this bill fixes all the problems in WorkCover. I do not think that anyone is claiming that it will, even the government, but it is a fairly modest and financially responsible change. I do not want to be held responsible for these potentially massive increases that are going to push up business failures, push up inflation and send workers onto the dole queue. I do not want to be responsible for that.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (11:34): I rise to speak to the motion that we are debating today. Mr Limbrick has spoken about what the inquiry is about. I mean, we need this inquiry for this piece of legislation. That is what we are in here for, reviewing legislation, and if it is not right, then we fix it. That is what we have been elected to do. That is why this inquiry is so important.

Mr Limbrick referred to the date of 6 March. The government has come to us and said they want it to be 6 February. The government could have got this inquiry up and running two weeks ago and decided not to. They voted against that. Two weeks ago we could have had this inquiry set up. We could have started the process of getting the issues around this legislation fixed. This is too important not to get fixed.

Nick McGowan: We could have done it in 2020.

Georgie CROZIER: I will come to that, Mr McGowan. You are absolutely right; in 2020 we had the Finity report. Mr Limbrick has got legitimate concerns about driving up premiums, but let us not forget who is responsible for that. That is the minister Danny Pearson himself. He is the man who has been responsible for overseeing WorkCover and this scheme where the premiums this year have risen on average 42 per cent. You and I both know that that is not right. There are businesses that tell us that they have got premiums that are up 70 or 80 per cent. This minister has absolutely failed every single business in this state in overseeing this WorkCover scheme. He has broken it. Just like the state is broke, this scheme is broke, and this is all at the hands of the Labor government.

Mr McGowan referred to the Finity report *Financial Sustainability Review WorkSafe Victoria December 2020*. Mr Davis referred to this. What the hell has the government been doing for three years? Sitting on this report that has some very alarming findings around what needs to be done.

Importantly it talks about the issues around what we are very concerned about, and that is the return-to-work improvement. The report states:

- RTW rates have been deteriorating over many years, and unless these can be improved then the end result is more claimants on benefits for longer

It goes on to say a whole range of other things around what is wrong and what the government needs to do to fix the issues that WorkSafe is facing. This report has been with government for three years, and now the government comes in here and expects us to rubberstamp this legislation when we still have concerns about it.

This is an important referral to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee so they can do a couple of days' hearings, but the government knows and Danny Pearson knows, and everybody in Victoria should know, that in the lower house he said premiums will rise again. That is not because we are delaying this legislation; that is because of what is already built in. He has already stated that in the Assembly, so do not blame us. Every single business and everybody in this house should be very concerned about the useless way in which the minister has managed this, and now we are finding that businesses are paying enormous penalties.

Nick McGowan: And that costs jobs.

Georgie CROZIER: That will cost jobs, as Mr McGowan is interjecting. They are already losing jobs in Victoria. Why are they losing jobs? Because confidence is being sapped out of this state.

The taxation impediment not only on business but on families is driving confidence and investment down. That is very bad for our state. Look at the number of taxes that this government has imposed on hardworking Victorians – just mammoth amounts. You talk about the deals. They have just done a deal with the Greens to increase taxes. The taxes that this government is responsible for are strangling this state and causing so much harm. That is what is going to cause job losses.

We have to get back to a return-to-work scheme. I am alarmed about a report that has just come out this morning from Bendigo Health. A Bendigo Health staff survey has revealed safety concerns over electronic patient records. Now, this was contentious some time ago, and we understand that technology is part of the issue, but alarmingly this story says that up to 50 per cent of clinicians reported plans to leave Bendigo in the next two years, with nurses and allied health professionals reporting high levels of burnout. We cannot have that. Our health system cannot afford to have 50 per cent of their nurses and allied health clinicians leaving the system because of burnout. We need support in place, and we need a return-to-work scheme. We need to have that in place so that our health system remains up and running.

We have seen the debacles that are happening and the disasters and the catastrophic stories that happen every few days. It just alarms me to no end, what is happening in this state in 2023 under this government. And this is important. We have to get this return-to-work scheme right. We have to understand exactly the impost on business, there is no question about that, but the government's consideration of various stakeholders was just not even undertaken. They did not even consult with the mental health sector. In my last few minutes I just want to again quote from this report:

In our view, while there has been a significant reassessment of the costs of the scheme at June 2020, unless WorkSafe is able to improve a number of aspects of return to work and terminations, we would expect these assessments of claims costs to continue to increase.

This is in the report from back in December 2020. What has the government done about that? Absolutely nothing. Nothing. And we had those huge premium increases last year of an average of 42 per cent. That has cost business. That has cost jobs. And they expect us, in short, to say, 'Well, you've got it right this time.' We know they have not got it right, and that is why this referral is incredibly important – to get this inquiry to do the work it needs to do to fix the government's flawed legislation so that we can get a better system in place on behalf of business and workers in the state.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (11:41): I am pleased to rise to speak on the motion in Mr Davis's name seeking to refer the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (WorkCover Scheme Modernisation) Bill 2023 to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee. The contributions across the course of the debate today and more broadly in the public domain have underlined how important the modernisation of the WorkCover scheme is here in Victoria. There has been considerable pressure placed on the scheme through a range of factors, many of which have been canvassed by other members in the debate. The impact that doing nothing will have on business and workers in this state is potentially quite devastating, which is why the government, led by the relevant minister, has been so proactive in engaging and in coming up with policy solutions to find a way to ensure that the workers compensation scheme that has existed with such strength in this state since this statutory scheme was introduced by the Cain Labor government in 1985 can continue to provide the necessary support to workers who are injured at work.

I think as others have said, including Ms Terpstra so eloquently in her contribution, we absolutely must remember who WorkCover is designed to support, who WorkCover is designed to assist, and that is Victorian workers. It is to ensure that when they go to work they come home safe, they come home alive, and that in the unfortunate set of circumstances where they are injured at work, there is a statutory insurance scheme that is viable and able to meet their demands so that they have got certainty about what their future looks like. Because nothing could be worse than having a loved one injured at work and then facing the uncertainty in the future about what should confront them. We must all ensure that the supports that are available to injured workers are sufficient to meet their needs. That is why the WorkCover modernisation bill is so important to be considered by this chamber. The government has obviously sought to examine the issues confronting us. We know that premiums had to rise. We made the difficult decision earlier this year to increase the premium rate to 1.8 per cent of remuneration to better align Victoria with other comparable jurisdictions, but raising premiums alone is not going to solve all of the issues and the pressures that our statutory workplace compensation scheme is facing.

We have had a tripling of liabilities since 2010, and the long-term nature of many of those claims, the rise of mental injury claims, has created a set of circumstances that fundamentally was not envisaged when the scheme was first designed and created. We do need to do the work to ensure financial sustainability, but more importantly because of the nature of the timing of scheme arrangements we have got to make sure that legislation to fix some of these issues – not just paper over the cracks but fix some of these issues – is passed by the Parliament before scheduled premium rises, and the notices of premium rises are due to be made early in the year.

This brings us to the nature of this motion, which seeks to further consider these issues, because there has been an acknowledgement in the debate that they are important, and we agree – that is why the government wants to pass legislation to fix them. We think they are serious; we want to fix them. We do not want delay, and we do not want business to face the uncertainty of potentially quite significant premium increases as a result of this Parliament's inability to pass legislation because of the obfuscation that we are seeing from certain members of this place – refusal to deal, kicking the can down the road, kicking it into the long grass, hoping it is a problem for next year. That is also what this motion before us seeks to do – it seeks to push consideration of the legislation designed to fix the problem beyond March. We do not think that that is in the interests of Victorian workers, and we do not think that that is in the interests of Victorian businesses. We think that should the Parliament, should this Council, decide that it is an issue that is worthy of consideration by the Economy and Infrastructure Committee, that consideration should be concluded before the Parliament resumes in the new year. I am happy to have circulated the amendment relating to omitting the words in the motion 'by 5 March 2024' and replacing them with 'by 6 February 2024'. That amendment will be circulated now. I move:

That the words 'by 5 March 2024' be omitted and replaced with 'by 6 February 2024'.

The effect of this amendment is to change the final date for reporting of the committee – to bring forward the final date – so that should the Parliament, should this Council, agree to refer the bill to

committee, that committee work can be done over the next several months to ensure that we have a report with recommendations from that committee before us before we meet again and so that when we rise at the end of this week we will know that in our next sitting week that investigation will have been completed and the debate on whether this law should pass can occur as soon as possible once the Parliament resumes in the new year.

We know that if we delay further we will place injured workers under more stress, strain and uncertainty, because it will place serious questions over how the scheme will continue. And we know that the Victorian WorkCover Authority, in making its decisions about premium rates that it needs to make ahead of the premium rate increases that are due to be notified in April, will need to be thinking about these things in the weeks prior to the issuing of those notices. Whilst we would prefer obviously for these matters to be dealt with as soon as possible, the government strongly thinks that to provide the sort of certainty about premiums that business requires and to provide the sort of peace of mind that injured workers require this house should ask – should require in fact – that the consideration by the Economy and Infrastructure Committee be concluded by 6 February so that when we return next year we can debate the merits of the legislation, informed quite possibly by any recommendations that the committee deems necessary to make. I am sure that given how important this issue is for so many in our community, both businesses and workers, the committee will be able to avail itself of the 10, 12 or so weeks that will be available to it to efficiently conduct its business.

This is a matter which has been the subject of a lot of debate, a lot of discussion. There have been many consultations undertaken by the government, led by Minister Pearson, with relevant parties. This is a topic that key and interested stakeholders know very, very well – very, very well – and in the context of that extensive consultation we believe that the committee process, should the Parliament, should the Council, agree to conduct the committee inquiry, can be done reasonably efficiently and that consideration can be given to all of the issues that are on the table but that we can provide the certainty we need to give to injured workers and to businesses so that, come March or April, when premium rises are due, they can have certainty that this legislation will be considered. I strongly urge all members to support the amendment to change the reporting date to 6 February. It is the best way, should this motion get up, that we can ensure that the necessary considerations are done by the committee and that businesses and injured workers are provided with certainty, because what we cannot allow to happen is that our workers compensation scheme is placed in further jeopardy. It is too important to injured workers here in Victoria to allow that to occur, and I urge all members to support the amendment that has just been moved in my name.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (11:51): I am very pleased that the government has obviously conceded that an inquiry is necessary. That is a breakthrough. But I will be circulating an amendment shortly. After discussion with the crossbench it has been decided that the most suitable date for the conclusion of the inquiry would be 22 February, and that is what we will be proposing. I move:

That the words ‘by 6 February 2024’ be omitted and replaced with ‘by 22 February 2024’.

We have got to remember that this is a problem of Labor’s own creation. You have completely stuffed up a system that should ensure that workers are compensated but businesses are not left languishing in this whole area – and you admitted that, because in your press release of 19 May you actually said that ‘WorkCover is fundamentally broken’. So you have admitted you have completely mucked up the scheme. Under Labor’s watch over the past decade there has been a tripling of claims liability and longer times on average spent on the scheme. Recent analysis by Victoria’s independent budget watchdog the Parliamentary Budget Office confirmed that businesses will be slugged an additional \$17.8 billion over the next 10 years – \$17.8 billion coming out of their bottom line. We know this government loves taxing businesses. You actually hate business, and you are forever taxing them, but businesses create wealth and they create employment. You should never forget that. We can actually say that this government has failed Victorians and failed businesses with these premium hikes.

During the term of the coalition government, 2010 to 2014, WorkCover premiums went down by more than 5 per cent. Victoria currently has the lowest rates in Australia for return to work post injury, and the longer a person is on WorkCover the less likely they are to return to work. Victoria currently has the lowest rates in Australia for return to work post injury; that is an indictment.

I want to go to a local constituent in my electorate, Glenn Carroll from the Horsham Sports & Community Club, who wrote to me to say:

Many thanks to the Victorian Labor government for increasing our WorkCover Premiums by 80% –

80 per cent, no less, because in 2022–23 the premiums were \$19,386.20 but in 2023–24 they have risen to \$35,205.66 –

So much for the mooted 43% increase which was exorbitant anyway.

This is an 80 per cent increase in premiums. My constituent goes on to say that they are not sure what extra services are being provided. Well, there are clearly none. The increases are to compensate for your extraordinary mismanagement of an important system. The increase in the cost of providing WorkCover is a symptom, but the cause is the mismanagement of the whole system. Just increasing premiums at the cost of business treats the symptoms, but how does Labor plan to treat the actual cause – or are they just relying on businesses to bear the cost of their gross mismanagement? That is why a short, sharp inquiry concluding by 22 February is vital. We cannot process legislation in this place which is flawed. We need to get it right. This is an extraordinarily short time frame, actually, for an inquiry, but I am on that committee, as is Mr Davis, and I am sure we can get the job done, learn what the real problems of the scheme are and get it sorted.

Your legislation is flawed and it needs to be made better. Labor's claim that small businesses could be hit with additional costs as high as \$6500 a year to prop up WorkCover if we do not pass these changes is nothing other than blackmail. Why should small businesses have to pay for Labor's failures? The changes to this scheme were initially proposed due to mental health claims making up 16 per cent of all WorkCover claims. Is this thanks to the pandemic and the lockdowns that occurred in this state or Labor's general mismanagement of our economy and indeed the whole state? We need to move that the amendment be adopted, so I move that the amendment to Mr Batchelor's amendment be proposed.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (11:57): President, you honour me with this opportunity to address the chamber on the motion before us today just before question time. I understand that there are two amendments to the piece before us today. Thank you to those members who have moved them, and I note them with great interest. I will join other members of this chamber by noting that WorkCover is of course a very critical part of our worker landscape, providing such a critical service to workers when they need it most. People do not go to work thinking, 'At the end of the day I think I'll need to make a call to WorkCover,' but unfortunately that happens for altogether too many people.

We know the extraordinary growth of WorkCover is something that deserves our attention and reflection, and that is why I am really proud to be part of the Allan Labor government, which has worked with a range of stakeholders over a great number of months to put forward a suite of proposed changes to the WorkCover scheme and see how it can best support workers in our fine state. We have – I myself am included in that – been very clear with our brothers and sisters in the unions about what this means and where the situation is with our WorkCover scheme here in our state. We have also talked to businesses and business leadership about this and been very clear with them about the upcoming changes that we are proposing and of course having to make some very, very difficult decisions – very difficult but of course necessary decisions. It is a necessary decision, I must say, to increase the premium rate to 1.8 per cent of remuneration, bringing us in line with the average premium rate in other states and territories.

I will just say, though, that I have indeed a great deal of remarks that I would like to make on this motion, and if I could be afforded the opportunity after question time to return to this, I would certainly appreciate that.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Education First Youth Foyers

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:00): (374) Acknowledging the tireless work in this space by my Northern Victoria colleague the Honourable Ms Lovell, my question is for the Minister for Housing. The Education First Youth Foyer program provides accommodation to young people between the ages of 16 and 24 at risk of homelessness while partnering with local education institutions such as TAFE to develop the education and skills of its residents. I am sure the minister would concur that the three existing youth foyers, in Broadmeadows, Glen Waverley and Shepparton, have changed the lives of many vulnerable young Victorians. I applaud the minister's funding commitment to building two more foyers, in Wodonga and Wangaratta. But there is some uncertainty in the sector around the support funding for both facilities. Can the minister clarify when support funding for the planned youth foyers in Wodonga and Wangaratta will be announced?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:01): Thanks, Mrs Tyrrell, for that question. I do want to acknowledge the work that has gone into making sure that youth homelessness and rough sleeping are tackled in a range of ways across the state. We know that young people are amongst the most significant cohort in percentage terms of homelessness and of rough sleeping. We know that more than 100,000 people have sought to access homelessness services and that every year this number has been informed by a range of pressures being experienced, including cost of living and the challenges associated with complexity in a range of areas, including mental health, alcohol and drug addiction and people who are victims and survivors of family violence, amongst other things.

When we talk about the impact of homelessness and of rough sleeping, we know that a range of supports are necessary given those complexities. We have funded homelessness projects and programs and services by about \$300,000 a year across Victoria, including around \$164,000 for services, and youth foyers are a big part of this. Those two facilities which you have referred to were in fact announced by my colleague the Leader of the Government. Once they have been delivered, the operational process of making sure that they are able to do the work that they do will continue.

I do, however, also want to take a moment to thank everybody who is part of the delivery of those services and who worked so hard across a range of partnerships to make sure that people, firstly, know about the youth foyers and about other supports and, secondly, have opportunities to access those services and supports. In particular for rural and regional settings, after natural disaster and emergency it has been services just like this that have been instrumental in the connection that people have been able to either create or sustain in times of greatest need.

Mrs Tyrrell, I would be very happy to provide you with updates around the progress of these particular builds and the crystallising of this investment into services which will benefit the community as a whole. As I said at the outset, homelessness and rough sleeping are complex areas of need, and these are areas which require a range of solutions as we work toward addressing not just the challenges being faced in the immediate and in the short term but what the longer term causes are of these factors that result in circumstances that need and require and demand our attention.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:04): I thank the minister for her answer. Infrastructure Victoria's strategy 2021–2025 document recommended the establishment of six additional youth foyers in regional Victoria, included Wodonga and Wangaratta as well as Bendigo, Geelong, Mildura and Morwell. Will the minister give an undertaking to personally meet with me to discuss the future expansion of the wonderful youth foyer program in regional Victoria?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:04): Thanks, Mrs Tyrrell, for that supplementary question. As I think I outlined in the answer to the substantive question, I would be really pleased to continue to engage with you. We have spoken about this before. It has been an ongoing conversation with people across rural and regional Victoria. One of the things that I have tried really hard to do ever since taking on the responsibility of this portfolio is make my way around rural and regional Victoria. I am doing that again, all things being equal and the house rising at a reasonable hour tomorrow, on Friday. This work will go on. As you have said, there are a range of youth foyer commitments that are being delivered. As we include the work on construction being scheduled to commence later, towards the end of this year and the start of next year, at the two locations that we have talked about, I would be really pleased to continue to talk with you, as I am also talking to the communities, to community housing providers and to those not-for-profit, mission-based organisations that are doing such an important power of work on the ground.

Emergency communication services

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:05): (375) My question is for the attention of the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, two weeks ago Marianne Maher's partner rang 000 after she woke in the early hours with no feeling in her foot, pins and needles, a fever and pain radiating up her leg. With no response from an ambulance and her pain worsening, her partner called 000 another four times, only to be told an ambulance was on its way. Four hours later an ambulance arrived, but it was too late and Marianne had to have her leg amputated, otherwise sepsis would have caused her death. After five calls to 000, why did the call taker say that an ambulance was on its way when clearly it was not?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:06): I thank Ms Crozier for her question – indeed a very tragic experience for the woman involved. What I can say in relation to this matter is that Ambulance Victoria have certainly made an apology for the time it took to respond to this patient. AV, as you would appreciate, is the responsibility of another minister, but I can confirm that they are conducting a review to better understand the circumstances. They have reached out to the individual and family, and they are committed to providing them with answers as they progress with the review. ESTA have reviewed the case and advised that there were no call-answering delays. As you would appreciate, 000 operators process calls based on the information they are provided by each caller and based on protocols that are agreed to with the responding agencies.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:07): Minister, it is Victoria in 2023 and a woman in excruciating pain who clearly needs an ambulance cannot get one. She loses her leg as a result. You have just said that AV have made an apology and are conducting a review. My question to you then is: will you ensure, as a senior member of government, that that review is made public so that we can understand the catastrophic failings of why this occurred?

The PRESIDENT: Ms Crozier, I will give you, if you would like, a chance to rephrase that, because the Minister's answer will be it is outside her remit.

Georgie CROZIER: Okay. Minister, it is Victoria in 2023 and a woman in excruciating pain who clearly needs an ambulance cannot get one. She loses her leg as a result. Minister, I presume you have had discussions with the Minister for Ambulance Services about the catastrophic failings that have occurred. Will you also speak to the minister to ensure that the review that you have just cited will be made public?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:08): Ms Crozier, it is not a matter for me in relation to what material –

Members interjecting.

Jaelyn SYMES: I actually think that the woman involved is probably the one that would want to know whether her personal information should be made public or not. I am sure that the Minister for Health will keep an eye on our question time and take on board your comments.

Ministers statements: emergency services

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:08): I want to take the opportunity to update the house on how Christmas has come early for CFA brigades, VICSES, marine search and rescue units and Life Saving Victoria –

Members interjecting.

Jaelyn SYMES: You guys need a holiday. Across the state, the volunteers from these hardworking agencies are sharing in almost \$15 million of funding across 233 projects. They have got new trucks, tankers, watercraft, trailers and a snowmobile that will be delivered, as well as facility upgrades and defibrillators.

Where are all of these gifts coming from, some may ask. Last Wednesday I had the pleasure of visiting Harcourt’s CFA brigade to announce this year’s volunteer emergency services equipment program grants, an annual grants program which helps volunteer emergency service agencies purchase equipment and improve their emergency response capability. The Harcourt brigade were recipients of a medium tanker funded through a previous VESEP grant, and I was grateful to have the chance to channel my inner Santa and hand it over with the member for Bendigo West in the other place.

CFA are sharing in almost \$11 million of this funding, and I would like to congratulate the Chiltern brigade in my electorate, as well as brigades in Darlington, Emerald, Maude and Wooriwyrite, on receiving funding for a new medium tanker. Camperdown, Sarsfield and Mallacoota brigades will each receive \$100,000 towards the upgrade of their headquarters.

A member: Tracey will be rapt.

Jaelyn SYMES: Tracey will be rapt. VICSES units in Corio, Kaniva, Marong and Wangaratta, just to name a few, are receiving replacement utility vehicles. Twenty-nine Life Saving Victoria clubs are sharing in over \$800,000 in grants for upgraded equipment, and marine search and rescue flotillas will share in over \$300,000 of funding. I am very proud that since the Allan Labor government has engaged in these programs we have provided \$123 million of grants to volunteers around the state.

Duck hunting

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:11): (376) My question is for the Minister for Outdoor Recreation in the other place. My very first question this year was about recreational duck shooting, and since then a select committee formed by the government and chaired by the government has made a clear recommendation that recreational native bird hunting be banned on public and private land from 2024 onwards. While the government have until February to respond to the recommendations, we all know, and they know, this is simply far too close to when a season is legislated to commence in March. My final question for the year is this: why hasn’t the government responded to its own inquiry report and cancelled the 2024 duck-shooting season?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:11): I thank Ms Purcell for her ongoing interest in this issue, and I will refer this matter to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation. It is a matter that the government has got six months to respond to, as with any other parliamentary inquiry, and I am sure that they will provide you with a response when they are ready.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:12): I thank the minister for referring it on. I think it is important to note that the former Premier did estimate a three-month time frame. However, the committee made this recommendation for a ban for a number of reasons, including that nothing can be done to stop wounding entirely, meaning that as long as duck shooting continues it is guaranteed

that thousands of birds will always be left to suffer and die. So noting the tight time frame, when will the government respond to this report?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:13): Again, I believe that that is a repeat of the substantive question. Regardless, I will refer that matter to the appropriate minister.

Emergency communication services

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:13): (377) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. Last week Josh from Aherns Fruit Market in Foster received an alert that an intruder had broken into his shop. On calling 000 twice he received a message that they were too busy and to call back later. Why is your government continuing to fail Victorians who need an emergency response?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:13): I thank Ms Bath for her question. As you have indicated, the individual that you have spoken to rang 000. As I think many people understand now in the chamber about how things happen in relation to how calls get through and get dispatched, when you call 000 it is first answered by Telstra. It is first answered by a body that I do not have responsibility for; the federal government do.

You have alerted me to a recorded message, and I have made inquiries just in recent days in relation to this because I had heard about it. I can assure you that ESTA have not used recorded automated messages for emergency calls for over 12 months. There was a time during the pandemic when recorded messages were used. We have not used them in 12 months, so I can assure you, Ms Bath, that the incident you have referred to could be a result of somebody hearing a recorded automated message that Telstra has played when the national call centre receives a high volume of demand, because all calls go through 000 Telstra first before coming to ESTA, but I have made inquiries and I can confirm that ESTA have not used recorded messages in over 12 months.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:15): Well, Minister, last week, as you know, in public accounts and estimates hearings the department said that such recorded messages on 000 were implemented for a short time last year and were surprised to hear that these were still being used. Who is right? Are they right, or are you right? Why are Victorians like Josh still getting recorded messages when they are trying to ring 000?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:15): Ms Bath, I am not sure whether you failed to listen to my answer. Help me out, everyone. My answer was the same as the PAEC response, right? That is what I took from Ms Bath's question. Perhaps when you revisit my answer to your substantive question you will understand the answer.

Ministers statements: Midsumma Festival

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:16): I rise today in my capacity as Minister for Equality, and at the outset I am enormously proud of the strength and the perseverance and the unbreakable spirit that LGBTIQ+ Victorians have shown time and time again, in particular this year. I was delighted yesterday to contribute to yesterday's Midsumma Festival 2024 program launch and to recognise Victoria's LGBTIQ+ communities, whose passion, talent, creativity and inclusion will breathe even more life into this celebration of love and equality that has been going strong since 1988.

Pride events such as Midsumma play a really vital role in fostering inclusion and cohesion and also in dispelling much of the ignorance and the disinformation that fuels discrimination, stigma and violence against members of our LGBTIQ+ communities. The Allan Labor government proudly supports Midsumma with a \$6.8 million commitment to deliver the statewide LGBTIQ+ celebrations grants round, Victoria's Pride, over four years.

