



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Wednesday 17 May 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

Matthew Bach

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, Nicholas	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib
Bourman, Jeff	Eastern Victoria	SFFP	McIntosh, Tom	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Broad, Gaelle	Northern Victoria	Nat	Mulholland, Evan	Northern Metropolitan	Lib
Copsey, Katherine	Southern Metropolitan	Greens	Payne, Rachel	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LCV
Crozier, Georgie	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Puglielli, Aiv	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Greens
Davis, David	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Purcell, Georgie	Northern Victoria	AJP
Deeming, Moira 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 17 May 2023

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

Petitions

Police conduct

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) presented a petition bearing 349 signatures:

The Petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the actions taken by Victorian Police against citizens protesting the public address by author Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull. We acknowledge the Premier, the Hon. Daniel Andrews' condemnation of the Nazi salute by the neo-Nazi group at Keen-Minshull's address. However, the actions of Victoria Police which allowed the neo-Nazi protesters to mount Parliament stairs, display the Nazi salute, and generate clear images for their online supporters has not been addressed. There is video and photographic evidence indicating that Victoria Police provided a cordon surrounding the neo-Nazi group, and used pepper spray, mounted officers and physical force to move and disperse a larger group of LGBTIQ+ people and allies who had gathered to protest Ms Keen-Minshull's address. The actions of Victoria Police were not representative of an impartial or fair state. Instead of keeping the peace, their actions have caused a great deal of distress, trauma and concern for the protesters, LGBTIQ+ Victorians, and their families, friends and allies. We feel deeply betrayed by Victoria Police, who proclaims their allyship and support as seen during events such as the Midsumma Pride March and Carnival.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to conduct an independent review of Victoria Police's strategies in countering online propaganda for extreme right-wing groups, conduct an independent inquiry into the actions of Victoria Police on 18 March 2023 at the public address by Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull, and issue a public apology to the LGBTIQ+ community, their allies and other supporters of the protest against Keen-Minshull's address.

Samantha RATNAM: I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Corrections Amendment (Parole) Bill 2023

Introduction and first reading

Matthew BACH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:35): I introduce a bill for an act to amend the Corrections Act 1986 in relation to conditions for making a parole order in respect of the prisoner Paul Denyer and for other purposes, and I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Matthew BACH: I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Papers

Papers

Tabled by Clerk:

Auditor-General – Supporting Sexual and Reproductive Health, May 2023 (*Ordered to be published*).

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

Bev McArthur: On a point of order, President, Dr Bach and I claim to be misrepresented, and it is by way of exclusion. Mr Batchelor's motion about nuclear energy failed to include Dr Bach and me as supporters of nuclear energy, given we are signatories to a minority report, along with Mr Limbrick.

The PRESIDENT: That is not a point of order, but thank you.

Committees**Economy and Infrastructure Committee*****Membership***

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (09:50): I move, by leave:

That Dr Mansfield be a participating member of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee.

Motion agreed to.***Members statements*****Public transport fares**

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (09:50): On the first day of the Andrews Labor government's V/Line capped fares, I visited Warrnambool railway station to hear from travellers about how the government's new cheaper fares would affect them. In Warrnambool a woman in the ticket queue said to me, 'I saw it online. We were going to drive to Melbourne next week, but now it's cheaper for my husband and I and our children to travel on the train.' An emotional, happy couple told me, 'We just waved goodbye to our daughter on a backpacking trip. What an affordable start.' A man who had to pick up his daughter said, 'My daughter is able to come to visit more often.' A student who travels to Melbourne each weekend is going to save \$60 a week. I met a couple at the Portland bus stop who happily told me, 'This is going to make seeing each other so much easier.' One person told me outright, 'This will make dating easier.' And I must mention Ida Tevelein expressing her opinion on 25 April in the *Portland Observer*:

Let's face it, you couldn't even drive to Yambuk for \$4.60 in a car! Yet, that is all it costs me for a return fare to Melbourne for the day, \$4.60!

Ida had a wonderful day visiting her daughter in hospital. I am sure these capped fares will leave a lasting legacy, creating many new stories, particularly for those who live in outer regional Victoria.

Real Deal project

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:52): Last week I attended the Real Deal forum for the Geelong community at the Cloverdale Community Centre in Corio. Eager and excited people from all over Geelong were literally packing the hall. It was initiated by the Sydney Policy Lab and inspired by the Global Green New Deal. The Real Deal brings together diverse organisations, including unions, faith groups, community centres and environment groups. With the support of locals like Sal Fisher, Colin Long and Liz Bonner, the project is empowering communities to plan for the future they want to see as we face the climate crisis. The Real Deal is deliberately in Geelong, which has experienced major economic transitions, to learn from the mistakes of the past, understand current community concerns and create a future that leaves no-one behind. Listening to the community for the past six months, the project has heard that the climate transition is more than new jobs – it is about habitable, affordable housing and the ability to afford a decent quality of life and access to basic services. Last week was the start of a discussion about potential solutions, such as rental reform, Geelong Sustainability's climate safe rooms program and genuine access to public health and dental care. The

best moment of the evening, however, was seeing so many people signing up to commit 1 hour a week to ongoing work on these issues. I reckon this Parliament should be paying attention.

IDAHOBIT

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Water, Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Commonwealth Games Legacy, Minister for Equality) (09:54): Today is IDAHOBIT, the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersex Discrimination and Transphobia. To every LGBTIQ+ Victorian and every LGBTIQ+ person around Australia and around the world, we see you, we respect you, we acknowledge you and we also confirm your rights – our rights – to safety, dignity, inclusion and the opportunity to participate in community life. To every ally who has stood firm, determined and with love to support us in recent times, through the small-minded, loud and hate-filled narratives of people who seek to deny our opportunities to participate in everyday life, thank you. To the councils who are raising flags today all over Victoria without exception, rainbow flags that will be flying in front of every local government office, thank you. To every family and community who is supporting LGBTIQ+ people with love, care and support, thank you. It is not easy standing in the face of constant discrimination, stigma and harassment. It is not easy to have lifelong experiences of being singled out, of being demonised, of being denied opportunities to participate. IDAHOBIT is an opportunity for us all to commit to standing against bigotry, discrimination and hatred.

Wear Orange Wednesday

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:55): Today is Wear Orange Wednesday – WOW Day. This day is in May and it is a national day of thanks for our SES workers, so I want to give a real shout-out to all of our SES workers and volunteers. In Victoria we give thanks for our thousands of hardworking State Emergency Service volunteers, who selflessly serve the Victorian community seven days a week, 24 hours a day and every day of the year responding to natural disasters like floods, storms and landslides and emergencies like roadside rescues, and we acknowledge their assistance to other great emergency services like the CFA – Country Fire Authority – police and Ambulance Victoria. With thousands of dedicated volunteers and a couple of hundred committed staff in approximately 150 units across Victoria, they have been serving the community for close to 50 years. The majority of the work of Victoria's SES has been and continues to be completed by unpaid volunteers, and these volunteers have been the backbone of the organisation. I want to thank our SES volunteers for their commitment to leading better public safety outcomes, including their rescues in the floods last year and their continual storm and road rescue operations, which I am aware have caused tremendous trauma, and they just continue to serve in this capacity. So today I along with all my Liberal colleagues and National colleagues want to acknowledge our sincere appreciation for our hardworking volunteers and paid staff in Victoria's SES.

IDAHOBIT

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:57): Today I also rise to celebrate IDAHOBIT. This date commemorates the day that the World Health Organization removed homosexuality from its classification of diseases back in 1990. While we have much to celebrate in terms of our achievements, the rise of hate speech and attacks on our LGBTIQ+ community, some of which have taken place on the very steps of this Parliament, remind us that we have a long way to go. But let us celebrate some good news today: every Victorian council and the Victorian Parliament hoisted the rainbow flag today. This makes Victoria the first jurisdiction in the world with all local governments flying the rainbow flag on IDAHOBIT – something to be really proud of, Victoria.

Rainbow Community Angels

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:58): I also want to talk about a community initiative that is taking positive action in response to the current climate of hate directed towards the LGBTIQ+ community. The Rainbow Community Angels train and support LGBTIQ+ people and

their allies to take part in peaceful actions to support community safety at events. The organisers include experienced LGBTIQ+ advocates, drag queens, trans and gender-diverse people and rainbow families. Angels wear magnificent wings to shield people from seeing any hostile protesters who are present. Other acts include marshalling; assisting with communication and safety; and liaising with media, event organisers and others. The angels are making a real difference not just for young and marginalised people finding their way but for everyone to feel safe and respected.

National Volunteer Week

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:59): In this National Volunteer Week I would like to acknowledge, congratulate and express my deepest gratitude for all of the volunteers throughout my electorate of the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region. Some of the dedicated and selfless volunteers I have had the privilege to work with over the past few months include Ann and Graeme Taylor, who have headed up the Beaconsfield Progress Association for over 20 years and are responsible for the wonderful Anzac Day service and the publishing of the *Beaconsfield Banner*. The protection of the Beaconsfield railway house was also largely the result of Beaconsfield local Fran Healy, who initiated and led a very successful campaign, which resulted in the protection of the historic stationmaster's house and bunya bunya tree. Thelma Thompson at 80 years of age leads National Trust of Australia volunteers and has turned the Casey–Cardinia National Trust gift shop into a thriving small business that raises funds for the National Trust to preserve our built and natural heritage for future generations, and I encourage all members to check out that shop when they are next in Berwick. There are local environment groups like the Cardinia Environment Coalition, which relies on funds raised through its own plant nursery in order to maintain six nature reserves throughout Cardinia, including the 172 hectares of the ecologically and culturally significant Beaconsfield Nature Conservation Reserve. If I had more time, I would talk about many more of our amazing people in the community, such as Liesel Kippen, Peter Cahill and Jack Lyons, but I would like to close by mentioning as well Rob Hansen and Bob Taylor, who very successfully advocated on behalf of their sportsground in Upper Beaconsfield.

Veterinary care

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (10:00): To many of us, our companion animals are family. They provide us with friendship, comfort, emotional support and a sense of purpose. It is often those who will benefit the most from a relationship with a companion animal that have the most barriers to getting one: the elderly, people living alone, disability pensioners, victim-survivors of family violence and low-income earners. Part of this is because across Victoria veterinary care is becoming more and more physically and financially inaccessible. The last Parliament unanimously passed a motion from the Animal Justice Party calling for a subsidised veterinary care system in Victoria much like our human healthcare system, which we called Veticare. As we continue to advocate for and progress towards this vital scheme being introduced, I have been proud in recent weeks to support two organisations that have recognised this gap and are providing access to veterinary care for some of our most vulnerable Victorians. It was rather moving to make a visit to the Regional Community Vet Clinic's free cat and kitten mass desexing day in Castlemaine and also to see a dog called Sooy and her mum Dana, who is on a disability support pension, have their urgent vet bill covered recently by Pet Medical Crisis. I hope the government can recognise the importance of both organisations' work and support them too.

IDAHOBIT

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:02): Before I begin my members statement today I just want to wish all LGBTIQ+ Victorians a very happy IDAHOBIT. I stand in support and solidarity with you as a supporter and ally, and I proudly wear rainbow colours and sequins today to show my support. We here on the government benches reject homophobia and bigotry in all of its forms. As the Premier often says, equality is not negotiable in Victoria. So a very happy IDAHOBIT to you all.

Williamstown dockyard

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:02): I recently met with officials from the Victorian branch of the AMWU to discuss the enormous potential for a manufacturing renaissance right here in Victoria. Of course it is a proud union which also supports LGBTIQ+ people in Victoria. After many years of neglect and industry policy failure by conservative Liberal governments, an exciting opportunity has arisen to realise the advanced manufacturing potential right here in this great state of Victoria. Williamstown dockyard presents that opportunity. The dockyard previously employed more than 1500 workers in highly skilled manufacturing jobs. Heavy engineering and advanced manufacturing have historically represented a pathway for working-class people to secure well-paid unionised jobs as well as training large numbers of apprentices. This is why the Williamstown dockyard is an ideal location for the manufacture of Victoria's fleet of electric buses; infrastructure for roads, rail and the State Electricity Commission; and components for wind towers and appliances for the electrification of Victoria's homes; and not the least it is ready-made for shipbuilding and repair. I thank the AMWU Victorian branch for identifying the possibilities and for showing us that manufacturing workers can play a vital role as we decarbonise our economy. Government has the potential to ensure the creation of good, secure, well-paid manufacturing jobs for working people, many of whom reside in my region, and I look forward to seeing this proposal become a reality.

Willum Warrain

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (10:04): Happy IDAHOBIT. A vibrant and confident Aboriginal community encouraging cultural strengthening, promoting health and providing a safe gathering place for all community members – this is the vision of Willum Warrain, and this vision was on full display during my visit last week. Located in Hastings on the Mornington Peninsula, an area that has one of the fastest growing Aboriginal populations, Willum Warrain plays an important role in educating and connecting young Indigenous kids with community through their Deadly Kids program.

Willum Warrain recently celebrated its ninth birthday as a gathering place for Aboriginal people and is the only Aboriginal-run retail and wholesale nursery south of Melbourne. The level of care and knowledge evident with their bush nursery is super impressive. A huge thanks to Peter, Karsten and Nadia for welcoming me through your gates and talking me through the story of Willum Warrain. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to come and spend time on the site and to learn from thousands of years of culture and wisdom. I am looking forward to coming back soon and continuing to see and be part of the fantastic work that you are all doing.

Gender equality

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:05): Following on from my notice of motion earlier this morning, I rise today to pay tribute to the work the Andrews Labor government has done to support women. It was only recently, in April this year, that a new world-first exhibition, *Goddess: Power, Glamour, Rebellion*, which celebrates trailblazing women of cinema, opened at ACMI due to the support of our government. In 2021 our government created a landmark \$1 million fund to improve the public's recognition of women leaders, because only nine of the 580 statues in Victoria are of women. Our Jobs Victoria women-in-warehousing program has addressed a critical skills shortage in the sector while providing more than 200 women aged 45 and over with a new career. We are tearing down the barriers faced by women in traditionally male-dominated careers – think plumbing, electrical and aviation – with our \$5 million Women in Apprenticeships fund, whose first 10 initiatives will support at least 615 women in apprenticeships. We recognise women face a disproportionate risk of homelessness, and that is why we have embarked on our Big Housing Build, with one example being a former Fairfield rooming house transformed into a 38-bed self-contained modern home for women in need, thanks to \$3.3 million in government funding. And of course there is the \$23 million investment to install 1500 free sanitary product dispensing machines in up to 700 public sites. I am proud to be a member of a government that supports women.

*Bills***Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Home Stretch) Bill 2023***Statement of compatibility*

Matthew BACH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:07): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

In accordance with section 28 of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (the Charter), I make this Statement of Compatibility with respect to the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Home Stretch) Bill 2023 (Bill).

This Bill seeks to legislate the Home Stretch program, a program that extends support to young people leaving out of home care until they reach the age of 21. It does not infringe upon any rights outlined in the Charter. This Bill is based on language from Part 19 of the Children, Youth and Families (Child Protection) Amendment Bill 2021, which I would note was examined by the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee with no incompatibilities raised.

In my view, the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Home Stretch) Bill 2023, is compatible with human rights as protected by the Charter.

Second reading

Matthew BACH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:07): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

It was 588 days ago now in the other place that the government introduced the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Child Protection) Bill 2021. This was an important bill, and like all other children, youth and families bills that have been brought forward during my time as Shadow Minister for Child Protection, the opposition parties provided full-throated support for this bill. This bill passed the Assembly. It was debated here in this chamber, and yet before the committee stage the bill was removed. It lapsed at the election. The bill contains several important elements, none more so than those contained in part 19. Part 19 of that previous bill is replicated word for word in this new bill today.

To start my contribution, I would like to read from the government's second-reading speech at that time, on 6 October 2021, about why it was that these exact measures were so important. At that time the government said it was introducing this legislation:

... to create a contemporary, rights-based framework for the support of vulnerable children and families ...

The government went on:

Ensuring the safety and protection of children is amongst our most important responsibilities and reflects our shared goals and aspirations as a society to have strong families in which children can grow and thrive and get the good start in life they each deserve. For those young people leaving care, the Bill recognises the continuing responsibility that the State has to support these young people as they transition to adulthood.

And this legislation that I am introducing today does that. It provides the legislative framework for the Home Stretch program, which again has been supported by the government, by the opposition and by members of the crossbench for a long period of time.

Specifically regarding part 19 of the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Child Protection) Bill 2021, which is replicated word for word in this new bill, here is what the government had to say – and before quoting the government at some length, I would note that I agree with every word and that even at that time full bipartisan support was provided for this measure:

To enable all young people transitioning from care to thrive as they grow older, the Bill will expand the Secretary's responsibilities to provide services to assist young people under the age of 21 ... who are transitioning from out of home care to adulthood, to include young people who have grown up in permanent care.

Building on the success of Victoria's landmark Home Stretch program which, in an Australian first, rolled out to all care leavers in January 2021 and was extended to include young people on permanent care orders from July 2021, the Bill creates a legal obligation for the Secretary to provide a transition to adulthood allowance for all eligible care leavers, further positioning Victoria as the lead jurisdiction for care leaver supports in Australia. The allowance will contribute to the costs of accommodation and support of young people who have left care as they transition to adulthood where the young person is living independently or where they are remaining with their existing home-based carer.

We know that many young people leaving care experience a difficult transition and achieve much poorer life outcomes than their peers. It is incumbent on us as a society to take action to address disparities in life outcomes for young people for whom the state has had parental responsibility. Young people supported by a transition to adulthood allowance will have a key worker from Better Futures who will support them across a range of life areas, including with housing, with education and training, with finding employment, with obtaining legal advice, and with assistance in gaining access to health and community services and counselling and support.

Importantly, the minister at the time went on, quite correctly:

Evidence shows that supporting care leavers is not only the morally right thing to do, it makes good economic sense, with downstream savings across other areas of support including homelessness, mental health, and the criminal justice system.

So at that time, 588 days ago, the government introduced exactly this measure, which lapsed at the last election. 588 days ago the government made the point that this is the morally right thing to do and that it will lead to cost savings. In making those assertions the government was entirely correct.

Some history regarding that initial bill is necessary, especially for new members of this place. When the government's initial bill came to this place, Dr Ratnam, the leader of the Greens party, made it clear that she would seek to make amendments to that bill, and those amendments related to the ongoing debates about raising the age of criminal responsibility. Dr Ratnam was entirely within her rights to do so. Those discussions are incredibly important, and subsequently the Attorney-General made announcements about the government's own plans. It was in the context of Dr Ratnam's amendments, and undoubtedly in the context of a looming election, that the government decided not to proceed with that bill. Nonetheless, what the minister said in introducing that bill – that this is the morally right thing to do and that it will actually lead to cost savings for the budget – was correct then and remains correct now.

What the government said at the time regarding really poor outcomes for care leavers was entirely correct. For example, we know that many young people leaving foster care call their 18th birthday D-day. This is because 50 per cent of care leavers within one year will be unemployed, in jail or homeless or will have become a new parent themselves. That is according to Anglicare. A survey from Create, a foundation that seeks to support care leavers, found that 35 per cent of care leavers were homeless within their first year of leaving care, 46 per cent of boys were involved in the juvenile justice system and 29 per cent of all care leavers were unemployed in their first year. Furthermore, other survey results, this time from the Care Leavers Australasia Network, found that 41 per cent of girls leaving care had been pregnant at some point during their adolescence and that 43 to 65 per cent of care leavers suffer from diagnosed mental health disorders.

I think it is because of the compelling nature of these statistics that there has ever been bipartisan support for ongoing care to the age of 21 – a program that, to give credit to the government, the government rolled out. Ms Crozier, when she was shadow minister for child protection, advocated for this program, and it has always had the support of the Greens party. But the government rolled it out. Nonetheless, as the government said 588 days ago, the relatively straightforward matter of providing the legislative framework for Home Stretch has not been completed and must be completed now.

A final point from me: it should not be a complex matter or a matter that involves any dispute to finally put in place the legislative framework for Home Stretch that the government itself put forward 588 days ago. We should be able to do this as a chamber in an expeditious way. Then we must start the next conversation. Young people who have not experienced the care system overwhelmingly

receive support from their parents well past the age of 21. We know the statistic that many young people, in particular young men, remain at home oftentimes until their late 20s or even longer. So groups of care leavers have been advocating for an increase in the age at which care ceases to 25, and I want to put on record during this speech that I support that further expansion. The government's logic was right that a further expansion of support for care leavers should not be seen as a cost to the budget; it is actually a cost-saving mechanism. Given that the budget is to be handed down next week, I would argue to the Treasurer in the other place that now that we are finally coming to the matter of the legislative framework for Home Stretch to 21, he and the Minister for Child Protection and Family Services should introduce measures in the budget to provide care and support to the age of 25. The government has already said that further support for care leavers will in fact lead to cost savings for the budget. They were correct when they put forward that argument. That is not the principal reason, however, why I have introduced this legislation. The principal reason is, as the government said 588 days ago, that it is simply the morally right thing to do.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:17): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for two weeks.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for two weeks.

Committees

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Reference

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:17): I move, on behalf of the Greens:

That this house requires the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 17 November 2023, on the rental crisis in Victoria and measures to make renting more affordable and secure for Victorians, including but not limited to:

- (1) the drivers of low rental supply in Victoria;
- (2) the impact of low supply on renters;
- (3) options to increase the supply of long-term rentals, including:
 - (a) regulating the short-stay industry;
 - (b) incentivising long-term rentals through state tax levers;
 - (c) the role of build to rent and rent to buy in increasing housing supply;
- (4) the factors impacting the high cost of rent in Victoria, including:
 - (a) state and local government legislation and regulations;
 - (b) state government taxation;
- (5) the impact of increasing first home buyers on rental stock;
- (6) the effect on renters of rental stress;
- (7) the options to make renting affordable to households of all income levels, including:
 - (a) rent control options;
 - (b) rent assistance options;
 - (c) strengthening rental bidding laws;
 - (d) land trusts and community-owned housing;
- (8) the effectiveness and enforcement of existing rental standards;
- (9) how to improve standards for tenants including:
 - (a) energy efficiency standards and disclosure;
 - (b) cooling standards;
 - (c) privacy standards when applying for a rental;
- (10) the adequacy of tenancy support and mediation in Victoria;

- (11) the impact on tenants of the current legislative and administrative framework in terms of security of tenure;
- (12) options for legislating longer and perpetual leases;
- (13) further protections for tenants against notices to vacate during and after the termination of a lease;
- (14) the efficacy of the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal in, and alternative models for, tenancy dispute resolution;
- (15) the effect of the Residential Tenancies Amendment Act 2018 amendments on head tenants in share houses; and
- (16) any other related matters.

I take a moment to acknowledge the many renters that have joined us in the chamber today – people who know firsthand the impact that the current rental crisis is having on us here in Victoria and people who live with that every day. I think their presence here today puts us all on notice that we need to work collaboratively as a chamber to act on this issue. The rental crisis is here. It is happening now. People are being pushed to the edge, and we as a Parliament need to take action to alleviate the pressure that it is putting on everyday Victorians with ever rising rents, substandard homes, lack of availability and many other issues.

That is why the Greens have brought this motion and this inquiry to this chamber. Renting is cooked at the moment. As a renter myself, I am well aware of the many problems that people are facing, and as a member of the Legal and Social Issues Committee, I really welcome the opportunity to hear from renters across our state. It is so important that their stories are told, and I will be sharing some of them with you today in my contribution.

We are in the midst of the worst rental crisis since World War II, and it is time for us to take action. There are tens of thousands of people right across Victoria who are just one rent increase away from eviction, and there is nothing to stop that from happening. It is not enough to simply acknowledge the problem and then move on. We must make a concerted effort to investigate the causes of this crisis and to develop solutions that will help those who are struggling to find safe, secure and affordable housing. That is why the Victorian Greens are calling for this inquiry into the rental crisis in Victoria. We need to hear from renters and from experts and to review the data to develop a comprehensive understanding of issues, such as the drivers of low rental supply, high rental costs and the impact that rental stress has on renters. Crucially, we need to pull that together and consider policy and funding solutions.

We know that this crisis is affecting Victorians from all walks of life. One in three Victorians rent. It is critical that we commit to change in Victoria, because the most vulnerable among the renting cohort – people on the brink of homelessness – simply cannot afford to wait any longer. Even for those who are a few rent rises away from eviction, each rent increase still means a tightening of the purse strings: ‘Kids sport is cancelled for the season. Let’s try and get by without filling out the medical scripts this week. No treats at the shop. We’ll fill up the car later, and we’ll just stay home this weekend.’ The rental crisis is literally spiralling new people down into poverty. When we see employed people facing poverty because of the rental crisis, it is such a stark indicator that the system is broken and we need to fix it.

Rents have already gone up by around 20 per cent and are forecast to continue to rise. The situation is really dire, and it should not be like this. It does not have to be like this. We have the power, collectively here in this chamber, to improve things for Victorian renters. This inquiry will examine the solutions that ensure that there are enough rentals for those who need them across Victoria. We have all heard of the massive queues for rental inspections. As a renter – one of the few in this Parliament – I have experienced them firsthand. Each time I found a rental that was suitable, it was snapped up within hours or days, often for above the advertised price. There are many renters who have already reached out to me and my colleagues. John from Brooklyn has found renting very hard for the last five years

or so. He has had to move further away from the city in order to find affordable housing. Each rent increase makes saving harder.

We need to take action to ensure that people's homes are safe, secure and livable. We are facing more extreme weather, and it is not acceptable to expect renters to live in substandard homes without cooling and reasonable energy efficiency standards. People call our offices in the summer with stories of landlords who are refusing to install air conditioning in hotbox apartments and houses. Renters are on average paying more for their energy bills than home owners. We have all heard the horror stories of freezing or boiling homes without proper heating or cooling, of people running electric fan heaters to try to stay warm or of those who spend their days in libraries and shopping malls so as to not overheat in their homes. Mouldy bathrooms, cracked windows, holes in walls – the list goes on, and for every one of these stories of unlivable rental conditions, there is another story of landlords and agents who are making it difficult for renters who are asking the bare minimum for their home living standards. It is not good enough.

Adrian, a renter from Heathmont in my own region of North-Eastern Metro, spent last winter with broken ducted heating, with only an electric fan heater for warmth. It took months for the heating system to be repaired. Harley from Pascoe Vale, a survivor of family violence, has been living in a house where the heater has been broken for six months with windows and a back door that will not close. The landlord changed real estate agents after the property manager told the landlord that the house needed to be fixed. After raising the issue with the new real estate agency, Harley was told that the landlord would not be renewing their lease. Not being able to properly close windows and doors is putting Harley's safety at risk.

We need strong mechanisms in place to address the power imbalance between landlords and tenants and ensure that there is actual compliance with rental standards. We need adequately funded support and advocacy for renters – services such as Tenants Victoria. These organisations provide vital support and advice for renters who are facing eviction, discrimination or other issues related to their tenancy. They are currently underfunded and struggling to keep up with the increasing demand for their services.

Another story: Scott from Karingal is too scared to report things out of fear of being evicted and then being unable to find a new home. He feels that there is no way of holding landlords to account and that if he does not play nice, they will find a way to kick him out. Wahaj from Moonee Ponds has been getting nowhere with their property manager and has been living with a broken toilet, leaks in the kitchen and no working smoke alarms. Wahaj cannot afford to move out, let alone find another property, as everything is so expensive – we know that here. This inquiry will consider the need for an overhaul of our current tenancy dispute resolution model. Vulnerable Victorians cannot afford to have their bond sitting in limbo for years while waiting for a VCAT case to be heard, and they should not have to take minor and reasonable requests to the tribunal just to get action.

The current reality is exorbitant and unaffordable rent prices, leaving people in a state of perpetual rent stress. Properties are being snapped up within hours of being listed, leaving many with nowhere to live. People working full-time are living in youth hostels because they cannot get a break applying for rentals. Melbourne rental vacancy rates have reached record lows of 0.8 per cent. Rent prices have skyrocketed, with many renters spending more than 30 per cent of their pay on rent – the definition of 'unaffordable housing'. Regional Victoria has reached a historic low in rental affordability. Rents have been climbing at double-digit rates, and if nothing changes, rent prices are set to keep rising.

Victorian uni students are pitching tents in lounge rooms, sleeping in shifts in overcrowded share homes and having to ask their teachers for a place to live. This issue is acutely worse for international students who do not have local rental histories or are dealing with racial discrimination. Shruti from Glen Huntly, a uni student, has been completely unable to find an affordable house. Shruti, like so many other uni students, earns a minimum wage and is feeling the pressure building week to week.

In addition, the impact of short stays and Airbnbs has further exacerbated the problem, with properties left vacant for the majority of the year. A married couple in Bairnsdale were given notice to vacate as their landlord wanted to sell. As they get older, each move gets that much harder. While they have likely found another property to rent, they are anxious they have only been offered a 12-month lease. They wanted to remain anonymous today as they were concerned publicly coming forward could mean losing their home and becoming homeless.

The poor enforcement and regulation in the rental market has created instability for renters, who live in constant fear of being kicked out. As well as enforcement and strong regulations, there should be options for longer leases. More than one-third of Victorians do not own their own home, so long-term renting is the reality for many. But our policy frameworks continue to consider renting as a 'just for a short time' option before you buy a home. People should be able to make their rentals their homes, to settle in an area and build a community without the fear and stress of constantly moving.

Andeli from Diamond Creek – again, from my region – receives the disability support pension and feels there is no hope of finding somewhere affordable that also meets their bare minimum accessibility and safety needs. Andeli is currently having to decide which of their needs they are most willing to neglect. When people struggle to find stable housing, it creates a ripple effect. Many people are forgoing essential expenses like medication, doctors visits and food to pay their rent.

People on minimum wage and welfare are being priced out of the rental market, while public housing waitlists grow. People are being evicted from their homes and forced into homelessness because they cannot afford the 20 per cent or more rent increases. More renters are facing homelessness because of a broken system. It puts more strain on social services and public health. Addressing the rental crisis is crucial not just for renters but for the health and wellbeing of the entire Victorian community. The current complacency and inaction from the government simply will not do. That is why the Greens have introduced this motion today. As a Parliament we have a responsibility to address collectively the rental crisis here in Victoria. While the government did introduce some measures to support renters during the pandemic, such as the eviction moratorium and rent relief grants, these measures were temporary. However, they show what is possible, and as economist Eliza Owen recently suggested, rent caps are 'viable' as a short-term solution.

A rental inquiry is a vital step towards understanding the problems faced by renters, identifying contributing factors and systemic shortcomings. This inquiry will ensure that the voices of renters are put squarely in front of decision-makers. We need to take action now to prevent more households from being pushed into financial stress or homelessness. I urge everyone in this chamber to look at the evidence, the flow-on effects for the wider community and the stories of vulnerable Victorians, renters like those here today, who are struggling to keep a roof over their heads. We cannot sit idly by while people like Shruti, Harley, Adrian, Scott, Wahaj, John and Andeli, who I mentioned earlier, struggle to find safe, affordable accommodation. I hope this motion will receive support from all sides of Parliament so that we can create a fairer and more just society with housing options for all income levels and safeguards to protect Victorian renters.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:32): I am pleased to rise to speak in relation to the motion before us today. Housing policy is one of the most – if not the most – critical issues that we need to address here in Victoria and here in Australia, because fundamentally people have a right to somewhere to live that is safe, that is high quality and that provides them with all the protections that they need to live and engage in study, work or family life. I do believe, however, that just examining one part of the problem is not going to lead us to a comprehensive solution to these issues and that, as well as looking at rentals, we need to be thinking about how we make the rest of the home ownership market more affordable for people seeking to get out of renting and get into home ownership and we also need to be addressing issues around the lack of, and the need to build more, social, community and public housing. So I think it is the entirety of the housing debate that is really critical to addressing many of the issues that have been raised both in the motion today and also in the context of this debate.

I do want to make a couple of comments just going through a process before we get to, I think, the more substantive question about the policy substance that we want to be addressing with these issues. It is, I think, a little bit regrettable that at the moment we see that, for our colleagues in the Greens, the Liberals appear to be their policy partner of choice when it comes to housing in Australia. We see what they are doing in Canberra in teaming up with the federal Liberal Party to stop the federal Labor government's plans to invest in an enduring endowment for social and affordable housing here in Australia, by blocking the Housing Australia Future Fund, and we are also seeing it play out on the floor of the Parliament here today. But I suspect that is because they have got to dance with the ones that brought them, and their track record of preferring the Liberals and preferring their preferences to further their own purposes is pretty clear.

But to get to the policy substance of the issues that we are here today to talk about, I want to do it in two parts. I want to firstly talk about what we need to be doing to deal with housing supply and both the supply of affordable housing and the supply of affordable rental properties. Then I want to spend a bit of time talking about what we have got to do to make sure that people in the rental market have the adequate protections that they need to stop the kinds of practices that have been referred to by the lead speaker for the Greens in today's debate.

I made these remarks last sitting week in this Parliament, just as I have in the earlier sitting weeks of the Parliament this year: the most important thing we can do to improve the housing situation in Australia is build more housing, and particularly build more social, public and affordable housing. In my opinion that must be the absolute number one priority for those of us who think that we need to take action on the housing crisis here in Australia. We have seen from the state government an absolute record investment in building new social and affordable homes, the Big Housing Build – \$5.3 billion being invested right now in building more homes. In my own region of Southern Metropolitan – and I have been round and visited I think nearly all of the developments that are underway at the moment – we have got about half a dozen new social and affordable housing developments underway. Just last week I was in Ashburton at the Markham estate looking at the new homes that have been built there, both new social housing and new affordable rental properties that are at the moment in the process of being rented out to those who need somewhere to live.

What we are seeing is that on the supply side one of the most important things we can do is build more homes, and that is exactly what the government is doing – more social housing and more affordable rentals. And that affordable rental plan has been criticised by those on the crossbench. They think it is not good enough. They do not really like our affordable rental program. But I can say to the overwhelming number of applicants that we have had for our affordable rental program, who will be paying below market rent, with those who are on lower incomes getting access to long-term rentals: we think that this program is actually delivering exactly the kind of supply into the rental market that people who would not be eligible for social housing yet and are finding themselves squeezed out of the private rental market need, giving them a place where they can apply for below-market rents with long-term security. And most importantly, to address one of the issues that was raised, they are going into brand new 7-star energy efficient homes that are being built to modern accessibility standards. To me this is exactly the kind of supply we need to be bringing onto the market to address some of the issues that have been raised, because we do know that historically rental stock in Australia – and in Melbourne in particular – has largely been in low-end, older homes that are leaky, that are draughty and that are not energy efficient. What this government is doing is building rental homes that are the opposite – that are energy-efficient 7-star modern facilities – and providing them at below market rents to people on low incomes on long-term, secure tenure. That is exactly what we need to be doing. We need to be doing more of it, and that is exactly what this government is doing.

The second point I want to just briefly touch on is the question of protections, because those who do need to rent their homes, who are in the rental market, do deserve protections from unscrupulous practices. The previous speaker said things like rent caps are just short-term solutions. What we need are longer term protections and permanent protections that can fundamentally change some of that

relationship between private renters, landlords and the real estate agents and property managers, who more often than not – and we hear this when we talk to people who are having issues with their property managers – do not give the best time to private renters. That is why the suite of 130 reforms that this government has made is making renting fairer – things like banning rental bidding, ensuring that rents are advertised at a fixed price, making sure that rents only can go up once every 12 months and ensuring that you cannot provide no reason to vacate notices so you can kick out your tenants just to try and go back to the market for no reason whatsoever other than trying to get more money for the property.

I think the other thing and the important thing that we have also done – so that was on the cost side – is taken action to make sure that those older rental properties that so many Victorians do call home are now subject to minimum rental standards. That is having things like windows that open and ensuring that energy efficiency is something that is taken into account and that as we head into winter our rentals here in Melbourne have proper heating so that the way that people, the tenants in these properties, experience their living arrangements is done so that they can experience some minimum standards. Do we have to do more to make sure that those standards are enforced? Absolutely. We always need to be vigilant about these things.

That accompanies the other suite of measures that the government has taken to ensure that tenants can do things to their own homes, like put up curtains, make modifications to the walls and, importantly, have their pets. There is absolutely always more work to do on this front. Just on that, I do want to close by saying that it is good that we have a Commonwealth government that has finally come to the party on housing and particularly on rentals. With the last Commonwealth budget, the largest increase to rent assistance that we have seen in 30 years is going to have a positive impact on private renters, and moving forward it is about changing the nature of the supply of rental properties here in Victoria – the changes that are being made to encourage more build-to-rent schemes – so that more rental properties come onto the market and are being built with the purpose of being rented out in long-term ways, fit for purpose and energy efficient. It is fundamentally only by improving the supply of housing, by improving the supply of rental properties and by ensuring that the necessary protections are in place for renters across Victoria that we can make sure that we are looking after the very important renters that we have got right across our community.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (10:42): It is really great to speak on this motion. It is an issue – housing in general, renting – that is very close to my heart. I now own my own home, a pretty average three-bedroom in the outer north, but I was a renter for quite a while. I have been a renter in a shoebox apartment in Abbotsford and I have been a renter in Reservoir as well, so I know a lot of the difficulties people face. In particular I get a lot of correspondence from people in the north – and Mr Puglielli had a lot of really good examples – particularly residents with big families, who really find it hard to crack into that rental market. An agent is much more likely to select the single male or the couple without kids than families for getting into homes. So that is something I hear over and over again. I hope that this is something that this inquiry might look into as well.

What has disappointed me I think is the government's attitude towards this motion. This is a chamber that is elected by the people, and the make-up of the chamber unfortunately for the government is not completely up to them. What happens and is decided on in this place is a shared journey. It is important for all of us to come together to find an outcome to do that. That is what the Victorian people sent us here to do.

I see that Danny Pearson the Minister for Government Services was out in the media today saying that this is a ridiculous and childish prank, that this is just the worst student politics and that, 'If you're serious about this stuff, get off your arse and do something about it.' He said that no-one would actually read the report. First of all, it is good to see the minister back out in the media. He has been in hiding recently. He seems to be more focused on his share portfolio than his actual portfolio. Secondly, if the ministers in this government want to sit up there in Treasury Place in their ivory tower and pretend that there is not a housing crisis, that is on them; that is a reflection on them.

Gayle Tierney: On a point of order, Acting President, I ask that you bring the member back to the motion before the house.

A member interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Sonja Terpstra): Order! Mr Mulholland, I will uphold the minister's point of order. If I could ask you to remain relevant to the motion but also just to be mindful of parliamentary language.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Thank you, Acting President. I was only quoting the minister, and it is completely relevant. The minister was speaking about this motion before the house, and the government's response to that is absolutely relevant to what they are doing here.

Also, Mr Batchelor spoke about supporting different types of housing, and I am supportive of different types of housing. I am supportive of choice. He talked about the importance of build to rent, and I think that is really important as well, but I find it curious, because there is a proposal in my electorate in Darebin, where Assemble Communities, who are backed by industry super, had I think quite a brilliant proposal to build a 480-apartment development in Preston next to Bell station. They went through the process and went to Darebin council. They even set aside 20 per cent of houses for social housing for 15 years, with an additional 35 per cent affordable housing and 5 per cent as specialist disability accommodation, something that we should all be supportive of. But the council, which has a Labor mayor, has been road-blocking and slowing down this development on the basis that it is not enough of a development to have social housing, the council should be receiving more funds from developers to cover the cost and developers should pay more to upgrade additional infrastructure. This is a build to rent prioritised for frontline workers – for our nurses, for our coppers, even for our baristas; for frontline workers who could not otherwise afford the rent in other places – yet we have got a council with a Labor mayor opposing build to rent. This just highlights the supply crisis that we have got going on here. We also have a Labor deputy mayor in the City of Melbourne heritage-listing brutalist car parks, so it goes to what I was saying – that the Labor Party like to talk about this but their problem is they themselves and their members out in councils are slowing up the supply crisis.

I have been taking part in the stamp duty inquiry and quite enjoying it. I have been asking some questions of different expert witnesses, and one thing I would disagree with the Greens on is their proposal of a rent freeze. I want to make it clear that the Liberals and Nationals oppose that policy motion. While we are very open to looking into, in this inquiry, all sorts of different policy motions, this would be a disastrous policy. There was some very telling advice from the Urban Development Institute of Australia, Victoria, last week when they addressed the stamp duty inquiry. They explained, when I put to them what would happen as a result of a rental freeze, that such a policy would do nothing to drive affordability and nothing to drive new supply; all it would do is decrease the incentive to invest in new housing. It would reduce supply across the market. It would put more properties in the short-stay market. So the Greens' solution to the rental crisis seems to be to reduce the number of houses and increase the number of Airbnbs.

I want to make it clear that we do support this motion. We want to look at the role of build to rent – and build to rent in increasing housing supply. We want to incentivise long-term rentals through state tax levers. We want to look at that, and we want to look at the impact of taxation – I think that is an important point to go to when we are looking at taxes. We are looking at taxes in the stamp duty inquiry as well, but we should also look at the impact that state taxes have on rentals. Victorians have been hit by a significant rise in the rate of land tax, which was brought in by the Andrews Labor government. Property is a common investment vehicle for Australians of all walks of life. It is by no means the preserve of the ultrarich. In fact it is not uncommon for Victorians to hold the vast majority of wealth in a single property investment.

I also think we need to take into account that people who rent out a property also are impacted by the same financial strains of, say, interest rate increases as everyone else. They are not in some sort of

nirvana up in the sky that is not affected by and is immune to the strains on the economy for everyone else. So if you decide that a landlord has to have a set price for rent, that is going to have an impact on them. That is going to mean they will most likely have to sell or have to do other things. We have seen this disastrous policy of a rental freeze play out in New York, and we know from experts and economists that it basically creates a two-tiered housing crisis, where landlords literally have no –

Interjections from gallery.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Sonja Terpstra): Order in the gallery, please. Order!

Evan MULHOLLAND: thank you – incentive to invest in rental properties. I think it is quite important for landlords to invest in their own rental properties and to work in collaboration with tenants in order to uphold the basic standards of renting. I think that is really important.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (10:52): I am pleased to speak on the motion brought by Mr Puglielli to discuss an important issue for all Victorians – younger and older, rural and urban. The Andrews Labor government understands the unique challenges that Victorian renters are facing in today's rental market. The government has a history of making access to affordable housing fairer for all Victorians, which is why it is continuing to provide support that is making a difference. We have delivered 130 more reforms to the Residential Tenancies Act 1997 to help strengthen renters rights, and together with investing \$5.3 billion in the Big Housing Build to increase the availability of housing, the government is bringing about a once-in-a-generation investment to support renters and grow our housing supply. Together with the actions of the federal Labor government to increase rental assistance for the first time in 30 years, it cannot go unnoticed that Labor always have placed and always will place renters as a priority in aiming to secure stable housing for everyone.

While we support action for renters, it would have been better if the Greens had worked with the government on its extensive range of housing actions, rather than palling up with the Liberals to move this motion – which after all is a motion – whilst we on the government bench here are working hard to actually do something about this issue. And the Greens are even less helpful in Canberra. Our federal Labor colleagues last week announced only Labor governments provide –

Matthew Bach: On a point of order, Acting President, regarding relevance, it was a very narrow point of order raised by Minister Tierney earlier about relevance. Now we are straying, as is so often the case by government members, off to Canberra. This is clearly utterly irrelevant. The member should be brought back to the rest of her talking points regarding the actual motion before the house.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Sonja Terpstra): Dr Bach, there is no point of order. I remind members in this chamber that when a debate begins on a motion, if you go into areas that are beyond the terms of the motion, you open the door. Members are free to respond to it, but I ask Ms Ermacora to come back to the motion.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Our federal Labor colleagues last week announced that only Labor governments provide the protections tenants need and build the homes Victoria needs to grow our supply of housing. Our federal Labor colleagues announced an increase to Commonwealth rent assistance, the very first one in 30 years. In the same week, the federal parties of those opposite, the Greens and the Liberal Party, stood together to block the \$10 billion housing future fund that was going to be established rather than vote with the federal government.

We cannot view this issue in isolation as there are many factors that are impacting on the difficulties renters are facing every day. Inflation and interest rates increasing the cost of living is the biggest hurdle of all. But Labor's reforms include removing no-reason notices to vacate, allowing more renters to keep pets in their home, making it illegal to invite offers of rent above the advertised price, introducing rental minimum standards, limiting rental increases to once every 12 months and increasing housing supply by investing in the Big Housing Build, just to mention a few.

By introducing an Australian-first rental scheme that will make at least 2400 homes available to low to moderate income earners across the state, the government has tackled and will continue to tackle housing affordability and help renters get out of the rental market and transition into home ownership. The affordable housing rental scheme delivered as part of the \$5.3 billion Big Housing Build will offer eligible income earners an affordable rental property for at least three years, backed by the security of government ownership. The \$5.3 billion Big Housing Build is delivering 12,000 social and affordable homes over the next four years, creating more than 10,000 jobs in the process – practical actions on rental affordability.

But the government is not stopping there. It is also providing significant incentives for developers to enter the build-to-rent market, which provides more options and security for renters. Build-to-rent projects provide greater security of tenure by offering long-term rentals so people can stay in one place and put down more secure roots, with associated social and community benefits. Eligible build-to-rent developments completed and operational between 2021 and 2031 will also receive both a 50 per cent land tax discount and full exemption from the absentee owner surcharge for up to 30 years.

Obviously not every Victorian is in a position to purchase their own home. The government is committed to providing stable and affordable homes for all Victorians. It is not lost on me nor on the government that public housing availability is a difficult issue currently facing Victoria. The government is committed to resolving this availability issue through the Building New Homes to Fight Homelessness initiative, which in December 2022 marked a milestone of completing its first 1000 homes. Again, this is another practical action, not a motion. The government invested \$469.1 million towards this initiative and invested \$5.3 billion in the Big Housing Build, which is the largest single investment in social and affordable housing by any state or territory government, and made a commitment to deliver more than 12,000 new homes across the state. So far, more than 7400 properties have been completed or are underway. The people who will benefit the most from the government's Big Housing Build are those who are at risk of or are experiencing homelessness. The government are building the social and affordable housing Victorians need to provide them with the dignity, security and stability of a home and are primarily focused on securing homes for young Victorians.

The Andrews Labor government has supported private renters to remain in their properties through the private rental assistance program, the Housing Establishment Fund and RentAssist bonds, and \$50 million has been committed for 10 projects across the state to secure more accommodation for young people aged 16 to 24 at risk of or experiencing homelessness. In the Victorian budget 2022–23, \$75 million was invested to transform services for Victorians experiencing or at risk of homelessness, including tailored support to get them into permanent housing. These are all significant investments that are transforming people's lives and making a very real difference.

It is disappointing to see that those in opposition continue to be wilfully blind to the excellent steps that the government is making towards long-term resolutions to support renters and address housing affordability. However, the government is not wilfully blind to the issues facing renters. The proof is in the pudding. We have made groundbreaking changes to the Residential Tenancies Act and committed billions of dollars to infrastructure to combat the issues raised today, and I am very supportive of our strategy, which is full of actions rather than just simply a motion.

Matthew BACH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:01): It is difficult to follow that – one of the most inane contributions that I have heard in this place in my time. I hope that is considered parliamentary language, certainly when we have heard such strong language from members of the government, even Mr Pearson earlier today. He said, 'This is a stunt.' Far be it from me, by the way, to consistently have to come to the aid of the Greens party, but I find that is part of my new role. I was doing it earlier today when I was talking about the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Home Stretch) Bill 2023, which I second read. The government had pulled a previous bill because Dr Ratnam dared to introduce an amendment – that was a stunt – on raising the age of criminal responsibility, which, lo and behold, the government actually supports now. But nonetheless that was a stunt. Now it

is a stunt to bring forward motions. We should simply all join in a chorus in praising the government – and I am happy to praise the government when praise is due. I was actually doing so earlier today on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Home Stretch) Bill, which I second read, which word for word was taken from a previous government bill that you allowed to lapse – a fabulous bill. It had my wholehearted support, and many of the things that the previous member spoke about are in fact meritorious.

Nonetheless I would have thought we could all agree that the plight of renters in Victoria – and yes, the plight of landlords – is one that deserves our attention. I am not sure anybody in this chamber, even the most avid reader of talking points from the Premier's private office, would argue that everything is rosy in renter land today – it is not – so I would put to the honourable member that we can bring forward motions like this working in collaboration across parties, which I would argue is a good thing. It was characterised by the previous member as an example of the Greens palling up with the Liberals, but nonetheless we can work together across parties to bring forward motions like this while certainly acknowledging, I would have thought, that all members in this place want to do better for renters, that of course some good things are happening but more needs to be done. I know in my electorate – and I am sure you hear the same, Acting President Terpstra, in the region that we both represent – that so many people out there are hurting. Rents are going through the roof. We know that many landlords are finding it harder and harder to rent out their properties; I agree wholeheartedly with the comments of Mr Mulholland. I think that we can do two things at once in this space. Both home owners and landlords say that things are becoming really tough with so many interest rate rises.

There was a gentleman who made a comment during Mr Mulholland's contribution. I will not recapitulate it in full, but one element was, I think, 'eff the economists'. I have great sympathy with that gentleman. I heeded the views of the economist who runs the Reserve Bank board and bought a home. My wife and I stretched to buy a home when he was saying, 'Don't worry, there won't be any interest rate rises,' and there have been 11 since then. Now we are in a very fortunate position where we are able to own – well, we do not own it, the bank owns it, but nonetheless buy – a modest home. Those economic conditions have hit renters as well – so hard – so I would have thought it was opportune to work together in this place to look at some of the things that this motion says we should look at.

The drivers of low rental supply – I am really concerned about supply. I would commend Mr Mulholland for his campaign on yimbyism. I think that is a fabulous campaign. In the region I represent I hear so often, especially from older folks who own their home, that they care desperately about amenity and do not want to see too much development. I empathise with that view, but I also think we can continue to work together to do better, especially for the many young people who do not necessarily want to live 1 hour and 20 minutes away from the centre of town but want to rent or, yes, seek to save really hard and put down a deposit for a home of their own in the middle suburbs where there is much better access to infrastructure. I think that is a really complex conversation, acknowledging that some older folks who own their own home, who have quite frankly over the years oftentimes had it pretty good, do not want to see further development. But nonetheless we need to do better in providing affordable homes and, yes, affordable opportunities for renters. I think that element – I am looking at part (1) of the motion – is really important.

The 'impact of low supply on renters' – I think that is such an important thing to be looking at, given that we know that these pressures are so extreme on people renting in Victoria right now and people who just cannot get into the rental market as well because of price increases. I thought point (6) was particularly interesting also – 'the effect on renters of rental stress' – because I think oftentimes, coming back to that gentleman's comments from the gallery, we can talk in dry terms in debates like this, but we are talking about people. We are talking about people who are oftentimes suffering shocking stresses in their lives. I think that we can listen to the best experts and get the best advice as long as we are also talking, as that gentleman implored us to do, with people with lived experience, who are doing it so tough right now.

As Mr Mulholland said, we on this side of the house do not agree with everything the Greens have to say on the broader rental issue. In fact we disagree strongly with some of the things they say on the broader rental issue, but I do not doubt that they come to this debate in good faith, as we do and as I am sure many members of the government do, notwithstanding the quite frankly idiotic comments of Minister Pearson this morning, labelling this a ‘stunt’ and berating the Greens for daring to bring forward a motion on rental assistance, given as we have heard from the government that everything is so rosy. Well, I would say everything is not rosy. We can commend the government for doing some good things in this area while also saying that there is so much more to do. We can work together as a chamber. That is our job, to do that.

I do not agree with everything that this motion is seeking to achieve and I do not agree with everything that other members around this chamber have to say on rent, but I do agree that when it comes to support for landlords, when it comes to support for renters, when it comes to the supply of housing, when it comes to issues that stop home owners putting properties up for rent and when it comes to rental affordability, we do need to have further conversations that I think can then lead to action. I am not a fan of having a committee on everything, but in this house recently we have seen very significant reforms flow from committee processes just like this. So again, I would say to members opposite who want to deride this action as simply a talkfest: look back at very recent history. We have seen committee processes in this place oftentimes lead very quickly to incredibly significant reforms, some of which I agree with and some of which I do not, but you cannot say that committees in this place just sit around and talk and never get anything done. It is just factually untrue. That is why I will be supporting the motion.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (11:09): We know that many Victorians are doing it tough right now, and for the one in three Victorians who are renting, they are doing it tougher than most. They are staring down the barrel of overpriced, substandard housing for the foreseeable future. Let us not forget the 30,000 Victorians who spend each night sleeping rough in cars, on couches and in overcrowded houses. For them, the options have simply run out. As the Australian Human Rights Commission clearly states:

Every person has the right to an adequate standard of living, which includes the right to adequate housing ...

Housing is a human right, one that we in positions of power have a responsibility to protect for all Victorians, not just the landlords and not just the wealthy few. If we do not, the legacy of this Parliament will be forcing more people into homelessness, overcrowded housing and substandard rental properties that are making people sick.

We have a responsibility to make sure every person in Victoria has access to safe, affordable, healthy housing where they can live, take care of their families and put down roots in their wider communities. We are a long way from achieving that, but we can and must make some urgent decisions to stop this rental crisis from getting any worse. People’s quality of life and their futures depend on it. The human rights commission also states that for housing to be deemed adequate, a range of factors must be addressed, including affordability, habitability and location, and we are falling well short of that mark. The Greens have heard firsthand from renters across the state who are living in houses that cost far too much for far too little, and for my constituents in Western Victoria this is an issue that is seriously impacting their lives.

One person we heard from was Marnie from western Victoria. Marnie is a victim-survivor of domestic violence and a single mum to five sons. With no support she was unable to keep the family home and has spent the past nine years renting and facing financial and emotional hardship, stress and instability for her and her boys. In six years she was evicted three times due to the landlord selling the property. Despite having an impeccable rental history and excellent references, it was nearly impossible to find a rental. It is not just the stress and the time that it takes to find a new home but the cost and upheaval of moving her belongings and her children over and over again that wear her down. The increase in rent each time she has had to move is forcing her into poverty, and Marnie is just not sure how she

will manage and what the future holds. We have to ask ourselves: is this good enough? Is this giving Marnie and her kids a fair start in life? Marnie is just one of many constituents in Western Victoria who are in the midst of a devastating rental crisis.

Many areas of regional Victoria have some of the tightest rental markets in the country. In western Victoria the Surf Coast shire has a vacancy rate below 1 per cent and at times during the past few years has had a vacancy rate of zero. In Warrnambool rental costs have risen by 36.4 per cent over the past five years. Meanwhile, the neighbouring Colac Otway shire has the highest rate of homelessness in Victoria, and over 30 per cent of the shire's households experience rental stress, meaning they are spending more than 30 per cent of their household income on rent. With those sorts of rents, people are making decisions they should never have to make, choosing between food and medication for themselves and their families to afford the latest rent hike – and if they are getting by, they face the instability and fear of future rent increases, and many might just be one increase away from being evicted into homelessness.

Short-stay rentals are another issue seriously impacting the rental market for my constituents in regional Victoria. Businesses, including hospitality and farms, and essential services like health care, early childhood education and schools are unable to attract workers. In these areas short-stay accommodation is abundant, but many of these holiday homes sit empty for large periods of the year at the expense of a family or an essential worker having access to a secure home. Victoria has some of the weakest regulation of short-stay accommodation in the country, and this has to change.

One of my constituents, Stuart, is a young dairy farmer who lives along the Great Ocean Road in the Moyne shire. He moved down the coast to find work after losing his job in retail when the pandemic hit. Stu was unable to find a rental near his new job in Peterborough, so he had to move to Terang, which is a 40-minute drive from the farm he was working at. Stu worked a morning and evening shift and had to make the round trip to work twice a day, driving close to 3 hours every day at dawn and dusk, often the most dangerous times to be on the road. The rent was no cheaper in Terang, but Stu had to wear the extra petrol costs and the risk of fatigue in driving on country roads for hours each day. Stu had to do this for over 12 months before he could find an affordable rental closer to his workplace. However, Stu says that he is now just one rent increase away from being forced out of the area and he would need to find a new job again. The real sting for Stu is that there are homes available in Peterborough – plenty of them in fact – but they are all short-stay rentals. Look on any day and you will usually find around 30 short-stay rentals listed in Peterborough on Airbnb and another 50 in Port Campbell, which is 10 minutes from Peterborough. A quick search yesterday of long-term rentals in the area showed just one house listed even close to being affordable in Port Campbell, with none available in Peterborough.

In a survey of 71 businesses operating along the Great Ocean Road, the top two stated reasons for businesses being unable to attract and retain workers were no local workers and a lack of affordable accommodation. Unless we fix this problem we are going to drive local businesses into the ground and give them no option but to close their doors, and that is already happening. We are proud of regional Victoria. It is where we holiday, it is where we go with our families and friends if we want to recharge, and for those of us who live there it is our home, it is our community and it is where we bring up our families. We have an obligation to start cleaning up the mess that successive governments have created and to make sure that we give current and future generations the security that they will have somewhere decent to live and for businesses to know that there is a sustainable future for them and our region, because fixing this housing crisis is not just the right thing to do – it is the smart thing to do for the sustainability of our health services and our social services that bear the brunt of homelessness and housing stress. As a GP I saw firsthand the impact that homelessness, difficulty affording housing and substandard housing had on people's physical and mental health. It is something that is really hard to convey.

We know that we just cannot rely on landlords to do the right thing. Landlords are ignoring repairs, as we have heard, despite rolling in record profits from investment properties and increasing rents

exponentially while expecting tenants to live in squalor. Renters want to hear their voices heard in this Parliament. They want and deserve action, and I acknowledge the renters who have joined us here today. We have heard how emotional this situation is for them, how real it is for them.

This rental inquiry is an opportunity to put evidence squarely in front of the government and provide an opportunity to act, but it appears that they are afraid of what it might reveal – afraid of the pressure it would create for them to act. This government has been telling us today that they want the Greens to work with them. We are here, we are willing and we have been trying to work with you. We want to see real outcomes, and when we hear concerns about rental affordability, when we raise them, we are offering the opportunity to work with us. We would like to work with you to get outcomes on this, but when we do not get action, it is our job to call that out, and that is what we are doing here today.

The government has also been quick to cite their record expenditure on social housing. We keep hearing about it. It is worth noting that that record is only possible because they had spent next to nothing on housing for so many years before the commencement of the current big build program. It is time to stop the complacency and face up to the fact that we are in the midst of the worst rental crisis in our living history, and we have no time to lose.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (11:18): I rise to speak on the motion regarding rental reform, and in doing so I would like to begin by noting that the Andrews Labor government has a track record of making housing and renting fairer for all Victorians. Having grown up in unstable housing I know the importance of real change and good governance. In my lived experience – and I might take a moment, and I think it is worth folks knowing here in the chamber – some of my earliest memories are of living in a caravan park. I have spoken about that time and time again and to people that I meet each and every day in my work as the Parliamentary Secretary for Housing. I have moved from house to house to house, never staying long enough to unpack a box, never changing or even daring to dream about painting the walls in a colour that worked for me, never hoping that I could have a pet at home because that was a dream too big for me and my family all those years ago. So I now am enormously, enormously proud to get up here in this chamber and talk about the changes that the Andrews Labor government has made, because from the lived experience that I bring to this job each and every day – from those early days in Dromana caravan park, from those early days in rentals that kicked us out because they found out we were Aboriginal or the house that kicked us out because they were going to renovate or the time that we got kicked out because my dad had a stroke and our family situation changed so desperately and so urgently that affordability for that home was just no longer a reality – I know all too deeply about what it means to live in rental stress.

I know very well each and every day what Victorians are living through, so I do not take any criticism that comes at me for being out of touch and disconnected, because each and every day I remember where I came from. I bring that to my job, and I bring that to being a very proud member of the Andrews Labor government. So I will say to those that are here today that need to hear about the lives of renters: it is not some abstract disconnect, it is very much my lived experience.

Merely talking about the problems is not the Labor way; I did not get in here to talk about the problems. I am here for action, and action is what we have been taking in this Parliament when it comes to rental reform. We have delivered over 130 reforms to strengthen renters rights, the sorts of reforms that I could have only dreamed about as a child. Let me tell you, I have spoken about those terrible places that I moved to time and time again. I never had the heating or the cooling that made life at home comfortable. The changes to the Residential Tenancies Act 1997 mean that you now have homes free from mould and dampness, with proper ventilation and a working heater. I know just what a change that will make, because everyone deserves the house that they live in to be turned into a home, a warm home, a home that provides them with safety and security at the end of the day.

We have absolutely cracked down on rental increases, meaning landlords can only increase rent once every 12 months – that makes an enormous difference. And we have made it easier for renters to get their bond back. I cannot tell you how many times as a renter I fought so very, very hard to get my

bond back, and that meant that while we were waiting for the bond to get back I was couch surfing or I was staying at a mate's place or I was calling up time and time and time again and going, 'When am I going to get my bond back?' I absolutely understand the enormous challenges of getting your bond back. That is why I remember going out with the Attorney-General to see VCAT open up in Bundoora, in the Northern Metropolitan Region as it was then, and I knew what an enormous change it would make having that office open there, because tenants can make a claim for their bond without their rental provider's agreement now. This is enormous.

We have removed no-reason notices to vacate and allowed more renters to bring their pets into their homes and make some modifications to their rented properties. Some may dismiss that and say things like 'Whoop-de-do' about these vital reforms, but every one of my mates growing up had a cat or had a dog at home and I did not because I lived in a rental. There was some dignity in being able to come home and, I do not know, pat your cat. I did not have that because I lived in a rental. This change matters; it really, really matters. It brings families together and it makes a home. So while some belittle these changes as insignificant, they are significant. I do not have childhood stories about pets at home, because I grew up in rentals. So I just want it absolutely known that the Andrews Labor government have taken action. Others trivialise reforms like the ones I have mentioned, but these make lives and homes safer, more affordable and of course fairer.

There is of course more work to be done; I am not denying it. It is not perfect out there, and the rental markets do need to operate more effectively for renters and rental providers. But on this side of the house the Andrews Labor government will keep working to support renters to ensure renting is fairer, more secure and affordable, because only Labor governments provide the protection that tenants need and build the homes Victorians need to grow our supply of housing.

This state government has built the really quite incredible and not to be diminished Big Housing Build, the biggest investment in social and affordable housing by any state or territory. It is historic in every sense. Only last week I was talking to some folks from overseas who said, 'What have you done? What is it about?' Because this is being talked about internationally. When I am getting calls and emails from global governments asking, 'What is it about your Big Housing Build that makes it so special, and how did you get it through?' I say it was about political will. It was about a recognition of the need for more affordable and safe accommodation right here in Victoria, and we stepped up in that budget and made that \$5.3 billion available. I am really proud to tell local people in my community in the Northern Metropolitan Region and even those on the other side of the world that I am very happy about the Big Housing Build, because it is only Labor that recognises that having a safe and secure place to call home gives people a solid foundation to thrive. I understand it, I live it and I breathe it every single day.

We actually take action, because merely talking about problems is not the Labor way. Every new social and affordable home built across our state speaks to our government's recognition of the importance of building a place to call home for a family in need. This investment also puts downward pressure on overall rental prices in the private rental market and improves housing affordability, and that is what the Big Housing Build is doing. We know that increasing building supply is, critically, a part of improving housing affordability, and only a Labor government delivers the homes people need, because we know a safe and secure home is the foundation for a good life.