For more information on Midsumma's exciting program of events for next year, please do hop online and visit midsumma.org.au. Please enjoy every moment of the festivities. And if you are an ally, get amongst it, get involved and participate. Be part of a program of events, celebrations and opportunities to have and continue conversations that are bedded in the notions of respect, dignity, safety and inclusion.

I am also exceptionally grateful to Transgender Victoria for their tireless work and remarkable dedication in realising Australia's first dedicated community hub for trans and gender-diverse communities, the Affirmation Station in Brunswick. Congratulations to everybody involved in making this a reality.

Emergency communication services

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:18): (378) My question is again to the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, the ambulance union claims that:

ESTA continues to struggle with understaffing and is again resorting to non-standard rosters to address employment gaps.

Minister, have any of those employment gaps caused delays in communication to Ambulance Victoria?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:18): Ms Crozier, I am really proud of the ESTA workforce, soon to be Triple Zero Victoria. They have overcome monumental challenges that were presented as part of a one-in-100-year pandemic. It is a wonderful workplace. They are meeting their call performance targets. They are attracting new staff. Every time I visit I find someone that has worked there for more than 20 years. This is a workplace that has gone through a challenge but goes from strength to strength every day. I love visiting the ESTA workplaces around the state. They are providing an exceptional service to Victorians because of the support and investment from this government. It is a credit to their leadership and every single individual that works there.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:19): President, the minister failed to go even close to the question. We all know that 33 Victorians died because of the failures in ESTA. Your government was warned in 2016 about the underfunding, and now you are trying to cover up those failures. Minister, the union has said that. You have failed to answer that question, so I will ask again: when will those employment gaps and the understaffing in ESTA be rectified?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:20): You are putting a position to me, and the facts do not support the premise of your question. ESTA are far exceeding their call-answering benchmarks for ambulance each and every day.

Water policy

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:20): (379) My question is for the Minister for Water. While Victoria refuses to sign the new Murray–Darling Basin plan, which is set to pass federal Parliament today, the proposed amendments will in any case apply equally to Victoria. Under the agreement, the Commonwealth does not actually need the permission of the states to purchase water from willing sellers. However, as a result of failing to sign up to the deal, the Victorian government will not be eligible for funding for transitional assistance for regional communities impacted by water purchases by the Commonwealth. The federal Labor member for Bendigo Ms Chesters recently made an excellent speech in Parliament that is worth reading if you have not yet had a chance. She said:

... I really hope my Labor colleagues in the Victorian government are listening and get on board with the plan ... I strongly urge the Victorian government to pick up the phone and start working with us.

Minister, will you listen to your federal Victorian Labor colleagues and get on board with the new Murray–Darling Basin plan?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:21): Thank you for that question. It is important at the outset to note that the Victorian and Commonwealth governments have a fundamental difference in policy position as it relates to the impact of buybacks and to the way in which they harm communities. When we look to the statistics from the Murray–Darling Basin Authority, the Commonwealth’s own authority, we know that the last round of buybacks – 550 gigalitres from the high-reliability water systems of the southern basin – cost 3200 jobs. We also know that there are a range of projects within Victoria’s work plan that have delivered and continue to deliver benefit to Victorian environments.

As part of a package of works and commitments, as part of our agreement to sign up to the Murray–Darling Basin plan, to sign up to the agreements that were reached not only in the first instance when legislation was created but as a consequence of the 2018 amendments on the socio-economic criteria, Victoria remains committed to delivering on the plan as it was agreed. Victoria also remains determined to advocate for Victorian environments. I would have thought that that is something that you are also interested in doing. Rather than sending a vast superhighway of water down to one part of the Murray–Darling Basin, we need to take care of returning water to all environments. This is where our projects have such an element of relevance not just to Victorian flood plains but also to the importance of balance, to the importance of making sure that projects such as the VMFRP, the Living Murray program and the sorts of sites that I hope you would visit, which are able to do more water with one-tenth of the volume that might otherwise be required for an overbank flooding event, can then build in a measure of climate adaptation and resilience that will be of increasing importance into the future.

I am determined, as I have said to my federal counterparts, as I have said to a range of stakeholders, ministerial representatives and communities not just here in Victoria but across the basin, to make sure that we remain at the table and that we remain amenable and open and available and ready and willing and able to have discussions and negotiations with the Commonwealth on how to fund these projects and how to make sure that in returning water to the environment we do so in a way that balances the various needs of communities across the basin and also makes sure that all environments, including Victorian environments, get the benefit of future Commonwealth investment.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:24): I thank the minister for her answer, and I will take that as a no. To be clear, Victorian basin communities may be subjected to Commonwealth buybacks regardless of what this government’s position is, but you are going to miss out on Commonwealth funding to offset any potential negative socio-economic impacts – like the ones you have talked about – because of your ongoing refusal to sign on to the agreement. This is part of what your federal Victorian Labor colleagues are concerned about: their communities are going to miss out. Is the Victorian government going to step in and provide funding assistance for any communities impacted by Commonwealth buybacks?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:25): Thank you for that supplementary question. Let us talk about the importance of managing a range of interests and investments and priorities across Victorian communities. The Murray–Darling Basin plan is something that Victoria has signed up to. We remain committed to delivering on our obligations and our commitments under that agreement.

Sarah Mansfield interjected.

Harriet SHING: I will take up that interjection. You have just referred to the old plan and the new plan. The plan, as it stands, signed up all basin jurisdictions: the Commonwealth, the ACT, Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. That requires us to return a volume of water to the environment, and Victoria is the jurisdiction that has returned the most water to the environment since its inception. No other jurisdiction has done more.

Sarah Mansfield: On a point of order, President, in the last 6 seconds I would just like the minister to return to the question, which is: will the Victorian government step in to provide funding?

Michael Galea: On the point of order, President, the minister was being directly relevant to an interjection put by the member.

The PRESIDENT: I will call the minister to the question.

Harriet SHING: No other jurisdiction has done more. I want to partner with the Commonwealth. I would hope that you get on board to help that to happen.

Ministers statements: kindergarten funding

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:27): I rise to update the house on the completion of construction of a new kindergarten facility in Mount Duneed. Our government supported the project with \$2.25 million in funding through the Building Blocks capacity-building grant stream, which provides funding for projects creating additional kindergarten spaces. The new kinder is based in the City of Greater Geelong's Poa Banyul community hub. My colleague in the other place the member for South Barwon, also Parliamentary Secretary for Education, and I had the honour of opening this facility last week.

This is a one-stop shop for the residents of Mount Duneed and Armstrong Creek West. The integrated facility provides a valuable connection to a range of early years and family services. Local families can access free kinder and free maternal and child health services in one place. The hub also has family support consulting rooms, a parents lounge and versatile community spaces for playgroups and other programs. The new kindergarten has created 66 additional places for three- and four-year-olds, increasing early learning opportunities for this very fast growing community.

Expanding Victoria's kindergarten network is critical to supporting our nation-leading Best Start, Best Life early childhood reforms, and these reforms are the most significant in a generation. We are giving Victorian children, regardless of their circumstances, access to two years of quality kinder before they start primary school. In addition to supporting local governments with the expansion of their kinder services, the Allan government is building 50 new early learning centres across Victoria. These government-owned and government-run centres will be built in communities that have the greatest need for more childcare and kindergarten places. Where possible we will locate the centres at or alongside schools, hospitals, TAFEs, maternal and child health services and playgroups, because we understand the benefit to families that connectivity brings.

Since the Best Start, Best Life reform was announced in June 2022 our government has not stopped delivering on this commitment. Whether it be free kinder, pre-prep, three-year-old kinder or our 50 government owned and operated early learning centres, we are delivering for our littlest Victorians right across our state.

State Electricity Commission

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:29): (380) My question is to the Minister for Housing. Minister, does the new SEC's remit include the provision of electricity through the government-owned body to public housing tenants?

The PRESIDENT: Mr Davis, do you mind repeating that question?

David DAVIS: The question is: does the new SEC's remit include the provision of electricity through the government-owned body to public housing tenants?

The PRESIDENT: Mr Davis, I am really struggling with where that would be relevant to this minister's responsibilities under the general orders. I will give you an opportunity, if you like, to redirect it, because I think it would obviously be more appropriate for the minister for energy, or if you would like to rephrase it then it could be possibly under this minister's remit.

David DAVIS: Let me ask it in a different way. Will public housing tenants have full choice in electricity provider, or will the SEC be mandated?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:31): All right. We got there in the end, Mr Davis, and I am pleased that you have finally joined the party as it relates to renewable energy in public housing. In fact, it was just last week that I visited the Dunlop Avenue development in Ascot Vale. This is one development where again we have got a really unique provision of renewable energy. In partnership with the Energy On group, we have seen the contract being signed to deliver renewable energy to residents in a way that makes sure that they save hundreds of dollars below the Victorian default –

Members interjecting.

Harriet SHING: I have got 2 minutes and 15 seconds, Mr Davis.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, it was a very simple, narrow question: will public housing tenants have full choice, or will it be mandated through the SEC?

The PRESIDENT: I think the minister was relevant to the question.

Harriet SHING: Mr Davis, if it was such a simple question, you would not have required three cracks to get it right. Let us keep going in terms of a bit of context for you. Energy On, which is in the process of providing renewable energy across a number of sites, whether that is at Ashburton, at West Heidelberg, at Collingwood or at Ascot Vale, is in the process of providing residents with a range of different opportunities to save hundreds of dollars below the Victorian default offer – again, something which your mob objected to in the first instance. Mr Davis, there is a requirement in social housing developments to –

David Davis: On a point of order, President, ‘your mob’ – the member may be able to be a bit more sensible than that.

The PRESIDENT: I will call the minister back to the question.

Harriet SHING: Mr Davis, it is almost like you do not want to hear the answer. Requirements of at least 5 per cent renewable energy have meant that at Dunlop Avenue, for example, there are 405 solar panels, PV panels, on the roof of this particular development. Since it was completed at the start of the year, we have seen around 70 residents move into studio, one-bedroom and two-bedroom apartments. People have the option to opt out of the provision of renewable energy – again, this arrangement that means that they save hundreds of dollars every year off their bills. Let us just be, again, really clear about this. As one example, at Dunlop Avenue not one resident has sought to opt out, because of the fact that they are saving hundreds of dollars a year below the Victorian default offer.

Mr Davis, if you even had a smidge of understanding about the SEC, you would know that we are not in the business of retail. However, what I do want to make sure that you are aware of is that the Victorian default offer is already lowering the floor and that it is these sorts of arrangements and partnerships with groups like Energy On that are meaning that people can access renewable energy, that additional energy that is produced goes back into investment in social housing and that people can opt out of schemes if they so desire. We are talking about a mix of energy as we continue to work towards meeting our nation-leading net zero emissions targets, and I hope you get on board with this.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:34): A very simple question for the minister: will public housing tenants pay higher or lower electricity costs by the time of the next election than they do now?

The PRESIDENT: I was concerned putting the substantive, and I probably should have added when I called the minister that she could answer as she sees fit, because I was concerned about whether it was within her remit or not. I am not going to put that question.

Water policy

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:35): (381) My question is for the Minister for Water. Minister, on Monday irrigators in Greater Shepparton held a huge rally to protest against the federal government's water buybacks. While the rally was taking place, the federal minister insensitively revealed that she had done a dirty deal with the Greens to pass the legislation needed to support the buybacks. Minister, you have said you will not support water buybacks in Victoria, but as Dr Mansfield pointed out, that does not stop buybacks. Minister, will you ensure that for every megalitre purchased by a Commonwealth-sanctioned buyback an equivalent amount is released back into the irrigators pool from the Victorian Environmental Water Holder's holdings to ensure that no water is lost to food production in Victoria?

The PRESIDENT: I am concerned that might be a hypothetical question, but I will put it –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: I am concerned it is hypothetical about actions of people outside this jurisdiction, but I will put the question to the minister.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:37): Thanks, Ms Lovell. Firstly, I am aware – very, very aware – of the positions being taken by the Murray group of councils and by communities such as Shepparton, Mildura, Swan Hill and other parts of basin communities impacted by the proposed legislation before the federal government. This is legislation that constitutes a fundamental difference between the policy settings of the Commonwealth government and those of the Victorian government. Our longstanding opposition to buybacks remains unchanged. Removing the cap on buybacks as contemplated by the Commonwealth legislation is something that Victoria has opposed and continues to oppose. Buybacks harm communities. Buybacks cause jobs and communities to be lost and otherwise to be compromised. Everybody agrees that buybacks have an impact. The socio-economic criteria were entered into to provide a measure of safety, certainty and security, which was, as it relates to certainty, one of the founding objectives of the Murray–Darling Basin plan when jurisdictions entered into it in the first instance.

Ms Lovell, when buybacks occur they are about a transaction that irrigators enter into to sell their water to someone other than another irrigator. Firstly, I do not accept the characterisation of foreign ownership of entitlements as being a useful contributor to this discussion. In Victoria we have at least 50 per cent less –

Wendy Lovell: On a point of order, President, I never said anything about foreign ownership of water.

The PRESIDENT: There is no point of order.

Harriet SHING: The national average is around 11.2 per cent. Here in Victoria we have under 5 per cent of foreign ownership, so let us park that, because that is not relevant to the question of what happens when buybacks occur.

Buybacks take water out of the consumptive pool. They take it away from the access by irrigators, by food producers, to be able to do things such as produce all of the goods that are created in this food bowl of Australia. Water held by the environmental water holder is there for very specific purposes. It is already allocated to the environmental water holder. The position that Victoria takes is that to remove water from the consumptive pool to sell it to the Commonwealth is a decision that does not interface with the water held by the Victorian Environmental Water Holder. I will continue to advocate for Victoria's position in opposition to buybacks, and I hope that that position continues to be well understood.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:40): I take that as a no. Minister, if you are not prepared to release the water from the environmental water holder's holdings, are you prepared to legislate to ensure that no further water can be purchased out of the Victorian irrigators pool for the environment via the Commonwealth-sanctioned buybacks?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:40): Ms Lovell, the Commonwealth constitution is pretty clear. I would invite you to check out section 109, which relates to laws that are made and, where they are inconsistent at a state level with any law that is contemplated by the Commonwealth under the relevant head of power, those laws being void to the extent of any inconsistency. What I would, however, say to you, Ms Lovell, is that Victoria signed up to the Murray–Darling Basin plan. Victoria has delivered more than any other jurisdiction in returning water to the environment. I would like to see that we are in a position to be able to continue to do so without sustaining any harm to communities. I would also like to see that enduring support is provided to Victorian communities and that the impact for environments in Victoria is recognised in Commonwealth funding decisions going forward.

Ministers statements: Victorian Public Healthcare Awards

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:42): I rise to update the house on the winners of the 2023 Victorian Public Healthcare Awards. Earlier this month I joined the Minister for Health at the awards to celebrate Victoria's healthcare workers and their achievements. These awards are an opportunity for healthcare workers, public health services, community groups and volunteers to come together and celebrate their vital work delivering support and care for all Victorians.

I had the pleasure of presenting the awards for excellence both in mental health and wellbeing and in aged care. The Excellence in Mental Health and Wellbeing award, won by St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne and their mental health, alcohol and other drug hub, recognises initiatives that advance the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System's vision of creating a compassionate mental health system based on lived experience, leadership, holistic treatment and support for all Victorians. The Excellence in Aged Care award, awarded to Monash Health residential aged care for the customised prevention of occupational violence and aggression training package, celebrates the outstanding work taking place in our public aged care sector, delivering programs and services to meet the needs of the increasing number of older Victorians.

A number of mental health and wellbeing programs took out the highest honours of the evening, including the Yarra Ranges Rural Rainbows mindfulness group of young LGBTIQ+ people and North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network's program to strengthen paediatric mental health care. Congratulations to all who were nominated. It is so important to acknowledge and celebrate health and wellbeing programs and our incredible workforce for their work. We thank our mental health workers for being the foundation of the reformed mental health system.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:43): Before I go on, I welcome a previous member of the Assembly Nick Kotsiras to the gallery.

On today's questions, Minister Tierney, you will get from the Minister for Outdoor Recreation answers, in line with the standing orders, for Ms Purcell; and I ask Minister Shing to get Dr Mansfield a written response for her supplementary question, in line with the standing orders.

Constituency questions

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:44): (592) My constituency question today is for the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC on behalf of my constituents who work as frontline retail workers. The retail trade is the third-highest employing sector in south-eastern Melbourne and the

peninsula, with around 62,500 people employed in retail shops and fast-food outlets. Post COVID, employment in the sector has dropped by 9.3 per cent. Around 22 per cent of this number are young people between the ages of 15 and 24, making retail the largest employer of young people in my region. One reason that many workers left the industry during and after the height of the COVID pandemic was due to the abusive behaviour of customers. Leading up to Christmas, retail workers often experience this same abuse from customers who have lost their patience and treated them poorly. No-one deserves to be treated this way at work, least of all our young people, who are often in their first jobs. Minister, what will WorkSafe be doing to help to protect our retail workers in the lead-up to the Christmas and New Year period?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (12:45): (593) My question is to the Attorney-General regarding the proposed use of the old Bendigo law courts, which are currently empty. This stunning heritage building was built in the 1890s and is located in the heart of Bendigo. Since the new Bendigo law courts opened, the old law courts have remained vacant, and constituents have raised concerns that this stunning state-owned asset is just wasting away. The state government has been working on designs for the new \$152 million law courts for over three years, but there is still no plan for the old law courts. Locals have suggested a history museum, five-star accommodation and a restaurant, a filming location for a courtroom drama and an extension of Bendigo Senior Secondary College or use by La Trobe University. What is the state government doing to engage with the local community and to ensure that this historic and stunning building is utilised and maintained?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:46): (594) My question today is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. The North East Link toll road project now has the dubious title of being Victoria's most expensive road project. This toll road has truly become a behemoth in my community, a road that is destroying the precious environment. It threatens to add air and noise pollution, and it is dividing communities with a massive tunnel entrance. We have heard that the cost to build this toll road will be an eye-watering \$20 billion. Minister, I would like to know: have you totalled up the cost of the damage this project will bring to the community with the environmental destruction and added pollution? As I have suggested, \$20 billion is only the beginning of the cost of this disastrous toll road project.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (12:47): (595) My question is to the Minister for Housing. Can the minister provide an update on the time lines for construction of the new social housing at Bluff Road in Hampton in my electorate of Southern Metropolitan Region. Those who have been past recently will know the site on Bluff Road. The 146 old walk-ups are gone. They have been carefully demolished, leaving a lot of mature trees in place. That site at Bluff Road, we understand from the recent contracts, is going to deliver 285 new homes, including a mix of social, affordable, market rent and special disability accommodation, increasing social housing by 16 per cent on the site and giving the previous residents the first right of return once it is done. The Labor government is delivering more social and affordable homes across every corner of the state, and I am so proud that even more are being built in the Southern Metropolitan Region.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:48): (596) My constituency question is for the Minister for Health, and I ask: with the latest Ambulance Victoria performance figures showing code 1 incidents in Cardinia during July having an average response of 17 minutes and 20 seconds in call-out times across 1721 first responses, why are constituents in Cardinia still being disadvantaged in Ambulance Victoria's 15-minute call-out time targets? During the July to September 2023 period, paramedics attended 50.8 per cent of code 1 incidents in Cardinia within the 15-minute

target time, falling short of Ambulance Victoria's target of 85 per cent. We know that figures released last year by the inspector-general for emergency management, IGEM, showed that the 33 deaths were linked between 1 December 2020 and 31 May 2022 to 000 or ambulance delays. Will the minister give an assurance that this is being addressed?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:49): (597) My constituency question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. My constituent is a well-loved member of the south-eastern community. As part of their employment, they have to travel through South-Eastern Metro to deliver parcels to every house on the evening of 24 December. 24 December falls on a Sunday this year. My constituent is concerned that the lack of Sunday bus services on the 800 route will make it near impossible for him to deliver to homes in that area, leaving children devastated. So my constituent asks: will the minister consider implementing extra holiday season services on the 800 route to cater for Santa's delivery run and so residents can get out and about and do their holiday shopping?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:50): (598) My question is directed towards the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. The Wallan diamond is a vital infrastructure project that will ease traffic congestion and allow better access to and from the town of Wallan. The roads on and off the Hume Highway have not been upgraded in the last two decades, and it often takes residents up to an hour to get out of the Wallan township onto the Hume. The former federal Liberal government funded this vital project to the tune of \$50 million, and I am glad it has been saved from Labor's federal infrastructure review. The federal member for McEwen repeatedly claimed the project was not funded, despite claiming credit for it originally, but the terms of reference were only to review projects that had been funded, so he was actually proven wrong. I would like to know from the minister when the state government will get on with building the Wallan diamond and when it will be completed.

Northern Metropolitan Region

Adem SOMYUREK (Northern Metropolitan) (12:51): (599) My constituency question is directed to the Minister for Planning concerning the proposal to build a quarry at the new Beveridge North West precinct. I have received various forms of engagement from residents complaining about the construction of the quarry, which is proposed to be located less than 1 kilometre from residential areas. Whilst I sympathise with the residents, I understand the issue is not straightforward because Melbourne is in urgent need of new quarries to build houses and infrastructure such as roads and railways. The former minister undertook to make a decision on the fate of the quarry by October last year, but as yet no decision has been made. I ask the minister to provide an update to the residents of Wallan and Beveridge on when she will hand down a decision on this very important issue for my constituents.

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:52): (600) My question is to the Minister for Community Sport. In the wee hours of 4 November a tragedy happened to the Fish Creek Football Netball Club in which, in a suspected break-in and arson, the club was burnt to the ground. This club has been a famous club for its success, but it is also a wonderful club and very much the centre point of the community for decades and decades. This is a small town with a great fabric and a great community effort. Sadly, they are looking for funds. This is a club that will be willing to raise funds and do a considerable amount of in-kind support. I know my colleague Danny O'Brien has made representations to the Minister for Community Sport and specifically alerted her to Fish Creek Football Netball Club, and I understand that there are new sporting grants around, so I ask the minister: will she take special interest in this very worthy cause and provide funding to the Fish Creek Football Netball Club to rebuild?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:53): (601) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. A constituent recently sent me a photograph of their experience driving on the new Narre Warren–Cranbourne road underpass beneath the Pakenham train line near Princes Highway. The photograph showed many cars at a standstill attempting to merge into a single lane on this otherwise three-lane road. The reason for this was an excessive amount of flooding on the left side of the road. One brave soul had attempted to aquaplane straight through the freshly formed pond only to end their valiant charge with hazard lights and a flooded engine. My question is this: what is the minister doing to address the regular flooding occurring here in the aftermath of the Big Build level crossing removal?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:53): (602) I join with my colleague in the other place David Hodgett. He raised an issue for the Minister for Health some time ago, I understand, from a constituent that has written to Mr Hodgett, but he also made me aware of this: the information kiosk at the Maroondah Hospital, which had a 45-year history in my local district of Ringwood, was closed – abruptly, one might say. I am keen to understand from the minister why this has occurred. That kiosk was staffed by very many volunteers over very many years. They provided quality food and handmade crafts, but more importantly, they also provided a listening ear. As you would understand, President, that is terribly important for those who are using the hospital, the children that attend the hospital and the local residents that attend the hospital, not only from Ringwood but also from Croydon, from Warrandyte and from further afield. It would be great to know whether in fact there was good reason for this or whether in fact we could see the re-emergence of that kiosk, as it performs an important public service.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:54): (603) My question is for the Minister for Energy and Resources. I was recently contacted by a constituent, David, who had been rejected from the Victorian government's solar homes battery loan financing program. The credit assessment that they calculated determined that David could not afford to pay back the loan, but it was clear in his original application that he actually could do so. After many weeks, countless hours and considerable stress and follow-up, David has now received a loan, but he has not been provided with a reason why he was initially rejected from the scheme. We are in a climate emergency, and access to these schemes should be clear. Applications should be reviewed on merit, and the assessments should be accurate and fair. Minister, can you tell me how many of my constituents have been rejected from accessing the solar loan battery scheme in the past year due to a credit assessment process that does not actually seem fit for purpose?

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:55): (604) My constituency question is for the minister for environment and climate change as minister responsible for Forest Fire Management Victoria. In years of high fire risk, more than ever regional Victoria relies on the 70 lookout towers operated by Forest Fire Management Victoria. Early detection is critical, so I am alarmed to hear that questions have been raised about whether the towers will be fully crewed in the coming season. It is all the more alarming when there is a suggestion that one fire earlier this year might have been spotted from a tower which was left uncrewed. Minister, my question is specific: are fire lookout observers required to receive accredited first aid training before they are allowed to crew fires, and if so – or even if not – how has this damaging idea arisen?

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:56): (605) My question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport, and it regards the V/Line VLocity trains which have been rolled out on the Shepparton line. Constituents have recently come to me to highlight the inadequacy of these trains. Unlike older trains, the VLocity carriages do not have tinted windows or curtains to provide protection for passengers from the sun outside, which will become increasingly dangerous during the summer. Sunburn, heat stroke and increased risk of skin cancer are dangers which commuters should not have to face when using public transport. Concerningly, the VLocity trains also lack buffet carriages, which are essential on long-haul services, particularly for diabetics and passengers who are forced to catch the 5:16 am service, which is the only service to arrive in Melbourne before 9 am. Minister, will you ensure the windows of the carriages are tinted and curtains are installed, and will you reinstate buffet carriages on trains on the Shepparton line?

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:57): (606) My question is for the Minister for Environment. The state government has continued to promise concerned residents of Silverleaves that a coastal erosion study will be conducted. These residents have been fearful for the maintenance of their properties amid the erosion, which has led to mature trees falling and foreshore cliffs eroding as far as 17 metres in some areas. It is reported that the government has not even found a contractor to conduct the study. Residents live in the area because they love the natural environment, and they want to see it preserved for generations to come. It is time that this becomes a priority for the government. Our beaches and coastal areas belong to all of us, and we need to look after them. My question for the minister is: when will this study be completed?

Sitting suspended 12:58 pm until 2:03 pm

*Committees***Economy and Infrastructure Committee***Reference***Debate resumed.**

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (14:03): Deputy President, thank you very much for your patience and understanding as I return to some remarks that I was making earlier on the motion before us on WorkCover. I am delighted to take on these additional 7 minutes to talk about what is going on in WorkCover.

It is true that since 2010 WorkCover's claims liabilities have tripled, driven by the increased cost of weekly income support, many workers staying on the scheme long term and the rise in mental injury claims, which now represents an astonishing 16 per cent of new claims, which was never envisaged when the scheme was initially designed. These drivers must be addressed to ensure the scheme is financially sustainable so the benefits of the scheme can continue to be accessed by Victorians. That is why the Victorian government's priority now is to make necessary reforms to the scheme so that it is contemporary and fit for purpose and can continue to support Victorian workers into the future.

The WorkCover scheme was designed and created by Labor, and only the Andrews now Allan government can be trusted to modernise the scheme now. It is worth reflecting on WorkCover, which was introduced by the Cain Labor government in 1985 primarily to support workers with physical injuries. Workplaces right now are very different places. Technological advancement has changed how and where we work, and as a result the workplace risks and hazards have changed. This has certainly shaped the field of workplace injury reform in Victoria.

Where the risk of physical injury was initially the focus of WorkSafe, addressing the rise in mental injuries in Victoria is now the priority. Modernising the WorkCover scheme so it can continue to

support injured Victorians well into the future is a key priority of this government and will ensure the scheme can manage the challenges of the future. If we do not, the vital support that WorkCover provides injured workers will be jeopardised. We know that health outcomes for workers on compensation schemes are four times worse than those with the same conditions outside of the schemes, which can lead to prolonged injury and unemployment. We are getting on with modernising the WorkCover scheme so it can continue to support workers into the future.

The reforms in this bill are reasonable. They are balanced and follow many, many months of consultation with workers, as I mentioned earlier on. Every day, every week and every month wasted with delay will mean higher premiums for our business community and more strain on the Victorian community.

I note with great interest that in 2020 when this question did come up the initial thoughts of those opposite were to raise the scheme during that time and throughout the year. Throughout this year those opposite have also raised the pressure the premium increase has had on small businesses. If those opposite continue to oppose the reform and delay the passage of this important bill, we will have in fact no choice but to raise the average premiums to between 2.4 and 2.5 per cent of remuneration. There is indeed a lot that can be said when it comes to the WorkCover scheme and the necessary reforms required to change the scheme, including that this will mean an average premium increase of 88 per cent since the start of this year – a huge burden on our small business community during a cost-of-living crisis, which is entirely preventable – and we know that that will get passed on to consumers. It is in the best interests of employers and workers to pass this bill now and create more certainty for workers as we head into this important holiday period.

Although these changes must be made, the work that the Allan Labor government has done in mental health is nothing short of outstanding. We are implementing all the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, which came in the last term of Parliament. This government knows the importance of having a strong mental health system and will ensure that Victoria leads the country when it comes to mental health reform and services. I have spoken a great number of times in this chamber about my work in the workplace health and safety system and can say firsthand that I know the damage of psychosocial injuries when it comes to workers. The injuries can last a lifetime but do not have to if we have an effective return-to-work scheme and a return-to-work system that is drafted, written, implemented and delivered in a way that supports the worker's health and safety first.

In this state it is true that we have not wasted a day working to build our state's new mental health system, investing over \$6 billion following the royal commission, which is the largest investment in Australia's history. We know that this investment was done by a Labor government because we committed to implementing every single one of the recommendations of the mental health royal commission, and part of this work was to introduce the mental health and wellbeing hubs throughout Victoria, ensuring that Victorians have access to free mental health support when they need it most. Some of these have opened. The first six in fact opened last year, providing a free and easy way to get treatment and support in the community, and I encourage folks in this chamber to become well familiar with their works and good deeds for the Victorian community. There is indeed the development of Return to Work Victoria, which I have already spoken about briefly. But I will say clearing the path for workers to return to the workplace and access better rehabilitation is just so important. I look forward to joining with others in this place as we continue to examine this motion but also WorkCover and the two amendments that are before us in this place now, and I thank you for the opportunity.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (14:10): I am pleased to sum up on this and to do so first by thanking every honourable member who has spoken in this debate. It is an important debate. What we have sought to do with this motion is to establish an inquiry – a short, sharp inquiry – to deal with the issues around WorkCover. There are massive issues. This bill that we have discussed in the chamber is a bill that is insufficient. It is inadequate. It does not put WorkCover on a sustainable footing into the future.

I want to put on record the statements of Danny Pearson, the minister, in the lower house that premium rises will occur whatever the situation is with the bill at the moment – premium rises are coming in March or April. I want to confirm that Mr Tarlamis has actually confirmed to the opposition that that is the case. People should understand that premium rises are coming because the scheme has been allowed to be mismanaged over a number of years.

The Finity report that I circulated from December 2020 shows that the scheme was in serious trouble then and many of the issues were identified at that time. The government chose not to bring those issues to the fore, not to begin the work to improve the scheme through that period. The return-to-work issues are real. The blowout in the tail and the lack of support for workers is real, as are the massive premium rises that have hit employers, that will hit employment and that will make Victoria less competitive. We need a scheme that is sustainable, that is actually on a sound footing, and the government – frankly, their behaviour has been reprehensible in not dealing with this much earlier. We have an opportunity for a short, sharp inquiry. That can deal with the matters constructively and propose some useful ways forward in addition to what the government has put forward in its bill.

Secondly, I want to talk about the date. We tried to find a reasonable date in 5 March, and the government has sought to find a different date. In discussion with the government and crossbenchers we agreed to compromise on 22 February in a legitimate and reasonable set of steps. We understand that some – the government in particular – want to seek 6 February as the date for reporting. We will persist with the compromise date which we arrived at after communication with the crossbench and indeed the government and hope that that is the fairer date, because more work will be able to be done and the scheme will be able to be put on a more sustainable footing.

Make no mistake, this government has allowed WorkSafe to deteriorate very badly. It has allowed so many workers to be left in a very difficult position where they do not have adequate support and do not in particular have adequate return-to-work backup and arrangements. We need to work hard to ensure that this is a fair outcome for workers, a fair outcome for employers and the economy and to ensure that the scheme is made sustainable. It is not sustainable now. It is very clear that it is billions of dollars in deficit. It is very clear that the sustainability track is not there; all of the government's own reports show that.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: We have a rather complicated scenario before us because there are currently three questions before the house, being the amendment proposed by Mrs McArthur to Mr Batchelor's amendment in respect of the motion, as well as the substantive motion. The house will deal with the proposed amendment to the amendment first. At this stage the initial motion stands. We will not move on to the amendment to the motion until we understand what that amendment may look like. The question that we are dealing with now is Mrs McArthur's amendment to Mr Batchelor's amendment.

Council divided on Mrs McArthur's amendment:

Ayes (19): Matthew Bach, Melina Bath, Gaelle Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Aiv Puglielli, Samantha Ratnam, Adem Somyurek, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Noes (21): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Moira Deeming, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Amendment negated.

Mr Batchelor's amendment agreed to.

Council divided on amended motion:

Ayes (23): Matthew Bach, Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, David Ettershank, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Samantha Ratnam, Adem Somyurek, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Noes (17): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Moira Deeming, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Tom McIntosh, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Amended motion agreed to.***Business of the house*****Notices of motion**

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (14:26): I move:

That the consideration of notice of motion, general business, 268, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.***Bills*****Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023*****Second reading*****Debate resumed on motion of Rachel Payne:**

That the bill be now read a second time.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (14:26): I rise to make a contribution on this bill on this important topic, the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023 in Ms Payne's name. From the outset, can I thank Ms Payne and Mr Ettershank for the significant thought and effort that has gone into preparing this private members bill. I am sure the house would agree this is a complex issue that comes with potential benefits but also significant potential risks, which this government does not take lightly.

However, I do want to acknowledge some of the very important motivations that these members have in bringing forward this bill with regard to harm minimisation, equity and illicit market disruption. There is much work to do on the issue to better understand the impacts of cannabis reform on individuals and communities – important work that the government is now undertaking. While the Victorian government does not have current plans to decriminalise the personal possession and use of cannabis in our state, the Victorian government shares the members' views about innovative drug policy that supports harm minimisation.

As I have said, issues of alcohol and drug use and harm can be complicated, with policy responses often hotly contested. However, we are a government that looks past the division and sensationalist rhetoric of some people, and we want to take an approach to implement thoughtful and effective policies that improve the health of and social outcomes for Victorians. We have certainly put our money where our mouth is in respect of investment in this space, as the budget papers clearly outline. In the ninth budget this government has handed down since being elected in 2014 we have invested well over \$2 billion in alcohol and other drug treatment supports and harm minimisation initiatives. That is before we consider the important legislative reform steps we have taken, from becoming the first jurisdiction in Australia to legalise the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes to our recent decriminalisation of public drunkenness.

We do not just talk the talk when it comes to drug and alcohol reform and support. Our \$370 million investment in the most recent budget is more than double that which those opposite delivered in their last budget the last time they were in government. This year the investment in drug and alcohol support means that more than 40,000 Victorians each year are able to access help from government-funded alcohol and drug treatment and support services. This investment has also supported a range of innovative policy initiatives and dedicated services to reduce drug harm in our community, whether that is the well-publicised establishment of Victoria's first life-saving safe injecting service or the sometimes lesser-known programs, such as our DanceWize program.

I will just take a moment to reflect on DanceWize. It is an important program. It is funded by this government and run by Harm Reduction Victoria, and it is an original. It is Australian, and it is a peer-based alcohol and other drug harm reduction program that delivers peer care and support services for music events and festivals across Victoria. The project involves the attendance of key peer educators who host a chill-out space, discuss safer drug use and distribute health resources. Starting as a grassroots Victorian group known as RaveSafe, DanceWize has been supporting the minimisation of drug harm since 1999. The program's success saw its model adopted in New South Wales in 2017, and it is part of a national network which is able to support the emergence of similar programs in other parts of our country.

Of course DanceWize is just one part of a broader suite of harm reduction initiatives funded by the government, including the drug overdose prevention and education program, which delivers peer-based training through structured workshops on overdose prevention and response and other drug education; Drug Facts, run by the Alcohol and Drug Foundation, which provides accessible and comprehensive online information for all Victorians about alcohol and other drugs with an emphasis on harm reduction and primary prevention; the Good Sports program, which is a fantastic program which partners with local sporting clubs to change attitudes towards drinking, tobacco and drug use and improve mental health and nutrition among sporting participants in the wider community; and the Prevent Alcohol and Risk-Related Trauma in Youth program, PARTY, which is a harm minimisation outreach program that demonstrates the impact of alcohol and drug abuse to young people. It is delivered through the Alfred and Royal Melbourne hospitals to students across Victoria. Participants learn about the trauma, injury and health consequences of risky behaviour by reviewing real-life clinical scenarios. Whilst confronting, it gives them firsthand clinical scenarios – seeing an emergency room, a burns and trauma unit, an intensive care unit and a family bereavement room. Young people also meet trauma survivors, who discuss the impact of risky behaviour and options to minimise risk.

You are probably wondering why I am going down this road, but the reason I am focusing on the Allan Labor government's record of investment in these sorts of initiatives that aim to reduce alcohol and other drug related harm is precisely because harm reduction has to be at the very centre of drug policy and drug reform. And while Ms Payne and Mr Ettershank clearly have articulated and outlined the benefits of the decriminalisation of the personal use of cannabis, as a government and particularly for me as the Minister for Mental Health, we must also properly consider the potential risks of changing the legal framework of cannabis use in Victoria. We really need to tread carefully around these issues and ensure that any alteration to the approach does not undermine either our harm reduction endeavours or indeed our vision to make Victorians the most mentally healthy in the country.

I have to say, in considering this issue we also need to make sure that we are not unintentionally sending the wrong message to the public, in particular to young Victorians, that cannabis use is not harmful. Cannabis use can have a range of negative health impacts, and any increase in use could also lead to ill health for more Australians and impact our health system.

I think it is well understood, the health burden of alcohol and other drug use. It is not inconsiderable in our country, and the effects of cannabis, like all drugs, by their very nature are going to vary from one person to another, depending on the amount consumed, how it is administered or taken and the user's previous experience and individual circumstances, mood and body. The active drug in cannabis makes its way into the bloodstream. We all know that it enters the bloodstream more quickly when it

is smoked compared to when it is orally ingested. Obviously this fact can influence many people's choices about the preferred method of ingestion, but of course I do not need to spell out to the house the health impacts of smoking, whether that is tobacco or cannabis. We know that the ongoing and regular use of cannabis is associated with a number of negative long-term effects, an issue I know obviously is true of many drugs, including, it must be said, many legal drugs. But regular users of cannabis can become dependent, and commonly reported symptoms of withdrawal include anxiety, sleep difficulties, appetite disturbance and depression.

But before we consider any changes to current law we must acknowledge that there are already many Australians suffering poor health outcomes caused by recreational cannabis use. Cannabis use can lead to physical ill health and conditions such as bronchitis or smoking-related disease, including cancer, cardiovascular system damage and impaired reaction time and brain function. Of particular concern and focus for me is the potential for poor mental health outcomes from cannabis use, including anxiety, paranoia, memory loss and an increased incidence of schizophrenia, and there are also impacts to the broader health system that must be taken into consideration.

I do not highlight these points with any intention to be alarmist but simply to illustrate I guess the inherent complexity of this issue. Any and all drug reform must have the best interests of the Victorian community in mind. In that sense, we must take a balanced and considered approach to both the benefits and the risks, and there are still many of those questions that need to be answered. However, as Ms Payne and Mr Ettershank are very well aware, the Victorian government has a strong record of taking the issue of personal cannabis use very seriously. As I have already mentioned, we led the nation when it came to the legalisation of the use of medicinal cannabis. I understand that this is an issue of fundamental importance to the Legalise Cannabis Victoria Party, and I want to acknowledge their genuine engagement with the community, with the Parliament and of course with the government on their reform agenda.

This bill, which proposes to legalise the adult personal use of cannabis beyond that required for medicinal reasons, we are unable to support in its current form at this time. However, the government is amenable to ongoing discussions with the Legalise Cannabis Victoria Party on this topic and a process that would take the advice of experts and engage with the community. I am looking forward to continuing those important discussions with you both and of course to your constructive and thoughtful engagement in relation to these matters.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:39): I rise to speak to the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023 that has been presented by Ms Payne from the Legalise Cannabis Party, and I want to thank her for the very extensive and detailed information that she has provided to me and to my colleagues and to Ms Kealy, who is the shadow minister in this area. I really thank her for providing that information. And can I say that I do understand many of those points that you have provided to us around the issue of young people, around possession and around the number of young people that have been charged with cannabis use and possession of drugs and what we need to do in relation to that very large cohort. It is concerning that the numbers are growing, as outlined by Ms Payne to me. I think she said in 2019 there were 9000 people charged with cannabis use, and in the three years to June 2019 there were 11,498 people convicted. Significant numbers of people have been charged. I do hear that, and I do want to acknowledge that.

What I want to make a few points about is that what this bill aims to do is basically make it lawful for an adult to cultivate a certain number of cannabis plants and to possess and use small quantities of cannabis and tetrahydrocannabinol and authorise certain activities related to the cultivation of cannabis plants and the personal use of cannabis. There are various amendments in the bill that look at a person over the age of 18 that will be able to cultivate no more than six cannabis plants at the person's principal place of residence for personal use. New section 69Y authorises the limited manufacture of cannabis in preparation for personal use. New section 69Z authorises a person over the age of 18 years to possess a small quantity of cannabis and tetrahydrocannabinol and to possess not more than six

cannabis plants cultivated at that person's principal place of residence. New section 69ZA authorises a person over the age of 18 to use cannabis and tetrahydrocannabinol provided that use does not occur in a public place.

The bill goes on to authorise a person of or over the age of 18 to be able to give a gift of cannabis or tetrahydrocannabinol provided the gift is made in a small quantity to another adult. This also clarifies that a gift not made for payment, consideration, barter, exchange or other compensation is not an offence under the principal act. The legislation's new sections authorise a person of or over the age of 18 to use or possess items related to the cultivation or manufacture of cannabis or tetrahydrocannabinol provided the person intends to cultivate or manufacture cannabis or tetrahydrocannabinol for personal use.

Finally, there is another section which authorises a person of or over the age of 18 to publish documents containing instructions for the cultivation or manufacture of cannabis or tetrahydrocannabinol for personal use provided that the documents do not contain instructions relating to trafficking. The last part of what Ms Payne wants to achieve through this private members bill is for an owner or occupier of land or premises to permit another person of or over the age of 18 to cultivate cannabis plants at the premises.

That is all very technical, but what it means is that to enable that personal use, somebody can have six plants in their own home and use them, and that sounds fine. The concern I have is that the ACT has gone along this path and legalised personal use, but the cannabis party's bill goes further than the ACT's legislation. The ACT decriminalised cannabis use in 2020, almost three years ago. What they have in place is the cultivation of up to two cannabis plants per person, with a maximum of four plants per household, and you are allowed cannabis in your home for personal use. In the ACT it is an offence to expose a child or young person to cannabis smoke. This bill is silent on that. It is an offence to store cannabis where children can reach it. This bill is silent on the storage of cannabis where children can reach it. It is an offence to grow cannabis using hydroponics or artificial cultivation, and this bill is silent on that aspect. In the ACT it is an offence to grow plants where the public can access them, and it is an offence to sell, share or gift cannabis to another person. Gifting of cannabis is specifically allowed in the legislation that we are debating today.

In Victoria obviously we do not want young people to be caught up and then have a criminal conviction because they have had a small amount of cannabis on them. I think everyone wants a commonsense approach to that. Obviously the police will make that assessment, but I think there needs to be a bit of common sense. If somebody is caught or they are repeatedly caught, they do have the ability for diversion and to undertake the cautioning with cannabis programs that are provided.

Frankly, it does not really bother me if somebody just goes out and smokes a joint now and again. But I do have concerns about the long-term effects of cannabis use on many, many people, and it has been a concern for me for many years. As we know, some people can manage, but many, many other people cannot. I want to read a media release from the AMA, who made a submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which was examining a bill. The AMA said they are worried that:

... there are many short-term and long-term risks posed by recreational cannabis.

I want to read this in because I think it is important, and this is my concern about where we are at:

Legalising cannabis for recreational purposes sends the wrong signal to the public, and especially to young Australians, that cannabis use is not harmful –

this is AMA president Professor Steve Robson saying this –

We know from a recent systematic review that there was an increase in acute cannabis poisoning post-legalisation in the US, Canada, and Thailand.

When I have looked at various documents in the US – and there are many states in the US that have legalised it – there is data coming out, and that data is quite alarming in relation to potentially traffic

accidents and crime. They also note that it is not marijuana of the 1970s, 40 years on, that it is a far more potent substance and that therefore it has a much more significant effect, and that is what is concerning many lawmakers and medical specialists in the US looking at that data that is coming out over years of having cannabis legalised. The AMA obviously has those concerns too around those recent reviews that have been undertaken in these areas where cannabis has been legalised for years. I will go back to this press release:

We also know there are already many Australians suffering detrimental health outcomes caused by recreational cannabis use. We see poor mental health outcomes from cannabis use including anxiety, panic attacks, paranoia, memory loss and an increased incidence of schizophrenia.

Cannabis use can lead to physical ill-health conditions such as bronchitis or cancer, cardiovascular system damage, and impaired reaction time and brain function.

I think these are the concerns for me in this bill. It sounds quite harmless, but when you take into consideration what the use is and what potentially could happen by sending that message to young people that this is a safe drug, that it is fine, but it really does have these very significant mental and physical health impacts, that is the AMA's concern as well. I do think that there are harm reduction measures that are in place, and we need to do more. On that I listened to the Minister for Mental Health. They have obviously got concerns, and they want to continue the discussion with the cannabis party. But clearly the government is getting similar data and concerns from medical experts around some of those issues and the harm minimisation that needs to be done.

I also note that in the AMA's submission they express concern that people may use recreational cannabis products to self-medicate. They are urging patients to speak to their doctor about that and to discuss better treatment methods, because they are worried about people going off and using cannabis in replacement for other medication that is regulated through the TGA and has GP approval and allows for GP oversight of medical conditions. For those reasons I am concerned that while it sounds like a simple thing, it is more complex than just allowing someone to have a few pot plants – pardon the pun – in the backyard and what that will mean. For those reasons and because this bill goes further than what is already in place in the ACT, I am of the view that we need more data to come in on this.

I hope the government is doing this body of work. I have been to America and spoken to some experts in this area, some years ago now, but it is up to the government to have a look at the data that is coming in through those systematic reviews and understand the potency of cannabis and what is out there now and how that can impact young people. We do understand that more needs to be done on harm minimisation. We do understand that we need to look at those issues around a health approach rather than just any kid that has a bit of dope on them gets a criminal record. I think we need to have some common sense around that as well, so I hope the government is working towards that.

I do finally want to say that I know that when we did the inquiry into the use of cannabis in Victoria in 2021, when I was on that committee – it was an extensive undertaking, that inquiry – the police came and spoke to us about their concerns. I would hope the government is continually speaking to the agencies that are affected around this and working on those concerns that were raised in that report back in 2021. But I say again that I think the views of the AMA, in that media release that I have referred to of 10 November this year and in their submission to the Senate legal and constitutional affairs committee examining a bill to legalise cannabis for recreational use, must be taken into consideration by all levels of government. On the basis of those concerns, the opposition will not be supporting this bill at this time.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:53): Firstly, I would like to thank Ms Payne for bringing forward this bill. It is rather more modest than I would have liked, but nevertheless it is a significant improvement on the status quo in this state. I will start by saying one of the things that this bill does not do which I wish it did, but I understand the reasons for being more modest, is it does not really address the problem with supply and the underlying problems with organised crime in this state.

There is a little bit on supply – you can grow your own – but I think, like with tomatoes, not many people will do that themselves. Some will of course.

The fact is over a third of Australians have used cannabis at some time in their life. Over 7 million Australians have used cannabis at some time in their life, and as we have seen from the statements from the Labor Party and from the opposition, these parties believe that you are a criminal. They believe that the police should hunt you down and that you should have a criminal record.

Nick McGowan: That is what the law says.

David LIMBRICK: Yes, that is what the law says, and that is not what the law should say. They also believe that if you have a friend who has consumed cannabis in their life, your friend should have a criminal record. They also believe that if you have a son or a daughter that has used cannabis, they should have a criminal record as well. It is absolutely immoral. They do not respect personal autonomy, bodily autonomy. They do not respect the personal consumption rights of adults. They think that they know best and that they can tell people what to do with the threat of criminal sanctions whilst at the same time we have alcohol and tobacco, the harms of which are orders of magnitude higher than cannabis.

How many people in Australia have died of cannabis in our history? No-one has died from cannabis in our history. It is absolutely outrageous that in 2023 we are still debating this and still debating whether or not people can choose to consume a natural plant. It is absolutely wrong. It is absolutely wrong. And I am proud to belong to a party that for 22 years now has supported a free market in cannabis for adults.

The government and the opposition were talking about harm prevention. No-one disagrees that cannabis causes harm; everyone knows that it causes harm. What we are talking about here is whether prohibition makes that harm worse, and it absolutely does. It gives people a criminal record. Minister Stitt spoke about some of the problems with bronchitis and breathing issues. These are problems directly caused by prohibition stopping innovation in the market. If we look at innovation in markets that have legalised cannabis, they switch to edibles, which you do not inhale and you do not smoke. Smoking is the biggest problem with cannabis. Yes, everyone agrees inhaling the smoke from organic materials is a bad idea, mostly. They have edibles. They have dry-herb vapes. They have many other mechanisms for reducing the harm, but these are all prohibited in this state. It just blows me away.

However, one of the biggest problems, and this bill does not address it – but I urge the government, for goodness sake, to stop handing over all of these markets to organised crime. We have the cannabis market controlled by organised crime in this state. We have the vaping market. We have the tobacco market. I do not place that blame on the state government; that is more of a federal problem. But certainly with vaping we could do a lot. We are seeing at the moment arson attacks all over the city. We are in the middle of yet another gang war in the state, and it is caused by prohibition yet again. We have to take bold action on this, and if the major parties will not do it, then maybe we need to get rid of them and get parties that will. But I hope that they will take some action. They need to move forward on taking these things out of the black market and regulating them in such a way that adults can get by and make these decisions themselves.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (14:57): I too wish to thank my parliamentary colleagues from Legalise Cannabis Victoria, Ms Payne and Mr Ettershank, for the work that they have done in preparing this private members bill. I deeply appreciate the way that they are constructively challenging our thinking on a variety of complex subjects associated with hemp and cannabis. I have learned a lot this year. It has been great.