I absolutely will not take – and I have said it before – being directed by political parties that have time and time again opposed our social and affordable housing projects. The Andrews Labor government stands for more social and affordable housing with our investment, and of course we want to work with our Canberra colleagues. I want it known that the Big Housing Build will secure 2000 homes for Victorians with a mental illness and 1000 homes for victim-survivors of family violence – that is incredibly significant and a key recommendation out of the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

What is important to me, amongst all the other things that I have talked about, is more homes for Aboriginal Victorians. Ten per cent of these new dwellings will support Aboriginal Victorians to have

culturally safe self-determined housing options, and many of these houses will be in the Northern Metropolitan Region. I am working with my colleagues right across the region and right across the state to make these a reality. Of course there is so much more that I could say; I could just about talk forever. But let me finish by saying that whether it is action here in the state or at local government or even up in Canberra, Labor does not stand in the way of more homes for Victorians.

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (11:28): I rise today to speak in support of this motion on the rental crisis, and I welcome Mr Puglielli moving this motion. I would like to support this, mainly because of my lived experience of being in a rental property for a good part of my childhood. Growing up in a two-bedroom home with nine people from three families for many years has in many ways brought flashbacks, especially when people have come up to complain about or express their concern relating to their rental situation and how it has affected them in recent years. This motion gives us an opportunity to address the review and revise the situation of the legislation and regulations in relation to tenants and home ownership. It gives us an opportunity to actually address the situation at the moment of the decrease in living standards and the increase of the money which is required to be put up front when seeking premises.

So it is of great concern, particularly for me as a member for Western Metro, where a large number of constituents are of multicultural backgrounds. It has a very large socially disadvantaged cohort, most often migrants and refugees and a large number of international students – all of whom have a very large part to play in renting properties in my electorate. There are great effects at the moment with the banking system in relation to loans and increased repayments for home owners and property owners. It also affects them greatly in relation to whether they are able to survive – paying the rent, paying for their electricity bills or food or actually having to consider moving to a different location.

In relation to the rental properties in the west, there are terrible effects in relation to a particular cohort, mainly because of the language barriers as well. We would hopefully address how our legal system could help that cohort, who are disadvantaged in many ways – not only in relation to the affordability of the rent but also their ability to apply for a property in that situation and how to tackle and deal with the language barrier in relation to the legal system barriers as well. It would also give us an opportunity to look at ways of assisting home owners who have been in that situation for all of their lives. I know the government has mentioned it is doing a lot in relation to social housing, not only assisting them to have a roof over their head but also helping those who have been in those situations all of their lives into actually owning a property – actually trying to find programs to assist them to purchase a property or a flat, and to actually own it and not to continue renting. So hopefully this motion will give us programs or a way of assisting those in a rental situation to actually own a property.

It was astounding when Mr Batchelor from the opposite side mentioned earlier that the Greens and the Liberals are in a cohort or partnership in relationship to this sort of motion. I object to that. Whenever I stand up on this side of the Parliament to work with the Greens or any other party, it is mainly for the benefit of Victorians and the benefit of my constituents. It is not to make political points. It is basically for those people who are disadvantaged, for people in need who come to speak to me on this side of the Parliament in relation to assistance. We work with anyone – it does not matter if it is the government or the independents or the Greens or any other party or person in relation to policies that are good for our constituents. We do not work to get political points. So I was just a little disappointed that Mr Batchelor mentioned that we are working with the Greens. We will work with anyone for the benefit of our community.

Also, hopefully this motion will assist in relation to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal process for when renters have issues with their landlords, in relation to how things can drag on when recovering bonds or in relation to rental disagreements. Hopefully this will help renters have an easier process as they go through the actual process in relation to having any dispute sorted out without going through any legal costs or expenses or any hardship in relation to that. Hopefully this will address that and we can have some sort of review or recommendation on how we can make amendments to assist us going forward.

I do again thank you, Mr Puglielli, for raising this, because it does affect a lot of my constituents and I know it does affect a lot of Victorians as a whole. In relation to housing affordability at the moment, it affects house owners as well as those who are actually renting. Hopefully this motion will address and help not just those in a rental situation but will help them to move forward and assist them to proceed to actually owning a property down the track. It is not just about providing a roof. Hopefully there will be some sort of system down the track – not just continuing to have a rental situation – one that consists of helping them to actually own a home, as my family moved forward through our time here. After renting for many years, eventually we managed to purchase a premises. So hopefully this motion will result in some recommendations on how the government can source a program to assist those in a rental situation to actually own a property and actually have no issue in relation to home owners or whoever they are paying rent to. Hopefully this will move forward and assist the government to focus a little bit more not only on providing more social housing and more affordable housing but also on a program which assists those in a rental situation to actually own a property down the track. So hopefully this motion will have some recommendations on that aspect as well. So I do again support and welcome this, and thank you, Mr Puglielli, for actually raising this motion.

The PRESIDENT: Dr Ratnam has asked for the call. The clerks have advised me I can seek from the chamber if the chamber is happy for us to extend the debating time before Mr Puglielli's 5-minute summing-up.

Leave granted.

Adem SOMYUREK (Northern Metropolitan) (11:37): I rise to speak on the motion before the house. I said at the outset I will be opposing the motion. I will be opposing the motion based on economic principle. You do not need an economics degree, you do not need to have studied economics 101; you just need a rudimentary knowledge of economics to understand that when supply outstrips demand, you have downward pressure on prices. Inversely, when demand outstrips supply, you have upward pressure on prices. That is essentially what we are dealing with here at the moment with the housing affordability crisis. We have a lack of supply. We have excess demand on the property market due to lack of supply of rental accommodation. That is putting upward pressure on rental costs.

That is a big issue; I get it. People ought to be able to afford their rent. It is all part of the cost-of-living pressures that we have got going on at the moment. But the problem is that this is a symptom; rental affordability is a symptom of a much bigger crisis, and that is the housing crisis that we are currently going through and that will get worse. What we are proposing here is a potential solution to the symptom by making the cause greater. So in effect what you are doing is potentially making the housing crisis worse, and that is bad public policy. It is just bad public policy. We need to get our heads around fixing the housing crisis. What we have got at the moment is a perfect storm. We have got projected population growth, exponential population growth, going through the roof. We have got a number of issues combining to provide a disincentive for investors to invest in housing stock. You have got high interest rates. You have got the cost of construction going through the roof for various reasons. You have got skills shortages. The last thing we need to do in tackling the housing crisis is to add another disincentive to providing more housing stock. That is the fundamental problem I have got with this. You cannot try to fix a symptom of a problem by making the problem – the cause – worse, thereby replicating itself.

In terms of intervention in the rental market, philosophically I believe governments should intervene where there is market failure, but in this instance the market failure is not at the end of the rental affordability. The market failure will kick in when people do not have roofs to put over their heads. That is when the government will need to intervene in a big way if we keep putting disincentives in the way.

Interjections from gallery.

The PRESIDENT: Order! I am going to stop this debate. If there is one more comment from the gallery, I am going to stop this debate and I am going to walk out, and the chamber is going to dissolve and the gallery will be cleared.

Adem SOMYUREK: Thank you, President. I do not need to say this, but I will. I was a bit bemused as to why the government member was going through her personal circumstances, but I grew up in public housing myself, so I have sympathy for renters. So it is not about that; it is not about that at all. It is about trying to find the proper fix, the proper solution, to this problem, to a real crisis we have got on our hands.

In terms of the politics of all of this, unfortunately a lot of the things that the Greens do are based on electoral politics. We know there are hotly contested seats in the inner city. There is a race to the bottom between the Greens and the Socialist Left Labor Party, and I fear that this might be a part of all of that. Again I say rental affordability is a big problem, but it is a symptom of a much bigger problem – that is, the housing crisis – and if you make the root cause of the problem worse, you will never be able to fix the symptom.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (11:42): Those of you who have read the Liberal Party platform will not find my position surprising. As a Liberal I believe that people should be free to create value for themselves and others and to earn reward from those efforts. I believe that free enterprise, coupled with fair and objective regulations, is the best way to solve society's problems. I believe that where the private sector can deliver a service more efficiently and fairly than the government sector, unnecessary taxes and regulation should be avoided because they inevitably backfire.

There are already two excellent ways to hold negligent and corrupt landlords to account. One is, as was pointed out by others over there, a slow regulatory pathway via a tribunal and the law. This does indeed leave renters vulnerable and at a disadvantage, but what if renters had an abundance of good rental options available to them? We absolutely need excellent remedial options for rental disputes. But let us not abandon renters in a nightmare of bureaucracy; let us actually do what works. Let us empower renters by increasing and incentivising property supply through the free market so that landlords are subjected to some healthy competition so it is up to them to attract renters, who would be able to say to their dodgy landlords, 'If you do not fix these problems, I'm just going to move to one of the other five options that I have.' We need to empower renters. That means we need to give them market leverage as well as fair laws. We cannot go halfway. While I am at it, let us not pigeonhole people as renters for life; let us not forget that owning a home is actually the ultimate goal. Opposition to these kinds of rental controls is not a partisan issue. Economists on both sides of the aisle oppose it, from right-wing Milton Friedman to left-wing Gunnar Myrdal, both Nobel Prize winners.

In summary, I will give you six points. History shows that these kinds of interventions just do not work as intended. They create a short-term fix for a few people at the expense of long-term affordability for the broader population. The science of economics also tells us that rent controls not only limit new housing supplies but also lead to the removal of existing housing supplies from the market. They provide benefits to a small share of households but at enormous cost to renters in general, one being an objective inability for landlords to fund maintenance, and that is why rent controls like these lead to poorly maintained, outdated housing and the battles that we are all so familiar with – between the so-called innocent victim tenants and the so-called evil landlords – over upkeep, when what is really happening is that they are just two groups in our society that are stuck in between unjust and unwise laws.

Proponents often point to Europe as a success model, but they fail to point out the disastrous shortage of supply. In fact Assar Lindbeck, the famous left-wing economist, said that, short of bombing, he knew of no way to destroy a city that was more effective than rent control. These rent controls sharply reduce new construction to only pricey units and give way to a surge in for-sale shadow alternatives like Airbnbs and US-style condos, which are bought by small investors and rented out individually, ultimately making housing affordability and stability even worse. I know we all care about these same

issues. You have brought them up. This is already happening in Victoria. And last, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, research has already shown that the removal of these rental controls after a long time of having them in place has led to increased housing supply, better maintenance and even less crime. As one of my favourite economists, Thomas Sowell, concluded, without analysis the proposed rent controls do sound utopian. Yet we already know from repeated painful lessons from history that the effects of these policies are unfortunate. Tenants face limited housing stocks that are either run down or unaffordable and landlords lose money and ultimately stop investing and building altogether, and that leaves the poor and the homeless worse off in every way.

The solution to getting affordable, high-quality housing is supply. We need to stop wasting time researching questions that we already know the answers to, and we need to get busy releasing more land and incentivising middle-class investment in the property market. That is how we help renters.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:47): I rise to speak on motion 54 brought by Mr Puglielli. This motion seeks to require the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider and report on the rental crisis in Victoria and measures to make renting more affordable and secure for Victorians. Everyone deserves a place to call home. The rental crisis in Victoria is a significant issue for many members of our Victorian community who are increasingly being priced out of the rental market. There is a lack of housing stock, a lack of affordable rents and an erosion of tenants rights. Often those impacted by the crisis are more our most vulnerable – young and low-income households that are already living week to week.

I am a renter, and like many of my constituents and colleagues in this chamber, I have seen the rental crisis in Victoria firsthand. The number of properties available to rent keeps shrinking, and the prices of those available to rent keep rising. Even those lucky enough to have already secured rental accommodation are now experiencing rental price rises, with some increasing by as much as \$200 a week. Some of my experiences to reflect on –

The PRESIDENT: Sorry, Ms Payne, I need to interrupt. The time for this debate has expired.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:48): I thank Ms Payne for the contribution that she was able to make just then with the time remaining. I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate today. While I am at it, again I would like to thank the renters with lived experience who have come to the chamber today to provide that reality in the room on top of the lived experience of those in this chamber already.

It has been disappointing at times to see federal lines of attack from Canberra being brought into this chamber in this conversation; we want to keep this relevant to the Victorian context. Nonetheless, while there are issues with particular elements from certain parties being raised in relation to the terms of reference of this inquiry, it has been collectively raised by all speakers in this debate that we acknowledge that there is more to be done and that we need to work together to get there. So, as has been raised by my colleagues, we need to collaborate, I would say, on this inquiry to ensure that we can take appropriate action on the rental crisis facing Victorians.

To me and the Greens it is very clear that we must take action now to make renting better and fairer in Victoria. For all the reasons I and my colleagues have outlined today, it is just so important that work is done to make renting more affordable, to increase housing supply and to ensure that renters have access to decent, safe and genuinely affordable homes in their community. I commend this motion to the house.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (19): Matthew Bach, Melina Bath, Gaelle Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, David Ettershank, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Joe McCracken, Nicholas McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Samantha Ratnam

Noes (19): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Moira Deeming, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Tom McIntosh, Harriet Shing, Adem Somyurek, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt

Motion negatived.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Housing affordability

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:00): (137) My question is to the minister representing the Minister for Housing. As we have heard this morning, Victoria is in the middle of a housing crisis. Rents are at record highs and vacancies at record lows. Hundreds of thousands of households are in housing stress and at risk of homelessness, and over 120,000 people are waiting for a public home. We urgently need a massive investment in thousands of new public homes to solve our affordability crisis, but this government has been demolishing its public housing stock and directing funding to private community housing instead. Will next week's budget include new funding to build thousands of new public housing units?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers, Minister for Child Protection and Family Services) (12:00): Thank you, Mr Puglielli, for your question. I am sure that the Minister for Housing will be very pleased to provide you with a response to your question, and I will happily pass that to him.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:01): I thank the minister for referring the question on for an answer. Minister, aside from their 'Big Housing Build' and the destruction and privatisation of public housing estates, the government has no long-term strategy or plan for public and affordable housing. While a 10-year strategy for social and affordable housing was developed and ready to be launched last year, it was abruptly shelved at the last minute and has not been released. Minister, will you release the 10-year strategy as a matter of urgency?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers, Minister for Child Protection and Family Services) (12:01): Again, thank you, Mr Puglielli, for your supplementary question. I am again pleased to pass it to the minister.

Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:01): (138) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, can you confirm that there were concerns raised within ESTA that inappropriate coding was applied to avoid activating code reds during October and November 2022?

Jaclyn Symes: I missed the start, sorry.

The PRESIDENT: Can you ask it again, please?

Georgie CROZIER: Yes, of course. The question is: can you confirm that there were concerns raised within ESTA that inappropriate coding was applied to avoid activating code reds for Ambulance Victoria during October and November 2022?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:02): I thank Ms Crozier for her question. Emergency response escalations are entirely an operational matter – I am sure you would be aware of that – a matter for Ambulance Victoria made in real time by experts. I am advised that a range of factors are considered, including but not limited to things such as fleet availability, staffing numbers, hospital flow, number of priority cases or whether there has been a significant event such as a car accident or something where they are expecting multiple

admissions, such as the awful events of yesterday. The Department of Health and the relevant minister are not notified of an emergency escalation until afterwards.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:03): My question was not answered in relation to the concerns raised within ESTA. The minister did not answer that. My supplementary is: will the minister direct that all telco records, including personal and taxpayer-funded phones, be made available to IBAC if required?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:03): That is an extraordinary question. So, ‘Don’t interfere with an IBAC inquiry, but direct people in relation to an IBAC inquiry.’ I will not direct anybody in relation to an IBAC inquiry investigation. It is extremely inappropriate to ask me to. I am actually shocked by this question, I have got to say. I would expect any public servant, any employee of an agency, to cooperate with IBAC.

Ministers statements: IDAHOBIT

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Water, Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Commonwealth Games Legacy, Minister for Equality) (12:04): I rise today in my role as Minister for Equality to talk about IDAHOBIT. Today is the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersex Discrimination and Transphobia. IDAHOBIT is a day of celebration. It is a day of pride, of connection and of resistance. It is a day that our rainbow Victorian communities, and indeed around Australia and the world, come together along with our allies to celebrate how far we have come but also to acknowledge how much work there is still left to do. Whether you are an LGBTIQ+ person or an ally, today we stand together. The recent attacks on our rights as LGBTIQ+ people have shown us why days like IDAHOBIT are so important. Days like today show the bigots that we will always be stronger and prouder than their hate. Days like today show that in visibility, in dignity and in wellbeing, inclusion and connection there is pride.

This morning I was delighted to host an IDAHOBIT event here at Parliament: story time. Three drag performers read stories to little ones and their families, attended in a room full of members of Parliament from here and the other place from across our chambers. This was an opportunity to come together across the political divide to share our commitment to making sure that LGBTIQ+ people like us are celebrated, acknowledged, seen and respected. Today and every day I acknowledge, I see, I respect and I commit to doing the best by our LGBTIQ+ communities. In every way and on every day we stand with you, because equality is not negotiable.

Public transport funding

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:06): (139) My question is to the minister representing the Minister for Public Transport. The Labor government is preparing Victorians for a slash-and-burn austerity budget, with reports warning of numerous public transport projects being either massively delayed or quietly defunded. The Melbourne Airport rail is being put on hold. High-speed rail between Geelong and Melbourne is a pipedream now, and the promised overhaul of our bus network, laid out in the government’s own 2021 bus reform plan, is feared to be at risk. Victoria could be developing a modern, green and affordable public transport network with electric buses, high-speed rail and frequencies that match community demand. Instead, the government is pulling funding and telling us there is simply no room in the budget for this renewal, while refusing to make big banks and profiteering corporations pay their fair share of tax. Can the minister please clarify for Victorians how cutting funding for public transport during a cost-of-living crisis will help them?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Water, Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Commonwealth Games Legacy, Minister for Equality) (12:07): Thank you, Dr Mansfield, for your question –

A member interjected.

Harriet SHING: Oh, my gosh. I am so sorry. Thank you, Ms Copsey. It was a little difficult with the line of sight somewhat obscured. I will refer that question to the minister in the other place in accordance with the standing orders and seek an answer on that basis.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:07): With reports indicating that the airport rail might now be significantly delayed and the 2021 bus reform plan feared to be not meeting community expectations, will the minister flag with Victorians which essential public transport and active and sustainable transport projects are at risk of not being completed on time or at all in the years ahead?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Water, Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Commonwealth Games Legacy, Minister for Equality) (12:07): Thank you, Ms Copsey. I have gotten your name correct on this occasion with the supplementary. I will of course refer that to the minister in the other place for an answer in accordance with the standing orders.

Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:07): (140) My question is again to the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, today on radio 3AW ESTA CEO Stephen Leane told Neil Mitchell that IT issues in ESTA are still outstanding and more funding is required, so I ask: how much money is required to fix ESTA's IT system?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:08): I was just looking for some of the figures for you, Ms Crozier, but they are not coming to hand. This is a question that I have provided information to the chamber before on in relation to the CAD system. The CAD system is the call and dispatch system which supports our call takers in relation to connecting them to maps and communicating with emergency services to be able to dispatch them in a timely manner as Victorians expect. It is a system that we continually invest in. To put a figure on how much it costs, it is kind of a continually evolving piece of infrastructure. We have spent millions, and we make absolutely no apology for that. It is a vital piece of equipment, and we will continue to make investments. I have given you figures before. I am happy to give you the update on where we are up to, because I have provided it before and I can provide it again.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:09): Thank you very much for the assurance, Minister – as the CEO would not provide that funding, there is a question mark, as you say, about the ongoing funding that is required – that the house can have that. So I ask, Minister: when will the IT system at ESTA be fixed?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:09): Ms Crozier, you are implying that it is broken. I do not concede that it is broken. When you call 000, people answer and emergency services are dispatched appropriately. With all IT projects –

Members interjecting.

Jaelyn SYMES: We will continue to invest in an IT system that fundamentally supports the work of the hardworking staff at ESTA. It needs to be updated, it needs to be continually improved and we will continue to make the appropriate investments.

Ministers statements: National Volunteer Week

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:10): I rise to update the house today – obviously I have pre-empted it with my dressing – about the ongoing support for our amazing SES volunteers. Today I, along with many people in the chamber, am proudly wearing orange, and I have a special shout-out for Mrs Tyrrell, who I think takes the prize in relation to orange today. Congratulations, Mrs Tyrrell.

Members interjecting.

Jaelyn SYMES: Lee has done it before; she is new. It is Wear Orange Wednesday, part of National Volunteer Week, and it is a day to thank the thousands of SES volunteers from across the country and particularly here in the state of Victoria.

I want to begin by acknowledging that first responders had to attend a horrific collision in Eynesbury yesterday – just devastating. Bacchus Marsh VICSES units responded with FRV and CFA. Melton, Wyndham and Sunbury VICSES units were also on the scene. I just cannot imagine how hard yesterday was for them. It is certainly a challenging time for that community and that local school.

The past 12 months have been the busiest operational period for VICSES in their history since they have been established, with dedicated volunteers responding to over 46,000 requests for assistance. Activity included responding to floods, storms and calls for help from interstate. Last year's floods saw over 17,000 requests for assistance. The most, as I said, in their history were in that period. I am proud that our government has continued to support the amazing work of the SES, including in last year's budget, which provided \$28 million to maintain facilities and upgrade priority vehicles, and landmarks tonight in Melbourne and across the state will be lit up orange in recognition of WOW Day.

Volunteering of course is a rewarding experience and a great way to learn new skills, connect with people and give back to the local community, particularly in the emergency services space, so I do encourage anyone interested to get along to their local ES organisation, whether it be the SES, CFA, Life Saving Victoria, Marine Search and Rescue or a couple of others. To all of our emergency services volunteers across Victoria, thank you.

Maribyrnong River flood review

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:12): (141) My question is for the Minister for Water. Minister, will you confirm that you were formally briefed on the Maribyrnong River flood review and Nick Wimbush by the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action on 22 December?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Water, Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Commonwealth Games Legacy, Minister for Equality) (12:12): Mr Davis, I routinely receive information, briefings, updates and details of the matters relevant to all four of my portfolios, and that includes water. This is part of ongoing conversations and discussions that I have with people from within the department. Obviously, after the October 2022 flooding events there was a need for Melbourne Water to look at what had occurred, and it set the terms of reference by which that review would be undertaken.

I was sworn in as the Minister for Water on 14 December. At about 5:30 pm the following day Mr Wimbush was confirmed as the appointed head of the review as part of a process that Melbourne Water had undertaken following its own processes relevant to the probity matters and to the decisions made by Melbourne Water. There have then been conversations, as there should have been and as is appropriate to have taken place, with Melbourne Water, through the department and to me about the way in which the appointment had occurred – 'had' being the appropriate tense there, because, Mr Davis, despite how hard you may try, I was not involved in any of the processes associated with the appointment of Mr Wimbush, with the advice of the probity officer and with decisions taken by Melbourne Water around its review, and that is the end of it.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:14): I notice the minister has refused to indicate that she actually did have a briefing. I actually have that briefing here, so I can confirm to the house she was briefed on the 22nd. That FOI released to my office this week, including that material, saw the release of 38 documents, and I note that on 40 occasions ministerial staff were emailed, including seeking approvals, where ministerial office changes to releases and proposals were clearly documented. Does the minister still stand by her claim that she and her office were not up to their necks in tailoring and approving the work of the Maribyrnong flood review?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Water, Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Commonwealth Games Legacy, Minister for Equality) (12:15): Mr Davis, I have answered this question on multiple occasions now, but let me spell it out for you again. It is important that I am aware of, apprised of and, as the Premier has indicated applies to many portfolios, kept in the loop about the work that is undertaken across departments, entities, agencies and organisations. This includes being updated on information as it is provided, for example, in response to media requests. That is precisely what occurred in the instances that you are referring to, and again it is important that you understand that, as part of Melbourne Water’s technical review, decisions are made by Melbourne Water. They are not ministerial decisions. The appointment process, the probity advice, the decisions by Melbourne Water were not the subject of any consideration by me.

Nazi symbol prohibition

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:16): (142) My question is for the Attorney-General. Last year the government set an unusual and somewhat chilling precedent of banning symbols, starting with the almost universally despised swastika. If the intent of this ban was to suppress national socialist activity in this state, on the face of it one would have to conclude that this has backfired and is an epic failure. After being handed their new victimhood status by the government, although tiny in number, national socialists with their ridiculous ideology and dress sense appear to have become emboldened to the point of openly protesting in the streets. Predictably, they just changed to a different symbol. Can the Attorney provide any evidence that this ban has had any positive effect whatsoever?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:17): I thank Mr Limbrick for his question. Mr Limbrick, there are a range of measures that the government and indeed others want to take to ensure that we stamp out hate and bigotry in Victoria. Banning of the Nazi hate symbol, the Hakenkreuz, which received a lot of support in this chamber, was one such measure. I made public commitments in relation to the salute after we saw horrible behaviour on the steps of Parliament and again recently. This is just one measure to help promote tolerance and promote appropriate behaviour and to support minorities that are often targeted by such behaviour. A piece of legislation is not a shield for someone from such hate, but it is a great statement from a government, from a chamber, from the Parliament, that we will not stand for this type of behaviour in Victoria. So we will continue to come up with a range of measures that hopefully disrupt that type of behaviour and just as importantly provide a really positive message to people that are targeted that we have got their back.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:18): I thank the Attorney for her answer. My supplementary question is: what symbols does the government plan to ban next?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:18): In relation to the consultation that we are undertaking in relation to the salute, we will look at a range of measures and see whether there is anything else that could be captured by the next suite of legislation. It is something that I will be happy to brief you on once those consultations have been completed.

Ministers statements: men’s sheds

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers, Minister for Child Protection and Family Services) (12:18): I rise to update the house on the vital support that men’s sheds are providing Victorians. This government is proud to partner with men’s sheds. We recognise the significant contribution men’s sheds make in enhancing the health and wellbeing of men in Victoria and the positive flow-on effects for communities. Men’s sheds are places that enable men to work side by side on projects of interest and to share skills and experiences while giving back to their community. They provide a space for men to connect to their community through shared interests, working together on joint projects and learning and teaching new skills. They also

play an important role in communities experiencing social and economic change and assist communities to recover after a natural disaster.

There are now more than 360 men's sheds across Victoria, and we are proud to provide \$1 million to support men's sheds each year. Since 2015 this government has provided 459 grants to men's sheds across Victoria, and through this commitment 30 men's sheds were funded through the 2022–23 program to construct a new shed or refurbish or extend their existing shed.

As just one example of the important work men's sheds do, I would like to talk about the important work of Belgrave Men's Shed for their local community and wildlife. The Belgrave Men's Shed is supporting local wildlife by creating rosella nesting boxes for the locals to use. The men's shed members have built 20 nesting boxes with materials supplied by Yarra Ranges council from storm-damaged areas. These nesting boxes have been displayed at the Belgrave Library, and these can be used as habitat for birds awaiting the regrowth of storm-affected tree hollows. In Tatura, members of the men's shed stepped in to assist with the labour to securely install unique Indigenous artwork – a project which allowed the community to come together and provide a significant asset for their town. It is examples like these that demonstrate the important role that men's sheds have for our communities, and this government is proud to continue to support men's sheds.

Maribyrnong River flood review

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:20): (143) My question is again for the Minister for Water. Minister, on 15 December a ministerial staffer in your office emailed the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action with a simple statement entitled:

OFFICIAL-Sensitive: GOOD TO GO: OFFICIAL-Sensitive: FOR APPROVAL: Melbourne Water – Maribyrnong Flood Review –

with the following instructions:

... can you please add the bolded line into the release and web copy? Then it's good to go. I have revised the release below in yellow/bold ...

Minister, isn't it a fact that this is active intervention by your office and is far more than being kept in the loop?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Water, Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Commonwealth Games Legacy, Minister for Equality) (12:21): Thanks, Mr Davis. It looks like we are going another round. The answer is no.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:21): Minister, I ask: didn't you mislead the house on 8 February when you said, 'The very nature of an independent review is that I am not part of this work'? The fact is your office intervened with this review and it was not independent.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Water, Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Commonwealth Games Legacy, Minister for Equality) (12:22): No.

Maribyrnong River flood review

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:22): (144) Further to the extraordinary intervention of the minister's office, Minister, the FOI fought by your department but finally released shows Matthew Dawson in your office was involved in the approval of the 'Sensitive: good to go' Melbourne Water Maribyrnong River flood inquiry email of 15 December, and Shailla Van Raad, one of your ministerial staffers on 19 December, said in an email directing the department:

We anticipate that this will get some good media pickup in the coming days.

Hence, I think we need to prepare for this and some of the questions to come.

Isn't it a fact, Minister, not only that your staff knew that Nick Wimbush was to be appointed despite his obvious and self-declared conflict of interest but further that they actively approved the department's proposed course of action in writing, including his appointment?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Water, Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Commonwealth Games Legacy, Minister for Equality) (12:23): Mr Davis, you have just referred I think to a date which is after the appointment of Mr Wimbush, which was made on 15 December. I responded to a media inquiry in relation to Mr Wimbush's appointment, which was the first that I had heard of this matter. Let us just be really clear, I was sworn in as the Minister for Water at 5:30 on the 14th.

David Davis interjected.

Harriet SHING: Mr Davis, I am going to take up that interjection. Let us be really clear. I am going to pick you up on that, Mr Davis. In October the floods wreaked havoc across rural and regional Victoria. As you would be aware and as I would hope that you would respect, it is really important that, election campaigning notwithstanding, people in their greatest hour of need have assistance from governments. That is why the work continued, including to provide bill relief and assistance to those who were affected by inundation or cut off because of floodwater. That is why, as government, we continued during that caretaker period in matters that went beyond party politics to provide support, assistance, relief and recovery to towns, businesses, households and residents all over the state.

Mr Davis, again, you can try as much as you want to try to invoke this conspiracy that I was somehow involved in Mr Wimbush's appointment. I have said it on numerous occasions, and I will say it again: I was not involved in Mr Wimbush's appointment or in the process by which probity audit advice and information were sought or received by Melbourne Water. I was not involved in any changes to the appointment of Mr Wimbush. These are matters that are entirely for Melbourne Water, as they have remained.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:25): Goodness! Minister, did any of your ministerial office staff talk to you on 14 or 15 December about their approval of the department's appointment, or were they freelancing?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Water, Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Commonwealth Games Legacy, Minister for Equality) (12:26): Again, Mr Wimbush's appointment was confirmed to me in response to a media request and a request for information about Mr Wimbush's appointment. That is when I found out about Mr Wimbush's appointment – that is, after Mr Wimbush had been appointed and that decision had been taken by Melbourne Water.

Ministers statements: National Volunteer Week

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-Prep, Minister for Environment) (12:26): As this is National Volunteer Week, I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge all the wonderful volunteers across the environment portfolio contributing enormously to improving our environment, our local communities and our state's economy. This includes environmental advocates, 'friends of' groups, Landcare groups, Parks Victoria volunteers, citizen scientists, recreation volunteers, environmental sustainability groups, and wildlife rescue and care groups.

My department has recently published the *Volunteering Naturally 2022* report, the fourth annual snapshot of environmental volunteering across Victoria. The report demonstrates a bounce-back in volunteering efforts towards prepandemic levels, which is excellent, and sets out some fantastic case studies. This includes the Great Victorian Fish Count, the Victorian Junior Landcare and Biodiversity grants and, impressively, the story of Ken Rendell, who is still planting and weeding out in our community at 90 years of age.

I also want to acknowledge the 75 volunteer groups that have been selected since 2020 to receive a share of the \$2 million Volunteering Innovation Fund, creating new ways to protect the state's precious environment and biodiversity, and I cannot wait to see these conservation ideas come to life. Our dedicated volunteers do incredible work all across the state to help conserve our precious environment, ensuring that it can thrive for generations to come.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:28): Can I thank Minister Blandthorn, who will get responses for Mr Puglielli from the Minister for Housing to both questions that he proposed, the supplementary and the substantive; and Minister Shing, public transport, both Ms Copsy's substantive and supplementary questions, And the Attorney-General committed to getting Ms Crozier a response under the standing orders.

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, on that very matter that you have just raised, the undertaking I think from the minister was that she would provide how much investment has been put into the system. My question was how much additional funding is required, so I would ask that the minister respond to that specific question.

The PRESIDENT: That was the supplementary, which I believe the minister did answer.

Jaclyn Symes interjected.

The PRESIDENT: The minister will respond to what you have actually asked for in *Hansard*.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, my first question dealt with the date of a briefing to the minister. She simply did not answer the question – 22 December; she needs to either confirm it or not.

The PRESIDENT: I believe she did answer the question. I think she said she had had a number of different briefings. I believe she did address the question.

Questions on notice

Answers

The PRESIDENT (12:30): Mr Davis wrote to me seeking the reinstatement of a number of questions on notice directed to various ministers. Having reviewed the responses, I order that questions on notice 140 to 142, together with questions on notice 157 to 162, be reinstated in full as the responses did not address the time frame or information sought by Mr Davis. In relation to questions on notice 181 to 220, I am of the opinion that the minister has answered those questions.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:31): I have another reinstatement, for Mr Bourman, who wrote to me concerning a written answer to a question without notice. The question was asked to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation in the other place, represented by Minister Shing, on 4 May 2023 and was in relation to the Game Management Authority. I have reviewed the written answer provided by the minister for recreation on 12 May 2023, and I agree that it is not responsive to the question that Mr Bourman asked. I therefore require the minister to provide a further written response, and that response is due in two days.

Constituency questions

Southern Metropolitan Region

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:31): (171) Today I rise to ask a question for the Minister for Training and Skills, Minister Tierney. The Andrews Labor government will provide access to free TAFE for those studying in an industry with a skills shortage as part of the \$1.2 billion

A Future Made in Australia skills plan. This policy supports school leavers and workers looking to train or retrain, and it benefits businesses who need more skilled workers. After a decade of the Liberal–National government cutting TAFE and slashing apprenticeships and traineeships, it cannot come quick enough. It will provide opportunities in trades, resources, digital industries, cybersecurity, new energy and advanced manufacturing, and there will be 465,000 free TAFE places, including 45,000 new TAFE places. My question to the minister is: what impact will free TAFE have on my community of Southern Metro?

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:32): (172) My question is for the Minister for Emergency Services, and it is: will she come and visit the Lang Lang fire station with me to see the urgent upgrades that are required? Last week I visited the Lang Lang CFA, an incredible group of volunteers that respond to 100 to 130 call-outs per year and assist strike teams wherever they are needed across Victoria and interstate. They have responded to car and other vehicle accidents; grass, house and bushfires; and floods, storms and natural disasters, and they assist the SES whenever needed. I walked through the fire station and saw their 3.4C heavy tanker, one ultralight ute and one lightning unit. A new station is on the wish list to allow for the training of new volunteers, and they need a backup vehicle for when theirs is away on strike teams. I want to thank the local volunteers and also their employers for allowing their staff to serve in areas of the community in this way.

Western Metropolitan Region

David ETTERSANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:33): (173) My constituency question is for the Minister for Public Transport, Mr Carroll, represented in this place by Minister Shing. My constituent is Caitlin Morrison, a resident of the Maribyrnong area, who last month was violently assaulted whilst travelling on the number 57 tram route. The unprovoked attack left her with severe and lasting injuries from which she is still suffering. Ms Morrison was shocked to learn that her number 57 tram, like a significant proportion of the network, did not have CCTV, meaning that police were left with no way to identify her assailant. My constituent asks: what steps has the minister undertaken to ensure the trams in the Western Metropolitan Region, like the number 57 route, are fitted with CCTV capabilities?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:34): (174) My question is for the Minister for Equality, Minister Shing. Today, as we know, is the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia, and I am proud to represent a diverse and inclusive community. However, many of my constituents have reached out to me concerned about the vile, homophobic and transphobic threats to local people holding family friendly events. This includes threats and attacks against Monash council, Casey council and a small business in Chelsea. I was delighted to join the minister today in hosting a drag queen story time here in the Parliament, and what a fantastic event that was. However, in light of this disturbing behaviour in my electorate, I ask on behalf of my constituents: what actions are being taken by the minister to address instances of discrimination towards LGBTIQ+ communities in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region and across Victoria?

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:35): (175) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and it concerns the ongoing drainage issues of a constituent of mine living on the Murchison-Tatura Road in Murchison. Mr Robert Wright first contacted my office in December 2022 complaining that roadworks on the Murchison-Tatura Road outside his property had negatively impacted the drainage system along the side of the road. As a result his front paddock is now subject to flooding during rain events, rendering the paddock useless for sowing crops. I have previously written to the minister requesting that Regional Roads Victoria consult with Mr Wright on the issue, and I have also requested the same personally of the director of Regional Roads Victoria, Hume region.

To date no satisfactory consultation has occurred with Mr Wright to help resolve this issue. Will the minister direct Regional Roads Victoria management to engage with Mr Wright to finally resolve the drainage issue outside his Murchison-Tatura Road property?

Western Victoria Region

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:36): (176) My question is for the Attorney-General. I am sure the Attorney would agree that all victim-survivors of family violence deserve equitable access to legal support no matter where they live in Victoria. However, victim-survivors in the Barwon region of Western Victoria face the very real risk of missing out on that critical support due to inconsistencies in the way specialist family violence courts are being funded across the state. The first five specialist family violence courts established in 2019–20 received specialist funding so people could access legal support, helping victim-survivors keep safe and strengthening accountability measures for users of violence. The additional seven specialist family violence courts established at the end of last year are being implemented without community legal services receiving funding. This includes courts in Geelong, Melbourne, Sunshine, Broadmeadows, Ringwood, Dandenong and Latrobe Valley. My question to the Attorney-General is: will the government prioritise funding community legal services and ensure the specialist family violence courts can be delivered as designed for the constituents in Barwon?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (12:37): (177) My constituency question is for the Minister for Education. On behalf of my constituents I ask the minister for some information regarding how the government is supporting students at North Melbourne Primary School to start the transition to their new campus. The innovative new vertical school looks state of the art, with lots of inspiring learning spaces as well as places for the school community to come together for performances, assemblies and events both indoors and out. On behalf of the school community I would appreciate any further information on how the government's reforms, including the new campus of North Melbourne Primary School, are helping Victorian students get the best education possible.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:38): (178) My question is to the Minister for Water. Could the minister please provide me with the results of recent testing in the last few years that has been undertaken by the state government and Melbourne Water on the waters of Lake Carramar to ensure the water, which is metres from residents' properties in Patterson Lakes, is safe for their animals and for them and free from the continuous presence of blue-green algae, known as cyanobacteria. Residents have complained that they have been waiting for more than 10 years for Melbourne Water to comply with recommendation 4 to guarantee adequate through flows to Lake Carramar. While Melbourne Water has provided a sign permanently warning the residents that people, animals and wildlife should avoid the toxic water, it should be noted that animals and small children cannot read. There has been no work to improve the water flow to reduce the risk either. According to the Victorian Department of Health, contact with the water can cause skin irritation and mild respiratory and hay fever symptoms and, if the toxins are ingested, can lead to vomiting, diarrhoea, fever and headaches. Pets that come into contact with the toxic algae could die. I look forward to hearing from the minister.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Nicholas McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:39): (179) My constituency question is to the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure. It relates to Burwood Highway and McMahan's Road in Ferntree Gully, within my electorate. In the 2022–23 budget the government announced, as part of the metropolitan road upgrades, signalisation of this intersection. The government also sought community feedback to better understand how people currently use the intersection, seeking views on how the government should be considering their planning. The community were invited to provide

their thoughts between 3 and 23 October 2022. According to the government website, planning is underway and is anticipated to be finalised in early 2023 – that is this year – and it will be informed, of course, by the community feedback. Road users and pedestrians have been waiting a long time for the government to address the safety issues at this troubled intersection. With the correct design elements, this long-awaited upgrade will, we hope, improve safety. We are now in May, and I ask the minister: when will the planning process be finalised, and when will the minister confirm the government has indeed used the community feedback to shape the design development aspects of this new intersection?

Committees

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Reference

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:41): I move:

That this house requires the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 25 June 2024, on the Victorian education system across government schools, including:

- (1) trends in student learning outcomes from prep to year 12, including but not limited to:
 - (a) the factors, if any, that have contributed to decline;
 - (b) disparities correlated with geography and socio-economic disadvantage;
- (2) the state of the teaching profession in Victoria, including but not limited to:
 - (a) the adequacy of existing measures to recruit, remunerate and retain teachers;
 - (b) training, accreditation and professional development, particularly for teaching students with special needs;
 - (c) the adequacy of the Department of Education's measures to support teachers;
 - (d) the impact of school leadership on student wellbeing, learning outcomes and school culture;
- (3) the current state of student wellbeing in Victoria, including but not limited to the impact of state government interventions, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, to address poor mental health in students, school refusal, and broader student disengagement;
- (4) the administrative burden on teachers and the availability of new technologies to alleviate the burden;
- (5) examples of best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings used to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing; and
- (6) school funding adequacy and its impact on student learning outcomes and wellbeing.

Before I begin kicking off the ball on this very important inquiry topic, I would like to say from the Nationals and the Liberals that our thoughts and prayers go out to the children, the families, the principal, the teachers, the staff and the school community of Exford Primary School regarding that tragic collision at Eynesbury yesterday. I was speaking to someone associated with this only this morning, and they said this will not take days or weeks, it will be months and years. I am sure all of us in this house extend our thoughts and prayers to that school community in the hope that they improve and there are good health outcomes for all those poor children affected.

The reality is that in thousands of Victorian classrooms each day we have fantastic teachers who come prepared to teach. They are dedicated, they are organised and they are positive role models for their students. Their focus is on student learning, educational outcomes and student wellbeing. They are positive motivators. They also constantly give up their time at lunchtime or during school hours to go that extra mile: to help with homework, to finish that assignment or to make clear that piece of information that was lost on a child or many children. They go out into classrooms and into the yard to play and communicate with students at lunchtime, to take that extra time whilst throwing down a sandwich. These are the same teachers that go home most weeknights and work at home. Sunday afternoons and Sunday evenings become another form of the workplace, with lesson preparation and corrections. They attend staff meetings and parent meetings, and they have to shoulder the burden of

a fair degree of administration. I know this because the teachers that I am speaking about were my colleagues when I worked for nine years, up until 8½ years ago, in the state school system in Gippsland. I pay homage to each and every one of those teachers and the thousands of teachers in our state that do an amazing job.

It is also clear that our Victorian education system is under significant pressure. It has been significantly impacted over the last three years because of the COVID pandemic and the lockdowns and the fact that for 170 days we had students not being able to engage in the formal school process, in class, but having to attend their lessons via Zoom or receive information and work at home. This has made an impact on our students, and I think part of what the inquiry needs to look at is delving into how deeply that has cut across various students in our state and what has worked in bringing students back up to speed but also what has not worked and what needs to work in order to make up that lost time. Now, we cannot rewrite history; we can only go from now.

The Legal and Social Issues Committee apparently has absolutely no work on its plate at the moment. I thought potentially there would be an inquiry in terms of rental housing, but that did not get up today, so there is time, and this committee can well deal with this issue. It is important to unpack the issues in terms of listening to people in the field – to teachers and educators, to principals and school leaders, to school councils and, importantly, to parents and past and present students. I was walking up a hill with some fantastic year 11 students the other day, and their chatter was around how they coped or did not cope during the lockdowns – they came in when they were only in year 8 – and the experiences that they had. That was illuminating.

The breadth of this inquiry really focuses on student learning outcomes – let us put Victorian students at the centre of this inquiry – and student wellbeing, mental health and engagement. And let us look at COVID but look at it in such a way that all of those parties can come together and explain how we can improve student wellbeing and student outcomes. Also, very importantly, let us look at the state of teaching in Victoria – the teacher workforce, the professional development and teacher retention. By pushing out the reporting date to June next year, we can do a deep dive. We can examine this calmly and allow the secretariat to have that time to complete all required activities, and we can give that experience both in a formal capacity and to individuals in the community to make their comments.

There are other inquiries on the table, and it actually works quite well to have that June reporting date. There are two federal inquiries underway. The Education and Employment References Committee has got the inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters, and that is going to report to the federal Parliament in June this year. That is certainly something that we have seen in the media and reports: about students, unfortunately, having been isolated at home and not exercising that muscle, not wanting to go back to school. So this federal inquiry is looking into that.

There is also an inquiry on the issues of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms, and that is to report in November this year. Again, we can see some alarming statistics around the increase in disruption, aggression and antisocial behaviour directed at principals and staff – and there are some stats that I will talk to shortly. That is coming up in November. Our committee could actually take those reports on board and examine them by its reporting date.

There is also one that was commissioned – and I was most interested in it – in 2017, which is by Professor Halsey into regional, rural and remote education. That is Australia wide, so it certainly had some interesting things to say. We need to drill down into what that means for our regional areas in Victoria specifically. How does low SES – socio-economic status – impact learning? The government may say, ‘We’ve done this. We’re aware of this. We don’t need to.’ I think as legislators, as elected members of Parliament, it has been a long time – in fact almost 20 years – since there was a deep dive into the education system in this Victorian Parliament. Last year we saw one looking at universities’ investment in skills, not looking at prep to year 12. Also in 2017 there was an autism inquiry – again very important but not a holistic look at the state of government education in Victoria. Then back, just by way of finalising reports, between 2010 and 2014, when there was an inquiry by the joint Education

and Training Committee, they were quite prolific in their short and sharp educational activity, and it was really good to read that and see former member for Eastern Victoria Region the Honourable Peter Hall also on that committee. So a deep dive into this very important issue I think is much warranted.

We only have to look today at the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study. That is an international inquiry, 50 countries, and the reports from that look at year 4 students and the abilities that they have in literacy – very important, reading and literacy. If you do not have reading and literacy skills, you are behind the eight ball. Unfortunately, Victoria is walking backwards, and it is the only Australian state to register a statistically significant decline. I note in the paper today the Minister for Education was praising Victoria, and I understand that we had a reasonable level or position. But any decline is actually quite concerning, and the Grattan Institute's education program director Jordana Hunter said we need to 'get serious about teaching reading' in the *Age* today.

Another mark of international standards, how we are standing against the rest of the world, is the Programme for International Student Assessment – PISA, as we like to call it – the OECD program that looks at this and assesses it reasonably regularly. The last one was in 2018. Another one is coming out, but we are not at that point yet. We find across the nation – let me clarify that, across the nation – maths is declining, a full year behind. Reading is declining, almost a full year behind, and science is the same. I take the point this is Australia wide, but as I said, we have the opportunity to do a deep dive into education. We can think globally, but we need to act locally as an upper house and as responsible legislators.

Victoria's NAPLAN – again, if you are a teacher, NAPLAN can make you pull your hair out sometimes, because it just can be, 'Is it useful? Is it informative?' I know certainly some schools used to suggest some students stay away on NAPLAN day. It is often quite a contentious thing, but it is an indicator. It is a benchmark, and unfortunately our recent NAPLAN results say that there has been certainly the largest drop in educational outcomes of any state in the nation and a significant drop in year 5 numeracy and grammar and year 9 spelling. So this is something that we need to investigate in a holistic way.

The Grattan Institute recently put out a report into education. It is specifically looking at teachers, greater teachers and how better government policy can help, and it had three recommendations. Let teachers teach by better matching teachers' work to teachers' expertise. Help teachers to work smarter by reducing unnecessary tasks – we know that there is huge administrative burden that is placed on them more and more. They are required to teach core subjects, but there is also additional workload and additional curriculum. I think we have the opportunity, without getting overly political, to unpack what that is and unpack a way forward to bring those educational outcomes for our students up and also rethink the way teachers work and organise their work in schools. It comes to the point: how can we reinvent this and look at this?

We see regularly the issue around teacher shortages. You only have to pick up the paper to see very often the stress that not only classroom teachers but principals are under, scrambling to find teachers to fill their classrooms. I thank the respected president of the Victorian Principals Association Mr Andrew Dalgleish for the conversations we have had. I have had a couple of conversations with him, and he spoke recently about the fact that we need quality teachers in front of our classrooms. There are a thousand teacher positions on the Department of Education's website. I was also speaking with a local teacher in my electorate. He is a principal. There are over a thousand students at his school and 160 teachers, and he cannot get sufficient teachers in. He has got vacancies. As well as doing his own administrative work as principal, he is taking classroom classes, as is his assistant. These are quite stressful situations. We need to in a collaborative way investigate how we can fast-track and support not only classroom teachers but also principals in their leadership. We also see that a recent nationwide survey of 4000 teachers found that 70 per cent have unmanageable workloads. Three-quarters reported moderate to severe stress, depression and anxiety, which is above the standard population. This must have a flow-on effect.

As I have spoken about just now, school burnout from principals is real and experienced on a daily basis. The ACU Institute for Positive Psychology and Education did a survey. I am putting some stats on the line here: 2500 Australian principals, almost 40 per cent, said that they had had threats of violence towards them by parents or students. Thirty-one per cent had experienced physical violence. An alarming 53 per cent reported offensive behaviour of conflicts and quarrels. We have got burnout, stress and anxiety. We need to sit down at the table and let those principals come to the table and have these very important conversations. There are pathways to leadership I know already in the current structures, but we need to look at how to ensure that there are positive ways that we can mentor and keep principals. They are coming in younger, they are burning out sooner. How can we look at ways to support them and let them be part of that conversation?

Student disengagement and drop-out is a major, major issue. I say that from both a statistical point of view and an anecdotal point of view, from speaking with families who survived COVID and survived the lockdown. Some coped with that COVID lockdown, working via Zoom, and some rejoiced in it, but for a huge percentage of people – young people, students – it was a real struggle. There was significant disengagement, and it is such a crying shame. We cannot wind back time, but what programs are working well and what other jurisdictions – and that is part of this inquiry – are showing the way? What best practice is happening? We see that Estonia is the highest performing OECD country. What is happening there? What is happening in Korea and Japan? We can learn from other jurisdictions, and it is important to do so.

Also, I would like to thank Mr Puglielli, who is in the house now, for having the discussion around incorporating part (6) into the inquiry terms of reference on school funding adequacy and impact on learning and wellbeing. We have a million state school students, or above. The Victorian government has spent \$1.7 billion on education. There can be a Pandora's box opening when we include funding, but I am more than willing to take up the Greens position and include this.

I will finish my contribution there. We have had a shocking mental health shadow pandemic for our students. There is nothing more important than the health of our society and the education of our young people. This is an opportunity to do that. I thank my colleague the Shadow Minister for Education Dr Bach – and certainly he will speak and provide the parts that I have not today – for his influence and positivity. I thank the crossbenchers for other conversations that I have had. I hope the government will see this for what it is – the desire to make better outcomes for our students and to bring about positive mental health and wellbeing for our young people, because they are our future – and I look forward to further debate on this topic.

Sitting suspended 1:01 pm until 2:02 pm.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:02): Today I rise to contribute to the debate on our colleague's motion on the Victorian education system. But before I do, I want to also join Ms Bath in extending my thoughts and prayers to the children and families affected by the devastating school bus crash in Eynesbury in Melton. I know that everyone in this chamber will join me in expressing our sadness. I also want to commend the hardworking first responders from the CFA and Victoria Police as well as Ambulance Victoria who rushed to the scene, and the hardworking personnel at the Royal Children's Hospital that worked around the night to care for these children.

It feels weird to change tune like this, but so does the moving and shaking of our chamber. Back to motion 16 from my colleague Ms Bath, this motion requests that the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquire into, consider and report by 25 June 2023 on the Victorian education system across government schools. It touches upon a variety of things that an investigation aims to find out, and I will address these shortly.

I want to begin by first saying that clearly the proposed review of the Parliament is duplicating the work that has already been done, and it is not a good use of the valuable resources or the committee's time, given the government is working hard each and every day to ensure Victoria continues to be the

Education State in every way. There are several reviews afoot to ensure we apply the best research and advice when educating in Victorian schools. This system is reviewed through a range of public resources, including teachers, academics, students and parents. For instance, there is a national school reform agreement expert panel, the Productivity Commission's review of the national school reform agreement, a teacher education expert panel, the *National Teacher Workforce Action Plan* and the Senate inquiry into school refusal, and the Victorian government has been actively participating in all of them.

We are truly the Education State, and those of us on this side of the chamber get it. We know that education is a great equaliser. I know that some do not take pride in this, but we as a state pride ourselves on education for our younger Victorians. We recognise the impact and the importance of education on an individual's life and how many opportunities a decent education can give you. We also recognise how integral to our community teachers are: the hard work, the hours, and the hours of unseen work, often unpaid. We thank them for the immeasurable good they have done for our children, our families and our community.

Guided by these principles, it is essential that Victoria has a government that shares these values and puts them into practice. Because of this, I am proud to be a member of the Andrews Labor government. We put our money where our mouth is, and we talk about education. While those opposite, the Liberal and National parties, spent the 1990s shutting schools down in the northern and western suburbs, the Andrews Labor government has worked tirelessly to build schools for our growing suburbs. Compare this to the Andrews Labor government's record on new schools. We are opening 100 new schools by 2026 and upgrading over 1000 existing schools. I know that my colleagues in the west, Minister Blandthorn and Minister Stitt, would know more than me on this topic, but every day, basically, it feels like we are opening up a new school in the west.

Let me just give you a taste of how rapidly we are getting on with the job. I am sure that my colleagues in the west would be more informed to speak on this than me, but sometimes it feels like there is a new school opening up every day. Just to give you an idea of how rapidly the Minister for Education has been getting on with this job, I will read out all the schools that were opened last year alone. These schools were opened last year: Bass Coast College San Remo campus, Clyde Creek Primary School, Clyde Secondary College, Deanside Primary School, Endeavour Hills Specialist School, Gilgai Plains Primary School, Greater Shepparton Secondary College, Greenvale Secondary College, McKinnon Secondary College east campus, Port Melbourne Secondary College – that is in my neck of the woods, and I am excited to visit that school soon – and of course Strathulloh Primary School, Willowbank Primary School, Wollert Primary School and Wurun Senior Campus. That is 14 schools opened in one year alone. 2020 saw the building of 11 schools, and in 2021 we built 14. Next year we expect to see another 14 built.

This has put us well ahead of schedule in our plan to build 100 schools by 2026. This is the work that the Labor Andrews government is all about. It is strong, life-changing infrastructure that affects all and will be felt for decades to come – just like Kennett's school closures are felt to this day. In my neck of the woods, families and students have felt the benefits of having governments that are serious about education. In Prahran, where my office is, Prahran High School has been open for four years – that is four years of valuable education made accessible for students in the area. While those opposite are members of the coalition whose federal counterparts walked away from funding the final two years of the Gonski agreement, leaving Victorian students \$1 billion worse off each year from 2018, we are a government that invests in education. Look at our announcement earlier this year. Victorian families can now save hundreds of dollars – that is right – with extra vocational education and training funding to cover the costs of students' course materials. That is a \$120.2 million funding package to make sure schools can cover course material for students and deliver the vital VET courses in industries where they need it most.

But this motion also speaks to 'the state of the teaching profession in Victoria'. We here on this side have a deep respect for our teachers, as I touched on earlier. This is why we have delivered several

policies to support teachers. We are committed to supporting new teachers in their educational training. We believe in opening schools and giving opportunities where we can – just like making both the certificate III and diploma of early childhood education free. This means that for those wanting to get into early childhood education, they have one less barrier in the way of achieving their dreams and goals.

We are also expanding the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership in regional areas, with learning centres to be built in Bairnsdale, Ballarat, Bendigo, Mildura and Shepparton and with regional educator learning centres being opened in Geelong and Moe earlier this year. These educator learning centres are world-class facilities. We are making training accessible and viable to ensure that we have a strong and robust education workforce. It would be a tragedy if any talented would-be educator was unable to pursue a career in education due to economic or geographic constraints. It also greatly benefits students in regional areas by ensuring that teachers have access to this world-class training. In training new teachers we are also offering staff to those regional schools that might find it more difficult to fully staff their classrooms. The innovative Teach Rural program will benefit schools around St Arnaud, Bairnsdale, Wangaratta, Tallangatta, the Otways and Swan Hill. It will help student-teachers and preservice teachers gain a range of experience in teaching environments outside of metro areas.

The Andrews Labor government also believes that all schools should be safe and supportive spaces. These principles have guided many of our education policies. Despite how much of an exciting time in your life it is, your school years can be really tough. Students may have a variety of issues going on in their lives – at home or at school. It is important that schools be equipped to be able to support any student that is struggling with issues, whether it be mental health support, cultural support or learning support. The 2021–22 budget saw the delivery of the \$200 million Schools Mental Health Fund. The fund is designed to allow schools to establish mental health support programs tailored to the needs of their students. It also facilitates the connection of schools with specialist services to strengthen the support networks of their students.

This government is incredibly proud of the measures that it has taken to ensure that every student in Victoria feels welcome and supported in the school environment. We have spearheaded several programs to promote the comfort and support of students across Victoria. We have made great efforts to assist schools in accommodating the needs of LGBTQI+ and gender-diverse students as they face unique difficulties. For too long we have heard stories of students who feel unwelcome or unsafe at their school, all because of the treatment they have received because of their identity. The Andrews Labor government is a proud supporter of the adoption of the Safe Schools program. It is a fantastic means to address the wellbeing of LGBTQI+ students across Victoria.

The Andrews Labor government has invested \$1.6 billion in disability inclusion. This includes so many life-changing programs, like grants we offered in 2020 to build and upgrade schools with increased accessibility within schools to courses developed with the University of Melbourne's graduate school of education to train Victoria's teachers in teaching students with learning disabilities.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:12): I rise today to make a contribution on behalf of the Greens on the motion before us, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak about public education here in Victoria, which I have quite recently benefited from – go, Eltham High – so that further work can be done to investigate pathways for improving student learning outcomes and wellbeing as well as for improving the job satisfaction, pay and working conditions of our teachers. I was pleased, as has been prefaced, to have some productive discussions on the wording of this motion with those across the chamber to ensure that school funding and teacher remuneration are considered within the terms of reference, and as such I will be supporting this motion.

We have the potential to ensure that public education is world class. Right now Victoria has some of the lowest funded public schools in the country – not exactly a good look for Victoria the Education State, as was noted earlier. This lack of funding is creating serious barriers to addressing many of the

elements referenced in this motion. As the last few years have made clear, we as a society ask a lot of our public teachers and educators. Not only did they rise to the challenge to deliver schooling online during the pandemic, but now beyond those trying times we still expect teachers to bring their skills and their care to classes every day while the public system is not providing them with the pay and resources to thrive in their profession. There is no reason that in a wealthy country like Australia Victorian public school teachers should be purchasing school supplies out of their own pockets. There is no reason why our teachers and principals should be working 16.5 unpaid hours per week, according to some estimates. We can do better than that. We need to be doing more than just saying thanks to teachers for all of their work. We need to be offering higher wages and better conditions. Smaller classes, more support staff and less administration and teaching hours will all help teachers to have the time to do what they do best, which is teach. This will certainly benefit students too.

We ask a lot of schools and of teachers. We expect good academic results while also developing well-rounded young people. They often need to address the many complex individual needs of students, including and importantly their mental health and their wellbeing. We rely on teachers to support students through difficult periods in their lives, and public schools disproportionately enrol students with additional needs and those who experience disadvantage in our community. As we heard in the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, there is much to be done to support the mental health and wellbeing of our young people. School can provide an excellent gateway to this support and to services. We all know that there is a great need for more mental health services for young people and actually everyone in our community. I acknowledge the government has taken some steps towards providing more mental health support in schools, but I would be keen for this inquiry to hear about what else needs to be done. We all know a teenager who is having a tough time – who is struggling with school, refusing to go or having issues with friends, bullying or harmful behaviours – and I want our schools to be resourced sufficiently to fully support these kids. I have no doubt that schools are doing their best with what they have, but I would like to see them have more. Every family should have access to a high-quality, genuinely free, local public school no matter what their needs, their background or their location.

This inquiry will give us the opportunity to examine the scope of the impact that underfunding has had on educational outcomes. The burden is felt most acutely by students in Victoria's poorest suburbs. Nationally, students in Australia's most disadvantaged schools are about 10 times more likely to have their education affected by chronic teacher shortages than students in wealthier schools. When public schools cannot afford quality classroom materials, textbooks, computers and lab equipment, it has a ripple effect. Schools must ask for greater and greater contributions from parents. In the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, thousands of parents are struggling to afford uniforms and textbooks for their kids. Schools need to be provided with sufficient funding to deliver the curriculum and programs without the need to rely on family contributions. Victoria's public schools are still underfunded by billions of dollars every year, and both state and federal governments need to come to the table with a new school funding agreement that finally delivers 100 per cent of the Gonski schooling resource standard. The difference this would make to schools, students, families and teachers cannot be understated. With fully funded schools there can be more teachers, more support staff, more support for students and particularly more support for students experiencing disadvantage in our community.

I look forward to taking part in this inquiry as a member of the Legal and Social Issues Committee and working to ensure that Victorian teachers and students are provided with everything they require to allow them to thrive in our public schools. With well-paid and well-supported teachers and fully funded schools, our students will have the best opportunity to learn and grow in their school community.

Matthew BACH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:18): I am pleased to rise also in support of this motion. I want to thank Ms Bath for doing the legwork and putting together a fabulous motion, but I know she would think it remiss of me if I did not also thank colleagues from around the chamber for their input. I might take up where Mr Puglielli left off, talking about funding, and I actually think that

that addition that has been made as a result of engagement with Mr Puglielli and the Greens party is a really important one. As the house knows, I recently had the great pleasure of further engagement with the Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union, and they advocate on a whole range of fronts of course and are fierce advocates for their members. More than anything, though, they currently are pushing around funding, and when I spoke to senior staff at the Victorian branch of the AEU about what they see as the key problems as a result of Victoria's significant underfunding of our public schools, they pointed to a range of things: not solely poorer outcomes for kids who are doing it really tough – although that is part of the problem that we are seeing, as Mr Puglielli said, not enough support for students with mental health problems, not enough support for students with particular needs – but also not enough support to allow the most able students to really stretch.

We saw a shocking example of this just today. The latest Progress in International Reading Literacy Study data is out, and unsurprisingly to any of us who take great interest in education, only Victoria saw a significant backwards step – only Victoria – around the country. The government gets out of the argument around results – results which have been declining for 20 years here in Victoria – by saying, 'Look, some other Australian jurisdictions also see really bad results.' That is true, as Ms Bath said, but we should not just be happy with that low-ball approach. We should aim to be the best in the nation. There is no reason why we cannot compete with Estonia and a whole range of other countries that currently do far better than us on really important metrics.

I think the motion is correct when it points to both learning and student wellbeing. These elements are intertwined of course, so I think it is correct in that way. I want to thank also members of the crossbench for ensuring that there were some changes to section (2) which broaden out section (2).

Post pandemic, with results through the floor, with student wellbeing such a concern for all of us in this place and mental illness on the rise, it is absolutely appropriate that for the first time in a very long time we as a Parliament look into our public education system.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (14:21): I am very pleased to speak on Ms Bath's motion and to have the opportunity to talk about public education and education in general here in Victoria. Before I do I just want to put on the record and express my sympathies for the families at Exford Primary School. People will have watched reports in the last 24 hours of the horrors that emerged with the bus accident yesterday afternoon. Certainly on my personal behalf and I am sure on behalf of many in the chamber, I express our deepest sympathies to the families and the school community and particularly pay tribute to the staff who rushed to the scene to help in the immediate aftermath. I know that we all, whether we are parents or not, want to see our schoolkids get home safely at the end of every day. It is an absolute tragedy, and I think it is important to just mention it in passing because it is certainly on the minds of many Victorians here today.