Our approach to this takes a harm minimisation, equity and illicit market disruption approach. And listening as a government, we must weigh up potential benefits with potential risks, and we do this seriously. Issues such as this need consultation at many levels and a great deal of work, particularly when they involve significant change. The Victorian government shares the members' views about

innovative drug policy that supports harm minimisation, and we have a history when it comes to alcohol and drug policy reform of proudly taking a harm minimisation approach. Our record includes establishing the first medically supervised injecting service in our state, decriminalising public drunkenness, new and innovative research into production of hemp in our state and the launch of the medicinal cannabis trials, which were quite recent.

The trial of the medically supervised injecting centre began in North Richmond in 2017, and this was a brave step to take a safety-first, medical approach to addressing the decades of harm caused by drugs in the City of Yarra. This government wanted to stop people from dying of overdoses. The medically supervised injecting centres provide controlled, safe and hygienic environments for individuals to inject drugs. The centres are staffed by trained medical professionals who are equipped to respond to overdoses and other medical emergencies that may arise from drug use.

Today, the centre continues to provide sterile injection equipment and disposal facilities. They are designed to be non-judgmental and welcoming environments that provide access to additional healthcare services, drug treatment and other support services. Since opening in June 2018 the facility has safely managed more than 6750 overdoses and saved 63 lives. This has taken critical pressure off local hospitals and critically made a 55 per cent reduction in ambulance call-outs in that area. Ambulances are therefore freed up to be called out elsewhere, potentially saving more lives. I am aware that St Vincent's Hospital, which services the area, has experienced since the opening of this facility a decline in presentations relating to drug overdoses and related issues. Other hospitals have not – not in the same area – so this is very important. We were unafraid to go in and investigate, do the research and find out how this could work effectively, undertake a trial, and measure the trial and the results of the trial. Now we have locked it in, and proudly so, because people's lives are being saved, communities are becoming safer and the outcomes are far better for the broader community.

Another area that we have been leaning in on regarding reform is Victoria's public intoxication reforms. They are a direct result of tireless advocacy from First Nations communities and the family, particularly, of Aunty Tanya Day. In my speech in the next few minutes I will talk about Aboriginal people who have passed on, as well as key recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and coroners reports, including into Aunty Tanya's tragic and avoidable passing. We know a police cell is not the place for someone who is intoxicated to recover. This new approach includes outreach services to support people with transport to a safe place if needed. The government has recognised the disproportionate and distressing influence of Victoria's previous laws on public drunkenness especially on the Aboriginal community. The findings of the commission were tragically reinforced by the inquest into the death of Tanya Day, which occurred in 2017.

Tanya Day's death was a tragic story in itself and also a very sad example of generational trauma and the same archaic system existing for too long. Ms Day's uncle, the late Mr Harrison Day, had his death examined by the royal commission. Mr Day died in custody in 1982 from an epileptic fit in an Echuca police cell after he was arrested for an unpaid \$10 fine for public drunkenness. The Allan government has moved resolutely to decriminalise public drunkenness, opting instead for a health-centred approach because we know now that that approach works. This is to ensure care and support for publicly intoxicated individuals in our communities. Dedicated services are becoming available in the areas of the state where the data tells us that there is the greatest need and are centrally coordinated by statewide advice, referral and dispatch. Those are two examples where significant reform has been followed through by this government. I think our curiosity and interest in the concept of the decriminalisation of cannabis is definitely there, and we definitely need to strengthen our knowledge base and the research base to appreciate the issues in the space.

As a further example of what we have been doing in this space, this government took the pioneering step of legalising medicinal cannabis in 2016. This set a benchmark for further advancements in this field across Australia. The government supported David Ettershank's motion to consider how the needs of medicinal cannabis patients can be more fairly and appropriately managed by employers. We

recognised that patients using medicinal cannabis often faced challenges in balancing their medical need with other aspects of their daily lives, such as maintaining regular employment.

We are also committed to aligning Victoria's occupational health and safety regulations with current medicinal guidelines and therapies while also balancing workplace safety. It is critical to emphasise that no employee should be impaired while on the job, whether due to a legal or illegal substance. Workplace drug testing is an essential tool for mitigating risks and hazards in certain work environments. However, such measures should not disproportionately affect those using medicinal cannabis, provided they are not impaired while working. No individual in Victoria prescribed medicinal cannabis should be forced to make the difficult choice between taking their prescription medicine or going to work, provided they are unimpaired.

This government acknowledges the importance of drug testing in the workplace, especially in industries where risks are high, as a measure for employers to fulfil their OH&S responsibilities. We also stand in favour of investigating ways to accommodate the specific needs of medicinal cannabis patients within these work environments. As a result, a closed-circuit medicinal cannabis trial will enable trial participants to drive in a controlled environment after taking their prescribed medicinal cannabis – this without fear of breaking the law, while participating in valuable research to inform Victoria's approach to drug driving and medicinal cannabis into the future.

This government is also continuing to support the hemp industry through research and investment. We are co-investing with AgriFutures and industry in the national industrial hemp variety trial and hosting the Victorian trial at Hamilton. Last year this government passed the Agriculture Legislation Amendment Act 2022 to support the cultivation of hemp crops for subsequent industrial use, and I acknowledge the important research that was undertaken by the Industrial Hemp Taskforce established by this Labor government. The taskforce engaged directly with industry stakeholders, participants and research organisations to gain a thorough understanding of the industry, exploring its challenges and opportunities and how Victoria can maximise hemp's economic potential.

Agriculture Victoria has co-invested with AgriFutures and the industry in the national industrial hemp variety trial and hosts the Victorian trial, as I said, in Hamilton in south-west Victoria. As outlined in the AgriFutures emerging industries report *Industrial Hemp Variety Trials: Results from the Hamilton Smart Farm Trial for the 2021–22 Growing Season*, the trial included the evaluation of six hemp varieties provided by industry and sown at three sowing times. The varieties selected for inclusion in the trial ranged in origin, sex expression, end use, maturity, height and yield potential. Initial results are encouraging, and the trial will be repeated for growers to have confidence in achieving the same results or better in different seasons.

In conclusion, I acknowledge again the contribution made by Legalise Cannabis Victoria and the work that my colleagues are doing. There is no question that this government is open to being challenged and open to learning and open to doing research and conducting a considered and careful process before, as our record shows, making changes. I again thank you for the challenge. Whilst we are unable to support the bill at this time in its current form, I think you can see that we are very happy to listen, to learn and to consider all proposals from the Legalise Cannabis Party.

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:11): I want to thank both members of the Legalise Cannabis Party for their contributions and their effort. I am sure you know where I am going to come from on this particular matter, nonetheless I admire the fact that you are trying to come up with a solution and that you have put something forward. I congratulate you both on that and the work you will continue to do regardless of what I say, and that sometimes may be a good thing.

In November this year, in fact on 1 November, although I think it was some three weeks ago, I became the first ever Victorian MP to be tested at my workplace here at Parliament. On the steps of Parliament I took a test. I gave a urine test on the steps of Parliament – done properly, done legally, lawfully.

Jaelyn Symes: Don't elaborate; that's enough. That'll do for now.

Nick McGOWAN: I learned more than I needed to know about – but I will stop there. I will take the minister’s advice on this occasion. I gave a hair sample, which was a little concerning, because I did naively think they would sort of pluck a hair, and when they got the scissors out and they took it close to the crown and took a sizeable chunk of hair it was more than I was anticipating they might take.

Jaelyn Symes: You’ve got a bit, though.

Nick McGOWAN: Yes, I am lucky I am blessed with hair – what I did not get in looks I got in hair – so that was sensational. And then I also gave some saliva. I had to give saliva. I gave all that evidence and handed it over to the drug detection agency. They are a private provider and they reached out to me after my motion in this place some months ago now, and I thank them for their magnificent work but also their generous and constructive approach. They do testing in the workplace in Victoria. I have no association with them, for the public record, but nonetheless they reached out to me and I accepted their offer. Although the journalist that covered this at the time was somewhat excited at the prospect that maybe because the testing went back some time he might receive a positive test from me on any particular substance. Sad to say for him, it was not quite the story he had wished for. It was negative on all fronts, and I am happy to make those records public to anyone who wishes to see them.

A member interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: You can help me with that. I have made clear previously my concerns particularly about illicit and unprescribed drug taking – and I make that very distinct distinction – and in my view it has no place in the workplace, much less in our local communities. Perhaps where we do agree is that our current cannabis policies have failed us, and they continue to fail us. They are not stopping Victorians from using cannabis for recreational purposes, and that worries me immensely. But it does not necessarily follow hence that we should legalise cannabis for such. The only metric we should use to decide whether we should legalise cannabis or not is whether it is harmful to users and whether legalising it will increase or decrease its usage. To me that is pretty much it in a nutshell.

Let us talk about the harm it causes. The Australian Medical Association, the peak professional body for doctors in Australia, is categorical in its rejection of this bill. The submission by the AMA to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee’s Legalising Cannabis Bill 2023 inquiry lists out the potential immediate and long-term impacts of cannabis use.

Let us look at the potential immediate impacts. Here are some of the things that a cannabis user can or may experience: reduced brain function, anxiety or panic attacks, paranoia, memory loss. Now, these things are not frivolous. As the AMA submission also presents, in 2021 cannabis was present – and we need to be very careful in how we present the information – in 4.5 per cent of drug-induced deaths. Present – that does not mean it causes. I do not want anyone to think otherwise, but nonetheless the fact that it was present says something.

There were 29.2 cannabidiol-related hospitalisations per 100,000 Australians in 2021, with two in three requiring overnight hospitalisation. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, in 2021–22 weed was the third most common drug of concern that people received treatment for. A 2023 systematic review found an increase in acute cannabis poisoning post-legislation in the US, Canada and Thailand. I have been to Thailand. I have spent quite some time with people there. One of the things that concerns me most, to take up Mr Limbrick’s speech on this matter, particularly in Thailand is that one of the experiences they found was that when they legalised it – although ironically they have not, but that is a quirk, so let us say for general purposes they have – overnight they turned all those people who were operating illegally, the underworld figures – perhaps I will stick to that characterisation – into legitimate businesses. It was a multimillion, multibillion dollar business overnight. So if ever we went down this path, one of the biggest challenges aside from the health challenge is: how do you prevent some of the most criminal, perhaps less desirable, characters in our communities from profiting from that immediately? It is a huge challenge, and I am not quite sure what the answer to that is.

I referred earlier to a systematic review. It is important to note that that is not a single finding; it is based on 30 studies, and they were subject across three different countries. They looked at the cannabis use and found that poisoning increased after legislation that gave them those changes took effect. The long-term effects were quite pronounced. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare they include physical dependence; upper respiratory tract cancers; chronic bronchitis; cardiovascular system damage; mental health conditions, including depression; and poor adolescent psychosocial development. Moreover, as per the prominent work cited by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on their website – they cite a study which says – somewhere near 10 per cent of people are likely to become addicted when they use cannabis. That is a concern. Now, they are a reputable organisation, as I know you know, but even if it is half that, even if it is 5 per cent – let us halve it; they say it is 10 – in this country the last survey they did showed use is going up, clearly. We heard a third before, but even if it is in the order of 2 million or 2.5 million Australians, that is still a lot of Australians who then become addicted, and so that concerns me greatly.

The submission to the Senate inquiry from the Drug Advisory Council Australia cites the most recent extensive study on this – that is the systematic study I have referred to – and its 65 other findings and studies it relies upon. We are told that in order to fix a problem with our vulnerable people, our vulnerable young people in particular, legalising cannabis is a pathway to correct that situation, but what we know is that is consistently not the case.

I want to take up a further point here in respect to diversion programs, because the question we have to ask ourselves is: why are these young people not being diverted? Why are they instead being criminalised? On that I have some sympathy. The Australian Institute of Criminology in 2021 reported that there are not nearly enough drug education and treatment services to divert people to. That is quite alarming. These findings were confirmed by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales in 2019. In fact they found there was a declining trend across Australia because of the lack of services to refer people to.

No-one is helping young people or Indigenous Australians by legalising cannabis use and possession, something that will no doubt lead to a further decline in their physical and mental health and lead to an addiction problem. If we really want to help young people and Indigenous Australians, we should try talking about its harms, we should try investing in diversion programs and we should ensure that anyone who needs assistance and help can safely and easily access it without stigma.

I am doing my bit; I have undertaken my drug tests. I do not do that glibly either, because there is a serious point here, and it is not about outing people. It is actually about raising awareness, as you have done today, and actually then also providing support and assistance to those who might need it. You know, some people are just fine, but some are not. So it is them that we ought to look to assist.

I thank you for your efforts, but nonetheless at least for me I clearly do not approve of illicit drug taking. I clearly will not be supporting the bill, but nonetheless I thank you for the work you continue to do to look for a constructive solution to some of the problems, including detaining people, because that is clearly not going to work necessarily for them either.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:20): I am very pleased to rise today on behalf of the Greens and support this bill, which essentially allows for the personal use and possession of cannabis. The Greens have long been supporters of the green. We have been advocating in this place for over a decade for legal weed, and in supporting this bill we will continue to call for a realistic and evidence-based approach to drug law reform that treats drug use as a health issue rather than a criminal issue. It is frankly unfair that a young person could end up with a criminal record for possessing cannabis, and it is also unacceptable that First Nations people around Australia are more likely to be pursued through the courts for possession of a small quantity of cannabis than non-Aboriginal people.

We are really lagging behind much of the world here when it comes to the conversation on legalising cannabis and cannabis reform. Many other countries have realised that prohibition causes more harm

than it prevents, and they have consequently changed their laws. Our current tough-on-drugs approach disproportionately affects socially disadvantaged people. Thousands of vulnerable people who use drugs are needlessly dragged through the criminal justice system with great damage to their lives. To be blunt, a law and order, 'Just say no' approach does not work here. We need to be clear eyed and acknowledge that people in Victoria smoke weed. That is what they do. We have rightly legalised it for medicinal purposes, but we should be going further, decriminalising it and legalising it for personal use too. This allows for community education and harm reduction, and it disempowers the black market trade that has been spoken about here today.

More than a third of people over 14 years of age have used cannabis at least once in their life, and out in the community the majority of people agree that possession of cannabis should not be a crime. I am talking about almost 80 per cent of Australians – that is significant. As a step beyond this bill, the Greens position is that cannabis should be legalised and its sale should be regulated and then taxed. For example, our Parliamentary Budget Office costing from last year revealed that such a plan could raise \$1.21 billion in revenue over the next 10 years. These funds could then be invested into, say, drug and alcohol detox and treatment services, which have been frankly chronically underfunded for years. It is high time that Victoria got smarter on drugs. This bill would be an excellent first step towards sensible drug policy in our state, so I say: yes, we cannabis.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (15:23): Thank you very much for the opportunity to come today and speak on the bill and give commentary on the issue at hand. The truth is that cannabis use has been a major area of policy reform that this government has undertaken both in the realms of harm minimisation and of course medical usage where needed and appropriate. I take my time today to give thanks to Mr Ettershank and Ms Payne for their continued advocacy on this issue and the work that they do here in this place. It is clear this bill was crafted with the best of courage and consideration, and their continued efforts must be acknowledged. I also would say that I acknowledge some very important motivations that these members have in bringing forward this bill, and their commitment to harm minimisation, equity and illicit drug market discouragement have led to a policy area both in and out of this place. I would just say that while the Victorian government does not have current plans to decriminalise the personal possession and use of cannabis in our state, we do in fact share the members' views about innovative drug policy that supports harm minimisation.

When it comes to alcohol and drug reform and policy, the Allan Labor government takes a harm minimisation approach. There are a range of initiatives, reforms and services that I would like to bring to the attention of those in the chamber today, but these matters can of course be complicated and bring up many emotions and mixed experiences in our community. We are certainly a government that is looking beyond the divisive and sensationalist rhetoric that some have kicked about in this place, and now we want to consider really thoughtful and effective policies that improve health and social outcomes for Victorians and the Victorian community.

We were, as I said, the first jurisdiction in the country to legalise the use of medicinal cannabis as I understand. We have established the life-saving injecting service in North Richmond and more recently we have debated over many hours and many, many times here in this chamber the decriminalisation of public drunkenness. We are leading the nation. We have listened to the experts. The Allan Labor government is listening to the experts and just will not accept voices that entrench further stigma around this issue. We are here to help Victorians reduce the harm felt by drug use through all of our different programs, and we are almighty proud of it.

Now I will take a moment to go to what it is that we have done, which is investing more than \$2.5 billion in drug and alcohol treatment, supporting harm minimisation initiatives that sit alongside really substantial legislative reform achievements over our last nine years. And the more than \$370 million that has been allocated in the 2023–24 state budget allows us to continue to do the life-saving and life-changing services and initiatives that continue to save lives. I am thinking particularly of the operations of the medically supervised injecting room in North Richmond. This service allows the community to have access to vital programs that prevent excessive harm and is a service that I am

really proud has found a home in the Northern Metropolitan Region. As members of this place would know, legislation was passed earlier this year to make this important service a continuing feature of our health system, and I recall that debate here with much interest. And there are the public intoxication reforms that, as I mentioned, have been debated in this place many, many times. I think that they all go to the greater question of alcohol and other drug reform in our state and the advocacy that had to take place off the back of the really tragic and unfortunate death of Aunty Tanya Day, a completely avoidable death.

Change is happening, and it is a clear reflection of the Allan Labor government's commitment to communities and particularly to First Nations communities. I am thinking first and foremost about the centres that I have visited throughout the state supported by the Aboriginal community controlled organisations, the model that is squarely prioritising the health of First Nations Victorians – services like withdrawal centres and rehab and others that really do place a cultural model of care first and foremost in the health system. There are many, many others I could talk about, but I will take a moment also to reflect on the workers that make all of these centres work for those people who need them most. There are our paramedics and other health professionals as well, and I say thank you to them.

I will take a moment to reflect on the activism, the advocacy and the tireless policy work that has led to the fact that we are having a debate in our Parliament about drug and alcohol reform, and that is quite incredible. Many of these reforms have been led by people from the public health community, people that I have had the pleasure of working alongside for many, many years, and so for those good folks I reflect on their good deeds and good works over many, many years and thank them for continuing to show up for our community.

But when it comes to cannabis reform, our position was clearly articulated earlier in remarks from Minister Stitt. The truth is that we have led Australia when it comes to medical use and will continue to do so, undertaking these reforms that the government has proudly got on with. We have been able to see these changes deliver their intended outcomes safely and for the benefit of the Victorian community and Victorian people. The integral legislation that was passed in 2015 has resulted in safe access to medicinal cannabis for Victorians in need of it. These reforms mean that no Victorian needs to face the difficult choice of breaking the law or watching their loved ones suffer. I have heard time and time again some of the stories of these folks, and I am just entirely moved by their incredible advocacy, strength and courage to share their family stories and share stories of hurt and harm and yet bring that to the point of public law reform, which is just actually incredible.

While the rest of the nation has indeed followed us, at the time, I have got to say, this was some really bold work. It was expert informed and nation leading, which can only be done under a Labor government. This government took a really carefully considered approach to this reform to ensure that it achieved its desired outcomes and provided Victorians with a pathway to safely use cannabis for its therapeutic and medicinal benefits. The steps we have taken to ensure that Victorians can feel safe and secure while also being able to access the medicines and remedial treatments are quite an incredible achievement for us and our state. I know that it happened because of advocates like those beside me, Mr Ettershank and Ms Payne, but also advocates out there in communities – advocates drawn to be the face of reform because of their family story and their long and abiding passion for change.

There is so much else that we could consider, and I would like to take a moment to reflect with you in this chamber on the recently passed legislation to allow for proper safety and research trials to help us better understand to what degree it is safe for somebody to drive a vehicle after consuming cannabis. I have got to say, that was quite an eye-opening debate for me and, I imagine, for others in the chamber. The truth is that what we know from that is that medicinal cannabis can be detected in a roadside presence test regardless of impairment, so it was really good to hear that debate in the chamber about a closed-circuit medicinal cannabis trial which will indeed enable participants to drive in this controlled environment after taking their prescribed medicinal cannabis without fear of breaking the law and while participating in much-valued research to inform our approach to drug driving and medicinal cannabis in the future.

There are of course many, many challenges with balancing individual health and driving needs against road safety, and we are committed to establishing this evidence-based policy position on medicinal cannabis and safe driving. The closed-circuit track trial will provide valuable information while also mitigating possible risks to all road users on the public road network, ensuring that Victorians can feel safe at all times when making decisions around these issues. When I think about this trial and how it is that we will face, with the debate before us, a very real issue about driving impairment, this is a really valuable addition to the public debate around the legalising of cannabis. I thank the chamber for their very heartfelt contributions to that debate earlier, and I would just say that there is of course a lot of work to be done in that trial, and good luck to all the researchers and the eminent experts that will inform that work. It will be conducted, as I said, in a controlled driving environment that is separated from our public roads, and safety considerations for all participants and research staff will be an absolute priority.

There is a track record that we can take the time here in this chamber to reflect upon. Many of us have been around for these debates now for a couple of years, some in fact for even longer, and so to those that came before I thank you for the nation-leading work that you have done in getting us to this point where we continue to push our nation as the state leader amongst our other state parties. We are investing in and have a track record of a commitment to drug use harm reduction, and that is of course coupled with our nation-leading legislative reform related to medicinal use and access. We very much acknowledge, as I have said, that there is so much more to do. I think the work that came about in our recent sitting on the trial is just one example of that – to ensure that further reforms are safe and appropriate for the Victorian community. I look forward to continuing this work in the chamber and indeed beyond.

Matthew BACH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:35): It is a real pleasure to join this important debate, and I think we need to get real. We need to get real that this government's policy of harm maximisation when it comes to cannabis must end. The Andrews Labor government – the Allan government – has fought a war on drugs. The drugs won. The drugs won a long time ago, yet this government is committed to its forever war. I like Ms Watt, especially when it comes to issues of incarceration. She talked briefly about deaths in custody. You better believe Ms Watt is real. Nonetheless, the government's talking points for this debate contain the most extraordinary and inane piffle, paragraphs and paragraphs about totally extraneous and irrelevant matters.

Tom McIntosh: What does that mean?

Matthew BACH: Extraneous and irrelevant? They are basically synonyms. I only needed one; I did the second for emphasis, Macca. Here on cannabis in Victoria the Allan Labor government, which likes to say that it cares about social justice, for example – I believe in justice justice, they talk a lot about social justice; okay, fine, we will use the language of the left – herds together the poorest and most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in the state and piles them into prisons in huge numbers simply for the personal use of cannabis.

If the police came around to my house, just say, and they found me and my good lady wife – this is an entirely hypothetical example – enjoying a spliff out the back, everybody knows someone like me would never ever in a million years be shunted into the justice system, yet in this state today hundreds and hundreds of people are languishing in jail, some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in our state, purely because they have used drugs. They have not dealt drugs. That is a dreadful thing; that is a dreadful crime. They have not been engaged in drug trafficking. That is an awful thing. They are poor and desperate people who have used drugs themselves and then, under the ongoing totally cruel and inhumane policies of this government, have been herded together and funnelled into jail.

There are many ways to skin a cat. Whether this exact bill is the right way, others can comment upon. But we need to agree at least upon a baseline here. Certainly part of that baseline should be that we do not want to see more drug use in our community. We want to see less drug use, yet the policies of this government, of harm maximisation, are actually leading to more drug-related harm. I agree entirely

with some the comments of my friend and colleague Mr McGowan about diversion. This is something Mr Ettershank has spoken about in this place before. I remember an excellent question without notice Mr Ettershank posed to one relevant government minister about diversion programs. The government, in its speaking points, likes to talk about diversion. When we were in government many years ago we funded diversion programs as well – not enough of course.

Georgie Crozier: I put a school in youth justice.

Matthew BACH: There was a school, Parkville College, as Ms Crozier notes. But people are not getting diverted, so we need to look at doing things differently. I think we need to look at doing things very differently. There is an ongoing discussion, I understand that, and if my information is correct, we may not indeed come to a vote on this matter. But I am really, really pleased that an important debate has been brought forward.

I want to acknowledge that it is entirely possible on this important question for intelligent people of goodwill to have different views. There are many people who are connected to our side of politics who fervently believe that the sort of measure being put forward by the cannabis party is not the right way to go. I understand and respect that. There are other heroes on our side of politics who believe very strongly in further cannabis legalisation. I am talking about people like Milton Friedman. I was interested in some of the comments of the new Argentinian president, an interesting character, Javier Milei. He has a rather strong view on the criminalisation of people who are engaged in the personal use of drugs.

As I say, there are many ways to skin a cat. What I am most concerned about is the huge number of people who are currently languishing in our jails. I am concerned about that first and foremost, because as I said before, I think too many of us who would not find ourselves incarcerated in a pink fit just cannot fathom the crushing blow that it is to be incarcerated, especially for poor and vulnerable and disadvantaged people. I said in my first speech in this place that we needed to look at every possible means to get people out of prisons who are not a danger to others. So as a Liberal, I really struggle with the idea that somebody might be doing something that I may not like but nonetheless is not causing direct harm to others, and yet this Labor government herds these poor and vulnerable people together and throws them in jail often for years at a time.