It is a great opportunity to have a debate in this chamber about the important topic of our education system here in Victoria and particularly about our public education system, because there is no more important institution to the future of our state than that which is educating and teaching the next generation of Victorians, and the commitment that the government has definitely shown over the course of its two terms so far and ongoing into this third term to that public education system, to our teachers and, most importantly, to the students, who we hope are learning what they need to learn to grow into the people who will lead this state and lead our nation and frankly lead the world into the future. We know that the contributions that our Victorian kids can make and will make will reverberate around the global stage.

I am an absolute believer in the importance of education and ensuring that we have a high-quality world-class education system. In my inaugural speech I made a passing reference – I did not have enough time to go into it in a lot of detail – to the fact that we can be great supporters, and we are great supporters, of public schools while acknowledging that there is always room for us to do better. I think that is the spirit in which we on the side of the house are absolutely taking both this motion today but this topic in general – we are strong and fundamental supporters of our public education system, of

our public schools. That is why, as my colleague Mr Berger so eloquently outlined, we have spent so much time building more of them. We believe in public education so much that we have spent so much time and so much effort building more schools. There is nothing more significant I think to many of the communities right across Melbourne, in both our fringe and our growth suburbs.

But frankly, you see it in the established areas of my communities in Southern Metropolitan, where this government has built new schools and they are open and thriving. The reason that this government had to build new schools in established parts of Melbourne in order to service the great need for this coming on is because the Liberal Party under their former government, which Dr Bach in his interjections earlier spent so long saying did such great things for education in Victoria and had great educational outcomes, actually spent their time closing schools. What Labor has had to do on coming to government is build them up again. While they closed schools, we built schools, and those schools are opening and the kids in them are thriving. There are many such examples, particularly in –

A member: People are voting with their feet, because they're coming back to our public schools.

Ryan BATCHELOR: they are – parts of Southern Metropolitan, in parts of the electoral district of Albert Park, in South Melbourne. A couple of new schools opened there, and they are absolutely thriving and a credit to the public education system and the staff who work there.

So we do think that this demonstrates our government's commitment to public education is unyielding, as is our commitment to supporting the staff who work there. Certainly we understand that the job of teaching can be a challenging one. There are lots of things that we expect our teachers to do, and frankly students and our children create all sorts of challenges for them as they try to go about that task. There is an urgent need to make sure we have got more people entering the teaching profession and people staying in the teaching profession, and that is why we have recently seen education ministers around the country working together on this very important topic, an example of the great relationship you can have between a state and federal government on a matter of national significance like our teaching workforce.

We have got our teaching workforce action plan, which is being implemented. There are five priority areas across the teaching workforce action plan, including improving teacher supply so we can get more people choosing teaching as a career; strengthening initial teacher education to ensure that those teacher education programs deliver classroom-ready graduates; retention, so keeping the excellent staff that we have, enhancing career pathways, reducing unnecessary workload and freeing up our teachers to focus on the core teaching tasks and collaborating with their peers; elevating the profession, recognising and valuing the importance of what teachers bring to their students, obviously, but also to our broader communities – I think all members will have engaged with some truly fabulous schools in our communities and seen just what they bring; and then better understanding what is going to come in the future, so getting ahead of the game in terms of analysing and understanding the emerging trends that are coming to support better workforce planning. That work is underway. We are doing it in collaboration with other governments around the country, and education ministers are monitoring implementation of that plan.

The other thing I just wanted to briefly touch on was the significant investment that the government is making in not only building schools and supporting our teachers but also supporting our students, particularly the support we are providing in terms of wellbeing at school and particularly in relation to mental health. \$600 million is being spent to support and embed wellbeing and learning at all Victorian schools – to support every government secondary school in Australia to access vital mental health support services and the rollout of mental health practitioners – because we know that for some, achieving better learning outcomes often is hindered by mental health and wellbeing challenges.

Matthew Bach interjected.

Ryan BATCHELOR: One of the ways that we go about improving the learning outcomes of so many in our schools, Dr Bach, is to support their mental health and wellbeing, and that is why we do

not see this as being additional to what is required in our classrooms. We see mental health support and wellbeing as being a central part of that.

I was recently at Sandringham College in Southern Metro talking to them about the role of and the way their inclusion support staff are working with many of the students they have with a range of learning disabilities and the kinds of supports that they are providing to ensure that those students remain engaged both with the school and also in the classroom. It was really uplifting to see the tangible difference that these kinds of inclusion support programs and the staff that run them are having on ensuring that these students are getting the best out of their schooling experience so that they can get through and graduate from school with all of the associated literacy and other educational outcomes. It is very clear from both the contribution that I have been able to make briefly today and also those of my colleagues – and I am sure we will hear more over the course of the afternoon – the very significant commitment that this government has to our public education system. We are building more schools, we are supporting our teachers, we are supporting our kids, and that is everything we need to be doing to make sure that this state has the best education system.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:31): It will surprise nobody in this chamber that I support this motion to inquire into educational outcomes and in particular the impact of school closures during the pandemic. I have always believed schools should never have closed. I believe it is the job of adults to protect and nurture children, but during the pandemic it seemed like they were treated as little more than potential vectors of disease. Of course some kids managed to study during the pandemic like champions and some just got through it, but many of them got left behind both socially and educationally. I am able to say this with confidence because I have spoken to many parents. Families suffered because of a myopic focus on daily infection numbers rather than the harms being caused by school closures. Some of these harms are only becoming apparent now. I know it was a difficult period for my family, even though we were relatively well placed to manage it. I remember it was extremely hard to even run a birthday party online, so I can only imagine what it was like to manage a whole classroom. It was a horrendous time for single-parent families and others with limited computer or English literacy.

Many of you will disagree with me about whether or not the actions during the pandemic were justified, but the one thing we must all surely agree on is that the government now has a responsibility to get to the bottom of what happened and provide help to those who need it. There are many other worthwhile questions to be asked. Is the money on education being spent wisely? Are teachers being supported well enough? What can we do to help our kids get better results? These are all very worthy questions. It is our job to ensure no child is left behind and it is our job to create a better future for our children, so let us step up and do our job. I commend this motion to the house.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (14:33): I rise to support this motion by my colleague Ms Bath asking the Legal and Social Issues Committee to examine the Victorian education system across government schools. During Ms Bath's speech earlier she highlighted the fact that it has been 20 years since this Parliament did an inquiry into our education system from prep to year 12. The inquiry would look into the trends in student learning outcomes, disparities relating to geography and socio-economic disadvantage and the state of the teaching profession in Victoria, including the adequacy of existing measures to recruit, remunerate and retain teachers and the support provided by the Department of Education.

This issue is of great importance to me and to the thousands of people living in Northern Victoria, whether they personally have children of school age or not. The state of Victoria's education system affects everyone. Sadly, I have to report that according to many constituents that I speak to, our education system is struggling. Teachers and other staff do a tremendous job, often under extreme pressure. Many central and northern Victorian schools now rely heavily on casual relief and emergency teachers. I have been told that 40 teachers left Greater Shepparton at the beginning of this year and a key secondary college in Bendigo was 17 teachers short at the start of the school year. In February the *Age* reported that the principal of Echuca College had to teach year 10 English because

of staff shortages – just one teacher calling in sick left the school in a tough situation. At the time the Victorian Principals Association said the workforce shortage extended to public, Catholic and private schools and that the shortage was particularly bad in regional areas.

According to research from Federation University, teachers are leaving the profession in droves, citing salary, lack of respect, intensification of workload, assessments, parent issues and the full-on demands of teaching leading to burnout, particularly after the COVID pandemic. A recent survey of over 4000 teachers by the Black Dog Institute shows that 70 per cent of teachers report unmanageable workloads and half are considering quitting in the next 12 months. One in four were teaching a subject they were not trained or qualified to teach. Teachers are suffering stress, depression and anxiety at four times the rate of the general population.

In addition to the extreme workload faced by teachers, I have spoken with parents, teachers and students, and many young people are struggling with mental health and disengagement. The inquiry would consider the current state of student wellbeing in Victoria, including the impact of the state government's interventions following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a parent of three kids, I understand what it was like to juggle kids doing school from home.

The inquiry will also provide an opportunity to do the research and examine best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings used to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing. I am pleased to see that La Trobe University is soon going to be hosting roundtable discussions in Albury–Wodonga and Shepparton to look at education pathways, because there is a significant gap between regional Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne.

The terms of reference for this inquiry also include school funding adequacy. This is an important issue, and I hope that we will see additional funding for education in the coming state budget. As my colleague the Shadow Minister for Education Matt Bach has pointed out, this government spends the least of any Australian government on education, while Victorian parents pay the most, over \$100,000 for one child from prep to year 12. Across Northern Victoria families are clearly paying more, but they are getting less as our schools are under pressure. Many teachers are leaving the workforce due to stress, exhaustion and burnout. Outdoor recreational activities and educational opportunities are being cancelled due to the government's ongoing lack of funding for schools. Our teachers carry a heavy administrative burden and face endless hours of paperwork and duplication.

I want to acknowledge the valued contribution that teachers make. I am sure most of us in this chamber would be able to recall an encouraging word from a teacher. My mum was a teacher, and I saw her dedication and commitment to improving the lives of her students. To be in a profession where you can teach members of the same family across generations and see young people grow up is a unique privilege. I strongly urge the house to support this motion so that we may have a full inquiry into the state of education in Victoria at this present time.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:38): I rise to speak on motion 16 in Ms Bath's name, which is effectively a referral motion to the Legal and Social Issues Committee for an inquiry into the Victorian education system across government schools. I thank Ms Bath for bringing this motion to the house. It is an important issue, but there are some things that I wish to get on the record in regard to it. I have had the benefit of listening to speakers in the chamber today, and in regard to this debate there are a number of things that I must say. I do find it curious that we are only focusing on government schools, and I do often think that when we have a motion such as this, the political motivations are really about how much we can degrade or run down the government school system, the system that really is the most welcoming and inclusive public school system in Victoria and one that welcomes all comers and supports all children no matter what their socio-economic background or status is – accommodates and supports them like no other system.

I just want to address the issue that was raised by Mr Puglielli in regard to funding. The government's total recurrent expenditure for government schools grew by over 39 per cent between 2014–15 and

2020–21 – a bigger increase than any other jurisdiction in Australia. The government has made significant investments in our teachers, in student health and wellbeing and in universal access to high-quality VET.

I just want to say – and I will come back to mental health again in a moment – in regard to mental health Victorians are a resilient population. Our government has done so much work to support students. When I was listening to Dr Bach's contribution, what he was effectively saying is it is all about the results, but when you send a child to school you educate the whole child. It is not just about the results, because if you support a child and they have their needs met, whether they are social or emotional – whatever needs they have – they will actually learn well. So there is a bit of a disconnect, and I find it quite surprising given Dr Bach's background. But again, he has never set foot in a public school as a teacher; he has only ever taught in the private system. And I know, as someone who is proudly public school educated – and so are my children – that, making a choice as a parent, I would only ever send my children to the public and government school system because I want them to learn in a secular, inclusive learning place that is fit for their needs and supports their needs.

It is something we find all too often in this chamber whenever we talk about public education: those opposite want to attack it, deride it and degrade it at every turn. We know it is in their DNA, because Kennett shut over 300 schools. We hear those opposite talk about students, but how many students were displaced when they shut schools? Students could not attend their local schools. They were told, 'Yes, well, you can go and attend this school, or go and attend the private school down the road.' Parents could not afford that. There was displacement. They were forced to travel, which caused additional expense and hardship. I know it only too well as someone who campaigned on public school issues myself before I entered Parliament. For those opposite to try and say they have got some kind of credibility in this space is completely ridiculous.

Let me just return to results for a moment. Victorian students have achieved great results and some of the highest NAPLAN results in the country, ranking first or second in eight out of 10 domains at the primary level. Year 3 students scored their best ever mean reading results, yet again proving that they are the best readers in the country. There have been outstanding improvements in the results of many schools across the state, and that is why we continue to be Australia's Education State.

It was very disappointing to hear Dr Bach in his latest thing on *Sky News*, where he really insulted parents, teachers and students. It was really disappointing. I mean, Dr Bach puts himself forward as the alternative education minister yet insults students, teachers and parents at every turn. This is the sort of thing that came out of Dr Bach: 'Censors cleansing our kids' bookshelves are creating a generation of illiterate children.' Oh, my goodness. And I have just spoken on the results that kids have achieved. I do not know – we must be living in an alternative universe, but anyway. The opposition spokesperson for education Dr Bach compared Victorian students to cave children in one of his recent diatribes on *Sky News*. I read that article – it talks about the analysis of a couple of books that Dr Bach focused on. I think some of the books were *The Wild Washerwomen*, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* –

Jacinta Ermacora: That's a great book.

Sonja TERPSTRA: they are great books – *Shoo!* and *Madeline*. Some of the things I will not repeat. I do not know whether there was some partaking of psychoactive substances there, because it was quite the wild ride. When I read some of these things, I just thought: wow, if any member of Parliament on the government benches had said some of the things that he said in that article, I am sure it would have been all over the *Herald Sun*. For weeks and weeks it would have been dined out on. But of course this article just kind of went through to the keeper with barely a whimper. I just do not understand how Dr Bach can put himself forward as the alternative education minister but insult children, parents and teachers at every turn.

Again, I think there was another contribution here earlier saying this is one of the most expensive systems and parents are paying. This government has done more for parents on this –

Members interjecting.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Absolutely. There are funds for camps. There are funds for uniforms. All these things are designed to address any cost-of-living challenges, and I know this government in terms of policy has done more to address any inequities that were left by those opposite in the policy frame for education. For example, we have tightened up the parent payments policy so that schools cannot charge for things that are not essential. That helps parents make sure that if they have got a child – sometimes families have four or five children – and they have got to send them to school with a uniform, we help with the cost of that. We help with all of those sorts of things, and we have made sure that schools cannot charge for things that are not essential. So over here on the government benches we want to make sure that parents can send their kids to good local, publicly funded government schools, because every public school in Victoria is a great state school.

So again, parents, these insults have not stopped there. He compared Victorian parents via his news. He issued mocking instructions to parents to:

... throw an i-Pad at your children and go back to watching Married At First Sight ...

Wow, what is that about? How is that helpful? Then on mental health Dr Bach continued. The mental health of some of our students is a serious concern, but he said it is ‘not the Battle of the Somme’. What a disgraceful and outdated stigma of mental health the member is perpetuating. This is atrocious.

Melina Bath: On a point of order, Deputy President, there has been wideranging debate on this topic, and education should be the focus of this, but attacking another member of this house and misquoting is not part of the debate, and I ask the member to come back to the debate.

Sonja TERPSTRA: On the point of order, Deputy President, I reject what Ms Bath has said. It is a direct quote of what Dr Bach –

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Sorry, you are debating the point of order.

Sonja TERPSTRA: No, I am explaining.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: You are debating the point of order.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Ms Bath also had the same opportunity to explain her point of order. I am being directly relevant to the motion because Dr Bach raised these points in his contribution.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: I would just bring the member back to the motion as it is written rather than taking up other items.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Again, I will talk about the mental health aspects that were raised in the motion because again this is a wideranging inquiry that is only looking into our public school system. I am sceptical of the motivation behind bringing this motion, because it will be an attack job and a hit job on our public school system. On the back of the transformational Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System, the Labor government has invested more than \$600 million into mental health in schools. Not only that, we have got the doctors in schools program as well, so we have delivered funding for qualified medical practitioners in all government secondary and specialist schools across the state. We continue to roll out our mental health in primary schools program as well as evidence-based mental health training and funding.

So we do not dismiss the concerns of students and parents. We do not ignore them. We do not use them to drum up a reputation fit for right-wing shock jocks. This is what is absolutely atrocious about this: it is whipping up fear and loathing for no good purpose and continuing on with making people concerned. What we need to make sure of is that our schools, our public school systems, are properly supported and funded. That is something those opposite will never do, because they hate anything with

the word 'public' in it. They hate anything with the word public, and Dr Bach should be ashamed of his contribution not only in regard to this motion but in regard to comments that he has made, on the record, publicly, in regard to the public school system.

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (14:48): I might try and set a different tone for my contribution in this matter. I come to this as someone who spent 10 years teaching. I have been a head of department, a careers coordinator and a mentor for our younger teachers as well. I have been responsible for delivering curriculum in a 7 to 12 context in the humanities area more generally, and I have had to match that against the standards of the curriculum set out in the public system. I also keep in touch with a broad range of teachers and learning support officers as well, who have taught in a number of different contexts; I speak to them regularly. I guess broadly speaking I do think it is important to conduct an inquiry into our education system. I will outline my reasons in a second, but I will just say that this is not an opportunity for us to demonise teachers. This is a fact-finding mission. It is an opportunity to listen to the experiences of teachers, of learning support officers, of families and of professionals – because this is one of the most noble professions that I have had the honour of working in.

In relation to the concerns about learning outcomes, I guess we have sort of got to think about: what learning outcome do we want? Is a job or an apprenticeship? Is it just measured as an ATAR result? Is it the attainment of skills and knowledge or experiences? We need to consider what outcomes we actually want from an education and then decide how we best measure them. One of the common measures that is used is the NAPLAN data, which, as some may know, measures at years 3, 5, 7 and 9, and it looks primarily at literacy and numeracy. That is often heavily used as one indicator of success or otherwise, but I do not think it should be the sole indicator to talk about the success or otherwise of the system. In my experience the biggest challenge is in early secondary years, and it particularly relates to year 7, 8 and 9 boys and their literacy. I have seen firsthand that the standards over the last 10 years and the ability of young men in particular to have legible handwriting, reading and auditory skills – listening – probably have diminished to an extent that you could put them back two or three years, and it is a big challenge. So that seems to be one aspect that this inquiry could look into which may actually result in positive yields. You could almost argue that that in itself could be an inquiry, to be honest.

I want to talk about the state of the teaching profession in Victoria, and it is an interesting matter. Research by John Hattie, who some might know is a well-renowned researcher and academic and has been involved in this area for a long period of time, suggests the two most significant factors that impact education. The first one is teacher quality. The second one is what is known as shared teacher efficacy, and that basically means teachers working together in a collaborative way for the benefit of student outcomes. Both of these factors revolve around the teacher, their knowledge, their capability and the practice of teachers in the work that they do, so in terms of supporting teachers to be the best that they can possibly be, what options are available? What could we actually think about?

Firstly, we can look at the robustness of the training and qualifications teachers need to attain in order to qualify as a teacher and how that actually works. What goes into the input of a teacher to make them a great teacher? Secondly, VIT, which is the Victorian Institute of Teaching, and other bodies do run professional development. Anyone who has attended a teacher PD, as I have, would know that they are not always the most exciting experiences to sit in. They could be looked at to enhance the teacher experience, to really home in on the skills that might be needed to improve teacher practice. Thirdly, and this is a bit of a different idea altogether, we could look at teaching almost as an apprenticeship model, rather than a university model where you do units and study like that. It would be a much more hands-on experience. So that is another idea that could be considered as part of this inquiry.

The third point that I want to talk about is the current state of student wellbeing in Victoria, and this has got to be one of the most significant areas where students and teachers probably need support. In the past a teacher was just seen as a teacher, as an educator and imparter of knowledge, but we know that in the modern education system they are so much more. In recent years teachers have also

morphed into what I would call quasi welfare workers, and there is a lot of work that goes into that and a lot of skills which probably would not be traditionally taught in a strictly teaching discipline course. I know from my own experience that it was challenging. Lockdowns in particular caused real issues. Sometimes there was flexibility, but at other times there were real challenges engaging young people in their own learning.

One of the biggest challenges was to create a consistent structured day that young people could revolve around, and I know from experience young people really love structure and consistency because it gives them pattern and routine. From my own experience I know that there were some students that thrived. You could call these students self-starters. But there were others that really found it challenging. However, some of these students, even those self-starters, really suffered anxiety as well because they lacked the normal structure there would be in a normal school day. Many who did not have the teacher-to-teacher face time suffered, and this was partially due to the lack of social interaction but also due to the fact that being in front of a teacher just was not there. Quite often these students learned either in a visual or in an auditory sort of manner, and I had to diversify classroom teaching practices many times. You have to cater for different needs in a classroom, and it made it really difficult to do that in a lockdown situation. These challenges associated with engaging students are difficult. Lockdowns certainly amplified that impact, and I worry that probably in the next couple of years we will see the lag impact of that come out in various forms of measurements and results.

The last thing I want to talk about is the administrative burden on teachers, and this is something that I certainly had a lot to do with as a head of department. I can tell you how frustrating it is if anyone has ever had to go on an excursion. Now, I do acknowledge that sometimes there is paperwork in place for good reason, but remember I had to complete a 28-page form, which is known as a risk assessment form, to go on excursions. It did not matter if I was taking six kids down the street to go to an Anzac Day service or I was taking a whole year level out to Koyal Castle, which I have had to do in the past; there was a standard template that had to be done, and the amount of time it took to fill that form out took me away from the important work of teaching. My experience is not unique; many teachers have been burdened by those sorts of imposts on their time. Imagine if those imposts could be alleviated in some way. This is some of the important work that the inquiry could look into in order to enhance the way that we have our teachers focusing on teaching. Technology could help alleviate the pressure on teachers; however, I think the regulation around what teachers actually do in their job needs to change as well. Teachers perhaps should not be, necessarily, risk assessors, pen pushers and subject to filling out form after form. Let us get teachers to be freed up away from that stuff so that they can actually focus on what they are paid to be doing, which is teaching.

I encourage the chamber to support this motion. We must remember this is an inquiry. It is an opportunity for the education sector to be heard. It is also an opportunity to think about how we as members of this chamber can make a difference to the young people and their future, because really that is what education is all about. It is about helping our younger people so they can thrive and have the best possible future they can.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (14:57): I am rising today in support of Ms Bath's education motion for an inquiry reference to the Legislative Council's Legal and Social Issues Committee. As the parent of two school-aged children that are currently being educated in the state system, I have genuine concerns as a parent and representative to my constituents in the Northern Victoria Region, and this is why I am supporting Ms Bath's motion.

My youngest child started prep in 2020 when all of the COVID lockdowns started. This has impacted his vital early education to the point where his basic education in reading and writing was delayed so much that he has been in school tutoring now for over 12 months to catch up. Unfortunately a lot of parents are not in the same situation as I am, and they cannot afford the time or costs involved for their children to catch up to the education standards they need to be at. We need this inquiry to source the vital data and information needed to boost our failing education system. I say 'failing' because only recently I participated in my daughter's year 7 parent-teacher interviews, and it was there that I

discovered that her entire year 7 grade at the high school was at a year 2 to 3 spelling level. That was very alarming. We are letting our children down by continuing with the education system that we have. I was disgusted to hear that all of this year 7 class was at this level. That they are four to five years delayed in a student's necessary skill set is really impacting their academic development. Spelling is a vital basic for the academic development of our young Victorian population, and it is alarming to see that they are so delayed.

I am going to stand here and support this motion because I think as a Victorian government we do need to reassess our education system, and the vital data and information that could come from this inquiry may help us better equip our young Victorians and young families. I am going to keep it really short, because we are running out of time.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (15:00): I speak on the referral motion to the Legal and Social Issues Committee on the Victorian education system. I am concerned, with extensive federal reviews and detailed existing data collection in the education space coupled with the Victorian government's record, being the Education State, and further work underway in Victoria, that any further information via the referral will provide either no new insights or cost taxpayers of Victoria more money than the value provided. In reading the motion I am concerned that much of the information requested to be investigated is already available in the public realm. If this motion is passed, the outputs of the proposed inquiry are likely to duplicate existing information or at best validate the Andrews government's existing education strategy.

The other concern I have is that this kind of motion runs down the state government education system a little bit. The exact opposite is the case when it comes to the work and commitment of this government. Since coming to government in 2014 the Andrews Labor government has made record investments in Victorian schools. In fact the Andrews Labor government's very first budget invested \$4 billion in Victoria's education and skills system, representing the single biggest boost to education funding in Victoria's history.

Let us contrast that with the previous public record of the Liberal state government. Here I quote our Premier Daniel Andrews in a press release on 2 April 2016, where he said:

Federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham has hung his Victorian Liberal colleagues out to dry today by confirming the former Liberal State Government's cuts to Victorian government schools.

The Premier went on to quote from the *Australian* on the same day:

The Commonwealth funding to Victorian schools rose by 22.2 per cent but the Victorian funding to the same schools declined by 7.1 per cent.

In 2016 the Andrews Labor government directly released policies to address *The State of Victoria's Children Report 2013–14*, which highlighted the need to reduce the impact of disadvantage on children and young people's education. This publicly released report led to a massive boost to needs-based funding and investment in early childhood education and maternal and child health. Breaking the cycle of disadvantage became a strong focus of the government's investment programs. In contrast to the Liberals' appalling record on state education, the Andrews government has strengthened the regulation of school teaching qualifications to ensure kids receive high-quality teachers and high-quality education. Continuing education programs for school and early childhood teachers have been established as well as processes for providers to seek endorsement of postgraduate continuing education programs.

We have much to be proud of on this side of the chamber when it comes to education. I am particularly proud of the key election commitment this government made to ensure students with disabilities get the same chances as other students. I conclude there.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (15:03): It gives me great pleasure to rise here today to support this wonderful motion by my colleague Melina Bath, and I would just like to say that if the

government have nothing to hide about the state of education in our government schools then they should hide nothing.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (15:04): I thank all members for the broad-ranging debate today, and I would like to just recap some of the comments. I have been listening very intently to the pros and cons of this inquiry. Mr Berger opened the account, certainly mentioning Mr Kennett. That was one from the Andrews government. He said that there is already an internal review and that we do not need this. I think that the public – the parents, students and principals that I have spoken to – actually feel that they do need to unpack the issues around student outcomes and indeed teacher investment, teacher training, teacher retention and also securing the longevity, health and wellbeing of our principals, because we know the importance of good leadership there.

I thank Mr Puglielli very much for working with me on shaping, with Dr Bach, the nuance in this motion and putting number (6) in. I think that was very wise. He certainly spoke about the need to remove some of the administrative burden on teachers so they can do what teachers do best, which is teaching. I thank him for his contribution. Dr Bach as always was succinct, articulate and on the money, and he will be on this inquiry. He is a member of this committee, so he will certainly add a great deal of depth to that.

Mr Batchelor spoke about supports in public schools and went on to talk about the big build within public schools that the Andrews government has produced over recent times. It is important to build schools, but it is also important to be able to put quality teachers in front of classes. I think he was talking about students thriving. Well, from the metrics we are seeing from international studies and from localised studies, we are hearing different things. We need to invest both in our teachers and in that quality of education.

I thank Mr Limbrick for saying that he will support this, and his interests certainly lie around the COVID impact on student mental health and wellbeing and the long lag time and what will happen. This will give us an opportunity to see that. I thank Ms Broad for her contribution. As usual, she has shown the most articulate understanding as the daughter of a teacher in the public sector.

Georgie Crozier: We've got a few teachers this side.

Melina BATH: We do indeed have a few teachers, Ms Crozier. One thing that she pointed out which is very important I think – that one in four teachers are teaching outside their qualifications. That happens in small schools, but it is not an advantage. It is actually quite a stress on those teachers. They are having to scramble. It adds to their workload and I am sure concern from time to time, and also that quality – does that filter down to the classroom? It is a concern. How then can we improve the flow of teachers into our schools?

Ms Terpstra is always very entertaining. She also raised Mr Kennett, and I think she raises Mr Kennett every time. She does not like what we are saying on this side. I find that a line of attack is the best line of defence on occasion, but I am always interested to hear her comments. Mr McCracken showed what a quality person we have here as a former teacher and leading hand. I think he is on this committee, so if this gets up, he will add great insight and nuance and show the importance of integrity of the issue at hand, not the politics at play. So I really hope we can get him to elucidate his experiences and draw out our witnesses. Ms Tyrrell, thank you very much for your contribution. Hers was about sharing her own personal experiences as a parent of small children who are having to make up ground post the pandemic experience and post learning from home. Ms Ermacora kept to task on the government standard.

I think this inquiry gives us a great opportunity to really serve our students but also investigate the positive ways that we can invest in our teachers so that they can have longevity in a very honourable and important profession and also serve the broader community well into the future.

Motion agreed to.

*Business of the house***Orders of the day**

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (15:10): I move:

That the consideration of order of the day, general business, 2, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

*Motions***RSL sub-branch poker machine entitlements**

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (15:10): I move:

That this house:

- (1) recognises the vital role of Victoria's Returned and Services League (RSL) sub-branches in supporting local communities and veterans;
- (2) supports RSL sub-branches that use less than their full poker machine entitlements in their venues;
- (3) acknowledges that community sub-branches that are unable to use these entitlements due to local government restrictions should not be penalised by the government;
- (4) notes that the Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation and the Department of Justice and Community Safety have advised Glenroy RSL sub-branch to pay over \$470,000 for unwanted poker machine entitlements which they cannot use;
- (5) further recognises that similar situations confront other community sub-branches including:
 - (a) Darebin RSL sub-branch;
 - (b) Pascoe Vale RSL sub-branch;
 - (c) Altona RSL sub-branch;
 - (d) Caulfield RSL sub-branch;
 - (e) Cheltenham RSL sub-branch;
 - (f) St Kilda Football Club;
- (6) further acknowledges that chasing RSLs to pay for unwanted poker machine entitlements shows the government is not serious when it comes to tackling gambling addiction and is addicted to pokies revenue;
- (7) calls on the government to take action by:
 - (a) allowing community sub-branches like the Glenroy RSL and others to forfeit their pokies entitlements without financial penalty;
 - (b) ending the cash grab against RSL sub-branches, letting them get back to their important role in their community of supporting local organisations and veterans; and
 - (c) finding ways to rein in their reckless spending agenda instead of at the expense of community RSL sub-branches.

Well, it is great to have a win here on this side of the chamber. We saw yesterday the Andrews government has made a decision to abandon its heartless pursuit of RSL clubs over gaming machine entitlements they could not legally use, and I say that that is well overdue. Labor's mean-spirited approach caused heartache and financial losses for community clubs just trying to do the right thing and support our veterans and support their local communities.

The worst example of this was in the Glenroy RSL in my electorate of Northern Metropolitan Region. The sub-branch was pursued by Labor for payment of entitlements, which the local council and the Supreme Court prohibited them from using. This situation should never have eventuated – Labor's pursuit of community clubs, mercilessly, for payments they could not even make for using gaming machines they could not even use. Labor would no doubt have hoped this issue would just go away. With a little bit of pressure in this place, in the Parliament, and in the media, the very thin skinned Daniel Andrews has rolled over.

The government now needs to provide full details of the surrender scheme to ensure there are no unnecessary delays to its implementation. Make no doubt about it: the government has been dragged kicking and screaming to this position. The press release put out by the minister yesterday demonstrates how effective advocacy from the Liberals and Nationals coalition can achieve commonsense outcomes for the community. The government should now apologise to the RSL for years of threatening legal letters and correspondence attempting to shake down the RSL for pokies they could not even use. The motion reads as follows:

That this house:

- (1) recognises the vital role of Victoria's Returned and Services League (RSL) sub-branches in supporting local communities and veterans;
- (2) supports RSL sub-branches that use less than their full poker machine entitlements in their venues;
- (3) acknowledges that community sub-branches that are unable to use these entitlements due to local government restrictions should not be penalised by the government;
- (4) notes that the Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation and the Department of Justice and Community Safety have advised Glenroy RSL sub-branch to pay over \$470,000 for unwanted poker machine entitlements which they cannot use;
- (5) further recognises that similar situations confront other community sub-branches including:
 - (a) Darebin RSL sub-branch;
 - (b) Pascoe Vale RSL sub-branch;
 - (c) Altona RSL sub-branch;
 - (d) Caulfield RSL sub-branch;
 - (e) Cheltenham RSL sub-branch;
 - (f) St Kilda Football Club;
- (6) further acknowledges that chasing RSLs to pay for unwanted poker machine entitlements shows the government is not serious when it comes to tackling gambling addiction and is addicted to pokies revenue;
- (7) calls on the government to take action by:
 - (a) allowing community sub-branches like the Glenroy RSL and others to forfeit their pokies entitlements without financial penalty;
 - (b) ending the cash grab against RSL sub-branches, letting them get back to their important role in their community of supporting local organisations and veterans –

it is funny this motion has come here today, that clause 7(b) is almost word for word what was in the minister's media release; funny, that –

and

- (c) finding ways to rein in their reckless spending agenda instead of at the expense of community RSL sub-branches.

A lot of that has now happened, which is great.

I would like to take the house back to the start of this sorry saga. In 2015 the Glenroy RSL decided to obtain 10 additional pokies entitlements on top of the 40 they already had, which was still well under the average. This received approval from the gaming commission. However, in 2016–17 Moreland City Council took the RSL to VCAT. The RSL won at VCAT, and the council then decided to appeal that decision to the Supreme Court, where it was sent back to VCAT and then rejected. So the RSL have been in the position where the department and the minister, Melissa Horne, have advised the RSL they had to pay \$470,000 for the 10 pokies entitlements they cannot even use, and they have already had to cop around \$300,000 in legal fees. Now, I understand the government is surrendering the entitlements, but that is \$300,000 that could have gone to community organisations which this RSL supports – community organisations such as Rotary, Probus, Lions Club, Glenroy Specialist School, Penola Saints Netball Club, Pascoe Vale Girls College and many more, community

organisations that are doing it tough in the northern suburbs, are worthy of support and do receive support from this community-based RSL sub-branch.

Even on 27 January this year the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission wrote to the RSL in an aggressive letter advising them to ‘use it or lose it’. The commission said, ‘Forfeiture is automatic and non-negotiable,’ yet we see the government backflipped on that. It is not quite non-negotiable. I think they will even admit that. The commission said it has ‘no discretion to vary forfeiture, nor is there recourse to appeal’ and ‘Upon forfeiture, the full outstanding entitlement repayment amount will become immediately due and payable.’

As I said, the Glenroy RSL is not a big one, but it does play an important role in supporting veterans and supporting the local community around them. Four RSL sub-branches – Altona, Darebin, Glenroy and Pascoe Vale – are all facing similar situations, with the state government shaking them down for a total liability in excess of \$2 million for pokie machines they cannot even use and no longer want. It is a heartbreaking situation that puts these RSLs in a very difficult financial position and forces them to spend a lot of money – hundreds of thousands of dollars – in legal fees. It is funny, this backflip. It has come from the Parliament and a bit of pressure – because he went out there. He goes to press conferences and he says, when he is asked about gambling reform:

For those for whom there is a real problem, a wicked problem, we have to support them, and we always have, and that’s why it’s highly regulated and that’s why we have made many changes.

We called out the Premier’s comments as hollow, because it is quite clear through this saga that Daniel Andrews is addicted to pokies and pokies revenue at the expense of the RSL and veterans. The Premier likes to make virtuous comments to the media, but behind closed doors he is shaking down small community RSLs for hundreds of thousands of dollars for poker machines they cannot even use and no longer want. As Ken White, the president of the Glenroy RSL, said, the government ought to have a heart and make the right decision:

We are a small community RSL. Almost half-a-million dollars is a big hit to us and will mean that we will be unable to spend more on veterans support and will make it harder for us to continue to provide significant financial support to local community organisations and schools as we have done in the past.

These comments appeared in the *Herald Sun* on 26 April, and it is important to note that that was on 26 April because it was only on 27 April that – note the date, the day after – the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission wrote a letter demanding the RSL pay and also advising them of an immediate 10 per cent compound interest unless the due amount is paid. It is funny, the date there. We see Operation Daintree talk about the tentacles of this Labor government and we know what happens, so it is quite curious that the RSL would receive a letter the very next day demanding them to pay. The very next day after the government has been shamed in the media they receive a letter demanding them to pay up for poker machine entitlements they cannot even use.

I do not know what has happened there. It is quite curious that that is what they have received, and to have such aggressive letters from a government organisation advising them to ‘use it or lose it’. The very next day, after they are shamed in the *Herald Sun*, to receive a letter to pay up or pay 10 per cent compounding interest daily is just shameful.

Anti-gambling campaigner Tim Costello said Labor, the Premier and his government had a ‘massive gambling problem’.

“When clubs are trying to do the right thing by their community, for the Andrews government to stand in their way is appalling ...

‘They should be applauded for trying to get rid of them, not obstructed

‘Most of the pokies are in Labor electorates, the poorest postcodes, and when someone seeks to do the right thing by their community they are knocked back.’

The *Herald Sun* also reported there was:

... support among Labor MPs to allow the clubs to forfeit their licences for minimal cost.

There you go, there are some Labor MPs who quietly have a voice but do not publicly have a voice. Where was the Labor member from Broadmeadows talking in the chamber about it? Where is the Labor member for Pascoe Vale talking about it? They have not said one thing about the Glenroy RSL. They are happy to go there. They need to represent their communities.

But we also know that the *Herald Sun* revealed that:

... efforts to reach a compromise have been stonewalled by senior government figures and it is feared the state won't back down because it cannot afford to lose revenue ...

I will note Melissa Horne never responded to my adjournment speech about this in March. Maybe that is when the wheels got in motion on this. Maybe she was on the side of the angels on this.

Labor pretend they are a really tight ship, that they are a really tight, unified team. They like to think that we do not know the history behind this. They think that we and the industry were not aware that the minister had previously attempted to bring about this change through cabinet but was stonewalled by the Labor leadership, and I think it really goes to show the character of this government, that they would put financial revenue for themselves, for the government, before RSLs trying to support their veterans and their community. When you call the Premier out for his obvious hypocrisy, he folds. But it was not for meritorious reasons, the RSLs and their community, it was a decision made to save face for the Premier.

Another case I will speak about is my pride and joy, my AFL team, the St Kilda Football Club, who are one of several pokies venues who want to leave the industry despite the money to be made. But government sources say they cannot push to hand back licences, and it has fallen on deaf ears with Premier Daniel Andrews, with clubs already locked into a 20-year pokies deal from 2018.

Alliance for Gambling Reform spokesman Tim Costello has lashed the Premier, saying: 'Daniel Andrews is holding these clubs back from doing the right thing, and is putting people's welfare at risk.

'The motto is to "gamble responsibly" but the state government needs to be responsible as well and reduce harm.

'Victorians are sick of the pokies and if the venues want to (quit), what is stopping the Premier from assisting?

...

Senior figures within the club are uncomfortable about a pokies venue sitting next to the Danny Frawley Centre for Health and Wellbeing, which aims to tackle mental health problems in the community.

Clubs and venues wanting to escape pokies have launched a petition behind the scenes, but have so far declined to publicly campaign for change.

I actually had the opportunity to visit the renovated centre at Moorabbin recently. I am a member of the parliamentary friends of the St Kilda Football Club. It is really a place that now promotes health and wellbeing. It promotes mental health support for the club and mental health support and wellbeing support for the community, which they should be able to do. The St Kilda Football Club is a great club. They are a socially responsible, forward-thinking club, and they want to do their part to support the community, to support the Moorabbin community, to support the wider community and the football community and to be able to have a centre for health and wellbeing that does not have pokies in it. I think if they want to do that, the government should be doing everything possible to assist them in making that happen, whether it be through a buyback or transferring it to another site. But as has been reported, all attempts have fallen on deaf ears.

I want to take this opportunity to discuss gambling harm in my own electorate, particularly the City of Hume. Locals lost more than \$100 million on the pokies in Hume. The latest data has revealed the extraordinary impact that gambling has had on one of Victoria's most disadvantaged areas. The Hume area recorded an annual loss of \$104 million to electronic gaming machines in 2022, a 45 per cent increase from the 2021 amount. The report noted that Hume ranked as the fifth-highest local

government area of the state's 79 LGAs for electronic gaming machine losses in 2022. Mayor Joseph Haweil said:

This is a predatory and evil industry, it targets those areas that are the lowest socio-economic areas and it plays on people's aspirations and desires to inflict harm wherever it goes.

They are comments from a paid-up member of the Labor Party. I think this sentiment is likely echoed throughout the Labor Party's membership, yet you have got a government that is doing everything possible to hang on by tooth and nail to pokies revenue, even when there are participants willing to partner with them to get out. I think it shows the character of the government. We seemingly have a Labor Premier and a Treasurer that are locking RSLs into pokies and locking clubs into pokies, even ones that no longer want them. Look at all these areas. Go up to Broadmeadows, go up to Donnybrook: people are really doing it tough, and with the cyclical nature of addiction and the effect it has on families, I think it shows a Premier who has forgotten who his base is and who has forgotten who he represents.

There is currently really no-one sticking up for those people in working-class areas that would like to see the government take action in this place or that would like to see the government partner with clubs that are willing participants to get out of pokies or transfer their pokies out to another area or buy back their pokies. This is the consequence of Labor's reckless spending agenda. We are now paying \$10 million a day just to service the debt. You have got a Premier and a Treasurer that are just hanging on to pokies revenue at the expense of family units and at the expense of people's mortgages – you have got to think. You have got a Labor government that is just abandoning these communities. They are ignoring the pleas of the community, they are ignoring the pleas of experts and they are ignoring the pleas of advocacy groups.

You have got to ask why the Glenroy RSL in particular had to go through all of this pain and had to go through \$300,000 in legal fees. I was just speaking to Ken White recently. It has taken an enormous toll on the president of the RSL sub-branch, on the sub-branch itself and on the staff to have to go through this process, to have to bring in lawyers, to have to battle with the government every day, to receive threatening letters from the gaming commission and to receive letters back and forth from the minister's office stonewalling every attempt they made at some sort of mediation. It should be Labor heartland. And they have been dealing with this since 2015. They have dealt with Frank McGuire and they have dealt with the new member, and it only got resolved when a bit of pressure was on. I think this house has a moral obligation to send a strong message to the government to have a heart. I am glad they have finally backed down, but this house should support this motion.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:30): I do rise to speak on this perhaps rather curious motion as proposed by Mr Mulholland. The first thing to say of course is that it is very true that RSLs provide a vital service to veterans, families and a whole range of other local communities right across this state. Many sub-branches do struggle financially for various reasons, including those specific to the sub-branch and community but also in a broader sense. Many sub-branches do rely on poker machines as a revenue stream source, and that relationship, as with any venue that receives gambling revenue, is something that should be approached with consideration by the organisation itself and of course from a regulatory standpoint from us here at a state level as well as at other levels.

This motion calls on the government to allow RSLs to forfeit their pokies entitlements without financial penalty. I was going to say that I have good news for Mr Mulholland: we are already doing it. It turns out Mr Mulholland has good news for himself: we are already doing it. He acknowledges that this Andrews Labor government is taking action to address this issue. So it is curious to see the motion be put forward today. As much as I am grateful for acknowledging the work that this government is doing on this issue, and I appreciate that from Mr Mulholland, I am curious to see he is calling for us to do something which we are already doing. In fact the work on this has been underway for months. We have already gazetted rules to allow clubs and RSLs to get rid of their entitlements

without a financial penalty. We have already commenced engagement with RSL Victoria and Community Clubs Victoria on these measures.

I am happy to let Mr Mulholland enjoy his moment in the sun to take some credit for this. I am not sure particularly that his remarks have been high on the minds of the gambling minister or the Premier, though I am sure it is very important to recognise all members of this chamber for their contributions, and I do acknowledge your advocacy, Mr Mulholland. It is fair to say, though, that this government has already been well and truly engaged on this issue. We are delivering outcomes already, which is really good to see, and much more will come to fruition.

It is obviously curious that this motion would be put. Perhaps if we were to be a little bit less charitable, we might say that those opposite have not been particularly engaged the last few weeks, particularly with the in-or-out game with Mrs Deeming. Apparently, we were told, there was to be no compromise and that she must be expelled from the party – not because of her anti-trans views but because of her association with Nazis.

Evan Mulholland: On a point of order, Acting President, the member is not being relevant to the motion.

Michael GALEA: On the point of order, Acting President, in the opening remarks Mr Mulholland referred to government unity and to that of a tight ship. That is relevant to what he was discussing.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Bev McArthur): Mr Galea, could you just come back to the motion, please.

Michael GALEA: With pleasure, Acting President. So it is right that this government, which is a tight ship as Mr Mulholland says, will ensure that there are appropriate regulations around gaming in all local venues, including poker machines in RSLs. Harm minimisation should be and is at the heart of these considerations, and that is why our clubs and RSLs are supported by this measure. On 1 January 2022 this government established the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission, providing for stronger, more focused regulation of Victoria's gambling industry. It has oversight of all gambling and gaming activities within Victoria, from pubs and clubs through to the casino. The VGCCC is required to undertake activities to minimise gambling harm, and harm minimisation considerations are central to its work. The \$153 million in funding to the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation over four years provided in the 2019–20 state budget represents the nation's largest commitment to addressing gambling harm. This government has already implemented a wide range of reforms to minimise gambling harm from the state's poker machines and is implementing all of the recommendations from the Royal Commission into the Casino Operator and Licence as well.

I would also like to note, and this might be of interest to Mr Mulholland, that the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee will very shortly be holding an own-motion inquiry into gambling in Victoria. He may have received an email, as other members may have this week as well, to notify him of this taking place, which is very exciting to see. It is a very important thing that we do look at. As members of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee – I believe, Acting President McArthur, you are too – I am sure we are both very much looking forward to eagerly participating in that inquiry and learning more about what can be done to further improve this sector and what can be learned following from the Auditor-General's previous reports and recommendations in this space. So I would encourage all members to take a particular interest in that and indeed all members of the community as well. Submissions for that inquiry will be closing on 7 July, and we will be holding hearings very shortly after, again a very important opportunity for us all to be engaging with this issue in particular detail.

I would also like to mention YourPlay, which is Australia's first statewide network precommitment scheme. It allows Victorians to set limits on how much time and money they spend on gaming machines. This allows players to make clearer financial decisions outside of the gaming environment. It also assists in identifying and changing their playing behaviours. There are lots of very interesting details about that. With an eye on the time I will not go into quite every part of it. But I would also

note that the Royal Commission into the Casino Operator and Licence recommended that YourPlay be a full, mandatory and binding system at the Melbourne casino for Australian residents, and this followed the 23 recommendations by an independent review to increase the uptake and effectiveness of the scheme. The Andrews Labor government has moved to legislate the recommendations from that royal commission and implement the recommendations of the independent review, so I commend the government for also moving towards making Victoria the first jurisdiction in the nation to have mandatory card play. This reform will ensure that all play on electronic gaming machines is linked to a patron ID, an important safeguard as well against money laundering.

I also note the prohibition on ATMs in gaming venues and the introduction of \$200 transaction and \$500 daily EFTPOS withdrawal limits. This makes Victoria the only mainland Australian jurisdiction not to have ATMs in gaming venues, and obviously I do not need to tell members here the benefits that regulation provides. We have capped the total number of gaming machines in the state until 2042, setting regional caps and municipal limits on gaming machine entitlements as well. These caps and limits will help to ensure that Victoria remains the Australian jurisdiction with the lowest density of gaming machines, with the exception of Western Australia, which does not permit gaming machines outside of the casino.

We have improved the responsible gambling code of conduct for venue operators from September 2020 as well. The new code improves harm minimisation and must include a statement that a venue operator has a duty to take all reasonable steps to prevent and minimise harm from the operation of gaming machines. This cap on the maximum number of gaming machines in Victoria, which is in place until 2042, will help to ensure that Victoria has one of the lowest densities of gaming machines in this country, and these changes do work with the changes to the responsible gambling code of conduct to improve harm minimisation and prevention.

Let me also say that the Victorian government has a very long and proud history of support for leading organisations across our veterans sector, such as RSL Victoria, who do fantastic work for the veterans community. We have provided more than \$3.4 million to RSL Victoria through direct funding and various grant programs. On top of that, we have provided hundreds of grants, totalling nearly \$4.3 million, directly to RSL sub-branches for memorials, facilities and education programs. RSLs do vitally important work supporting our veterans, their families and their local communities, and the Andrews Labor government is very proud to continue to support them.

Just this week the government announced more than \$1.4 million in funding for a further 55 projects offering practical support for the veteran community, as well as commemorating their incredible contributions. Thirty-one projects will be funded through the veterans capital works grant program, funding facility upgrades of up to \$50,000 for not-for-profit and ex-service organisations. A further 11 organisations will receive funding through the Victoria Remembers program, providing grants of up to \$30,000 for projects commemorating veterans service or educating Victorians about the contributions that veterans have made to our great state.

So there are many things going on with regard to this sector that this government is very engaged in and has been very engaged in for quite some time. I do again want to take note to celebrate that whilst others in this chamber might spend their time fighting and having their arguments in the media about who should be in their party, who should not and, 'Let's kick people out who were preselected for their role less than 12 months ago,' we on this side of the chamber actually focus on getting things done, and that is exactly what we are doing in this space. We have been doing this work for months, and I am very happy to see Mr Mulholland congratulating the work of the Andrews Labor government in this space as well.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (15:40): I rise to speak to notice of motion 62 brought by Mr Mulholland, and I commend him for raising this issue. This motion seeks to recognise the important role of Victoria's RSL sub-branches in supporting local communities and veterans. Specifically, this motion calls on the government to support RSL sub-branches that do not use their

full poker machine entitlements by allowing them to forfeit these entitlements without financial penalty.

The Australian RSL has a long and rich history. It was founded during World War I and has continued to serve veterans and their families ever since. Fast-forward to the present day and there are now 1135 sub-branches nationwide, and the RSL represents over 150,000 veterans across Australia. Guided by an ethos of compassion and service, the RSL and their sub-branches have played an integral role in their local communities both in Victoria and nationwide. They have supported generations of service men and women by building and supporting local communities, increasing public education and advocating for the best interests of veterans and their families. It is without question that the Australian RSL and Victoria's RSL sub-branches have always been and continue to be an important asset for our veterans, their families and our local communities. With this in mind, any opportunity we have to better support those community groups warrants serious and careful consideration.

Mr Mulholland's motion makes specific reference to the Glenroy RSL sub-branch and a number of other RSL sub-branches that have been required to make payment for poker machine entitlements that they have been unable to use. In considering potentially contending priorities, there is a need to balance minimising harm through existing poker machine entitlement laws against reducing the financial burden on RSL sub-branches, particularly when they decide or are forced to reduce the number of operational poker machines. Getting this balance right can help ensure groups like Glenroy RSL sub-branch are not burdened by any decision to reduce the number of poker machines in their venues and can continue to perform their important work in our local communities and for our veterans and their families.

At the same time, the community value of RSL sub-branches must be measured against the well-understood negative consequences of poker machines and associated problem gambling. These community groups' entitlements to poker machines should not be supported at the expense of the mental, financial and physical wellbeing of local communities and veterans. At the same time, we would like to see extensive statewide reform of our poker machine laws to address the harmful and unfair impacts of gambling. RSL sub-branches include large portions of our communities that experience significant disadvantage and will feel the negative impacts of problem gambling much more acutely than the general population, and of course veterans are a part of those communities as well.

This inherent tension was considered by the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation last year when they investigated the relationship between gambling and the Australian veteran community. Their findings further cemented the knowledge that Australian veterans are a high-risk group in relation to experiencing gambling harm, well above that of the broader Australian community. This same investigation found that not only can these risk factors lead large numbers of veterans to problem gambling but once they are led to problem gambling those same veterans subsequently experience higher rates of serious mental and physical health problems.

We also know that veterans are disproportionately over-represented in homeless populations and experience higher rates of mental health issues, drug and alcohol dependence and gambling addiction. Time and time again they are routinely over-represented in problem gambling data and problem gambling harms. These factors mean that veterans and their families can be particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of problem gambling. To protect veterans and the vital role of RSL sub-branches, it is important to consider how the number of poker machines can be reduced and how profits can be directed into harm minimisation.

Problem gambling harms local communities. It harms veterans and it harms their families. RSL sub-branches should be encouraged and supported to reduce their usage of poker machines wherever possible, recognising that veterans are particularly vulnerable to the harms of problem gambling. We understand that the government is currently working to address concerns with Crown Casino, the state's most notorious gambling parasite, and we look forward to reviewing that legislation when it

makes its way to this place. That said, we look forward to a more holistic approach from the government to deliver significant gambling reform and address the vampiric influence of the gambling industry in predominantly working class and lower socio-economic areas.

Legalise Cannabis welcomes the government's announcement of a surrender scheme to address the issues faced by Glenroy RSL sub-branch and other sub-branches as raised and as subsequently publicly endorsed by Mr Mulholland. We also welcome the wideranging own-motion inquiry into gambling and liquor reform being undertaken by the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee that will be commencing shortly. On this basis, and in the context of a broader gambling reform agenda, we will not be supporting the resolution.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (15:46): I am pleased to rise and support this motion brought to the chamber by Mr Mulholland. It is a motion that recognises the importance of our RSLs. He has named a number, and I get the story that has occurred with Glenroy and a number of other branches and the bizarre behaviour of the government in seeking to claw back money from machines that they were unable to use or could not legitimately use. There is a long history of this behaviour, I might say, with this Labor Party and this government over a lengthy period of time.

But I do want to say something before I discuss some of the finer points. I do want to make some points about my RSLs locally – a number of these I have very close relationships with. Certainly, the Prahran RSL, I am always working with them on local functions and support the range of things that they conduct, and I look forward to continuing that work. The Oakleigh Carnegie RSL and a number of other key RSL groups within the electorate of Southern Metropolitan Region – these are very important local community hubs. They are very important in the support they provide to veterans in the community. They are very important for the recognition that they also provide for the contribution that so many veterans in our community have made – putting their lives on the line. Let us be very clear, we do owe a debt and do owe a consideration to those service men and women who have actually put their lives on the line in harm's way. We cannot ever take that away from them and nor should we. Which makes us question the erratic behaviour of the government with respect to Glenroy and Darebin and Pascoe Vale and others, and indeed Caulfield in my area and St Kilda. Why on earth are they doing this? Why can't they behave properly with RSLs, which in many cases are small, local committees of people that are doing the work. Treating them so abysmally is, in my view, not the way to go.

I should say that the Premier actually has significant form on a number of these matters, and it is important to remember back that he, as Minister for Gaming, oversighted the phase of the allocation of electronic gaming machines that was undertaken between 2006 and 2010. He comprehensively botched that process. And it is interesting to just record that the Auditor-General tabled a report in this place in June 2011, and he made a number of serious conclusions from that report. Remember, Daniel Andrews, in that period of government, was Minister for Gaming and later became Minister for Health, but he was on the subcommittee of cabinet that oversighted all of these and was very active with the interdepartmental committee that oversighted these clear points. The conclusion was the revenue obtained from the sale of entitlements was around \$3 billion less than the assessed fair market value of these assets. For those that want to read it, that is in the conclusion of the Auditor-General's report. This was a botched process of allocation of gaming machines to clubs and pubs and so forth across the state, and it resulted in a process that saw \$3 billion of public money lost through Daniel Andrews's failure and Daniel Andrews's incompetence. Daniel Andrews cannot be allowed near money. Whenever he touches a process that involves money he botches it and costs the state a fortune. We see that with our major projects now, and we see it even with this recent treatment of the RSL local sub-branches, which do such a good job, and the absurd pressure that they have been placed under by Daniel Andrews and his government and the decisions that Daniel Andrews and his government have made to put the pressure, to turn the screws, on these small local RSLs. Well, I say he has a very bad track record on these matters. I am disappointed that Mr Ettershank and his party are not going to support this motion, but I think it is an important motion.

MOTIONS

1500

Legislative Council

Wednesday 17 May 2023

I do want to quickly in the time allocated to me – and I am conscious it is a relatively small amount of time – note that it is hard I think for anyone to disagree with most of these points in Mr Mulholland's motion. Looking at the first four, I cannot really see why anyone would be opposed to those. Point (5):

further recognises that similar situations confront other ... sub-branches ...

I am not sure that Mr Ettershank or others have actually said that they oppose the essence of the motion. The essence of the motion is that these branches should be treated fairly. Point (6):

further acknowledges that chasing RSLs to pay for unwanted poker machine entitlements shows the government is not serious when it comes to tackling gambling addiction and is addicted to pokies revenue ...

Well, this government has scooped in pokies revenue; in every term it often mismanages this. And point (7):

calls on the government to take action by:

allowing community sub-branches like ... Glenroy ... and others to forfeit their pokies entitlements without financial penalty ...

The government can then decide what it does with the numbers. I think it is actually worth putting on record again a little trip down memory lane on the numbers of machines. Poker machines were introduced into Victoria by Joan Kirner by the Kirner Labor government. Make no mistake: it was by the Kirner Labor government. The casino was brought into Victoria by the Kirner Labor government. The legislation that enabled it passed through this chamber and through the other chamber under the Kirner Labor government. The Kirner Labor government introduced poker machines, the Kirner Labor government introduced the casino, the Labor government in its desperate financial straits in the late 1980s and early 90s, under Cain first and then Kirner, went on a desperate search for revenue, and that is why it settled on introducing poker machines into Victoria and the casino. The Kennett government that was elected in 1992 actually had to implement some of these things, but make no mistake, the poker machines were already out there in their hundreds and hundreds. In fact, I went to an opening of one in Airport West. I watched Joan Kirner cut the ribbon on the poker machines while she was in government in 1992. Make no mistake: it was Labor that introduced these poker machines, with all of the damage and trouble that they do.

I want to put one other point on the record. It is important to note that the initial allocations of poker machines were much greater under Labor – 43,000 in fact was the original allocation. It was Jeffrey Kennett who cut the allocation in the late 1990s, and I well remember this. He cut the entitlement, and I am recalling these numbers: 27,000, I think, or 27,500, in that order, in clubs and pubs and 3000 at the casino. He sliced the number of machines in one hit from well over 40,000 down to around 30,000.

Noting the number of poker machines per head of population has in fact declined since that period because the population of the state has grown but the number of machines has actually remained largely static, the opportunity is there to further reduce the number of machines. Personally, I do not like poker machines much, and I make that point quite clear, but I do see that some people do and some people have a legitimate flutter, as it were, on those machines.

But they do relatively little good for our community. I do accept that some clubs and pubs do plough back significant resources into their local communities, providing important facilities and providing meeting venues and social places for people within their communities. Sporting clubs and so forth have provided those opportunities in their areas and have done so on the back of revenue generated from poker machines, but I think many of us have a natural concern and reluctance about the social ills that they cause, and whether it be at a community level or a more official level we have a reluctance to see an expansion of poker machine numbers in our area. I might add that in my area, in Southern Metro, there are significant areas in the old dry zone which have now become a target for this government to force or foist machines into, and that would concern me greatly.

I am returning now, in the small amount of time I have left, to Mr Mulholland's motion. I congratulate him on his advocacy, his hard work and the result – the government has effectively folded in the face of his activities. They realised that what they were doing was wrong and harsh, and they have stepped back from it. So I welcome that step back – if only they were prepared to admit it honestly.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:56): I rise to make a contribution on motion 62 standing in Mr Mulholland's name. There has been very interesting discussion on this motion, but for my contribution today I think I will focus on all of the things that this Andrews Labor government has been doing over many years, particularly in regard to harm minimisation. As we know, Mr Mulholland's motion sets out the role that the RSLs play. Before I begin my contribution I just want to remark upon the recent Anzac Day, when I was able to attend the dawn service at Croydon and then also other services at the Warrandyte RSL and Templestowe RSL. I just want to say a thankyou to all of those returned service people, men and women, who do so much for our country when they go off and serve. I just think that the occasions that we attended just recently were amazing. It was wonderful to see the veteran community come out.

I know there are diverse views in the veterans community about the role that poker machines play, and I know that some of the younger vets in my community who have reached out to me do not like the idea of the revenue that is made from poker machines in the RSLs that have them. They do not like the drinking culture that is often associated with those things either. But nevertheless there are some RSLs that obviously get income from these sorts of things. Be that as it may, as I said, in terms of harm minimisation our government will continue to monitor the arrangements for all venues across the state to ensure that we have the appropriate regulatory settings. As Mr Galea very eloquently and aptly put before in his contribution, the government is already doing a lot of the stuff that Mr Mulholland spoke about in his motion. So we are constantly making sure that we have the right regulatory framework in this area and respond to any issues that might arise at the time.

Nevertheless, our clubs and RSLs are subject to the strongest regulator in the country. On 1 January 2022 the government established the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission to provide stronger and more focused regulation of Victoria's gambling industry. It has oversight of all gambling and gaming activities within Victoria, from pubs and clubs through to the casino. The casino control commission is required to undertake activities to minimise gambling harm, and harm minimisation considerations are central to its work. For those experiencing or at risk of experiencing gambling harm, in the 2019–20 budget the government provided the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation with \$153 million over four years. This represents the nation's largest commitment to addressing gambling harm. The foundation delivers communication and education strategies, commissions research and works with gamblers help agencies to deliver counselling and treatment services to people who might be experiencing harm from gambling.

This government has already implemented a wide range of reforms to minimise gambling harm from the state's poker machines and is implementing all of the recommendations from the Royal Commission into the Casino Operator and Licence. We have introduced Australia's first statewide network precommitment scheme, which is called YourPlay. I know that Mr Galea talked about that and others may have mentioned that in here today as well. This allows Victorians to set limits on how much time and money they spend on gambling machines, which is critically important. It means that they have some control over this, and if they have only got a certain amount of money in the pot, they can preset those limits before they play. Through this, players are assisted to identify and change their playing behaviours, so that mechanism helps and aids people to try and make changes to their behaviour if they feel that they are problematic.

Since YourPlay commenced on 30 April 2023 there have been 13.89 million gaming machine sessions using YourPlay, so as you can see it is a very well used and well subscribed service; 27.78 million responsible gambling information messages delivered to players advising them of their losses, so I am assuming that those things come through progressively as you are playing and you get messages telling you what is happening and what you need to look out for; 127,707 YourPlay cards issued to players

of gaming machines; 50,542 registered YourPlay cards issued to players; 94,585 casual or anonymous cards activated by players; and 7173 players who have set a personalised message. What this shows is that people in the gambling community and people who like to participate in gambling activities are definitely making use of this really critical service called YourPlay. It allows them and helps them and is a very appropriate tool to enable them to manage their own gambling behaviours. An independent evaluation of the YourPlay scheme made 23 recommendations to strengthen the uptake and effectiveness of the scheme, and they are being implemented by the government.

The Royal Commission into the Casino Operator and Licence subsequently recommended that YourPlay be a full mandatory and binding system at the Melbourne casino for Australian residents. This has been legislated by the Andrews Labor government and by December 2023 Crown is required to implement on all of its electronic gaming machines the following: mandatory carded play, meaning that all electronic gaming machines played at the casino will be linked to a patron's identity, which is a key anti-money-laundering measure; and mandatory precommitment using the YourPlay system – the YourPlay system ensures players set time and spend limits prior to playing. At the Melbourne casino a player will not be able to continue play beyond their preset limit, so again this gives the opportunity and ability for people to set their preset limits and avoid the potential to be carried away in the moment and continue to gamble well beyond their means, which may plunge them into financial distress. We will be the first jurisdiction in the country to have mandatory carded play and precommitment, and this will live on almost one in 10 gaming machines in Victoria.