I did not get much love with Javier Milei, so how about Donald Trump? Interesting political figures have done really interesting things on drug law form. The best thing Donald Trump did – and he did do some good things – was to seek to change clearly racist laws that led to very different punishments for people who used crack cocaine and powdered cocaine. Overwhelmingly, poor black guys, in America, use crack cocaine. What had occurred over many years was that ridiculous mandatory minimum penalties were in place for the personal use of crack cocaine, but the posh stockbroker down the road who uses powdered cocaine – well, of course he was let off with a slap on the wrist. I would simply urge all members around this place to continue to look in good faith at these really important issues. I think it is a great thing that Ms Payne and Mr Ettershank have brought forward this bill, which may not receive the consent of the house today. Nonetheless for members to come to this important debate recognising that around the chamber there are different parties – I actually think is entirely legitimate and sound, when thinking about the values of our different parties, to have different views on this question.

I do not doubt, noting Ms Watt's previous beautiful, powerful contributions about the impact of prison, especially the impact of prison on Indigenous people, that right around this chamber we can find unanimity on that question. We want fewer poor and vulnerable and disadvantaged people in our prisons – we want fewer people full stop – but obviously we know that the organs of the state tend to incarcerate poor and vulnerable and disadvantaged people at a far greater rate than people like you and me. It is beholden upon us, I think, to look in good faith at any measure that we can that will not of course then lead to other adverse outcomes, as I believe significant drug law reform would not lead to other adverse outcomes. As Ms Payne said when introducing the bill, we have seen in other

jurisdictions that this kind of reform can be done very badly, but it also can be done very well, so of course there is need for care as we move forward.

As I say, I dare say this bill will not receive the support of the house today, but cannabis law reform and drug law reform are so critical. I do not think anyone in this chamber – there are so many people of goodwill right across this chamber – would support poor and vulnerable people being thrown in jail simply for using drugs themselves. Not dealing – that is a dreadful crime. Not trafficking – that is dreadful – but just using drugs themselves. Yet today, in huge numbers, that is what is happening. We need to look to do big and bold things to stop that.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (15:44): It is my pleasure to speak on Legalise Cannabis Victoria's bill to regulate the personal use of cannabis for adults. Cannabis prohibition has failed, and we all know that. In 2023 how can we still be arresting and charging people for the possession and consumption of a relatively benign plant? We are criminalising tens of thousands of otherwise law-abiding Victorians who are doing nothing to harm other people, as Dr Bach so eloquently stated.

These are the most recent stats we have. In 2021 in this state there were almost 9000 people charged with cannabis use and possession – nothing commercial, just personal use. And that accounts for 92 per cent of all cannabis offences in Victoria during that period.

Worse, in the three years to June 2019, which is the latest we have got stats for, 11,498 people were sentenced in Victoria for simple possession, and I think this is relevant to Ms Crozier's point: 10 per cent of those people, almost 1500 of those people, were jailed, were incarcerated, for personal use or possession – for a victimless crime. It beggars belief. And the cost to the taxpayer of policing this plant is astronomical. About \$1.1 billion annually is spent simply on imprisonment. When you include the cost of policing and prosecution to court, legal aid and community corrections, you are looking at a bill of around \$1.7 billion per annum.

But it is the human cost of drug criminalisation that is truly breathtaking. We know that the harms associated with ending up in the criminal justice system are very harmful indeed, and again, Ms Watt has made a very elegant contribution on this point. Research tells us that First Nations people and others from disadvantaged communities are at greater risk of harm from the criminalisation of cannabis. Vulnerable young people caught up in the criminal justice system can suffer lifelong consequences, and for what? An approach that has never worked, is out of step with community expectations and has done nothing – nothing whatsoever – to curb the illicit market.

Seventy-eight per cent of Victorians believe that possession of cannabis should not be a crime. We are not talking on the margins here. I have spoken to parents of teenagers and young adults who want to see cannabis regulated because their kids are able to access illicit cannabis so easily. It is easier for many to simply buy cannabis than a packet of cigarettes, and buying cannabis through the illicit market exposes them to the real gateway: dealers who will happily sell them dangerous drugs. When I was working in Shepparton a few years back I was told that acquiring an evening's worth of cannabis was more expensive than a comparable quality of methamphetamine – it was cheaper to buy ice. Let us not have someone seeking cannabis be offered that option by organised crime. Let us take cannabis, with its low harm profile – and we can talk about that profile in a minute – out of the hands of drug dealers and out of the hands of organised crime. Our own Parliamentary Budget Office calculates that this illicit market right here in Victoria is worth \$1200 million a year based on an annual consumption of 85 tonnes – 85 tonnes of illicit cannabis. To put that in some perspective, 85 tonnes is more than the weight of a 767 airliner. This illicit market exists for only one reason. The one reason only is that the state says it is illegal. If we simply legalise cannabis, that illicit market withers and dies. And sure, there are going to be a lot of really disappointed outlaw bokie gangs, but really, is their happiness such a priority for this place?

There has to be a better way, and there is. Leading economies around the world are decriminalising and regulating cannabis consumption. They are investing in harm prevention, in health education and in social justice reform. We have seen the benefits that people are deriving from cannabis as a lawful medicine for a range of serious medical conditions. There is good evidence that the harms associated with cannabis have been misrepresented and overstated historically. Cannabis is not for everyone. Many people just do not like it, but a lot of people, including me and Ms Payne, do.

When we have these bogies sort of thrown up about the impact of cannabis in various jurisdictions, the one thing they tend to lack is currency and context – sorry, that is two things. Ms Crozier was quoting some stats from the US, where there is a *laissez-faire*, totally deregulated cannabis market, and comparing it to what we are talking about here, which is a very modest and simple change. You are comparing apples with oranges.

I agree that there are real issues associated with this. It is not a health product, but at the same time people like to, for example, throw up the case of psychosis. For those who are familiar with the work of a former Australian of the Year Professor Patrick McGorry, he has just concluded part of an international study which has indicated that cannabis neither causes nor exacerbates psychosis. I know that is an uncomfortable reality, but that is what the latest research says.

We know that the responsible regulation of cannabis in Victoria can and will reduce harm. We know it will save the state money through a reduction in law enforcement costs and will free up police resources to concentrate on crimes that actually have victims. Regulation is taking place around the world, and it is happening over the border. The ACT has legalised the possession, use and cultivation of cannabis, and the sky, miraculously, has not fallen in. However, arrests for low-level cannabis offences have plunged by 90 per cent since those reforms. There has also been no detectable increase in consumption and no increase in adverse public health outcomes. To pick up Mr McGowan's point on increased use, even in those jurisdictions in America that I referred to where there has been pretty much of a *laissez faire* legalisation process, the average increase in consumption, after we allow for what is called interstate cannabis tourism, is less than 2 per cent, a negligible increase.

Our bill is very similar to the ACT's, but it is better. We seek to address some of the anomalies in that legislation. For example, in the ACT it is legal to grow a plant but it is illegal to have a seed. Ain't that a chicken and egg kind of conundrum? Perhaps that is the sort of situation that good legislation would address. What we are seeking is modest, intelligent reform, and what better time than now? Seriously, how long are we going to drag this out? After 95 years of prohibition do we really think that another year of failed policy is going to nail it? Do we hear the police say to us, 'Just give us another year or two and we can knock this one on the head'?

The 2020–25 Victoria Police drug strategy mentions cannabis twice. Firstly, it notes that it is dominated by organised crime – surprise, surprise; and secondly, that it is associated with fires in illicit grow houses. That is it. That is the totality of the police strategy on cannabis. Most of the cops I talk to say that this law is an embarrassment and a waste of scarce police resources. The New South Wales police association, testifying before a Senate inquiry earlier this year, has even gone so far as to call for cannabis legalisation. They actually oppose decriminalisation and would like to see legislation combined with health education and an evaluation of the reform process. Think of the money we could save and all the harm we could spare ordinary Victorians, in particular our young people. Victoria needs to regulate cannabis. It is as simple as that.

We are appreciative of the government's support and particularly encouraged to hear Minister Stitt's commitment to a process of expert analysis and community engagement to progress cannabis law reform. That is the approach we ourselves have been advocating to the government: an intelligent debate, a public engagement and expert analysis. We thank the government for that commitment and look forward to working with them on cannabis regulation in the new year.

Other Australian states have taken steps in this direction, other jurisdictions around the world are taking giant leaps. If we in Victoria are truly this country's most progressive state, then it is time to actually walk the walk, not just talk the talk. On behalf of LCV, let me express our appreciation to the Animal Justice Party, the Greens and the Libertarians for their words of support on this important bill; likewise to the other members who have contributed so thoughtfully. To the three-quarters of a million cannabis consumers in Victoria, our purpose as Legalise Cannabis Victoria MPs in this Parliament is clear. We are making progress, and we will be bringing this reform back to Parliament and pursuing the reform process with undiminished vigour in 2024. Today is a big step, and we will not rest until justice for cannabis consumers has been achieved. I commend the bill to the house.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:55): 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.

Committees

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Reference

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (15:55): I move:

That this house requires the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 14 November 2024, on the impacts and drivers of, and solutions for, food security in Victoria, including but not limited to:

- (1) the impact of food insecurity in Victoria on:
 - (a) physical and mental health;
 - (b) poverty and hardship; and
- (2) options available to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

Tamarra from Mildura told us:

The rising cost of living has made it hard to eat properly. I've got 3 children and it's difficult to give them a proper diet, because healthy food is so expensive.

Jessica from Bulleen said:

Some days I can only afford one meal. I have had to skip psych sessions, physio and ovarian health appointments because I can barely afford rent and food.

And Judy from Brunswick said:

I have accessed food relief and have put my bills on a payment plan. I have a good job as a social worker, but I could not afford to pay my way. It is scary.

I am sure many of my colleagues in this chamber today have heard from constituents like these ones, who are struggling every day. If we really listen to these people, to their stories, we should be compelled to take action, because food security and access to healthy, nutritious and affordable food must be acknowledged as a fundamental human right. Food is a basic need, not a luxury. Our food system should be meeting that need.

The Greens are proposing this inquiry because we believe that the government can and should be doing more to ensure that all Victorians have access to nutritious, affordable food. We need to look at what steps can be taken to address the immediate needs of our community but also plan for a sustainable and resilient food system in the future. The World Bank defines food security as being:

... when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

Food is one of our most basic needs. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs it sits at the bottom of the pyramid below security, employment and health, yet right now more and more Victorians are struggling to afford food. They are being forced to skip meals, to go without fresh food and to raid their savings just to pay for essentials. Food security is no longer a concern for the unlucky few. Recent data shows that 23 per cent of households are severely food insecure. That means they skip meals or go whole days without eating – 23 per cent of households. This year a cost-of-living report released by consumer group Finder found that 43 per cent of consumers are stressed about the price of their groceries and one in three have had to ask friends or family for financial support in the previous 12 months. The latest *Foodbank Hunger Report* also paints a grim picture of the realities of those who are severely food insecure, with many citing that it was even too difficult for them to access emergency food relief. This is supported by discussions I have had with food relief agencies, who are reporting the highest demand they have ever experienced and being unable to meet that demand.

This is not just a justice issue; it is a health issue. For so many people, out-of-control food prices and constant price hikes are taking a toll on their mental health. It is causing stress, anxiety and depression. People experiencing food insecurity also experience poor physical health, and this is worse the longer it lasts and the more severe the degree of food insecurity. It affects both the quantity and quality of food that people eat, and prices for fresh fruit, vegetables and legumes have risen faster than those for processed foods.

Kids who eat a poor diet are much more likely to exhibit challenging behaviours and struggle with their learning and development and experience iron deficiency and hospitalisations. They are much more prone to growing up to be adults with poor diets and with greater risks of cardiovascular disease, dental disease, depression and diabetes, just to name a few. Meanwhile, older people who experience food insecurity are more likely to experience muscle and bone density loss and frailty as well as poorer recovery after illness or injury. There is a complex interaction between food security, obesity and chronic illness, and the growing cost of healthy food is driving an increase in Victorian-era diseases like scurvy – scurvy!

While food insecurity is already affecting too many Victorians now, without a plan even more Victorians will be at risk in the future in the face of climate change and growing economic instability. Whole communities risk food insecurity when major shocks or climate disasters occur. Victoria hosts a significant portion of Australia's food bowl, yet we are no stranger to the disruptive forces of shocks in our food chain. 2020 saw the COVID-19 pandemic hit us, and we saw just how vulnerable our supply chain really is. There were limits on supermarket milk, canned goods like lentils and beans, bread, pasta – staples. This placed a major strain on everyday consumers. Then just recently, in late 2022, high rainfall around harvest saw much of our summer crops decimated and a spike in food prices. Two days ago wheat and legume crops in western Victoria were decimated by torrential rainfall, and now we are facing a number of years of hot and dry conditions. Reduced rainfall significantly impacts wheat production, which of course is essential to many everyday items. Livestock struggle in extreme weather – milk yield from cattle reduces by up to 40 per cent in extreme heatwave conditions. The Climate Council estimates that there are less than five days of perishable food in the supply chain at any one time and that households typically hold about three to five days of food. With our food reserves this low, all of us are vulnerable to unforeseen shocks and stresses.

Just as we need to build resilience in our food system to reduce the impacts of shocks on affordability, it is important we also reflect on the role that market concentration in our supermarket sector plays in determining the affordability and availability of food. It is no secret that the two major supermarkets have posted profits of over \$1 billion in the past financial year. During the COVID-19 pandemic, high profit margins were achieved by many supermarkets across the world but Australia's duopoly soared above the rest, operating at almost double the profit of their international counterparts. Recent research from the Australia Institute reveals that 56 per cent of price increases above inflation were company profits. This is great news for shareholders, but it is occurring at the expense of everyday shoppers struggling to put food on the table and primary producers such as our dairy industry who have to fight

the duopoly tooth and nail over fair prices for their milk. Given the lack of competition in the market, exacerbated in rural and regional areas where there is very little choice, there is limited scope for people to use consumer choice to drive down prices.

We have got a situation where many people do not have food security – people do not have physical or economic access to safe and nutritious food that meets their needs and allows them to live a healthy life. Without change, this situation is likely to worsen. Increasingly, governments in other jurisdictions in Australia and overseas are recognising this and the need to look at systemic responses to improve food security for their citizens. For example, in November of last year the New South Wales inquiry into food production and supply tabled its report. The inquiry recommended that a food systems plan be developed for New South Wales and include strategies to address food insecurity and promote equitable access to affordable nutritious food. Countries like Ireland are making headway as world leaders in sustainable food systems through their inspired *Food Vision 2030* plan. New Zealand has appointed an inaugural groceries commissioner to help level the playing field in its grocery sector and hold the major players to account. And the US promotes the development of urban food forests across cities such as New York, Atlanta and San Francisco to give people more access to locally grown fresh food.

Victoria also needs to recognise the very real threat of food insecurity – both the immediate challenge facing people right now who cannot afford food and the longer term risks. An inquiry into food security in Victoria would offer an opportunity to learn about things like the food relief sector – the role they are currently playing and the role we want them to play in the future – the levers the state government has at its disposal to ensure nutritious food is affordable and accessible for everyone, the risk to the supply chain, measures to better prepare for future shocks and how we can build resilience.

When a huge and growing number of people in our community cannot afford food – almost a quarter of households, remember, are severely food insecure – something is very wrong. Victorians are crying out for governments to do something. We have a moral obligation to step up and fulfil our responsibility to look after our citizens' most basic needs. An inquiry is an opportunity for us to identify what options the government has to address food insecurity, and I urge colleagues across the chamber to support the motion.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:04): I rise today to speak on Dr Mansfield's motion. The matter which we are discussing today goes to a very important issue. In fact it goes to two very important issues, the first being food insecurity and the second being cost of living. Dr Mansfield quite eloquently went through some of the physical and mental health outcomes that both of these things can inflict on people, and I do wish to acknowledge first up that they are not just hypothetical concerns. They are a reality for many of the people whom I represent. Increased hardship and, for some, poverty are the realities of the rising cost of living.

As a member of the Legal and Social Issues Committee I am of course interested in making sure that the work that we do as a committee, with the time and resources that we have, is productive and is focused on the issues and terms of reference that will allow for us to make strong and effective recommendations that will allow for considered and positive reform that is also achievable. I also of course want to see tangible outcomes for my constituents in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region, supporting those who need it most.

This government has a long record of providing substantial and important relief from cost-of-living pressures to people when they need it. We have delivered this year the fourth round of the \$250 power saving bonus. I know many members in this place and many members across the aisle in this place were raising this initiative, which was very good to see, and we obviously hope to see further such initiatives in the future. We have also, particularly for regional Victorians, brought regional V/Line fares in line with metropolitan fares. No more city-country fare discrimination – we now have equal fares across regional Victoria, equal to metropolitan Melbourne. We have expanded free TAFE to more courses than ever before. We have provided free pads and tampons in public places – a very,

very important initiative for women's health and for all women in Victoria. We have delivered free registration for apprentices. We have funded the Victorian veterans card, continued the baby bundle program and expanded the Smile Squad free dental care to independent schools. And that is just in this year's budget.

Beyond that we have also provided kinder kits, delivered three earlier initial rounds of the power saving bonus, implemented the Solar Homes program, delivered free Ls and Ps, and set rate caps for Victorian councils. VCAL reforms have cut out-of-pocket expenses for students, expected to save each family with a child going through VCAL \$1000. We also extended the free TAFE initiative, initiated back in 2019. And since 2020 we have committed over \$50 million to strengthen Victoria's food relief system as well as \$16 million in investments to strengthen food relief infrastructure.

I think it is important that we do apply our focus and our attention as a committee in the areas where we can make that real tangible difference, where the state has the responsibility and the powers to affect outcomes. With prices, specifically prices at supermarkets and other sorts of greengrocers, butchers and similar such stores, in that space the ACCC is the responsible body. The consumer watchdog has several powers, including the ability to prosecute companies for misleading claims about the reasons for price increases as well as unconscionable conduct in the case of extreme gouging.

I do find it a little curious that the Greens are here saying that this is something of a federal matter which the state should be stepping in on when not so long ago we were hearing the Greens celebrating the fact that the federal High Court overturned the state's electric vehicle tax. So on the one hand they are saying it is the state's responsibility to do things and on the other hand saying, 'No, no, no, no, no, take that away from that pesky state. We don't want an EV tax; we want that to be done federally.' I personally think if the states are the ones building and maintaining the roads we should probably be the ones to manage the tax for the roads, but that is a debate that we will no doubt have again another time soon in this chamber, when we return next year. I do find that a little bit strange, but we are here to discuss grocery prices and the like today.

When we heard from the Greens about price caps on groceries, they touted this brainstormed idea as the single solution to the cost of living caused by the inflation on our essential groceries. The original terms of reference proposed for this motion are explicitly written to enable, frankly, the Greens to campaign for this policy. I know it. They really do know it as well, as we all do. Of course there was a time when I might have said that they might have been open to logic, but having been through the Legal and Social Issues Committee's recent inquiry into the rental and housing affordability crisis in Victoria, we saw the Greens see the expert evidence about the public housing commission towers that are being demolished and rebuilt with a net increase in total and social housing, bringing these houses up to modern, First World conditions. Frankly, I am aghast looking at the evidence of this current situation, where 10 to 20 offers have to be made per unit because these flats are just so unlivable – they are not accessible, they overheat in summer, they are too cold in winter – and they have major disturbing issues with sewerage in some of these towers as well. They are frankly becoming, if they are not already, uninhabitable, and to look at that and say, 'No, no, no, it's fine, keep the towers' – as I said, I used to think the Greens have been quite logical, but I am not so sure I do anymore.

Let us look at price caps. Two countries in Europe have undertaken a policy of price capping for food products: Hungary and Croatia. As of December 2022, 56 per cent of surveyed Hungarians stated that they regularly encountered shortages of food products falling under price cap regulations. Only 21 per cent of the respondents stated that they were always able to purchase the product they wished. The price caps on certain basic foodstuffs, including milk, sugar, flour, vegetable oil and eggs, were introduced in February of 2022. Despite this measure, food inflation remained at an annual rate of 44.8 per cent by December last year. Hungary has now removed its price caps and shifted to other measures to mitigate cost-of-living pressures and grocery bills. There is a clear risk that price caps on specific goods will result in compensatory price increases in other goods and cuts to staffing and staff remuneration in order to maintain revenue levels.

I spoke earlier today in another contribution about France, and I will briefly mention as well that the French government earlier reached an agreement with some supermarkets that voluntarily offer an anti-inflation shopping basket. This is not a price cap but a measure that avoids the more damaging implications of straight-up price caps, and at the end of last year too Spain lowered its VAT – our GST – on some basic foodstuffs for deployed measures to fight inflation, including a cheque for €200 for vulnerable families. Again, if we were to look at a comparable example here in changes to our GST, that would of course be a federal government or, at the very least, national cabinet decision. On that note, we did see a call recently from the OECD for countries like Australia to increase their GST up to 20 per cent and to remove the exemption on fresh food products, which is frankly outrageous. We are dealing with cost-of-living issues here, and I will proudly speak up and say that is a completely unacceptable proposition to be putting forward. Victorians right now do not deserve an increase in the GST. They especially do not deserve to have to pay GST on fresh food prices. We could have many, many arguments and debates about the GST as a policy, but one of the good things about that policy that we currently have is that fresh food is exempted, as it absolutely should be. I am sure there is not much political appetite across the spectrum, neither here nor in Canberra, for that silly proposal, but it is worth mentioning, if we are to talk about GST, that the OECD has significantly gone off the mark there.

There is much, much more I could talk about with some of these measures, which are similar to ones which have been put forward by the Greens, but I do with the limited time I have left also wish to acknowledge some of the amazing organisations that are working on the ground day in, day out to support people who are facing food insecurity. They include Foodbank Australia in Dandenong South, Emergency Relief in Springvale and Dandenong, the Salvation Army in Dandenong South, Keysborough Learning Centre in Keysborough, the Community Support Frankston service in Frankston, Make a Difference in Dingley Village and Pantry 5000 in Carrum. These and others in my region – and there will be countless examples from right across this state – do amazing work day in, day out, and there are all sorts of other organisations too that are working in non-food-related spaces that are equally important, but I think it is especially warranted to give them a shout-out today as we discuss this motion which is before us in relation to food prices.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (16:15): I rise to speak on motion 242 in the name of Dr Mansfield calling for an inquiry by the Legal and Social Issues Committee into the impact of food insecurity in Victoria and its effect on physical and mental health, poverty and hardship and options to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food. We have attempted to work with the Greens in good faith regarding an inquiry. We will not be supporting this particular inquiry. We would have preferred a broader inquiry on the cost of living, one that looks at the cost of energy, which as we all know has a massive impact on the cost of food, and one that looks at state government taxes and charges, which also have a flow-on effect on the cost of food. We all know where this has come from, the populist policy campaign that the idea for this inquiry comes from, and that is the policy they have been talking about for a long time, which is one of price controls. I want to make it clear that the Liberals and the Nationals oppose price controls.

I have spoken in this chamber quite a bit about the Greens' very populist rent control campaign. The same economic theory of supply and demand actually also applies to food. Just yesterday actually we saw the Greens, in one of their contributions, reference that they were on the side of experts. We always hear this – almost every day – from the Greens. On price controls they are just outing themselves as a populist outfit hoodwinking the Victorian people into thinking that price controls would make a difference without any of the horrific consequences we know from evidence would come along with that. Given the Greens like to quote experts so much, I did a little bit of homework, actually. I thought I would do some research on experts as well, so I read with interest University of

Canberra economics professor Phil Lewis, who said that supermarket price controls were never a good idea. He said:

It's the sort of thing students learn in Economics 101. Price is determined by supply and demand. If you try to cap the price, it's going to lead to a shortage. The price of other items will go up. It'll be inflationary for most people.

He also said:

This is a strong hint as to why prices have risen so much. As well as growers facing higher input costs – in line with pressures pushing up food prices globally – these price hikes are being driven by lack of supply – with crops and stores wiped out by rain and floods ...

across Australia. It is like the Greens do not actually know where the food itself comes from. This is a reality. It is like they do not actually want to pay farmers for the crops that they produce. Price controls I know would be devastating for Ms Bath's constituents in Eastern Victoria as they would be for Mrs McArthur's constituents in Western Victoria.

You see the same campaign with rent controls, and I know that Phil Lewis said they are the same as price controls:

Rent controls mean some are lucky enough to find an affordable apartment. Many others miss out – or engage in “deals” with landlords to get around the controls.

The most disadvantaged tend to lose out most since landlords can discriminate in favour of what they consider the “more desirable” tenants.

Stanford University economist Rebecca Diamond has written:

While rent control appears to help current tenants in the short run, in the long run it decreases affordability, fuels gentrification, and creates negative spillovers on the surrounding neighborhood.

As with housing, so too with broccoli and cabbage. I know my colleague Mr Galea referenced this today, because yesterday we saw the Legal and Social Issues Committee release its report into rental affordability. I was glad to see some bipartisan agreement from colleagues in the chamber on the committee being opposed to rent controls. It was written there in the majority report. So I was very curious and very surprised to see the Greens Instagram accounts, which actually all said:

Victorian Rental Inquiry Finds:

IT'S TIME FOR A RENT FREEZE

That is what all their Instagrams said: that the Victorian rental inquiry finds it is time for a rent freeze. Now, I took a good read of the report. I read every page of that report, and I did not see in the majority report a mention endorsing a rent freeze or rent controls. Maybe some other colleagues can enlighten me on whether it did. I do not believe that it did, so for a party that talks about misinformation, we see some misinformation going on on their own social media channels.