We have also prohibited ATMs in gaming venues and imposed \$200 transaction and \$500 daily EFTPOS withdrawal limits. Victoria is the only Australian mainland jurisdiction without ATMs in gaming venues. Further prohibitions apply on cash advances from a credit account and on cashing cheques at gaming venues as well. We have capped the total number of gaming machines in the state until 2042 and are setting regional caps and municipal limits on gaming machine entitlements. The caps and limits help to ensure that Victoria remains the Australian jurisdiction with the lowest density of gaming machines, except for Western Australia, which does not permit gaming machines outside of the casino.

We have improved the responsible gambling codes of conduct for venue operators from September 2020. The new codes improve harm minimisation and must include a statement that a venue operator has a duty to take all reasonable steps to prevent and minimise harm from the operation of gaming machines.

As you can see, the government is well advanced in taking a number of actions around harm minimisation and is continually improving its efforts in those areas and acting on recommendations to continue to improve and to protect people who may be experiencing problem gambling. I will leave my contribution there.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (16:05): I rise to speak on this motion. As someone who is passionate about gambling reform, any step forward to reduce gambling harm, no matter how small, is good news. Late yesterday the government announced a limited surrender scheme that will only apply to clubs and RSLs whose entitlements are not approved for use, so venues that deliberately applied for and were granted entitlements to poker machines but then failed to secure planning permission to operate them will be eligible for this scheme.

It is worth remembering how large the gambling harm problem across Victoria is, to put this motion and the step announced yesterday into context. There are currently 26,386 poker machines in Victoria, and people across our state lost more than \$2.2 billion on these predatory machines last financial year. Glenroy RSL was an example mentioned in the motion. Community members lost more than \$4.7 million at that venue alone last financial year. These financial losses are on top of the human impact of gambling harm, which contributes to family violence, relationship difficulties, issues with work and study, cultural problems, criminal activity, health problems, emotional and psychological

distress and in some cases even loss of life through suicide. These misery machines prey on vulnerability, they supercharge inequality and they are designed to addict.

Because of its confined nature I am sceptical that the government's scheme will lead to forfeiture of many entitlements. Let us say, for example, that there are 200 eligible entitlements. This is less than 1 per cent of the poker machines currently operating in Victoria, and because the scheme only applies to entitlements that are not currently in use, it will not actually reduce the number of poker machines operating in our state today. There is also no indication yet from the Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation that she would actually extinguish any of the forfeited entitlements, meaning that those could be reallocated. They would pop up, and then they would begin causing harm at another venue if that was the case. We would welcome clarification from the minister that she will extinguish entitlements forfeited under the government's scheme.

The Greens would have liked to see Mr Mulholland's motion call on the minister to extinguish any forfeited entitlements, but that opportunity has not been taken up. So the real reduction from gambling harm from either this motion or from the newly announced scheme seems, sadly, minimal. I hope to be corrected. That is a shame because, make no mistake, we need real reform to reduce harm from poker machines in this state. We need dollar bet limits, \$20 load-up limits and \$500 jackpot limits. We need uniform closure of poker machine dens between midnight and 10 am, and there should be mandatory precommitment and cashless cards on every one of these misery machines across the state.

I acknowledge the government's response to the Royal Commission into the Casino Operator and Licence's recommendations. It is a great step, but we need it to cover misery machines across the state, not just at the casino, which accounts for only 10 per cent of the poker machines in Victoria, roughly. The Andrews Labor government should be removing barriers to organisations divesting from poker machines readily, not after being dragged to the table by a motion. Yet I have heard government MPs refer to motions in this place today as stunts or pranks. Well, here we are.

We also debate this motion today knowing that the government is gearing up to gift public money to the gambling and racing industry through the Gambling Taxation Bill 2023 currently in the other place. Speaking of finances, it is only the Greens who refuse to take donations from the gambling industry, unlike parties of our colleagues on both sides of the chamber, sadly. We need to end the flow of donations and influence from the gambling industry on our politics.

Yesterday's announcement has been greeted as a baby step by gambling reform advocates, and I do hope it is just a first step to a broader surrender scheme. The Greens would welcome a comprehensive surrender scheme. A broad range of organisations should be able to access such a scheme, not just a few clubs that have failed to gain planning permissions. Any entitlements surrendered through such a scheme should be extinguished so that they do not reappear to cause harm elsewhere. A buyback scheme was in fact a cornerstone of the Victorian Greens gambling harm reduction election platform, and it can be done.

In the ACT, where the Greens and Labor are in shared government, they have recently implemented a buyback scheme that is scaling down poker machines over time. As this motion spells out, many clubs in Victoria are interested in handing back their licences and machines as poker machine operation becomes as toxic as tobacco sponsorship. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the government on this issue to develop a more comprehensive surrender scheme. We think that there should be an independent expert panel to advise and consider options for replacing revenue impacts if Victoria were to be free of poker machines by 2035. The panel would include local councils so that they can input to the reduction of licences and gambling harm in their neighbourhoods. I would be remiss to speak to this motion without acknowledging the key role that local governments have played for many, many years standing up for their communities against gambling harm. I also want to acknowledge the hard work of community advocates and lived-experience advocates in this space.

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (16:11): I rise today to put my contribution to motion 62 moved by Mr Mulholland. I wish to acknowledge and recognise the role that RSL sub-branches play in supporting our veterans and local communities. When Mr Mulholland came to me a few weeks back inquiring in relation to whether I knew anything about the RSLs being charged an entitlement fee for machines which have not been installed and with full pressure from the government insisting that the payment be made, I was pulled back by surprise and horror, because the RSL communities have a very special and important role in my life, my having been a reservist for the last 19 years. It took me by surprise in recent days that the government has reconsidered their situation, done a backflip and reversed their role, very much thanks to Mr Mulholland's advocacy in the last few weeks. He brought to the media and to the wider community what the sub-branches have had to endure in the past few months in relation to legal issues and pressure from the authorities.

Mr Galea opposite mentioned earlier that the government has been active in doing stuff, and I welcome that the government has been doing that. I just hope if they have been doing all these things in the background, they will recognise the legal and financial burden they have put on these RSL sub-branches and hopefully, with all this pressure on the sub-branches and these legal costs which the sub-branches have had to endure, maybe the government might consider assisting them with the costs. I do acknowledge the government has done a backflip and now is not forcing these fees, so I do welcome that. Again, thank you, Mr Mulholland, for raising this, because there are many RSLs in my electorate in the west, and after Mr Mulholland mentioned this I actually went to all the RSLs and assured them that we are doing everything we possibly can to have this raised and to advocate.

I do want to express what the RSL means in this house. It is not a business which profits any individual or organisation. It is an organisation which assists our veterans. It is a faithful pillar to support our brave veterans and strives to ensure that our returned service men and women receive the care they deserve. That is what the Returned and Services League is all about. In navigating the complexities of health care and assisting with housing and employment opportunities for those service men and women who return, the RSL always stands side by side and advocates for their needs.

The RSL is much more than an advocacy group. It brings an essence of social connection desperately needed by our veterans and creates a community where they can find understanding, friendship and a place to reflect and gather their thoughts after all the service they have provided for our country. With social events, gatherings and activities, the RSL brings together individuals and gives them opportunities to share their experiences and to pass on any in-depth thoughts or grievances they have to the service. It eases the burden of isolation and also forms a network of support. That is what the RSL is. RSL Victoria also advocates for these service men and women and serves to continuously and tirelessly advocate and fight for their rights and interests. So again I just want to ensure that I raise these issues in this house to make sure that in the future, when anything like this may arise regarding the RSL, we do consider what it actually stands for and why it is there. It is not an organisation or business to profit from any individuals or any group, it is an organisation to help those men and women who actually have paid their time in service for our country.

I would again like to say thank you very much to Mr Mulholland for raising this motion and for all he has actually done in the last few weeks to raise this issue out in the wider community, and I acknowledge that the government has gone back and not charged these sub-branches for those machines which were not installed. In closing, I do strongly support this motion and I hope with any out-of-pocket financial fee the government has caused the sub-branches, it does consider assisting them to recover what is needed, as these branches are already in a difficult financial situation as it is. In relation to minimising and reducing the harm of gambling, I do not support poker machines in any sort of premises, but we have got to work together and slowly eradicate the gambling habits of those individuals who are in difficult situations. So I thank Mr Mulholland for his motion and I support it, and I hope the chamber supports it as well.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (16:18): I am more than happy to speak to this motion and recognise the vital role of RSLs in our community. Just recently, like many other members here today,

I joined multiple RSLs to commemorate Anzac Day. These services provide fitting ways for whole communities to respect fallen Anzacs who fought for the freedoms that make our democratic way of life possible. I attended an incredible student-led commemorative service at Mornington high school, with well over 1000 in attendance. Students and teachers were joined by members from the RSL, Lions Clubs and lots of other community groups and local businesses. The singing, drumming and trumpeting skills were really impressive, and the on-school avenue of honour for local fallen World War I soldiers was beautiful in the autumn sunlight. I very much appreciated being part of the service to remember the lives lost, as the students returned for term 2. These events bring the community together, and as is usually the case on Anzac Day there was strong bipartisan support for RSLs and respect for veterans generally. Of course I was also very pleased with the football result on Anzac Day, but all jokes aside, it is a terrific and longstanding mark of respect for our veterans, which I think is fitting. A record crowd roaring at the MCG in celebration of the freedom and culture that thrives in Australia is possible because of the sacrifices made by veterans.

The Andrews Labor government is supporting RSLs and clubs to get rid of their unused gaming machine entitlements. Let us be very clear: it is already happening. Not only has the government gazetted rules that will allow clubs and RSLs to get rid of their unused gaming entitlements without financial penalty but the government has been engaging with RSL Victoria and Community Clubs Victoria on the establishment of these rules for months. The Victorian government has a long history of support for leading organisations across our veteran sector, such as RSL Victoria, who do fantastic work for the veteran community. We have provided more than \$3.4 million to RSL Victoria through direct funding and various grant programs, and on top of that we have provided hundreds of grants, totalling nearly \$4.3 million, directly to RSL sub-branches for memorials, facilities and education programs. RSLs do important work supporting veterans, their families and local communities, and the Andrews Labor government is proud to continue to support them.

Most recently in Eastern Victoria our support includes the following RSL sub-branches: for Emerald RSL sub-branch, repair of the statue of the unknown soldier; for Inverloch RSL sub-branch, sustainability upgrades including solar and batteries; for Korumburra RSL sub-branch, urgent building maintenance support has been provided; for Lilydale RSL sub-branch, clubroom refurbishment; for Paynesville RSL sub-branch, a new roof; for Rosedale RSL sub-branch, a kitchen upgrade; for Sorrento Portsea RSL sub-branch, an upgrade of the switchboard and installation of safety lighting for the disabled car park and pathways; and for Warragul RSL sub-branch, a veterans welfare and wellbeing hub. So while this motion accuses the government of ripping money out of RSLs, we are in fact investing money directly into RSL sub-branches, improving their sustainability and supporting new programs for veterans. Not only are we investing money directly into the RSLs, but the surrender scheme will allow clubs and RSLs to hand back entitlements to government without being locked into paying them off, freeing up important funds that can be reinvested back into the community. In the big picture we will continue to monitor and improve the regulation of gambling in the Victorian community, including electronic gaming machines.

Our clubs and RSLs are subject to the strongest regulator in the country. On 1 January 2022 the government established the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission. The VGCCC provides stronger, more focused regulation of Victoria's gambling industry. It has oversight of all gambling and gaming activities within Victoria, from pubs and clubs through to the casino. The VGCCC is required to undertake activities to minimise gambling harm, and harm minimisation considerations are central to its work. For those experiencing or at risk of experiencing gambling harm, in the 2019–20 budget the government provided the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation with \$153 million over four years. This represents the nation's largest commitment to addressing gambling harm. The foundation delivers communication and education strategies, commissions research and works with Gambler's Help agencies to deliver counselling and treatment services to people experiencing harm from gambling.

This government has already implemented a wide range of reforms to minimise gambling harm from the state's poker machines and is implementing all the recommendations of the Royal Commission into the Casino Operator and Licence. We introduced Australia's first statewide network precommitment scheme, YourPlay, which allows Victorians to set limits on how much time and money they spend on gaming machines. Through this, players are assisted to identify and change their playing behaviours. This is a practical measure to reduce gambling harm, taking away some of the impulsive behaviour that pokie machines are designed to elicit by allowing people to set limits. Since YourPlay commenced, there have been, as at the end of last month, almost 14 million gaming machine sessions using YourPlay, almost 28 million responsible gambling information messages to players advising them of their losses, over 125,000 YourPlay cards issued to players of gaming machines, over 50,000 registered YourPlay cards issued to players, almost 95,000 casual cards activated by players and over 7000 players who have set a personalised message. An independent evaluation of the YourPlay scheme made 23 recommendations to strengthen the uptake and effectiveness of the scheme, and they are being implemented by the government.

The Royal Commission into the Casino Operator and Licence subsequently recommended that YourPlay be a full mandatory and binding system at the Melbourne casino for Australian residents. This has been legislated by the Andrews Labor government, and by December 2023 Crown is required to implement on all its electronic gaming machines mandatory carded play, meaning that all electronic gaming machine play at the casino will be linked to a patron's identity – this is a key anti-money-laundering measure – and mandatory precommitment using the YourPlay system. The YourPlay system ensures players set times and spending limits prior to playing. At the Melbourne casino a player will not be able to continue to play beyond their preset limits. We will be the first jurisdiction in the country to have mandatory carded play and precommitment, and this will live on almost one in 10 gaming machines in Victoria. We have also prohibited ATMs in gaming venues and imposed \$200 transaction and \$500 daily EFTPOS withdrawal limits. Victoria is the only Australian mainland jurisdiction without ATMs in gaming venues. Further prohibitions apply on cash advances from a credit account and on cashing cheques at gaming venues.

We have capped the total number of gaming machines in the state until 2042 and are setting regional caps and municipal limits on gaming machine entitlements. The caps and limits help to ensure that Victoria remains the Australian jurisdiction with the lowest density of gaming machines, except for Western Australia, which does not permit gaming machines outside the casino. We have improved the responsible gambling code of conduct for venue operators from September 2020. The new code improves harm minimisation and must include a statement that a venue operator has a duty to take all reasonable steps to prevent and minimise harm from the operation of gaming machines.

I have been more than happy to speak to this motion and recognise the vital role of RSLs in our community and also recognise the government's existing work on the surrender scheme. I have highlighted the great bipartisan spirit of Anzac Day and the continuing traditions upheld by our RSL sub-branches. These branches are supported by the government to improve their sustainability and services to the veteran community, including several recent projects funded in Eastern Victoria. Gambling regulation and harm minimisation continue to be critically important, and the government is continuing to address these through reforms such as the YourPlay system and through the work of the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation.

Matthew BACH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:27): Like Mr McIntosh, I am very pleased to join the debate on this important motion. As Mr McIntosh has done and as other speakers have done, I want to put on record my deep admiration for our RSLs and our RSL sub-branches. There are many in my electorate of the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region that I could mention. Maybe I should not say this, but I do have a particular affinity for the sub-branch at Box Hill, where just recently, actually, I joined with a member from across the aisle, Mr Leane, who is a fellow member in the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region – I nearly knocked him off, but he got the top spot I think; Senator Ciccone, a fine senator whose office is directly over the road from me in Blackburn, and a good shoppie; and in

addition Mr Wolahan, himself a returned serviceman, because the president of the sub-branch at Box Hill, Mr John Haward, who I have spoken of before in this place, invited the Governor-General to come to Box Hill to rededicate the war memorial and lay a new plaque. And what do you know, the Governor-General said yes. So we all assembled on a Saturday afternoon in the gardens that are adjacent to the RSL for an amazing ceremony and then a get-together. It was fabulous to meet the Governor-General and to be with these other wonderful members who cut across my broader region, but as always when we go to our local RSLs, the best part about it was catching up with members of the RSL afterwards. So I wholeheartedly concur with the sentiments of Mr McIntosh, Mr Mulholland and other speakers on this important motion regarding the immense service that our RSLs do for returned service people.

There are several key elements of the motion that I just want to touch upon briefly and reiterate the importance of in the context of my support for this motion. Point (1) is that we recognise:

... the vital role of Victoria's Returned and Services League ...

Of course. Now I will skip down to point (6), which is important:

further acknowledges that chasing RSLs to pay for unwanted poker machine entitlements shows the government is not serious when it comes to tackling gambling addiction and is addicted to pokies revenue ...

There are big issues regarding the stability of the state's budget, and we will have those conversations next week. But in that context, it is inappropriate to be taking some of the measures that have recently been taken that we know have impacted a series of RSLs. Mr Mulholland has helpfully noted just a few of the RSLs from around the state which have been impacted. Initially we learned of the sub-branch at Glenroy, but there was also Darebin, Pascoe Vale, Altona, Caulfield, Cheltenham and St Kilda.

Ultimately Mr Mulholland's motion calls on the government to take action by allowing community sub-branches like the Glenroy RSL and others to forfeit their pokies entitlements without financial penalty – well, from the tenor of the debate it seems like that is a proposition that has broad support in the house; it has not always had broad support, but it seems from the tenor of the debate that it does – ending the cash grab against RSL sub-branches, letting them get back to their important role in the community of supporting local organisations and veterans; and, finally, finding ways to rein in their reckless spending agenda instead of at the expense of community RSL sub-branches.

Of course Mr Mulholland has gone through the details that have led us to this point. The broader debate I think has been so edifying regarding the multiparty support in this place for the role of RSLs. There have been important contributions from other members who have far greater knowledge than I, I must say, regarding a whole series of really complex and often dreadful issues that our returned service people oftentimes face. And I know, to give credit where credit is due, that this is something that the President was very passionate about during his tenure as the minister for veterans affairs. There has been work going on at a Commonwealth level by the former coalition government and ongoing work now by the relatively new Labor government, so my hope is that we can continue to work together wherever possible to get good outcomes for returned service people. My hope also is that we can come together to support a motion like this that – again noting the tenor of the debate – it seems has the support of the house, given that the proposition that is being put forward is so obviously sensible.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (16:32): I thank the members that made a contribution to this debate. I will note that Mr Galea said the backdown yesterday had nothing to do with my advocacy on this issue and that the government had been working on this for months. I will just note that on 27 April, not quite 'for months' ago, Glenroy RSL received a letter from the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission asking them to pay out their entitlements or face 10 per cent compounding interest daily. So it appears that the left hand is not speaking to the right hand. On 26 April the government responded to the media story about it, saying venues in financial hardship

could apply to defer payments. That does not seem like the action of a government that wanted to do anything about it until they were actually called out for in the media. So it was already in the works but just a coincidence that the minister's release in part was word for word about this motion.

I note Ms Copsey's thoughtful contribution in which she acknowledged that some people in this place and the other place talk about motions being meaningless. I think somehow this motion just so happens to be on the notice paper for debate the day after the government backflipped and sent out a media release announcing their backdown on this exact issue. It is just a pure coincidence; it just happened to happen. David Davis very well highlighted how the Premier personally botched entitlements in his time as gaming minister. I thought Mr Ettershank had a very thoughtful contribution, and it sounded like he was agreeing with the motion all the way up until he said he was not, for some reason. I think Mr McIntosh quite rightly acknowledged the government's investment in RSLs, and that is welcome.

Matthew Bach: In terms suspiciously similar to Ms Terpstra.

Evan MULHOLLAND: I will take the interjection from Mr Bach and also note that the contributions of Mr McIntosh and Ms Terpstra were remarkably similar. It might have been sent through by the Premier's private office – the exact same speech.

We are supportive of the government's investment into RSLs, but what I want to know is: what happens to the \$300,000 the Glenroy RSL has had to pay in legal fees, going back and forth with counsel and with this government, in order to fight them on these payments of entitlements which they cannot legally use? This is a commonsense motion. The government in their actions just yesterday showed that they are supportive of this motion, and I appreciate and I am very grateful for that support. Just speaking to Ken White today, speaking to the Glenroy RSL community and people in the Glenroy community, they are appreciative that the government have – dragged kicking and screaming – finally come to their senses on this very, very important issue.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (16): Matthew Bach, Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nicholas McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Noes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, 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, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Motion negatived.

Business of the house

Orders of the day

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:42): I move:

That order of the day, general business, 45, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

*Motions***Victorian Parliamentary Former Members Association**

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:42): I am very pleased to be able to rise and move this motion, and I am pleased that members of the Parliament I think will understand the importance of this. I move, by leave, in the amended form:

That this house recognises the Victorian Parliamentary Former Members Association Inc. (the association) as the representative body of, and advocate for, former members of the Victorian Parliament, and:

- (1) acknowledges the contribution made by the association and its members to supporting former members of Parliament and improving their post-parliamentary welfare;
- (2) welcomes the role of the association in encouraging former members to maintain the contacts, associations and friendships established during their tenure as members of the Victorian Parliament;
- (3) endorses the role of the association in establishing relationships with kindred organisations within Australia and internationally;
- (4) recognises the association as a principal stakeholder, and adviser, in the development of welfare and post-parliamentary career programs for members of the Victorian Parliament and endorses the relationship that has been established between the Parliament of Victoria and the association on all matters affecting former members of Parliament;

and a message be sent to the Legislative Assembly informing them of the terms of this resolution.

President, I know that you know this issue extremely well, and I want to put on record your involvement as you were enormously supportive, as were a number of former members. I know that you were very, very involved in it, as were the clerks and Anne Sargent, and I think there were other people in the house that were very closely involved in putting it all together. There were former presidents also: Nazih Elasmr and Bruce Atkinson. But I want to put on record the work of Andrea Coote, who is a former member for Southern Metropolitan Region – Mr Davis and I know her extremely well – and who led –

A member interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: Yes, an extremely good member of Parliament and wonderful in the work she has undertaken – I think you would agree, President. She really did lead the way with those I have already mentioned, the Deputy Clerk of the Legislative Council Anne Sargent and Sarah Cox from the office of the Serjeant-at-Arms. There were former members David Morris and Frank McGuire and a number of people from Deakin University who were looking at this issue and assisting the association with the work that they were undertaking.

But what I think is most significant is the role they have played internationally. The work that they have done in supporting former members is not just on remuneration but around welfare and support programs for former members, and that has attracted so much interest from around the world and the Commonwealth. In Australia there are a number of states – Western Australia, New South Wales and South Australia – looking at the work undertaken by this Parliament. There are parliaments within the Commonwealth – the UK, Ontario, South Africa, the Australian federal Parliament and the Channel Islands, and I think Malta has been involved or has expressed an interest – and a number of other countries that are also looking at this work. I know that Ms Coote, when she delivered her speech in Canada, got a huge reception, and there was enormous interest from those countries about the work undertaken. That is why this motion is very important, because it is recognising the work of these individuals, as I said, and also what needs to be done in supporting former members.

I have mentioned a number of people, but there are many more. I will not go through all of them, but there has been a collective effort from both sides of the house, and I think that is what is significant. I want to thank the government for talking to me about this so that we have been able to bring this important motion to the house, give it the due recognition that it deserves, show what our Parliament can do as one and really as a Parliament support former members. It does not matter which party they

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represented. Whether it is an independent member or a member of the Labor Party, the Liberals or Nationals, all members have got that support.

With the work that was done, there were a number of things that were taken to that international conference in Canada. There were a number of recommendations made in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association report on the support that the Victorian Parliament has provided in enabling this to come to fruition. There has been an enormous amount of support from within the Victorian Parliament, and I think that goes to show the importance in which the Parliament itself holds supporting the welfare of former members.

Again, I want to place on record my thanks and appreciation for those that have undertaken this work, especially Andrea Coote, who has been a mentor of mine and has been an extraordinary support for me over many, many years. She was a wonderful member of Parliament, and she has really led the charge with a group of MPs that have come together and presented this at an international level. I think it demonstrates the wonderful work undertaken by the Victorian Parliament and yet again being recognised not just nationally but internationally. To all of those that have been involved, I say thank you, because at some point we are all going to be former members and we all in our own way may need the support of the association or the support that this group will give and that the Parliament provides.

With those few words, President, I want to again acknowledge you and the work that you have been involved with but also the government and everyone else involved in getting this up and in being able to move this motion today.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:49): I rise to add my support to this motion recognising the Victorian Parliamentary Former Members Association Inc. as the representative body of and the advocate for former members of the Victorian Parliament. I echo what Ms Crozier has said with regard to the contribution that this organisation makes. It should be noted that this is a volunteer organisation that works very hard to advocate for the wellbeing of members of Parliament and is a support service for those members as well. I know that some of the work that they have been doing has been to reach out to former members to ensure that they are okay, which is a very important thing, and to ensure that they have the support they need and that they are travelling well. I know that they do this on an ongoing basis, but they also provide regular gatherings and opportunities to come together to keep those connections that were made during their time in this place but also to ensure that they are getting the support that they need.

The association has been well supported by the Parliament for a long period of time. I know the former Clerk Andrew Young did a lot of work to support the organisation, and this is obviously being continued by the new Clerk Robert McDonald, and of course the Deputy Clerk Anne Sargent has also been a great support for them, as have all of the staff from the Parliament of Victoria as well as the presidents. All past presidents and the current President have been very supportive of this organisation.

The fact that they have been able to do what they have done is really commendable, and we owe them a vote of thanks for, in particular, the *Transitioning to Life after Parliament* report that was commissioned by Parliament in conjunction with the Victorian Parliamentary Former Members Association and was conducted by Deakin. As Ms Crozier said, it is a report that has been receiving international recognition. It has been quoted in a number of other reports that have also been published now, and it has been a matter for discussion in a number of other states and jurisdictions as well. I acknowledge the work that Andrea Coote has done in representing the association at the international conference and also the current president Peter Loney and other members for the work that they have done in bringing this very important report that has some very important recommendations in it.

I just want to highlight recommendation 6, which is what we are doing here today. It says the Parliament should:

Formally recognise the Victorian Parliamentary Former Members' Association (VPFMA) via a resolution of the parliament ...

So we are picking up one of those recommendations, recommendation 6, today, which is an important step in supporting this organisation in the work that they do.

I also want to point out that in another capacity I have also had the opportunity to work with former members in terms of seeking their guidance and advice about the impacts on former members of some pieces of legislation that we have dealt with in this place. On that occasion I worked closely with Philip Davis, who spent many, many years in this place. He was able to provide us with insight from former members to ensure that the changes that we were making were actually landing in the appropriate place and were supportive of former members. I also want to acknowledge that I have actually been a member of the former members association during my gap years, and I was happy to work with them during that time to continue to support their great work.

This is an important resolution. It is great to see that the chamber can come together in a unified way to support this important resolution and that we are taking this step forward today. With those few words, I commend this motion and wish it a speedy passage.

Motion agreed to.

Cost of living

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:54): I rise to move and speak to my motion 45, which goes to a very important issue that is affecting so many Victorian households:

That this house notes:

- (1) that Victorian families, households and businesses are struggling under increasing cost-of-living pressures due to policy failures of the Andrews Labor government;
- (2) that Victoria has the highest debt of all states and is paying \$10 million per day in interest alone;
- (3) that Victorian households and businesses are facing energy price increases of up to \$1000 this year with the Andrews Labor government unable to provide any detail on when power costs will reduce;
- (4) the burden of increasing tax bills including land tax which is hurting mum-and-dad investors;
- (5) the declining standard of living for an increasing number of Victorians struggling under the pressure of higher costs for necessities and the inability to access services; and
- (6) the ongoing waste and mismanagement by the Andrews Labor government with no plan to alleviate the financial stress and address rising debt.

We have got a real problem in this state with rising debt. I think most Victorians are waking up to the fact that a debt of \$165 billion and rising is of huge concern. That debt is equivalent to New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania combined – those three states – yet we are in this position and paying \$10 million a day in interest. When you add that up, that is \$70 million a week. That is over a quarter of a billion dollars a month. And what could that money do to actually improve services and bring down some of these cost-of-living pressures if only the government had managed Victoria's budget properly?

I will come back to that debt, but I want to make a few points. We have been talking about an inquiry into the Victorian education system. Parents know that the cost of educating a child in Victoria is very high, that those costs are rising, that they are greater than in other states, that the costs associated with children's basic learning is rising and that the cost of uniforms is rising, yet children cannot even go on overnight camps because there is just not enough money in the school budgets. So children are missing out on fundamental things like excursions because there is not enough money in those education budgets. I was speaking to a local school in Bentleigh about this very issue a few weeks ago. They were saying to me that it is such an important part of a child's education to be able to

experience going on those school camps. They get an ability to socialise, to be away from their home environment, to really learn about mixing with others and their peers, to have the wonderful experience of living away from home and exploring the outdoors and a whole range of other activities. Yet the schools cannot afford it and the parents cannot afford it, or some parents cannot afford it, so the schools, to enable those students to undertake the excursions, are digging into their maintenance budgets because the Department of Education will not provide additional funding. That is one thing where we are seeing the impact of the stresses on households and our services such as education.

Businesses are struggling because of the increase in taxes that have been applied right across the board. Let us not forget what Daniel Andrews said on the eve of the 2014 election to Peter Mitchell, Channel 7 reporter: 'I promise you, Peter, no more taxes,' or words to that effect. Well, we have had 43 new or increased taxes since 2013 – 43 – and no doubt we will be getting well in excess of that, I suspect, in less than a week's time when the budget is handed down.

We are seeing the government backflip on their budget promises. The airport rail link is now not going ahead. A few months ago Daniel Andrews told Victorians that they could do everything: they could build the infrastructure and they could deliver the health services to Victorians. Yet just a couple of weeks ago we again had a huge demand on our ambulance services. There was less than 3 per cent capacity and 70 Victorians were waiting for an ambulance because they were deemed to need one. That is a really serious situation, and today of course Victorians have been learning about the fact that the Ombudsman has referred on the issue that I wrote to the Ombudsman about, the code orange and code red situation in Ambulance Victoria. That was not me referring it to IBAC, that is the Ombudsman referring this very serious issue for further investigation. That should be concerning to every single Victorian – that the Ombudsman sees that this is significant enough to be referred to the anti-corruption commission. Again, I heard some flippant remark from Daniel Andrews just brushing it off, not actually being challenged on his remarks. It is all very well to say, 'The information's given to the minister after the event.' Well, that might be the case, but the minister might be asleep at 11 at night when a code is called, and of course they are going to be notified after the case.

But that does not go to the heart of the fact, and that is whether it should have been a code red over a code orange. I have had many people, far too many people, contact me very concerned about the criteria and what played out. So let us just see where that goes. But this goes to the heart of good government, and again I say that this government, with their increasing taxes, is putting more and more pressure on businesses and of course putting more and more pressure on everyday households.

Energy costs are just going through the roof. Again, these are failures of government to ensure that as we transition to renewable energy you have sufficient energy in place to be able to manage that. I was speaking to a local businesswoman in my area, my drycleaner, a few weeks ago. She said to me, 'Georgie, what on earth is going on? What is the government doing? Last year we paid \$4000 a month for our energy costs; it is now over \$8000, and we don't know if we can continue to operate.' You could not get a harder working couple operating this business with what they do. Like everyone, they have experienced some workforce shortages, but it is not that – it is the fact that they have to work so hard, and having those enormous on-costs is just creating huge stress. We are going to see businesses like this not able to survive. They have got to make a decision: can we go on like this? Can we put our family into debt while we get through this – because the government has not provided enough support. It was \$4000 to over \$8000 a month in energy costs alone. That shows you the extent of the pain that is going on out there. And this comes off the back of COVID, where businesses were shut down. Of course those were decisions of government; businesses did not shut themselves down, governments shut them down.