But on to the price controls argument, I want to quote Grattan Institute chief executive Danielle Wood, who says:

We are much better offering direct support to the most vulnerable, for example recent increases to JobSeeker, to help manage the cost of living pressures than this heavy-handed form of intervention.

Another expert, university professor Alan Fels, former chair of the ACCC, also does not support price controls on bread, milk and other items. He says:

I do think there is a case for having well-informed surveillance and exposure of overpricing in particular cases, similar to when the Howard–Costello government introduced such policies when the GST was introduced ...

He obviously does not support price controls. We know it is a bad option. We have got so many serious cost-of-living issues at the moment that we really wanted an inquiry to look into. Electricity prices are the biggest one. The average electricity price increase in Victoria is 25 per cent in the last year. The

lowest is 22 per cent, the highest is 27 per cent and the average annual bill is now \$1755, up from \$1403 a year ago. The average gas price increase in Victoria is about 25 per cent of the average annual bill; it has increased by about 25 per cent for domestic and small business customers.

We know there are inflationary pressures from the government's Big Build as well. They are pushing up the cost of scarce labour and materials and having a wider impact on the construction sector. I know it is having a wider impact on the ability to build homes for people, and even the federal Labor Treasurer is actually urging state governments to better coordinate projects and has said that state governments must make tough decisions to prevent inflation rising.

Another cost-of-living pressure, which I know the Greens have actually spoken out against, is Labor's health tax. Many local health services have been impacted. In fact I was speaking to a GP in Greenvale the other day who is very concerned about the GP tax and the ability to stay open because of the government's changes to the State Revenue Office requirements and the backdating of payroll tax for GP clinics. This health tax is another contribution to the cost-of-living crisis that is going on at the moment and will basically mean the end of bulk-billing.

We have seen all sorts of issues. I wanted to particularly comment on my electorate. As we saw today, rates in arrears have increased massively in growth areas. In the City of Hume in my electorate the rapidly growing mortgage belt suburbs of Craigieburn, Kalkallo and Mickleham have had a huge rise in arrears. The council's quarterly financial update published last week revealed rates in arrears had risen from \$27.87 million at the end of June to \$37.94 million by mid-October. Weekly household incomes in Hume in my electorate are below the Victorian national medians, which makes the cost-of-living issue even more serious for people in my electorate. When inflation is pushed up through the government's reckless spending, particularly on infrastructure, the Reserve Bank must act to contain inflation by putting up interest rates, and that is particularly heartbreaking for people in my electorate in growth areas who are really struggling at the moment. Price controls will do nothing for them, and I had really hoped that we could go to a wider cost-of-living inquiry to get to the bottom of these kinds of issues.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (16:25): I rise to speak on this motion, which is about looking into the cost of living basically – the cost of food and that sort of thing. Not one week ago we stood here and the same people that are now proposing this voted against an opportunity to have free food injected into the system for the people who are in most need. These people say they are for the environment and they say they are for the hungry, and yet the Greens voted against an opportunity to help the environment and help the hungry. I am kind of stunned, but not, that this has come. Of all the hypocritical, politicised, populist, sanctimonious things I have seen, this is one of the best, but I will support it because I actually support looking into issues for the hungry. But I am just absolutely stunned that not even a week later here we are.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (16:26): I rise to speak to this motion which Dr Mansfield has moved requiring the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider and report by 14 November 2024 – drag it out for a whole year – on the impacts and drivers of and solutions for food security in Victoria, including but not limited to the impact of food insecurity in Victoria on physical and mental health, poverty and hardship, and options available to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food. Well, we all know this is about price capping and attacking those that supply food.

We are fortunate in this country to have exceptional food, provided very largely by the best farmers in the world, a fabulous and varied climate and soil and ecosystem conditions of nearly every type imaginable. I would certainly not argue against how important that is. Food is the staff of life. As Dr Mansfield's motion so rightly identifies, it contributes directly to our physical and mental health. What concerns me in this motion, however, is part (2), the search for government solutions to lower the cost of food. Always if there is a problem, let us have government intervene and provide the solution – well, actually they make the problem worse.

We saw in the last sitting week the Greens, as Mr Bourman has just said, refuse to support the commercial processing of wild-shot game meat and its donation to food charities and those in need. Talk about hypocrisy on steroids. They are the classics. Clearly that measure, which would have lowered the cost of some food at least, was sacrificed for stronger ideological reasons, so do not talk to us about providing food for the needy.

Solutions to lower the cost of food are not spelt out here, but we know the Greens have form in this area. They do not believe in markets, and it would be no surprise to hear a call for price capping on food. That is what this is all about. The temptation to resort to price controls in challenging economic times is understandable, but unfortunately it is fundamentally flawed. For the same reasons as my colleague Mr Mulholland has said, there are sound economic arguments against this kind of interference in the market.

But this is not just a philosophical argument, and thankfully we do not have to rely on economic theory or political faith to understand it. We can look at the cold hard facts of history in this country and across the world. From the Soviet Union's infamous bread lines – and actually I was in the USSR and saw the bread lines – to the recent economic collapse in Venezuela, price controls have consistently led to shortages, black markets and economic turmoil. Closer to home, in the 1970s Australia experienced the adverse effects of wage and price controls, which disrupted market equilibrium and led to unintended consequences.

But why do price controls fail so consistently? The answer lies in the fundamental principles of economics. When prices are artificially capped, the organic balance between supply and demand is disturbed. Producers find it unprofitable to sell at lower prices, leading to a decline in production and quality. Consumers facing shortages often end up paying more through black markets or alternative expensive sources. Politically, while price caps might seem an appealing quick fix, a populist move good for Twitter and good for the photo-op, they erode trust in our institutions. They imply that the government does not trust the market, a market comprising numerous suppliers, sellers and consumers and one that has shown remarkable efficiency and resilience over the years. In the Australian context our food market is a testament to this efficiency. With a plethora of suppliers and minimal barriers to entry, it has been self-regulating effectively. Over the long term we have seen a general trend of decreasing real prices of food. This trend is a testament to the market's ability to provide the best outcome for the greatest number, especially for those less fortunate among us. For all those that do not know how farmers work, they are price takers not price makers, and they are subject to the weather and markets. And we produce the best products.

Like so much else of the Greens' policy agenda it is naive and, worse still, will actively damage the poorest, yet another example of the luxury beliefs which the new left – the educated, wealthy, middle-class left – can afford to feel good advocating while the ultimate cost will fall on those with the lowest income. We cannot panic, and addressing current inflation by resorting to price controls would be just that – panic. The most hurried solutions are usually the worst. History has shown us that such measures are like applying a bandaid to a deep wound. They might cover the problem temporarily but do not heal the underlying issue.

In recent weeks we have heard full and convincing arguments against rent caps. In my view the arguments against food price caps, where the market is even more efficient, are indisputable. From an economic point of view it would be preferable to seek solutions which do not distort the market, namely increasing income, perhaps through tax or rate cuts – try that; you are always in favour of increasing taxes and rates – or through investment in agricultural technology or essential transport infrastructure. You opposed the inquiry into how we could do better road building in this state – you opposed that – which would actually make transport of food much more efficient and less costly. Doing all those things would boost productivity and reduce the prices. You are opposed to gas, which is vital in many of the food production areas. You are opposed to wood collection so people can actually keep warm. You are opposed to most things except a subsidy on electric scooters or whatever you were suggesting this morning. I mean, I cannot drive my electric scooter 20 kilometres to get to

buy the milk, for heaven's sake. I might get the horse out. I will have to get the horse and cart out if left to the Greens.

Harriet Shing: Get your sulky. Hitch up your sulky.

Bev McARTHUR: I will be hitching. And the Greens do absolutely nothing in this chamber to lower taxes. Never, ever have you voted to lower taxes. You never do anything to increase access to a variety of energy sources. You are opposed to most energy sources. You only want renewables. I am technology agnostic – I will have the lot – to increase supply and reduce the cost of energy.

Matthew Bach: And nuclear.

Bev McARTHUR: And nuclear. Let us have nuclear while we are on the job.

Harriet Shing: It's a pre-cooked hamburger with nuclear, isn't it, Bev?

Bev McARTHUR: Absolutely. Anyway, we will have any form of energy to increase supply, but no, you have just got one sort of idea. But you are very happy to provide a subsidy for EVs using brown coal. I mean, the only cars driving around on brown coal are electric vehicles. You are into handouts, not hands up, and you forever never want to remove the heavy hand of government, which slows down and impedes enterprise.

In conclusion, at this difficult economic juncture we should choose the course supported by historical evidence and economic rationale, not the feel-good, too-good-to-be-true solutions peddled by the Greens and their ideological allies. We must trust the inherent efficiency of our food market. It is not just a matter of economic policy but of upholding a principle that has been the bedrock of our prosperity: the principle of market freedom. Part 2 of Dr Mansfield's motion invites an inquiry into options available to lower the cost of food et cetera. I would strongly suggest that the house does not need an inquiry to show how best to lower the cost of food and improve access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food. We know it already. It is the market which provides these things in abundance: consumer choice, lower prices and affordability for all. For this reason, while agreeing with Dr Mansfield on the centrality of good food in our lives to physical and mental health, I cannot believe an inquiry into government interference in the food market is either necessary or desirable.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:36): It does not seem to matter what the problem is, the Greens solution is always more government and socialism. I have been absolutely shocked over the last few sitting weeks to hear an actual discussion about price controls. Everywhere that they are implemented it ends up in misery.

I was very upset before hearing Dr Bach's contribution, where he was apparently the first person in this Parliament to mention Mr Milei from Argentina, the new libertarian president of Argentina. Before he was elected I was watching him very closely and watching his supporters, and it just so happens that there is a very big Twitter account of an Argentinian man who happens to live in Melbourne. He was sending pictures of what was actually a Woolworths supermarket, of the tomatoes, and he was absolutely astounded, and so were his friends back home in Argentina, to see this massive variety of tomatoes in Australia at the supermarket. You can buy every single variety that you could imagine. Even I do not know some of these varieties. If you go in there and you want to buy potatoes, you are unlucky if you have got less than nine types of potatoes to choose from.

This is because we allow markets to operate, and the reason that his Argentinian friends found it so astounding and amazing is because in Argentina, to their detriment, they have had price controls for a very long time. Argentinians, if they can buy tomatoes at all, are very lucky to just get a single type of not very nice tomato. They might be rotten. Under many countries that have had price controls they are lucky if they can get an onion and a potato. It does conflict me somewhat, as I know that the end point of this misery of socialism is people will get so fed up once the poverty rate reaches around 40 per cent that they will elect a libertarian president, so I know that there is at least some upside. There is at least some glimmer of hope, but I love my state and country so much I do not want to

subject them to this. I am happy to hear the major parties, at least on this point, both oppose price controls. I was very worried when I heard the Greens talking about this. I was wondering whether Labor was going to join in on this insanity, but to their credit I heard Labor MPs talking about markets and all this sort of stuff.

But there is something that I would like to talk about as well around food security. People look at our current state in history and talk about it as if we are facing the end of the world and all this sort of thing. I would like to talk about a green revolution – not you guys, the actual green revolution, where we managed through synthetic fertilisers, herbicides, pesticides, selective breeding and the power of science to undertake an increase in agricultural productivity the likes of which had never been seen in human history.

This has led to a point now in history where hunger throughout the world is declining at a rate that we have never seen. There is now less hunger in the world than ever, and a large part of that was driven, much to the consternation of the Greens and their supporters, by fossil fuels, through synthetic fertilisers, farm machinery like tractors – we have not seen any electric tractors in Australia yet – trucks, all of these things. It is all powered by diesel.

One of the big factors that is feeding into the current food prices is energy of course, and it has been mentioned by many MPs around here. We must do everything that we can to decrease energy costs, both in electricity, for the refrigeration at the supermarkets, and also through the production on the farm and transportation. Another thing is the lack of competition. I know the Greens do not like the major supermarkets much, but there is competition already. We have got Aldi; we have got Costco. I quite like Costco and shop there quite often; they have got some really good stuff. Aldi is not bad either; my wife quite likes Aldi. But a number of years ago there was a competitor to Aldi, another German company, Lidl, and Lidl was very interested in setting up operations in Australia. In fact they went so far as to buy land here. They were going to set up distribution warehouses and supermarkets and all this sort of stuff, and at the last minute they pulled the plug. And do you know why they pulled the plug? Because of all of the planning restrictions. They did not consider that they could successfully operate a business. Now, I am not blaming this on Victoria; this was Australia-wide. They thought that it was such a hostile environment they did not want to set up here.

If we want more competition, let us get rid some of these planning controls on setting up. In every other Costco that I have seen throughout the world they have got pharmacies in the Costco to allow cheaper medicines, and they supply cheaper medicine and everyday medicines that you can normally get at the pharmacy. Why don't we do that in Australia? Of course it is because we have got these planning controls and protections that do not allow us to set up a pharmacy within a supermarket. I know a number of years ago Coles was looking at this as well – setting up pharmacies within the supermarket to compete with pharmacies. The Pharmacy Guild did not like that, and there was a big fight and it never happened.

Planning controls are limiting competition. We must look at everything that we can do to increase competition in the market, to increase the efficiency of markets by allowing them to operate and to decrease energy costs. I do not think that the Greens believe in any of that stuff. I think that they think that the magic power of government simply twisting a dial and changing the price of something will somehow fix things. But as we know and as the people of Argentina tell us, that simply does not work.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (16:43): I am pleased to rise to make a contribution on Dr Mansfield's motion in relation to a referral to the Legal and Social Issues Committee about food security. Obviously whilst the motion is in its terms and on its face about food insecurity and what options there are to lower the cost of food, the debate has ranged widely into a number of areas. The real issues that many in our community are having with the cost of living have featured largely in this debate, and I want to echo many of the sentiments made by my colleagues on this side that we do understand and recognise that many, many of our constituents are absolutely feeling the pinch from the rising cost of living. The impact of the range of events that have contributed to price rises following

through to many and various aspects of the everyday essentials that many in our community require to survive is being felt right across the board – whether that be food prices, whether that be mortgage and interest rates or whether that be rents. The lists obviously go on and on.

In the last month actually I have spent a bit of time visiting some of the emergency relief providers that exist in parts of the Southern Metropolitan Region. I had the great privilege of spending quite a bit of time at the Bayside Community Information and Support Service, also known as BayCISS, in Hampton East recently, talking with them about what they are seeing and the different needs of people who are walking through the front door of their rather well-worn facility, I think I will say – it is probably the polite way to say it – a facility they do make the most of, and you could see by the stacking of the shelves of food for those who desperately need it just how important these kinds of services are. Speaking both with the CEO of BayCISS and with the president of the board, who himself volunteers every week to drop food parcels out to those in the local community who need support, he has seen more and more demand, more and more drops to make, in the last 12, 18 months. I think what that demonstrates absolutely is that the consequences of the rising cost of living over the recent period are having a real effect on many in my community.

I also spent some time at Bayside Community Emergency Relief, who have facilities, a little room really, again overstuffed with goods, where every day volunteers come in and fill packages to go out to groups in the community who need support. The demand is not abating. Fortunately, the generosity is not abating either of those in the community who volunteer their time. The challenge we have of course is that we cannot expect that organisations like these are going to solve these problems. They are at one end of the spectrum, an important end and an end that we should support, but this problem is not one that we can expect people like the Bayside Community Information and Support Service or the Bayside Community Emergency Relief to solve. There are much broader issues that exist right across our economy that we need to deal with.

Whilst we absolutely understand the issues that are the consequences of cost-of-living impacts being felt across the community, I think it is worth taking a little bit of time, particularly because we have had new inflation data out today, to just have a look at some of the trends that we are seeing. Hopefully, for those doing it tough there might be signs of some improvement in some of the underlying issues that are confronting people with the cost of living. What we have seen in the September quarter figures that were released a month ago is that for annual food inflation, so the basket of goods related solely to food, there was a 4.8 per cent increase in the year to the end of September – a significant increase, but not as much as it was the quarter before, which was 7.5 per cent, and a long way from the eye-watering 9.2 per cent increase in food inflation that we saw in the 12 months to December last year.

That in no way diminishes the impact that rising prices are having on people, but I think what we are seeing, hopefully, are signs that the peak of particularly food inflation in the community may have passed, as have some of those factors that were big drivers of that curve. We will not know this for a while, but it is important. Even the data released today demonstrates that particularly for things like fresh fruit and vegetables there was only a 1 per cent annual increase in those price movements. But we still have a problem in areas like breads and cereals, which have gone up 8.5 per cent in the last year, and dairy and related products, which are up 7.8 per cent, so there are certainly particular elements of the basket of goods that people need to survive that are still growing despite the fact that price growth seems to have eased a little in certain areas.

In the context of debate on this issue, one that we could spend quite a lot of time going through, I think we do need to understand that the range of issues around food security do affect people in a number of ways. They are measured by both the availability question – do people have access to the various types of food that they want at appropriate prices? – and whether that access is on a stable footing, because it is no good having access to quality, nutritional food some of the time. It is something that you have got to see happening consistently so that people always know that food is there. That relates to things like the location of outlets, availability of food within stores – all the issues surrounding that – and moving into dimensions like stability, making sure that there are not fluctuations in incomes and

that we have things like wages policy and economic security derived from people being paid properly and we have secure labour market conditions so that they get a decent day's pay, which is what they use to buy the essentials of life.

The Labor government also understands that, more broadly, cost of living is a significant issue. We do not as a state government hold all of the levers here. I mentioned at the start of my speech that we cannot expect those emergency relief providers to be doing all the heavy lifting. There are certainly other levers, many of which reside primarily at a Commonwealth level with respect to income support, family assistance payments – and that action is required. I think one of the interesting things to observe in today's inflation data is the impact that the recent record increases in Commonwealth rent assistance have had on moderating the scale of rent increases in the CPI. Rent inflation was not as bad this quarter because of the increases in Commonwealth rent assistance. I think it tells us that those sorts of changes to transfer payments are an incredibly important part of the mix in making sure that people have food on the table and a roof over their head. I hope that our friends in Canberra continue to do what they have done so far, which has been to increase those payments and cash assistance.

There is a whole lot of other support that the state government has been providing in terms of cost-of-living relief. My colleague Mr Galea went through that in some detail. These are exceptionally important issues that we need to deal with and that we need to be listening to our communities about. I will leave my contribution there, as my time has expired.

Matthew BACH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:53): As Mr Batchelor noted, in some respects this appears to be a benign motion: that we should look into the impact of food insecurity in Victoria on physical and mental health and poverty and hardship – okay. There is a very strange reference in point (2) to 'culturally appropriate food'. I am not sure what that would mean. Previously I have seen Greens motions refer to access to culturally appropriate food as a human right. Culturally I am a bit Greek. There is not much Greek food in the parliamentary cafe. Is this impinging upon my human rights, I wonder. It is a very odd reference and one I simply do not understand.

It is a benign-looking motion, as Mr Batchelor correctly said, but over the last few weeks here in this place of course members of the Greens political party have been talking about rent freezes, price caps and other failed utopian socialist policies, so we know what they want with this motion. They want this to be a vehicle to then somehow find somebody who backs price controls. I am sure they would be able to find some people who – as Mr Batchelor quite rightly said and as Mr Mulholland said before him – are currently struggling so much, being crushed by cost-of-living increases, so we must never be flippant when we talk about the current cost-of-living crisis.

This is oftentimes what happens when we have wall-to-wall Labor governments. This is oftentimes what happens when we have spiralling inflation. Mr Limbrick made reference to the fact that in Argentina the sorts of policies that are openly pursued by the Greens have led to almost total economic collapse and then the election of someone who the left of politics utterly despises. It is interesting he makes that reference. I was almost thinking that it could be a fun thing in my final week to cross the floor and support this motion on the basis, as Mr Limbrick said, that these policies always then lead to long periods of centre-right government. I was thinking about Britain in the 1970s, when Milton Friedman and others in the New Liberal movement wrote what they wrote. It was initially most unpopular, but then of course Britons experienced the 1970s. They experienced the winter of discontent. They experienced price controls, and Maggie Thatcher, who had previously been a peripheral political figure, was elevated, because for some time she had been speaking about economic freedom. Now, like Mr Limbrick, I love my state and I love the people I represent far too much to submit them to a ridiculous charade whereby we seek to find some rationale for price controls.

I would also have my worries that no matter what a committee heard about prices, the Greens would argue that that committee had backed price controls. I was alongside Mr Batchelor – Mr Batchelor was the deputy chair, and a very good deputy chair too, of the committee that recently sat looking into very serious matters: our housing affordability crisis and our renting crisis. We heard from so many

experts, for example, from the Grattan Institute and the Centre for Independent Studies – who do not always agree, by the way – that one of the worst things we could do would be to put in place a rent cap. I do not follow many Greens members on social media, but nonetheless I have been alerted to the fact – I was yesterday – that the Greens have been peddling an outright lie on social media, and I was not very surprised by that. They said, and I think the Greens political party still says on social media, ‘It’s time for a rent freeze,’ and they say that this is a recommendation of the report. It is not. It is blatantly not. The Greens political party sought to stack out our hearings, but they could not find one expert – not one – from the left, from the right or from any point on the political spectrum who would back rent controls, and yet the Greens are peddling an outright lie.

Now, perhaps with enough pressure the Greens may take it down, just like that odious woman – what is her name, Mehreen Faruqi – has been forced to take down that hideous picture that she took posing in front of a placard with somebody throwing a Star of David into a bin saying that Jewish people are rubbish and the world needs to be cleansed of them. It used to be a high political crime, I remember, certainly for anybody on the right, to pose alongside a placard. There was a dreadful placard at one rally I remember that Mr Abbott went to. I think it said ‘Ditch the witch’. That was an awful slur against Ms Gillard, our best former prime minister, in my view. I think she did some good things when she was prime minister, but what I am referring to is her amazing and outstanding contribution to our country since leaving office. If only all miserable ghosts like Kevin Rudd and Malcolm Turnbull would just shut up and do something useful like Ms Gillard has been doing. I am not aware that Mr Abbott knew that that placard was there, but Mehreen Faruqi did when she posted this picture online. Now she has taken it down – okay. We deserve more than that. We deserve an apology. Other people are calling for her to go. But this – although it is nowhere near, of course, as odious and insulting as that – does demonstrate the type of political movement we are dealing with and the predictable actions of the Greens political party should this seemingly benign motion get up and should the Greens therefore be able to argue, as they have argued with rents, that there are sensible people recommending price controls. Of course there are none.

It used to be alleged that those on the right were stupider than those on the left. I remember John Stuart Mill once said that conservatives are not necessarily stupid, but most stupid people are conservatives. Well, over recent times the Greens political party has cemented itself as the stupid party in this state. The Greens political party, the leadership of which loves to lecture others, especially members of the Liberal Party, about populism, now embraces every obviously stupid populist concern going around, whether it is rent freezes or whether it is price caps. I do not need to recapitulate the excellent commentary of others about the devastating and entirely predictable outcomes of price caps. We need to treat the broad issues here incredibly seriously.

Mr Batchelor was right that so many of our constituents are suffering dreadfully right now. I agree with Mr Limbrick: the obvious answer when it comes to prices is more competition – greater freedom, not less. And it has been noted that many Australians, many Victorians, appear to be rusted on in terms of their shopping behaviour to one of the big two supermarkets. Well, I am very pleased now that Aldi is expanding. I regularly shop at Aldi. As I said to Ms Shing, my charming German au pair very much enjoys the pickled sausages that I can purchase for her from Aldi. They are much cheaper than similar products from either Coles or Woolworths. There are other supermarkets we should allow into the market. I refer members back to Mr Limbrick’s excellent commentary about planning as well. Our planning restrictions, and this is obviously something that Minister Blandthorn knows much about, are far too restrictive, far too onerous.

There are things we could do, coming directly to the motion, to ultimately reduce prices and to provide more culturally appropriate food. Referring back to Jule, my charming German au pair, she finds far more culturally appropriate food at Aldi than at either of the main supermarkets, and it is quite cheap. She is able to access all manner of interesting German treats because of greater freedom, because of greater competition in the market, because of more players. I would love to see more players. Soon I will be moving to the UK, and there I will be able to go to Lidl. Are they Germans as well? I think

they are. If I have got more money that month, I could go to Marks & Spencer. They are fabulous but a bit pricey. There is Asda as well; they are great. We have an incredibly restrictive marketplace. We have incredibly restrictive planning provisions.

We know the outcome the Greens want. Sir Humphrey Appleby said, 'Never establish an inquiry if you don't know the outcome.' The outcome the Greens will post on social media is that, 'Here's a committee of Parliament saying that we should have price controls', just like they lied and said, 'Here's a committee of Parliament saying that we should have a rent freeze.' We all know the right answer to this question: it is ditch the wall-to-wall Labor governments, drive down interest rates, cancel the Suburban Rail Loop and allow far greater freedom in the marketplace.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:03): It actually has been a very entertaining debate today. I have noticed that the government crossbenchers have been sitting on the fence and they have had a foot either side.

Georgie Crozier: Splinters.

Melina BATH: And I think potentially, as Ms Crozier just said, they have splinters from sitting on the fence. But apparently now they have gone back to their original conversation with the Greens and will be supporting the Greens on this motion. We have been very clear. I know you are surprised at that, Dr Bach, but apparently now they are supporting this motion for a referral. It is motion 242 in Dr Mansfield's name. We would have liked to have seen and would have fully supported motion 267 standing in Dr Ratnam's name. That is a fulsome and wholesome and deep dive into the cost-of-living issues and those affected individuals and families doing it very tough. We would have supported that.

Let me talk about my interest. It has been a wideranging debate, so I will not cover back over the very good contributions of my Liberal colleagues, but as a National I would like to talk about the country, the regions. First of all, the Greens are very good at putting out, as we have heard, social media posts, but indeed their website talks about the profiteering supermarkets of Coles and Woolworths and the evilness of those.

I did a bit of a Google search, and I have also been to towns in my electorate. I have looked at Omeo, and I have been to the supermarket in Omeo. Omeo, funnily enough, does not have a large supermarket. It does not have a Coles or a Woolworths, it has a local family-owned FoodWorks. Indeed Orbost, again a beautiful town that I know very well, has a FoodWorks and an IGA. Also, the median income of people in Orbost is just under \$800 per week. They have two supermarkets, not part of that big duopoly – those big evil dudes, according to the Greens – and an average income of \$800 per week. Let us go to the good people in Brunswick. I think it was actually Brunswick East that I looked up. The median weekly income in Brunswick households is \$2100, and they have three supermarkets. They have Woolworths, one of those duopolies. They also have Cheaper Buy Miles and a local IGA. Now, I put that on record for when the Greens start to look at options.

In this motion 242 from Dr Mansfield we certainly agree with part (1), because it mimics part (1) of the other motion, the other referral to the Legal and Social Issues Committee about the rising cost pressures facing Victoria, their physical and mental health impacts and economic stress. We want to see a deep dive into those. But the second part, 'options available to lower the cost of food', of course is code for price caps on essential items. We have seen again on their website talk about how all around the world governments are taking a range of actions, such as putting price caps on essentials. Now, if you are putting price caps on essentials, you are also going to punish those people that live in rural and regional Victoria, not only because of the fact that it depends on the supermarket – and these supermarkets operate on very thin margins with locally owned, family-based businesses, and they are employing local people – but because you are often in the region where primary producers are making, growing, producing and trying to sell the product that forms part of that essential food item.

Let us just look at just one factor in terms of that energy supply and food supply chain. If you are looking at, for example, dairying, there have been rising input costs in dairying over the last year. I

have contacted a local dairy farmer who said that their monthly electricity bill at the same time last year was \$2800 a month and this year was up to \$4000 for that month. So if you are going to put a cap on essential services and you are going to put a cap on essential food, it will be on milk and, I am assuming, the ingredients that go into our daily lives, our daily food sources. You are going to put a cap on farmers' profits, yet their input costs are going up and up and up.

We also know that in relation to the Victorian Farmers Federation and investing in regional Victoria in their report in 2022 the total annual transport costs in the ag industry was \$5.8 billion a year, with supply chain costs often accounting for the single largest cost in agricultural production. And what have we got here? We have got the Labor government refusing to fund maintenance on roads to the extent it should be. They are cutting costs on maintenance of roads, and we see fuel prices and wear and tear on getting that product from farm gate to market. Also we see the Essential Services Commission talking about the increase in electricity prices.

So this Greens motion that has come up is short-sighted. We need to go to motion 267, which has a deep dive into the real issues. We will certainly not be supporting this. We note that the government has consequently taken the splinters from whence they have come and jumped over to support this, but the Nationals will not be supporting this motion.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Samantha Ratnam, Harriet Shing, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (16): Matthew Bach, Melina Bath, Gaele Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Motion agreed to.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Statements on tabled papers and petitions

Calvary Health Care Bethlehem

Report 2022–23

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (17:17): I rise to speak on the Calvary Health Care Bethlehem annual report 2022–23, tabled on 1 November 2023. Opened in 1941 as a private hospital offering maternity, medical and surgical services, Calvary Health Care Bethlehem is a publicly funded health service recognised as a specialist palliative care service and a statewide provider of services for progressive neurological diseases. The service operates from a site on Kooyong Road in Caulfield South, which has recently been transformed by a complete redevelopment. Over the last few years the services have been in temporary locations, including in Parkdale, while the existing site was demolished and rebuilt. The new buildings in Kooyong Road opened earlier this year and now offer brand new facilities for a specialist 32-bed subacute hospital and health service with an integrated retirement living, health and residential aged care precinct. They are very impressive and modern new facilities offering new ways of integrating care needs for the local community.

Their services are greatly valued by many, and whilst they have impressive new facilities, I rise today particularly to thank the staff at Calvary Bethlehem and their community palliative care team that I have unfortunately got to know over the course of the year. They were kind, gentle and supportive, and you cannot ask for much more than that. I was keen to make this contribution in the last of our sitting weeks for 2023 as a bookend to my inaugural speech given on the first sitting day of this calendar year. I spoke in that speech about my mum. She was diagnosed with advanced stage 4 cancer

in late April this year, and it was beyond treatment. She died in August just a week before her 72nd birthday.

During those months she received care and support from many, primarily her partner Greg but also the nurses, occupational therapists and physiotherapists at Calvary Bethlehem. So I wanted to place on record today my thanks to everyone who helped care for her during her final months and everyone who did everything that they could that enabled her to die peacefully at home, just as she had wished. It has been an incredibly hard year, but I want to thank everyone, including colleagues across the Parliament, who have helped my family get through it all.

Victorian Auditor-General's Office

Auditor-General's Report on the Annual Financial Report of the State of Victoria: 2022–23

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (17:21): I want tonight to talk about the *Auditor-General's Report on the Annual Financial Report of the State of Victoria: 2022–23*, tabled this day but actually available last week. It is an important report, and I pay tribute to the work that the auditor has done in this report. He makes it clear that Victoria is in significant trouble financially. He makes it clear that Victoria's indebtedness position has deteriorated, and he makes it clear that the government has no plan – wait for that; be clear, no plan – to deal with the indebtedness. If people doubt my concern, they should look at pages 15 and 16 of this report, which look at state indebtedness – section 2.3. 'Victoria's debt growth has outpaced other states' is the subheading:

Figure 2F shows GGS total net debt of all Australian states as a percentage of nominal GSP of each state. This is a common measure used across jurisdictions to understand their relative indebtedness. Victoria's debt to GSP ratio was comparable to other states prior to the pandemic.

This chart runs from 2012–13 through to the projections into 2026–27. What is clear is that from a take-off point in about 2016–17, and accelerating from 2018–19 and then going further beyond that, Victoria's position of net debt grew worse and worse relative to other states. We know in fact that by 2026–27 Victoria's debt position – our aggregate net debt – will be greater than New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania combined. Again, I pay tribute to the work that the auditor has done in making this a very clear position. The gross debt as a percentage of gross state product will be at 30.3 per cent in 2026–27, for those who wish to look at figure 2G:

The state Budget –

he says –

is focused on GGS debt as it relates to financial sustainability. The government assesses the sustainability of the debt by applying the following financial measures:

- net debt to GSP
- interest expense to revenue.

We also consider appropriate measures to be:

- gross debt to GSP
- gross debt to revenue (indebtedness) – gross debt as a proportion of operating revenue
- interest expense relative to the portfolio of debt – considering new and refinanced (rolled over) debt and the maturity profile.

The impact of rising debt on these debt sustainability measures are discussed further in ... Section 2.4.

As I say, this is a very important report. It is a report that Victorians should in fact be reading. He goes further later in the paper. He talks about emerging risks with employee cost growth. It is very clear – not only interest expenses are growing but employee expenses are also growing as a proportion of operating expenses. It goes through this in great detail. The number in the Victorian public sector is growing faster than the population, and paradoxically the quality of services is falling. We know that waiting lists have got greater. We know that dental waiting lists are worse. We know that of a whole series of areas. We have heard ambulance stories in the chamber in the recent period. I could go on.

Basic services that Victorians expect are not up to scratch despite the greater spending and despite the greater debt. Much of this debt also – and I want to be quite clear, and the graphs in here make it clear – relates to the period before COVID. We know the government made these decisions deliberately. There was an announcement, as some will remember, in the week before the 2018 election where Daniel Andrews, then Premier, and Treasurer Tim Pallas announced they were going to increase the debt share from 6 to 12 per cent of GSP – a deliberate decision, and they were going to go for it and jack up debt. And they went further than that. They obviously went much, much further than that, and it has got worse and worse and worse. Of course COVID was part of it, but much of the debt is BC – before COVID. Let us face it, every other state had COVID too but our debt, the debt we are carrying now, is much worse. And the auditor has done a good job in drawing the community's attention to these matters.

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into the Rental and Housing Affordability Crisis in Victoria

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (17:26): I rise to speak on the report tabled yesterday on the inquiry into the rental and housing affordability crisis in Victoria. The Greens-established parliamentary inquiry into the state's rental crisis tabled its final report yesterday and found that a rent freeze is effective in extreme circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic. While the evidence is clear, the current rental and housing crisis is an extreme circumstance. According to the latest report by the rental affordability index, renters in every capital city across the country are currently in a worse position than they were in 2019 prior to the start of the pandemic. Therefore the Greens' position continues to be that the government must implement a rent freeze without delay.

Over the course of the inquiry we heard just how much renters across the state are struggling. The inquiry heard stories of pregnant mothers being evicted with nowhere to go, retaliatory rent increases and elderly renters taking stock of safe bridges to sleep under in the event that they could not afford their rent anymore. Submissions to the inquiry painted a dire picture of Victoria's acute housing crisis. Despite this, the committee's report and recommendations predominantly convey the views and interests of property developers and landlords. Nowhere does the report recommend immediate rental relief or changes to the Residential Tenancies Act 1997, which would protect renters from the escalating crisis. Instead the report pushes for market-based solutions that will only serve to line the pockets of developers and push housing prices even higher.

To combat the silencing of renters' voices, the Greens authored a minority report which more accurately conveys the submissions of renters, community advocates, and experts whose recommendations are not motivated by financial self-interest. The Greens report highlights the disproportionate impact of the rental crisis on marginalised members of the community, including young people, older people, LGBTQIA+ people, people with disabilities, First Nations people, those experiencing mental illness and those facing domestic violence. The Greens report makes clear that the Victorian state government has an array of policy levers at its disposal to alleviate the impact of the rental crisis on the community. Its key recommendations are centred on the implementation of urgent rent controls and the building of a significant quantity of new public housing. This is based on what was put forward in an overwhelming number of submissions from housing experts, welfare organisations, social services and renters.

The report also calls for a number of other solutions such as the inclusion of housing as a human right in the Victorian charter of human rights, stronger protections for renters against evictions and privacy breaches, cooling and energy efficiency minimum standards, an overhaul of the dispute resolution system, the abolition of federal tax incentives for investors, regulation of the short-stays industry and mandatory inclusionary zoning to include public and genuinely affordable housing in private developments. The government has so far chosen to rely on market solutions and to peddle claims about the consequences of regulating the rental market based on information from individuals and groups who stand to profit from the rental market.

This is akin to old arguments against the hazards of smoking that relied on research funded by the tobacco industry. We cannot continue to deny the devastating impacts the rental crisis is having on people across the state, especially as the cost of living rises across all domains. The government must act now, and it must act swiftly. An immediate two-year rent freeze followed by a permanent cap on rent increases is what the community of renters needs. We did it during the pandemic, and we should do it again now. The question is: will the Labor government listen to the voices of renters and experts or just continue to let developers have their way?

Department of the Legislative Council

Report 2022–23

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (17:30): I rise today to speak on the Department of the Legislative Council annual report 2022–23, and in doing so I want to take a few moments to reflect on the parliamentary year that has been, because goodness me, what a year it was. This annual report contains several incredible statistics, so if you will indulge me I would like to take a moment to share some of them with you all now. Over this last year this chamber has met 38 times for 301 hours – that is right; we have shared 301 hours together – and 4 minutes and considered 64 bills, 29 of which were initiated here in the Council, 35 of which were received from the Assembly. There were 824 questions on notice; 29 petitions with 45,500 signatories – that is lot of Victorians lending their signature in support of issues for consideration before us here; a whole bunch of annual reports, statutory rules and parliamentary committee reports; and so much more. All in all, I think it is safe to say we have had a very busy year here in this chamber.

Beyond this I want to acknowledge the significant step forward taken by the Parliament of Victoria during National Reconciliation Week this year with the launch of the *Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan*. It was not too long ago, during my first year in this place in fact, that the Parliament of Victoria committed itself to engaging with and walking alongside our First Peoples on the journey to reconciliation, as part of its 2019–22 strategic priorities. I was honoured to work with the reconciliation action plan committee to deliver on part of this commitment, and I would like to thank all the staff and committee members involved in bringing this RAP to life.

In particular I would like to acknowledge Gunditjmarra, Wemba Wemba and Yorta Yorta brother Tom Day for his deadly artwork *Yarkeen Mirring*, which so many of us get to see every day, which was commissioned by the Victorian Parliament for use in the RAP document and for permanent display here in Parliament House, one that I know features prominently in many of the tours that take place, and so thank you to the team conducting the tours for embedding this new, exciting artwork into their work. I just need to say that every time I walk to and from this chamber I always take a moment to look at Tom's painting, and I am reminded of the genuine commitment to coming together, to acknowledging and respecting cultures and aspirations, and this is a particular comfort to me.

In this my third year as a member of this chamber and as it draws to a close I am just as thankful as ever for the kindness and support of each and every member of the staff here in the Legislative Council, because none of the work we do could be possible without them. To the cafe and catering staff, to the security team, to the cleaners and to every wonderful Legislative Council staff member in between I say thank you. Thank you for keeping us parliamentarians – all 128 of us, including one soon to join us – and our staff well fed. Thank you for keeping our offices and this place spick-and-span. Thank you for answering our IT questions and replacing our passes when they go missing, both services that I have used more than I care to admit. Thank you for assisting each member of this place, from the oldest to the newest amongst us, as we navigate our roles and responsibilities. I would like to acknowledge the work of Robert, our new Clerk, for all he does to support our members in this place and to ensure that the parliamentary sittings go so well and our committee meetings go so smoothly. You have stepped up into some big roles, and we are very grateful that you have done that.

I will take a special moment now to extend my deepest and most heartfelt thanks to Greg. I do not know if he can hear me, but I am talking about him. Greg has been a constant here, and I have not had

a chance to pay my respects and acknowledge Greg for all that he does to provide us in this place all the papers and signatures and to help us out when we need it, because I have got to tell you the place would not be the same without his constant support and encouragement.

Our job really as parliamentarians is only possible due to the hard work of the people of the Department of the Legislative Council. We would be lost without them, we truly would, and I look forward to continuing to work with the staff in the new year. But for now I extend happy holidays to everyone – and enjoy a well-deserved break.

Department of Treasury and Finance

Budget papers 2023–24

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:35): I stand to speak on the state budget 2023–24, which raises the budget for sporting infrastructure in Victoria. I will particularly talk about a piece of sporting infrastructure that has been overlooked by this government for a number of years – and that is the Shepparton stadium. The Shepparton stadium was built back in 1972. It was a two-court facility, and only one major upgrade has ever occurred, and that was in 1994 when two additional courts were built. This stadium is well past its use-by date. It is not catering for the amount of people that we have playing the sport of basketball in Shepparton. It is certainly not catering for us to attract events and tournaments to Shepparton. Even during the floods when the City of Greater Shepparton wanted to use this stadium as their relief centre, they were unable to do so. It would have been perfect, because it already has showers and toilets and stuff, except the roof was leaking. The roof leaks constantly, and we are forever having to reschedule games elsewhere because of the roof leaking. This facility desperately needs an upgrade.

The City of Greater Shepparton have been advocating for this for some time. I have been advocating for an upgrade to this facility since 2016. The City of Greater Shepparton have it as a high priority on their list of projects, but Basketball Victoria has also identified this. In fact this is the number one infrastructure project for Basketball Victoria's needs in sporting facilities. The City of Greater Shepparton have had it in their prospectus for funding for some time now. What they are wanting to do is build a new sports and events centre with six basketball, netball and multi-use courts, including a 3000-seat show court; new wet area amenities; an administration hub, entry and cafe; and external works, including a car park. It is a \$60 million project; they are asking for \$20 million from the state government. This would have a total regional benefit of \$68 million. It would create 235 jobs during construction. It is estimated that events it could attract to the town would attract an additional 24,000 visitors annually and 76,000 bed nights annually. It would also equate to approximately \$12.3 million per year in visitor spending in our region and help to support 89 jobs ongoing. The business case estimated that around 334 major events have the potential to be hosted in the new stadium in Shepparton.

As I said, I have been raising this since 2016. I have raised it over 20 times, but this government have continued to ignore it. Some local sports identities have started a petition on change.org. In just over 24 hours they have got 863 signatures. I would like to congratulate Jay Bryce and his group, who have stepped up to say, 'Enough is enough. This facility must be funded.' They had the whole of page 1 and the whole of page 6 of the *Shepparton News* yesterday. It was fantastic. They talked about how on the night of the Shepparton Gators Big V grand final in August there were capacity issues where the facility actually reached capacity, forcing hundreds of passionate fans to be turned away on the night. These fans should have been celebrating sporting prowess in our town; instead they were turned away.

Domestically the basketball association is experiencing an unprecedented boom in player participation, with record numbers of players joining our local clubs. However, with the inadequate court availability the Shepparton sports stadium is absolutely stretched to the limit. Junior grades are having to be redirected to the Visy centre, and scheduling constraints are pushing men's and women's games to as late as 9:20 pm, which means players are getting home well after 10 o'clock.

Jay Bryce has identified all of these issues. It is a real issue for our town. We need investment in our basketball stadium, and this government must put in the \$20 million that is needed to bring the Shepparton sports and events centre to a conclusion.

Victorian Auditor-General's Office

Employee Health and Wellbeing in Victorian Public Hospitals

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (17:40): I rise to speak on the Victorian Auditor-General's Office report tabled on 15 November into the wellbeing of health practitioners in the hospital setting. This is a scathing report, and one that demands an urgent and thorough response from the minister. It vindicates what I am hearing from healthcare workers, who say that morale has never been lower. Although this VAGO report focuses only on three public hospitals, I believe the findings can be applied broadly across our health system, and while it focuses on the deterioration in worker mental health and wellbeing since the COVID pandemic, the decline in mental health and wellbeing and morale has been brewing for decades. Back in 2006 the World Health Organization acknowledged that health services around the globe engaged in poor human resource practices that focused on cost-cutting, leading to low staff morale, heavy workloads, long work hours and unsafe workplaces.

In 2008 as a junior doctor I became involved in the Australian Medical Association because of a desire to advocate for improved working conditions for junior medical staff and for cultural change in the public hospital system. Even back then it felt like staff were viewed by the system only as units of labour there to fill gaps in a roster and meet arbitrary performance targets motivated by politics rather than evidence. It bred a workplace culture across the whole system where bullying and harassment were common, tolerated and even normalised.

Over recent years brave whistleblowers have exposed this culture in our hospitals, and I was thrilled for the junior doctors in Victoria who recently succeeded in a class action to get paid thousands of hours of legitimate overtime claims, but too little has been done to address the systemic issues that take a toll on health worker wellbeing. Demand continues to rise due to a lack of preventative health investment, and resourcing of services has not kept pace. To this point, the VAGO report identifies that this stems from the top. The Department of Health does not place enough value on employees' welfare. It does not even collect sufficient or timely data to assess how hospitals are performing as employers or protecting employees' mental health and wellbeing. This in turn means hospital boards do not prioritise these issues, and that lack of expectation flows down.

Hospitals are inherently stressful working environments. Workers experience difficult and emotionally challenging situations and traumatic events, and deal with members of the public who are also experiencing distress or who may exhibit violent or challenging behaviours. The department's own survey of health workers in 2022 identified that 70 per cent of health workers had experienced aggression, violence or abuse from patients. But the VAGO report identified that hospitals are failing to report gaps in processes and psychological hazards that can lead to increased risks of occupational violence, aggression and bullying. Given the nature of the work and inevitable strains this places on all hospital employees, it should be all the more reason to do everything we can to prevent additional avoidable stressors arising in that environment.

Hospital employees should feel valued and recognised as individuals with basic needs and working rights. The consequences of failing to do this do not just negatively impact employees – although this should be enough for us to care – the Victorian public who attend hospitals as patients and their families also suffer when staff do. For example, in a 2020 Australian Medical Association survey of junior doctors, it found that 47 per cent of respondents reported making a clinical error because of fatigue, yet none of the hospitals audited by VAGO have a structured approach to assessing and managing fatigue.

Employee safety should be a priority in all workplaces. In the healthcare context, it is not about hard hats and earmuffs; it is about reducing patient demand through investment in prevention and better

resourcing of existing services, for example, fatigue-minimising rosters, adequate staffing levels to meet demand, sufficient backup when staff are sick, and appropriate supervision and support. Creating a health system that values employees and their wellbeing is not impossible, but it requires a massive shift in the priorities of governments and administrators. If we do not, we will continue to see health workers walk away from the system at a time when we need them the most, and all Victorians will bear the consequences.

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into the Rental and Housing Affordability Crisis in Victoria

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (17:44): I rise to speak on the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's report into rental and housing affordability in Victoria, and I thank the members of the committee, led by the very capable chair Trung Luu. I also want to thank my colleagues Mr McCracken and Dr Bach, who were also on this inquiry, the other members on the inquiry and the committee secretariat.

Anyone who speaks to those doing it tough out there in all of our electorates knows young people in particular looking to rent, young families looking to rent, are doing it tough, and rental availability itself is quite scarce. As the report states, 44 per cent of Victorian households with a mortgage during 2022 were experiencing mortgage stress and rents increased by 15.3 per cent in 2022 alone. One of the more chilling but unfortunately not surprising findings of the inquiry was that home ownership is declining, starting later in life and becoming concentrated into a few hands. The finding that the cost of renting in Victoria is causing significant financial and social stress should come as no surprise.

I spoke in my maiden speech quite a bit about housing, but one of the particular things I am concerned about is people are not having that financial security to settle down and are buying houses much later in life. We know when they settle down and start a family they do not really do that until they have that financial security behind them. I think our housing crisis is having an impact on our birthrate in Victoria, because we have the lowest birthrate in Australia at 1.48 children per woman. I think the two are related and we need to make sure we get as many people into homes as possible for that reason, because we have a growing share of people going towards their retirement age and a diminishing share of taxpayers to pay for the care of those people.

There are some noteworthy recommendations. As the Shadow Minister for Home Ownership and Housing Affordability this report has been very valuable for me to have a deep dive into. Recommendation 5, which I particularly like, is:

That the Victorian Government establish an online public portal showing the status of all planning applications across the State, from application through to approval, construction and occupation.

I think this is a great idea. I would also like to see that implemented at a council level. I reckon Darebin City Council and its ALP mayor would top that planning delay portal, closely followed by probably the City of Yarra.

Recommendation 20 is that the Victorian government discontinue its first home owner grant and transfer the funding to the private rental assistance scheme. That would help those doing it tough, so that is a noteworthy recommendation. Another recommendation is:

That the Victorian Government amend Section 32 of the *Subdivision Act 1988* replacing 'unanimous resolution' with 'special resolution'.

It is often close to impossible to regenerate older buildings, both residential and commercial, to increase supply. We need to improve planning processing times – that was one of the recommendations – and clear the backlog of planning approvals currently under consideration. The minister likes to complain about local government, but we know a lot of the planning approval backlog stems from her ministerial desk, so we need to clear that up.

I was pleased to see contributions from people I am a really big fan of. Peter Tulip from the Centre for Independent Studies said that, as a general rule of thumb, for every extra percentage increase in supply the cost of housing reduces by about 2.5 per cent. We saw the Grattan Institute in there. We saw contributions from my friends at YIMBY Melbourne on a discussion around housing targets and finding that Melbourne missing middle. I am very interested in what they had to say. We need to find real solutions to the housing crisis. I am very glad to have read this report and will take it under consideration going forward towards 2026.

Adjournment

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (17:49): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Noble Park RSL

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:49): (632) The adjournment matter I raise this evening is for the Minister for Veterans in the other place, the Honourable Natalie Suleyman. The action I seek is for the minister to join me and the member for Mulgrave Eden Foster on a visit to the Noble Park RSL in my electorate of South-Eastern Metropolitan Region. For a quarter of a century the Noble Park RSL, along with its dedicated pension and welfare office, has been an essential hub for veterans, led by hardworking and dedicated president John Meehan and ably supported by a passionate team who strive to support our veterans in any and all ways they can. With over 1500 members, 800 of whom are ex-service members, the Noble Park RSL provides a safe and accessible place where veterans can come and spend time with their comrades, make new connections and get the support that they need. It is also an important place where the community and our schools can connect with our veterans and learn more about their service and sacrifice.

Notably, the Noble Park RSL has a large number of Vietnam veterans, with over 200, establishing itself as the RSL sub-branch with the largest Vietnam veterans membership in Australia. The sub-branch operates a vital joint welfare and pension office in collaboration with the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia. This office is staffed by two war widows and six veterans, serving as a lifeline for veterans and their families. They provide crucial assistance with claims and ensure members receive other benefits and recognition they rightfully deserve. Beyond the paperwork, Noble Park RSL goes above and beyond by organising activities that contribute to the wellbeing of veterans. They provide a significant sense of community for veterans also.

War inflicts a considerable toll on many, most acutely those who have served. RSLs have for over a century been safe havens and stalwart advocates for the rights and welfare of veterans. I acknowledge and thank Noble Park RSL for the critical work they do in supporting service men and women in our community and their families. RSLs are a shining example of why we support organisations that support veterans. By working with RSLs and other veterans organisations we can ensure that those who give so much receive the support, recognition and practical assistance they deserve.

I have had a long connection with the Noble Park RSL, visiting regularly and having attended and participated in many commemorative services there, including Anzac Day and Remembrance Day services. I have also witnessed firsthand their active participation in activities and the provision of support for initiatives that better connect the local community. They are always willing to put their hand up and lend a helping hand in any way that they can.

I know that president John Meehan and fellow committee members would love to have the opportunity to show the minister around the Noble Park RSL and discuss all the important services and programs provided to veterans, including the Veterans Card Victoria, which provides veterans with benefits such as \$100 off light vehicle registration, free trailer and caravan registration, fishing licence exemption and a free marine licence, amongst other benefits. Such a visit would also facilitate discussion about the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for our veterans and the RSL sub-branch, as we know

that there is still more that can be done to support veterans, and working collaboratively with veterans and the communities that support them is crucial to achieving better outcomes together. I look forward to welcoming the minister to Noble Park RSL at her earliest convenience, along with the member for Mulgrave Eden Foster.

Goulburn Valley Health

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:52): (633) My adjournment matter is directed to the Minister for Health and regards funding for the completion of the Goulburn Valley Health redevelopment project. The action that I seek is for the minister to ensure a funding commitment that fully completes the redevelopment of Goulburn Valley Health as well as a funding commitment of around \$25 million to establish a clinical health school in Shepparton to address the significant shortage of health workers in the region.

Following a tour of the stage 1 works of the hospital's redevelopment by the minister on 16 March this year, the government's media release promoted the minister's tour of the stage 1 works and referred to the works as the final stage of the redevelopment. However, the minister is fully aware that this is blatantly untrue. The works she toured are only stage 1 of the hospital's redevelopment, evidenced by the commitment of \$2 million towards commencement of planning for stage 2 of the redevelopment in the 2019 state budget. Vital components of the redevelopment remain incomplete and in need of funding. These components include the construction of an integrated cancer service, increased acute and subacute inpatient capacity, additional places for ambulatory care, services for specialist clinics, additional car parking and a helipad, and clinical support and diagnostic services.

Combating the shortage of medical staff within the region also requires the government to commit significant funding to establishing a clinical health school on the Graham Street site. Goulburn Valley Health will require an additional 360 nurses by 2025 and is also facing shortages in allied health staff. With studies conducted by La Trobe University finding that people who train in regional areas are more likely to stay in the region, the clinical school will help to address shortages in nurses, midwives and health workers locally. Establishing a clinical health school on the Goulburn Valley Health site would enable locals to access high-quality training to enter the workforce and would enable the hospital to access an expanded talent pool to compensate for the existing shortages. Training nurses and allied health professionals would enhance the capacity of the regional hospital in conjunction with the redevelopment project.

In 2021 I FOIed the business case for the redevelopment. More than three years later this FOI is still ongoing, despite the Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner ordering the government to release the business case in part and the full executive summary PowerPoint. The fact that I am still fighting for the release of this information shows just how desperate this government is to hide the state of the health system in Victoria and particularly the need for further investment in Goulburn Valley Health.

Respectful Relationships

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:55): (634) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Education Minister Carroll. On Friday last week I attended the Walk Against Family Violence on the steps of this Parliament to advocate for a future where we are all safe, equal and respected. When walking among so many leaders in the family and intimate partner violence space, there were many conversations about the importance of primary prevention – that is, intervention that occurs before harm and can include measures such as improved education.

With that in mind, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has for the first time collected data on the issue of economic abuse. This includes actions that control or limit access to economic resources and result in emotional harm or fear. It may include, for instance, forcing a partner to have a shared bank account that they do not have access to. This data show that 1.6 million women and 780,000 men likely experience economic abuse in Australia. The results of economic abuse can extend to your credit score,

whether you can work, where you can live and your ability to access secure accommodation. There is also a significant correlation between financial stress and partner violence and abuse.

Often this type of relationship abuse is not well understood. People do not like to talk about money, and as a result it makes it much harder for those in abusive relationships to identify this as abuse. The Respectful Relationships curriculum and resources in Victoria only touch on economic abuse in a brief way, highlighting the most extreme examples of emptying accounts and withholding all money. This does not work to help young people identify the subtleties in how these patterns of behaviour develop. The holistic inclusion of these subjects is essential for primary prevention. It ensures everyone has a good understanding of what healthy financial relationships look like. So the action I seek is that the minister commit to working with Respect Victoria and expanding the focus on economic abuse as part of the Respectful Relationships program.

Police resources

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:58): (635) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Police, and I ask the minister to not ignore the people of Frankston's concerns, which are backed up by the Police Association Victoria secretary Wayne Gatt regarding issues about safety that have been raised in a recent report commissioned by Frankston City Council and conducted by research company Metropolis. The action I seek is for the minister to reinstate the 24-hour police reception to all police stations that service the south-eastern suburbs and neighbouring areas.

The issues relate to how people in Frankston feel about their general safety, and this is of particular interest now, since last week police announced that they have been forced to cut down on opening hours in the evenings and quieter periods for 43 police stations, with seven in my electorate of the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region. Suburbs include the bayside Chelsea area, Cheltenham, Mordialloc, Endeavour Hills, Springvale and Carrum Downs, and while police have said that receptions will be manned, night-time closures of these stations are a real concern, with the nearest operating police stations with night-time hours up to 5 to 10 kilometres away. The Metropolis survey of over 801 residents found that 19 per cent of respondents felt unsafe in Frankston at night. This 19 per cent is about 8 per cent higher than the metropolitan average. The report further stated that 11 per cent of Frankston respondents to this survey nominated safety, policing and crime issues as their main concerns, which is double the metropolitan Melbourne average of only 5 per cent.

The report also found that people in Frankston felt 8 per cent less safe at night, 6 per cent less safe during the day and 5 per cent less safe in and around the local shopping area and travelling on or waiting for public transport than in the average areas of Melbourne's metropolitan regions. The respondents aired their concerns about crime in Frankston, with 13 per cent feeling unsafe due to a perceived lack of adequate policing. The 13 per cent statistic and concerns were about safety at night and also around lighting issues, but the main issue for the 13 per cent was that there was not adequate policing. I just want to reiterate the point – a perceived lack of adequate policing. This perception was part of a report conducted in May this year, and I fear that this percentage would be higher now with the reduction of police station hours. Perception is vital. Closing police stations at night is only going to heighten people's very real fears, and we now know that there are 319 fewer serving police officers in 2023 than there were in 2022. There are currently 800 general Victoria Police vacancies, and that is since COVID-19. Many of these safety concerns are around issues of drugs and alcohol.

Flood recovery

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (18:01): (636) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Education. The action I seek is for the minister to reinstate the flood relief for Victorian students initiative, which was a grant previously available following the 2022 floods. I am informed, Minister, by concerned members of the Maribyrnong community that many flood-affected families were unable to access the grant due to communication barriers and delays. Many of these families are still struggling today and are in urgent need of support.

The parliamentary flooding inquiry has highlighted the systemic issues that contribute to flooding, including climate change and poor city planning. The ongoing impacts of the floods have shown that our disaster resilience and recovery systems have failed people. As we look ahead now to prepare communities for more climate change related events, we must continue to support and rebuild communities who have already paid a high price. I am informed by the Maribyrnong community recovery committee that around 1500 people in nearly 600 homes were impacted by the floods in Maribyrnong. Barely 40 per cent of these people have returned to their homes. Among those who have returned, many are still living in damaged houses with limited electricity. Given these ongoing impacts, it is imperative that the government provide support to residents, especially children whose schooling has been interrupted repeatedly over the past few years.

Through its own investigations the Maribyrnong community recovery committee has found that only one family was able to access the Department of Education's flood relief for Victorian students grants. We are told that most families were completely unaware that this grant was available. Despite this, the grant is no longer available on the department's website in its original form. It has now been downgraded, which means it is only available to families at a handful of schools and only for very limited purposes. Previously the grant provided \$1200 for school students at government, Catholic or independent schools to replace a wide range of school supplies, including laptops. Currently people in genuine need are unable to access it.

Minister, I ask that you reinstate the grant and remove the barriers to accessing it so all families in need can receive support. We want to see children back in school and not having to worry about buying books, clothing or in some cases whether there will be food for their lunchboxes. If the grant is reinstated, the Maribyrnong community recovery committee has kindly offered to assist in ensuring schools and families are made aware of its availability. The Maribyrnong community have come together beautifully to support each other through these trying times. Now they just need the government to lend a hand too.

COVID-19 vaccination

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:03): (637) The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care states that:

Informed consent is a person's decision, given voluntarily, to agree to a healthcare treatment, procedure or other intervention ...

It also says that:

At the commission, we believe informed consent is a key quality and safety issue.

It talks about how it is a human right. It also talks about how hospitals and day procedure services have to have informed consent to comply with legislation, law requirements and best practice. However, the COVID vaccine mandates were the biggest violation of human rights we have seen in our time in our state. Having to choose between a medical intervention or your job is coercion, yet this is happening in Victoria today. Vaccine mandates undermine the basis of ethical medical care, which is informed consent, yet this is happening in Victoria today.

Gaining informed consent is a legal, ethical and professional requirement, yet this is not happening in Victoria today. The reason I bring this up is an FOI document regarding vaccine injuries in fire and rescue has recently come to light. The information revealed in this FOI request is confronting, and what is even more concerning is how Fire Rescue Victoria and the firefighters union have conspired to suppress it. Fire Rescue Victoria is the only fire agency in Australia that still has COVID vaccine mandates and requires boosters. Their own risk assessment acknowledged the risks and side effects of the COVID vaccines and listed them, saying that other side effects may include myocarditis, pericarditis, thrombosis or immune thrombocytopenia.

I am not an anti-vaxxer, but I am anti mandate and I am unapologetically anti mandate. It is not up to your boss or your union to make a decision on your health. It is up to the individual, and today there are at least 30 firefighters who cannot work, due to their vaccination status. This should be their own private business and nobody else's. I am worried right now for the thousands of fireys who have had this information deliberately kept from them despite repeated attempts by members to see this report. Again, this flies in the face of informed consent. Right now there are a number of firefighters in Victoria that are vaccine injured. Some are still working, and others cannot.

My adjournment is for the Minister for Emergency Services. We need all hands on deck with this fire season coming up. The action that I seek is for Fire Rescue Victoria to drop their mandates immediately.

Anti-vilification legislation

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:07): (638) My adjournment matter is for the Attorney-General, and the action that I seek is for the Labor government to expand anti-vilification laws as a matter of urgency to protect trans and gender-diverse people from the growing anti-trans hate. Trans people want to live authentically, but right now just being yourself as a trans person puts you in danger, and there is so much more that can be done to help. In 2019 – that is four years ago, for those who are not counting – the Greens supported a bill in this place to expand anti-vilification laws, which would have included gender identity. During that debate in Labor's contribution they said:

There is no disagreement that these issues are critical and that fundamentally we need to dive right in and go further ...

Yet the Victorian Labor government then voted that bill down. Following that there was an inquiry into this issue, which took place soon after, and in 2021 the report from that inquiry was handed down. That report urged, in a shock to no-one at all, that anti-vilification laws should be expanded to cover a range of attributes, including gender identity. But when asked this year, 2023, the Victorian Labor government advised that these changes are at least 18 months away.

So let me get this straight. It is going to take a full six years from when Labor said we need to 'dive right in and go further' to see trans people protected from vilification. Just recently we saw a trans day of remembrance, a day to honour the memory of trans lives lost to acts of transphobia and vilification. For this I attended a beautiful and, frankly, heartbreaking vigil. Six years is six different days of remembrance coming and going. How many people will the community have to honour before we see action? How many lives do we have to mourn? This is a plea, and I know the government has the ability to do more than what is currently being presented. I am not saying that you do not care; I am not saying you are not trying. I am saying you can do more, and the trans community knows that you can do more.

Trans people are seeing more and more hatred in person and online as each day passes from the mainstream media, from far-right groups and even from members of this Parliament. A report by the Trans Justice Project and the Victorian Pride Lobby into anti-trans hate found that one in two trans and gender-diverse people have experienced anti-trans hate in the past 12 months, nine in 10 have witnessed anti-trans hate online and one in 10 have experienced anti-trans violence. These are harrowing numbers. Trans people want to live authentically. I urge this government to please, please do more to protect trans and gender-diverse people from vilification.

Regional community leadership program

Gaëlle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (18:10): (639) My adjournment is to the Minister for Regional Development following the state government's decision to stop funding Victoria's regional community leadership program at the end of this year. This program aims to support emerging leaders, strengthen existing leaders and build community connections. It is disappointing that the Premier and member for Bendigo East Jacinta Allan has wasted billions of dollars on project cost blowouts on city-based projects and is cutting small regional programs that have been proven to deliver strong

community benefits. I spoke with program coordinators that received a letter from the minister saying that the program would no longer be funded and they need to find their own support.

Regional Victoria needs strong community leaders, especially during challenging times. In the last decade we have experienced drought, bushfires, COVID and, more recently, floods that have devastated local communities across northern Victoria. Now more than ever we need to support training opportunities to equip and encourage people to step up and contribute to the future growth and development of regional communities. This year more than 200 people participated in regional community leadership programs across Victoria. The Nationals and Liberals started this program in 2011 when we were in government because we understand that strong communities do not just happen; it takes good leadership to build strong communities. Funding was cut for these programs despite formal evaluations that found them to be an effective use of taxpayers money. I know people that have participated in the Loddon Murray community leadership program and have seen the benefits that this program has delivered.

Under this government Victoria now has the highest state debt of any in Australia. The Victorian Auditor-General released a report last week that found the Labor government has no plan for when and how the state will pay down existing and future debt. Within a few years Victoria's interest payments on this debt are expected to double from \$4 billion to \$8 billion. This government should look at reducing their waste on Melbourne-based projects instead of cutting regional programs.

They had already dropped the baton on regional Victoria when they cancelled the Commonwealth Games. Regional communities already face significant challenges, and recent natural disasters have pushed many regional communities to the edge. The action I seek is for the minister to reconsider the Labor government's decision and provide ongoing funding for this program which benefits regional communities.

Therapy dogs

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (18:12): (640) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Agriculture, and the action I seek is for her to investigate a streamlined process and regulation that makes the licensing of therapy dogs for supporting mental health more accessible in Victoria. Therapy dogs, also known as wellbeing dogs and support dogs, are best friends and family members that support individuals in multiple aspects of their lives. It is common for us to come across seeing-eye dogs throughout daily life in society, but less so dogs that support people with mental health challenges. The Victorian Department of Health states that nearly one-quarter of Victorian adults report being diagnosed with depression or anxiety by a doctor in their lifetime.

The process in Victoria is convoluted and difficult to access. Private organisations like mindDog in Queensland are certifying dogs in Victoria as psychiatric assistance dogs due to a lack of local understanding and awareness of this process. Australia-wide assistance dogs, also known as service dogs, are covered by the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992. An assistance dog is trained to assist a human in public and is guaranteed access to all public places, including shopping centres, hospitals, public transport and restaurants. According to this act, an assistance dog is trained to alleviate the effect of a disability and must meet standards of hygiene and behaviour. Certified mindDogs are able to travel on public transport; access public places, such as supermarkets and even the pub; and take part in social activities which have otherwise been closed off to their individual minders who experience mental ill health. While the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act guarantees public access for all dogs trained as assistance dogs and so does the Equal Opportunity Act 2010 in Victoria, there is no specific legislation that regulates the certification or treatment of these animals. The certification is left up to the rules of private organisations, who may unfairly take issues with specific breeds of dog, such as greyhounds.

The Equal Opportunity Act in Victoria only covers the discrimination of people with an assistance dog, defined as a dog that is trained to perform tasks or functions that assist the person with a disability to alleviate the effects of their disability. But assistance dogs are so much more than a dog trained to

perform tasks for those with a disability. They can provide comfort, support and confidence to the many of us who suffer from mental health, including anxiety. Other states, such as Queensland and Western Australia, have long had specific legislation for assistance animals, and I hope that the minister recognises animals as providing emotional support, companionship and relief from symptoms related to mental and physical disabilities or illnesses and considers the same for Victoria.

Health system

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:15): (641) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for Health, and it is in relation to reports today around a staff survey at Bendigo Health. I want to put on record my thanks to Bendigo Health for conducting this survey amongst their staff. I think that is great leadership, and it shows that the health service is really trying to get to the bottom of issues that are affecting staff and what their concerns are so they can therefore improve them. So even though some of the findings were quite alarming, I do think that it is a very good thing that this health service is out there and undertaking these surveys.

I am reading from some quotes: ‘massive safety risk’, ‘threat to patient safety’ and ‘moral distress’ are phrases used by unidentified Bendigo Health workers responding to the experience survey that I have referred to, and I am talking about the electronic patient record. A few months ago we had the debate around electronic patient records, and there were concerns around data, there were concerns around the lack of an ability to FOI and a range of other concerns in relation to integration with health services and how the government would be doing this. What this survey has shown is that there are some very challenging issues arising out of the electronic patient record, but what I am very concerned about are issues around medication safety components, and there are various comments made around that:

The drug chart is significantly difficult to read and interpret, often misleading the nursing staff to actual dosages prescribed, leading to many and multiple drug errors that have significantly affected patients ...

That is one response from a nurse, and I think that should absolutely set off alarm bells for the minister in relation to those medical errors that are occurring. We know through COVID, just through issues that were arising, that medical errors led to the death of patients. We know that. That happened in the Northern Hospital emergency department – a medication error led to the death of a healthy middle-aged man in shocking and tragic circumstances.

What I am now concerned about is the lack of transparency from the government around the latest sentinel report. They will not tell us how many children have died. In the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee last week we got some very revealing figures around the 20 Victorians that have died in the last two years because they could not get an ambulance and the 1395 Victorians on the waitlist who died before they got their elective surgery. What I would like the minister to provide to me and the action I seek is for the minister to provide the number of sentinel events of the 240 that were reported in the 2021–22 report that were due to medication errors.

COVID-19

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:18): (642) My adjournment matter is addressed to the Attorney-General. According to evidence at recent Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearings, more than 28,000 fines handed out for COVID infringements remain unpaid. We also learned that a payment plan the government set up that has cost a million dollars has granted just over 200 applications. This means that it has cost Victorian taxpayers nearly \$5000 to recover each fine that was handed out to people who might have gone to the shops outside their zone or dared to take their kids to a playground. This is a waste of time and money for everyone concerned and a great cause of stress for thousands of Victorians during a cost-of-living crisis. Attorney, we have a new Premier, and you have the chance to take a new approach. Isn't it time we put this whole nightmare behind us? My request for action is to waive all outstanding COVID fines before Christmas.

Ministerial youth advisory group

Matthew BACH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:19): (643) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Children, and the action that I seek is for her to reinstate the ministerial youth advisory group (MYAG), which has recently been shut down. To its credit, this government established the ministerial youth advisory group back in 2019. This was a group of young people with lived experience in the child protection system. The government said laudable things at that time about how important advice from young people who have been through the system was.

The government committed to bimonthly meetings in its media release at that time, which I am holding. The minister at the time – it was about four or five child protection ministers ago – Minister Donnellan said:

It's vital we learn from the experiences of Victorians in the child protection system and I look forward to hearing from these remarkable young people ...

Well, the house will be dismayed to learn that despite commitments from this government that the MYAG would meet bimonthly, the last meeting was held on 25 May. That is 187 days ago, and the wonderful young people on this group, several of whom have recently spoken to me about it, who respect Minister Blandthorn, as I respect Minister Blandthorn, very much, are desperate to get back into the room to have discussions with her about how to make the system better.

Now, despite a good recent budget outcome for residential care, which I have spoken about previously, I was really concerned to read the most recent report from the commissioner for children and young people. This is a body that Minister Wooldridge established back in 2011. It is about the shocking educational outcomes for children in care, and unsurprisingly to me children in residential care received the worst educational outcomes. The commissioner found:

Children and young people living in residential care have the highest level of school absences and achieve the lowest levels of numeracy and literacy compared to children and young people in other care settings.

As you know, previously I have called for residential care to just be shut down. I think it is an abomination. Why would you want to push more and more vulnerable young people into a government-run system of small homes out in the community? On this side of the house we want young people to be in loving families. Let us focus on building up our foster care stocks. Let us focus on kinship carers. We have already got secure welfare for the very small number of children who are so violent that they cannot be with loving families. Residential care costs 10 times as much as foster care or kinship care. Why wouldn't we be focusing there? We must hear the voices of young people, like one in this report who said:

I fucking hate it here ...

Another said this:

At the resi I felt ... suicidal, used to cut myself ...

These are the voices of young people, who we must hear.

Spiritual care

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:22): (644) I want to raise a matter for the attention of the Minister for Health in the other place, and it concerns the Spiritual Health Association and funding for chaplains within our health system. This is an incredibly important issue. The Allan Labor government has decided – disgracefully, in my view – to discontinue all funding for the Spiritual Health Association and for the chaplain program in our public hospitals.

I am very familiar with this program as a former health minister. I fostered and supported this program – indeed I put in additional money to support the program to ensure that it not only continued into the future but was able to do very significant work. To explain to the community – and indeed the minister, it seems – the way this works is that there is a chaplain in each of our major public hospitals.

The chaplain is there to support people of all faiths – if necessary, to bring someone in from outside – and to provide basic spiritual support for people, some who may be dying, others who are in difficult situations. People have strong faiths and want to have someone there who can assist them at these points of often significant trouble.

I am aware that the organisation has written an open letter to the Premier of Victoria, Premier Allan, dated 13 November and asked for her urgent intervention in the continuation of funding for the Spiritual Health Association. The program is administered through the Department of Health, so this is strictly for the health minister, but I note that the specific letter that has been circulated has been sent to the Premier.

For 70 years chaplains in our public hospitals have performed this important role. The letter is signed by Archbishop Dr Philip Freier; Archbishop Peter Comensoli; Mr Dinesh Weerakkody, president of the Buddhist Council of Victoria; Ms Agnes Sheehan, the CEO of CatholicCare Victoria; Makarand Bhagwat, the president of the Hindu Council of Australia; Adel Salman, the president of the Islamic Council of Victoria; Daniel Aghion KC, the president of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria; Bishop Lester Priebbenow, Lutheran Church of Australia, Victorian division; His Eminence Metropolitan Petar, the diocesan bishop of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, diocese of Australia and New Zealand; Reverend Ian Hutton, the moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria; Jasbir Singh Suropada, the chairperson of the Sikh Interfaith Council of Victoria; and Reverend David Fotheringham, the moderator of the Uniting Church in Australia, synod of Victoria and Tasmania. This is a nasty, harsh little cut.

Road maintenance

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:25): (645) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and it concerns the government's recent bizarre boast to have fixed a mere 5000 potholes when there are hundreds of thousands more to be fixed. The Department of Transport and Planning responded to a parliamentary question I asked on behalf of a local constituent and crowed about fixing a total of 5072 potholes in the Western Victoria Region. For me, there were two big problems with this response: firstly, fixing 5000 potholes is a drop in the ocean, and anyone who actually drives on our regional roads will hardly be impressed by the use of numbers like this. What matters is the experience of driving on the roads. We see that in front of our eyes and believe what we see a lot more than the numbers which emanate from Spring Street. The experience is what matters, and the experience is unpleasant, expensively damaging and, in places, indisputably unsafe. The fact is the department has no strategy to fix regional and rural potholes at the rate they are being created.

This response raised for me the bigger problem with government action like this: these repairs are simply bandaids that do not last long and wash away after the first shower of rain. Although the government might be proud of their media releases, there is no significant investment in finding a long-term solution to our roads. The government instead resort to pothole filling and minor patching, this never-ending cycle of improvement and degradation each wet season. Isn't it crazy that the government boasts about how many thousand potholes it fills? To anyone with sense, that is not a boast of success, it is a straightforward admission that the roads are falling to bits at an alarming rate. It is like getting excited because you have bailed out thousands of gallons of water from your boat. That is not an achievement; it is a serious indication that there is a big hole somewhere and you should be fixing the hole, not bailing out the water.

The action I seek from the minister is a rethink. Rather than totting up running repairs, which in fact simply concedes the scale of failure, he should concentrate the government's effort on fixing roads properly in the first place. So I request a considered, detailed report, detailing how alternative road design, construction and maintenance techniques could be employed to improve Western Victoria's road network and make temporary repairs on tens of thousands of potholes a thing of the past.

Responses

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (18:28): There were 14 matters raised today: Mr Tarlamis to the Minister for Veterans, Ms Lovell to the Minister for Health, Ms Payne to the Minister for Education, Mrs Hermans to the Minister for Police, Dr Ratnam to the Minister for Education, Dr Heath to the Minister for Emergency Services, Mr Puglielli to the Attorney-General, Mrs Broad to the Minister for Regional Development, Ms Purcell to the Minister for Agriculture, Ms Crozier to the Minister for Health, Mr Limbrick to the Attorney-General, Dr Bach to the Minister for Children, Mr Davis to the Minister for Health and Mrs McArthur to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. I will make sure that all those matters raised are referred to the appropriate ministers for response.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 6:29 pm.