We were in here for months and months and months asking for support to business through COVID. It came in dribs and drabs, and it was a damn disgrace, actually, how many businesses had to suffer and wait for assistance from the Andrews Labor government. Many of those businesses have got back up and running, but they are still paying the price. Many went out of business. You only have to go down the high streets around the suburbs to see how many 'For lease' signs are up. I think it is a very

serious and ominous reflection of what is happening in our suburbs despite the good efforts of small business owners and everyone involved. But it really is not something that this government cares about. They are actually for the big end of town, big business and the unions. They are their mates. They are not really concerned about small business and families and how they have to survive, the bills and the sacrifices that they pay every day. I think we will see very shortly rising interest rates, cost-of-living burdens and things like electricity prices absolutely causing so much pain and distress and real hardship for so many businesses and also families.

Land tax – well, isn't that a nice tax grab from a socialist government like the Andrews Labor government. They just love taxing us. They will tax anyone that has a go. There are many people, mum-and-dad investors, who just want to get ahead. They do not have a huge amount in their superannuation funds. They do not want to be a burden on government. They actually do not want to be dependent on a pension from government that taxpayers pay; they want to be self-sufficient. But again we know Labor governments do not care for that. That is not in their mantra. Basically their mantra is for socialism – do not let anyone get ahead. There are too many mums and dads on wages who might just have an investment home and are being slugged huge amounts of land tax. They have got to make decisions on whether they sell that investment property or the beach house down on the Bellarine Coast or down in Gippsland or wherever it is and about what they can do and what they can pay for, because they have got to make decisions around their family.

That is hurting mum-and-dad investors; land tax is absolutely hurting mum-and-dad investors. Again it just shows that when you have got such an extraordinary debt, like \$165 billion, government has to manage that somehow – and with their rising costs, they are going to have to tax us more, or borrow more. But those borrowings are getting out of control, and that creates a real disincentive for investment. Despite the government's spruiking all of the positivity, there is real concern amongst many about how this state is going to manage. We are hearing from their mates in Canberra that there are rough headwinds afoot – well, Blind Freddie could have told you that 12 months ago. But there is concern out there, and it is going to be very, very tough for many households. This government is not helping those families. They are not doing anything to really understand that there is a declining standard of living for many Victorians who are struggling under those increasing costs. We hear that all the time with grocery bills that are going up and up and up. People just say, 'I just can't believe it. I went in, and my grocery bill has doubled in the last six months.' These issues are just going to put more pressure on families in terms of choices they can make around their expenditure and their discretionary spend and how that will play out into our overall economy.

But in the meantime we have, as I said, a government that is absolutely hooked on debt. It is hooked on taxes and it is hooked on spin about how they are going to manage this. I think Victorians are waking up to the fact that you just cannot manage it all. There are going to be some very big issues that arise, and we are already seeing this with some of their backtracking on major infrastructure projects, whereas only a few weeks ago the Premier was out there spruiking once again that they can do it all. Well, he plays a big game. He is getting tired. It is obviously not long that he is going to stay around before he hands it over to someone else, because it is such a mess. He does not want that legacy of the rust bucket state that we are heading toward. He will have a number of legacies actually which I think he will not be very happy with, but he will be remembered not for what the government actually spruiks all the time. It is actually about a falling standard of living, it is about families hurting, it is about increasing taxes and it is about an out-of-control debt. It is about budget blowouts with project management. It is about a government not understanding the value of taxpayer money and how it should be managed properly. It is about corruption – the tentacles of this Premier and his private office go into all parts of government administration and public service. It is about corruption. They are the legacies that Daniel Andrews will be remembered for and not necessarily what he would like to be remembered for. Again I say I am extremely concerned about where the state is heading with that rise in debt, and I urge all members to acknowledge this motion and support it.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (17:10): I move:

That this motion be adjourned until the next day of meeting.

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

Business of the house

Notices of motion and orders of the day

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:10): I move:

That the consideration of the remaining notices of motion and orders of the day, general business, be postponed until the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Statements on tabled papers and petitions

Department of Health

Annual Report on Drinking Water Quality in Victoria 2021–22

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (17:10): I rise to speak on the Department of Health's *Annual Report on Drinking Water Quality in Victoria 2021–22*. The report does a great job of updating and summarising Victoria's water quality performance and the department's activities during the 2021 and 2022 reporting period. The department does a fantastic job of maintaining and improving the regulation of Victorian water agencies to protect the public from the waterborne health risks water consumption can cause. Not only this, it also highlights their preventative risk assessment work which operates to mitigate any problems the consumption of water can cause.

We all know how important these services are for the state. Maintaining Victoria's world-class water supply system impacts all of us, every single day. Drinkable and safe water is a right and a need, and this applies to everyone. On top of this I would really like to point out the incredible work the department does to ensure that this system is even more resourceful. I would like to applaud the department for their multidisciplinary approach to water management. They ensure public health is maintained while also safeguarding human environmental elements, which includes animals. These workers are just brilliant. Their routine inspection system, maintenance and asset repair and replacement work could not be more important. They prevent incidents from occurring and monitor environmental hazards. I commend their proactive stance in what they do.

We know that in the path of water, from the catchment to the consumer, there are many possible sources of contamination that must be proactively managed to avoid the detrimental impacts to public health. Their identification, control and monitoring of risks to the water supply helps keep us all safe. The report continues by outlining how the department considers the potential future impacts of climate change and the influence environmental factors can have on operational performance. The water management processes highlight the important research, and the contents of the report are key in harnessing advances in science and technology. These developments, research and innovations work to improve our state's resources, and how great is that, to see such developments translated into practice.

Our system has built resilience and continues to deliver on public health priorities. I was proud to learn that water quality standards are improving across Victoria, even just compared to the previous year: 488 localities, that is 98.3 per cent of the state, continuously met all water quality standards in the regulations in 2021–22. That is up from 465 localities, or 97.7 per cent of the state, in the previous year. How good is that? I am proud to note that the bar keeps getting raised and that Victorians are protected. These water quality standards are measurable and effective in ensuring that people and the wider community are protected from terrible diseases such as E. coli and avoid elevated levels of triethylamine, which can lead to negative health effects such as cancer and adverse reproductive

outcomes. It is incredible to note that the department works to make sure that these integral processes run smoothly and that their oversight continues to ensure that water qualities are set at a high standard, and 468 localities can rest assured they are being looked after and their health is of the utmost importance.

I would also like to take a moment to acknowledge how far the development of the water management system has progressed over time. Continuous research and aid into the provision of water, the development of biotech, helps and strengthens our communities in many ways. Thinking back, I remember when water fluoridation was introduced in my area of Southern Metro. That was back in 1977. These forethinking ideas and the development of science and technology has helped Victorian families and the community a great deal. It has saved Victoria an estimated \$1 billion through things like avoided dental costs and days away from work and schools and other costs. That is just one of the many reasons that I am proud to speak on this report today. Their work strengthens Victoria and helps us thrive in more ways than one. I thank them for the work they do and look forward to continuing to advocate for Victoria's public health measures to be of the highest standard. I would like to thank Minister Shing and her office for their leading work in this space, work that led to Water Melbourne in 2022 taking out the Ixom Best Tasting Tap Water in Australia competition. I commend this report to the house.

Remembrance Parks Central Victoria

Report 2021–22

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:15): I rise to speak on the annual report of Remembrance Parks Central Victoria that was tabled in the Parliament on 20 December 2022. On Tuesday this week a number of families from Bendigo travelled to Parliament to hand over a petition bearing more than 15,000 signatures condemning the board of Remembrance Parks Central Victoria for the desecration of graves of their loved ones by the trust. Unfortunately the petition was conducted via change.org, and therefore it is not in a format that can be tabled in the Parliament. So instead I personally delivered the petition to the office of the Minister for Health. Regardless of its format, the intention of the petition is clear. Families do not have faith in the board of RPCV to manage their cemeteries with the compassion required, and if the board will not resign then the minister must sack them and appoint a more competent and compassionate board.

In January this year the board of management of RPCV caused unimaginable pain to members of both the Bendigo and Shepparton communities when they desecrated graves where families had created small memorials or placed cherished personal items and, on some graves, modest floral tributes. Many of the graves targeted by RPCV were graves of children, and some of the personal items placed on those graves had very personal meaning. These items included small toys that the children had played with or a comforter the children could not sleep without. Some were solar lights for children who were afraid of the dark. These items were taken and destroyed with no prior warning to families. In some cases the items were smashed on the spot and the broken pieces left to upset the family even more. Families were distraught and felt these precious items had been stolen from their children.

RPCV's board chair Marg Lewis has shown no compassion to families and initially doubled down on the policy in interviews where she defended RPCV's right to remove items without consultation, claiming they did not fit with the board's adornment policy. It was only after *A Current Affair* backed the distraught families that Ms Lewis and the board did a very poorly executed backflip and blamed the CEO for implementing the board's policy. This board under the so-called leadership of Marg Lewis has a history of failure in governance. In May last year they put forward a proposal to increase the cost of funerals by 300 per cent. That went down like a lead balloon, and the board was forced to do a backflip. During that process the then CEO suddenly disappeared and was replaced by the board chair's captain's pick as acting CEO, and later the same person became the official CEO. Now after this latest debacle, this new CEO has gone, when the board actually should have been the ones to lose their jobs.

Under pressure, the board commissioned a review of their operations. But they set the terms of reference themselves, which no-one has seen, and they appointed the so-called independent reviewer. A meeting was recently held to report the outcomes of the review. However, the board made it clear that they would not be releasing the report. The meeting was a disgrace, and the board spent most of the time speaking at people rather than listening. The reviewer Lucas Robertson reported on his 12 recommendations, but we never heard what the findings of the review were. The recommendations centred around community engagement, communication and relationships, but it was clear the board did not intend to change their ways when they only allowed 10 minutes for questions. After the audience made it clear how they felt about the question time, that time was extended for a further 15 minutes. But it was not long enough, and people left angry. I actually said to Lucas Robertson that I felt it was a waste of his time conducting the review, as it is clear from the board's behaviour that they do not intend taking his advice.

I hope the minister will take on board the level of concern in the community about the competence of this board, as evidenced by the more than 15,000 signatories to the petition. The only action that will resolve the situation is for the minister to remove this board and replace it with a new, compassionate board that will have the confidence of the community to manage their cemeteries, and I call on the minister to act with haste to sack the board of RPCV.

Department of Treasury and Finance

Budget papers 2022–23

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (17:20): I would like to make a statement on the Department of Treasury and Finance budget papers 2022–23, particularly budget papers 3 and 4 that pertain to housing. We are in a housing affordability crisis. On any given night in this state over 30,000 people are experiencing homelessness. Over 120,000 people are on the waiting list for public housing. The majority of those are in urgent need of public housing, and thousands more are experiencing rental stress like we have not seen before. People are living in cars, in tents, on couches and on the streets.

We are having people turn up to our offices, call our phones and email us constantly in dire distress because they do not know where they are going to sleep that night, and I know it is not our offices only that are hearing from these distressed Victorians. I have talked to many MPs across this place who are saying they are experiencing housing distress and constituents turning up to their offices like they have never seen before, and that is happening because we have let housing affordability get to a catastrophic crisis in Victoria because governments have not done enough to make housing more affordable. The reason why constituents are turning up to MPs offices is because the social service sector cannot cope with the demand that we are seeing – unprecedented demand – for housing and homelessness services.

It is time for this Parliament and for this government to act, and to act with urgency. But what do this government and these budget papers tell us about what the government's priorities are when it comes to housing affordability? Let us talk about budget paper 3, which has no plan for renters – thousands of renters experiencing distress, so many of them in the chamber here this morning to hear of the inquiry into rental affordability. Budget paper 4 – no money for new public housing, but it does demonstrate that four times the amount of money that is going into so-called social housing is being spent on toll roads in Victoria. If you want to know what the priorities of this government are, that budget paper tells you. It is writ large what this government prioritises.

What does this government do in the face of a housing affordability crisis? In this chamber we saw a live example just today. Faced with a choice about investigating something so we can come up with solutions together – thousands of people in the midst of a rental crisis want an inquiry into rental affordability – what does this government do? It stands opposed, and instead of discussion in good faith the minister for landlords – sorry, the Minister for Consumer Affairs, who has by the way the highest number of investment properties I think of anyone in these houses, which is not much of a

conflict of interest, but that aside, calls the property industry to lobby members of Parliament to vote against an inquiry into making rentals more affordable in Victoria. He calls the inquiry ‘a prank’, ‘student politics’ and ‘childish’ instead of negotiating in good faith with this Parliament to get to the bottom of what is happening with the rental affordability crisis. We went in good faith to negotiate, but he slammed the door in our face and by doing so slammed the door in every renter’s face who came to this chamber to ask for a solution to the crisis that we are facing.

If you ever wondered what values drive the modern Labor Party, well, they are writ large in this chamber today – a bunch of neoliberal centrists who have lost their way, so much so that they are evicting a 68-year-old woman from public housing. Margaret Kelly was in the chamber yesterday. She had gone to the minister’s office last week to ask for a meeting. She had to stage a sit-in in the minister’s lobby because the minister would not give her a meeting to hear her out. Instead of meeting her they called in the police and surrounded her. That is what the Labor government does to its own renters, putting this government in the running to become the worst landlord right across this state. Maybe that is why they did not want an inquiry into renters, because they too are a very terrible landlord.

This Parliament has a job to do: to put ideas on the table, to hold the government to account and to find solutions, and that is what we could have done today. Instead, while demolishing public housing estates you are privatising our public housing. Your ground lease model is a con. It is PR spin that hands millions of dollars to private developers and knocks down our public housing. This government does not care about housing affordability in Victoria. It is the reason you knocked back a parliamentary inquiry into making rentals more affordable. It is the reason you put no money into public housing in the budget.

V/Line

Report 2021–22

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:25): I am pleased to speak on the 2021–22 V/Line annual report. V/Line services are a vital link in our public transport network, boosting connectivity across our state. The success of V/Line is of importance to communities across Melbourne and especially regional Victoria. I note that the Andrews Labor government has remained committed to providing needed funding to V/Line and has enacted much-needed reforms in recent years. In particular we have seen a number of developments through the Regional Rail Revival as one aspect of Victoria’s Big Build which has seen improvements across the V/Line network, in particular in the west of the state on the Ballarat line with the duplication of the track with new crossing loops; 135 new services each and every week; upgraded stations at Bacchus Marsh, Ballan, Rockbank and Wendouree; a new 20-minute peak time frequency, 40 minutes off-peak; a new station at Cobblebank; and new stabling at Ararat, which has enabled the provision of an extra weekday daily service as well.

To the north-west of the state around Bendigo we have seen new stations at Goornong, at Huntly and at Raywood. In the north-east we upgraded stations at Donnybrook and Wallan, with 10 extra trains a week already running to Shepparton, VLocity trains coming to the Albury and Shepparton lines and new stabling and station upgrades as well. To the south-west on the Geelong line we have seen duplication of the track from South Geelong to Waurn Ponds, a hugely important project for that growing part of southern Geelong; three level crossing removals; as well as upgrades to Waurn Ponds, South Geelong and Marshall stations. We have also seen an extra daily service to Warrnambool, with VLocity trains again coming on that line soon, which has been a much-needed boost to those communities. On the Gippsland line we have upgraded stations at Bunyip, Longwarry, Morwell and Traralgon, along with duplication of the track and the new Avon River Bridge near Stratford.

Most importantly of all, though, we have fairer fares with the introduction of the regional fare cap of \$9.20 per day or \$4.60 for concession travellers. We have seen the absolute difference this makes to all regional rail travellers and to regional communities as well. I note my colleague Ms Ermacora made a number of comments this morning in her account of what people in Warrnambool said to her and what a difference it made to their lives when that policy came in.

There is a lot of work that this Andrews Labor government is doing when it comes to V/Line, and there is much more that we will be doing. It is fantastic to see as well a bouncing back from COVID. Patronage has rebounded strongly, recovering from the 2020–21 financial year. There have been an additional 1.77 million patrons, a 20.6 per cent increase, with 19.6 per cent more train and coach passenger trips in the financial year 2021–22 when compared to the previous year. This is a government that is investing in our public transport infrastructure and services in Melbourne and, most especially, in regional Victoria.

Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission

Operation Daintree: Special Report

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (17:28): I am pleased to rise again to speak to the *Operation Daintree: Special Report*, which is one of the very serious corruption probes into this government. I have mentioned this in previous sittings, but it is worth talking about again because it goes to the point we are speaking about today, the concerns that I have raised, which I have also mentioned around another inquiry that has been referred to IBAC from the Ombudsman into ambulance data and code reds and code oranges. What we do know from various former members of the Parliament is that in relation to this report they have commented that the tentacles go everywhere from the Premier's private office. This report goes to the heart of those corruption allegations. Just to recap, it was the Health Workers Union in 2018 that was lobbying the government on violence-related issues in the health industry. There was concern about that, which was very valid concern, because there are rising cases of violence in our hospitals, and I think there was every right for somebody to raise those concerns with the minister at the time. But what was concerning was that the Premier, again at the heart of this corruption scandal, was out there and his office was intricately involved in the machinations of what occurred.

So what occurred was that a contract was awarded for over \$1 million, but there was no tender process, there was no competitive process undertaken. So it just shows that a Labor-aligned union that is associated with the Premier and this government has got access to be able to undertake this work. Now, what we found and what has been found subsequently through that is pretty alarming, because when it was awarded was on the eve of the 2018 state election and the caretaker period that was coming into play, so it was undertaken on the eve of that time. And that just shows you the extent of what the government would do to buy off their union mates and votes and how that plays out and how that is really bad governance. It is very bad governing for Victorians because of the corrupt process.

The actual project itself, which did not go to any sort of competitive process and was awarded to the Health Workers Union, was around giving a single provider, the Health Education Federation – basically a registered training organisation within the Health Workers Union – an ability to undertake this work about looking at the risk of occupational violence and looking at training programs. It was really shoddy. It was put together. But this was a lot of money, and people might recall that the Premier had gone out outside the Austin and talked about \$2.2 million. Now, when he was questioned about this a few weeks ago, he could not recall that. It sounds very similar to the 4000 intensive care beds that he could not recall either. He has got a very significant track record of an inability to recall the most important facts around contentious issues.

But I do think that the comments around what IBAC found around those 'tentacles', as they have been described by former ministers, about ministerial advisers working in the Minister for Health's office and exerting pressure on the Department of Health just shows you the level of influence that the Premier's own private office and the ministerial office had on this. I think it is very, very concerning. And I think that again, we have seen four IBAC inquiries that we know of that the Premier has been himself involved in. That is no record that anyone should be proud of, and it demonstrates just how many concerns people have about the conduct of the Premier and his government and what is actually being undertaken in this state. I will have more to say on this in future weeks, but as my time has expired, I will leave it there.

Adjournment

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (17:33): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Early childhood education

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (17:33): (215) My matter is for the Minister for Early Education and Pre-Prep and concerns our transformative early childhood reforms. How are our Best Start, Best Life reforms supporting our children and families in my electorate of Eastern Victoria, specifically in the local government areas of Mornington Peninsula, South Gippsland, Wellington and East Gippsland? This year kids all over Victoria started free kinder thanks to the government's Best Start, Best Life reforms. Participating kindergartens in the Eastern Victoria Region will provide free three- and four-year-old kindergarten for up to 15 hours a week, helping families with the rising cost of living by saving them up to \$2500 for each child each year. Thanks to these reforms a generation of three-year-olds can now access play-based learning at a critical time in their development, both emotionally and academically.

There are so many examples of the impact this is making across Eastern Victoria. I visited Yarram and met the team and kids at the brilliant Yarram Early Learning Centre. It is growing faster than anyone imagined, in part due to free three-year-old kinder. So to help meet demand the Victorian state government are investing \$2 million for new rooms through the Building Blocks program. The benefits of this policy run deeper than meets the eye. It ties together so many threads of what our government stands for: delivering a fairer, healthier and more prosperous Victoria. There are also the great savings to time that these investments are making for families with the development of kindergartens at school sites to reduce the number of drop-offs in the morning.

I am proud to say that Korumburra Primary School is one of the schools that it was recently announced would have a kinder built on site. A new two-room centre that opens to an outdoor learning and play space will be built at the school. It means 66 more kids aged three and four from the local community will be able to access kinder on site at the local primary school. Having the kindergarten and school together will help local children make a smooth transition from preschool to prep and make drop-offs for families with kinder- and school-aged children simpler.

This initiative will obviously be good for children's development. Research tells us that 90 per cent of a child's brain development occurs before the age of five. That is why a high-quality play-based education is critical for the development of life skills that will set children up for the future. But it will also be good for families. Parents, particularly women, can get back to work, which is a long-term investment in our people and our state's productivity. It means those extra hours parents work can go towards the family and make a net gain for their time, not just paying kinder bills.

Gumnuts Early Learning Centre in Sale have just opened their brand new kinder building with a lot of excitement from the volunteer committee, the staff, the kids and local families. Gumnuts received a \$1.5 million Building Blocks capacity grant for a modular kindergarten to provide another 66 free three- and four-year-old kinder spots. I visited just before it was finished to see the final touches being made. Finally, a huge thanks to the amazing early childhood educators who make everything happen on the ground in our wonderful early education centres.

WorkCover

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:36): (216) My adjournment matter is to the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC in the other place. The action I seek is for the minister to provide me and all Victorian business owners with an assurance that there will not be an increase in WorkCover premiums in next week's state budget. Most Victorian businesses, but in particular small businesses, are under extreme financial pressure as a result of the ongoing mismanagement of the

Victorian economy by the state government. This mismanagement is evidenced by the fact that since being elected the current state government has presided over more than 40 new and increased taxes. These new and increased taxes have dramatically impacted Victorian businesses, and the last thing that any Victorian business needs in this current economic climate is yet another tax imposed on it via an increase in WorkCover premiums. We all know that the WorkCover system has been totally mismanaged by Labor since it came to office, which is evidenced by the fact that the government has had to inject \$1 billion into WorkCover over the last two years just to keep it afloat. Minister, in these very difficult financial times, Victorian businesses need assistance, not to be hit yet again with premium increases or more new or increased taxes. I look forward to the minister's response so I can convey that to the many businesses in my electorate.

Equal Opportunity Act 2010

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:38): (217) My adjournment matter today is for the attention of the Attorney-General and is related to transparency around exemptions granted under section 89 of the Equal Opportunity Act 2010. After attending the Let Women Speak rally a couple of months back, I have been paying more attention to the interaction of different laws and how they manage any conflicts between rights. The Equal Opportunity Act allows for a mechanism to apply for an exemption to parts of that act. In researching the nature of exemptions granted, it was notable that even though staff in my office were attempting to understand Victorian laws, they accidentally stumbled across a helpful list published on the New South Wales anti-discrimination website. The laws are quite similar, but in New South Wales they at least have some data transparency. There is a full list published there, and interested people can easily understand which organisations are exempt and why.

My office contacted the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission to ask if there was a similar list in Victoria but did not receive a reply. In Victoria there does not seem to be an easy list for people to view. You have to search through the *Government Gazette* and find each single application. It is interesting when you go through them. There are various applications for schools so they can remain gender balanced, whatever that means these days. There are exemptions for military contractors as they have requirements under laws in other jurisdictions related to national security matters. There are various laws for women's organisations and a couple to allow for discrimination based on age. It is useful information, and it should be clearly published in a way that is easy to understand. My request for the Attorney-General is to work with the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission to ensure that a list of organisations that have been granted exemptions under the Equal Opportunity Act is published and publicly available.

Water safety education

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:40): (218) I raise a matter for the Minister for Employment in the other place, and the action that I seek is for the minister to update the house on progress on the government's Swim program. Swim is a \$3.4 million partnership between Jobs Victoria and Swim Coaches and Teachers Australia. The program's purpose is to create 280 inclusive employment opportunities at pools and leisure centres around the state through funded training and support. The program provides successful outcomes for many different stakeholders: firstly, the people taking up the opportunity to be trained as a swimming teacher and learn new skills will benefit from a new, fulfilling and rewarding career; swimming schools will benefit from a new workforce post COVID; and children and adults will benefit from receiving life-saving swimming skills.

The past summer has been one of the worst for drownings for two decades, and at least 45 people have drowned across Victoria since 1 July last year, which is the worst on record. According to the *Herald Sun*, every beach drowning over this past summer happened where people were swimming in places without lifesaving patrols, and rescues at patrolled beaches have increased, with more than 320 people rescued just in the month of January this year.

The Swim program is in addition to another Andrews Labor government program facilitating 300 swimming teacher roles in a \$5.7 million partnership with Aquatics & Recreation Victoria. Both programs will result in 580 Victorians gaining new, stable employment, with those prioritised being young people aged 18 to 25, people with a disability, women aged 45 and over and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. These programs will also result in reducing the backlog of families seeking lessons for their young children post COVID restrictions that prevented swimming lessons.

According to Life Saving Victoria, for every fatal drowning there were three non-fatal drownings. Research and evaluation manager Dr Hannah Calverley said for children aged nought to four this increased to eight non-fatal drownings for every one fatal incident. These can have lifelong debilitating consequences on the person and their family. Dr Calverley said it was essential for the public to make water safety a priority and how important it is that if people are going to coastal locations to swim they ensure that they are at a patrolled location.

These very important swimming education and employment programs are making sure that more families engage with swimming safety messages, and as a result these most tragic drownings will decrease. In closing, I am very keen for the Minister for Employment to update the house on the success of these vital and timely programs.

Traralgon Men's Shed

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:43): (219) My adjournment debate is for the Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers, and I am very pleased that she is here with us tonight at the table to listen to my action and request. Minister Blandthorn has been very gracious, and I very much enjoyed her speech upstairs at the men's shed event. We are hosting in Queen's Hall a wonderful display of men's sheds' intricate woodwork, toys and artisan woodworking artefacts that show the talent but also the engagement that men's shed participants have in our communities and the importance of men's sheds, and I really appreciate what Minister Blandthorn has said.

She said in her speech at the men's shed event that there were many other examples of wonderful events and things that the government has funded and supported, and it was really good to hear. But the one that piqued my interest was a comment around the Traralgon Men's Shed. In good faith and with goodwill, I am sure, the minister said that the government is funding the Traralgon Men's Shed after it had been flood affected, which we know happened in 2021. It is on public land, and through the floods it was basically awash. That men's shed can no longer access funding to be there, because it cannot be insured because it is a high flood risk area. They have been seeking funding since that time – for the last two years – to relocate. The government has provided some funding for the roller derby to relocate up to Glenview Park, which is up at the racecourse at Traralgon. They are delighted, and I am delighted for them, but the funding was not sufficient to move the men's shed up there. I just rang the secretary of the men's shed to see whether they had heard anything, and she said, 'Not as yet.'

I am sure the minister has communicated this in very good faith, but I would appreciate it if the minister could respond to the Traralgon Men's Shed to explain her comment about the fact that the Andrews government was building a new men's shed in Traralgon and potentially even go and visit the Traralgon men's shedders, because they are a fantastic group of people who have been devastated by that flood. They make furniture for primary schools. As the minister said, it is such an integral part of supporting their mental health, and we would love to see a new men's shed in Traralgon. It would be fabulous. The action I seek is: can the minister explain this in person to the men's shedders of Traralgon?

LGBTIQ+ community safety

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:46): (220) Today on IDAHOBIT my adjournment matter is for the Minister for Police. Recent attacks on the LGBTIQ+ community from extremist groups, including in my own electorate, where council-endorsed family and community

events have been targeted, have shown us that vilification is escalating. It cannot be ignored. Cancelling events for fear of these bigots is the very thing those bigots set out to achieve. It is not the solution. We in the LGBTIQ+ community need to be protected, not pushed out of public life. I acknowledge that the Victorian government has committed to extending anti-vilification laws to protect members of the LGBTIQ+ community, but an 18-month wait for those laws, as foreshadowed by the Attorney-General in this chamber last week, is a long wait in the face of the violence that is escalating in our community right now.

It does not mean that the police are powerless to address the hate speech and bigotry that is unfolding in our community. Under our current and existing laws prosecutions are possible: under section 17 of the Summary Offences Act 1966 for threatening language and behaviour in public; under sections 20 and 21A of the Crimes Act 1958 for threats to kill or inflict injury or for a course of conduct intended to cause apprehension or fear, and under section 195H for affray in the form of threatened violence that would cause a reasonable person to fear for their safety; and under section 474.17 of the Commonwealth Criminal Code Act 1995 for online conduct designed to menace, harass or cause offence. Our police should be vigorously policing abhorrent hate speech because it rips at the harmonious, peaceful and respectful fabric of our society. That type of policing should be happening now. The action I seek is that the minister takes all steps possible to ensure that Victoria Police are using the full force of the law currently at their disposal to criminally charge and deter the bigoted behaviour.

Southern Metropolitan Region level crossing removals

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (17:48): (221) Tonight my adjournment is for the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure in the other place Minister Allan, and the topic of my adjournment is the level crossing removal authority and the great work that they do. I will come to the action I seek shortly. Since being elected in November 2014, our government's priority has been clear: to remove level crossings. In my community of Southern Metro Melbourne we are removing every single level crossing on the Frankston, Cranbourne and Pakenham lines, and every level crossing in Southern Metropolitan on the Belgrave and Lilydale lines – gone. We have already removed two on the Glen Waverley line, and that is a big deal.

Recently I attended the Union Road, Surrey Hills, and Mont Albert Road, Mont Albert, works site tour, where I was given an update on the work that has been completed there. What better way to visit these important works than with the Parliamentary Secretary for Level Crossing Removals, a member in the other place Josh Bull, and the member for Box Hill in the other place Paul Hamer. It was so exciting to see the apprentices and uni students learning their craft on the job. As I often say, these are jobs of the future. We need the workers. Not only are these apprentices and students learning the tricks of the trade, but they are also getting a hand in a historical infrastructure project. The level crossing in Surrey Hills along Union Road was deemed one of the most dangerous in metropolitan Melbourne, with eight near misses since 2005 and a tragic loss of life in 2016. A car was trapped inside, and it was evident that urgent action needed to be taken. With the Union Road level crossing gone we can now look to a safer Victoria. Prior to the level crossing removal the boom gate on Union Road was down for 40 per cent of the morning peak – that is 40 per cent. Think of all the time this project will save the people of Mont Albert and Surrey Hills.

This is the Andrews Labor government in action: big projects delivering for Victorians, and not just talking the talk but walking the walk. We are almost halfway through one of the biggest excavations the project has seen. On the site we viewed the progress of the dig and the installation of the lift shafts. The action that I seek is for the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure in the other place Minister Allan to join me at a site of her choosing, no less, because there are so many to choose from in the community of Southern Metropolitan, for a tour of the works.

Mildura Base Public Hospital

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:50): (222) My adjournment matter is directed to the Treasurer, and it concerns funding to deliver a new Mildura Base Public Hospital for the people of Sunraysia and the north-west. The action that I seek is for the Treasurer to ensure that the 2023–24 state budget includes a funding commitment to construct a new world-class Mildura Base Public Hospital that will deliver better health services for the Sunraysia community.

The continued ignorance displayed by the Andrews Labor government towards the health needs of the Sunraysia community is nothing short of disgraceful. It seems as if the Andrews Labor government has forgotten the Mildura base hospital even exists. The people of the north-west have waited patiently for the release of the Mallee health plan, a document that it was promised would articulate Labor's plans to deliver a new hospital, which is so badly needed. Excuse after excuse for the delay was offered up, first by former health minister Mr Foley and then by the current health minister Ms Thomas. Then during the election campaign the people of Mildura watched as Labor announced funding for other regional hospitals but nothing for them. In the end voters became fed up with Labor's inaction and ditched the Labor-voting independent member, replacing her with a coalition member at the last state election. This result was the local community sending the Premier and his government the message that they both need and want a new hospital.

What is in no doubt is the wonderful work of staff at the current Mildura hospital, who care for their community whilst working in a facility that no longer meets the health needs of the region. In the last 12 months the Mildura Base Public Hospital has experienced a code yellow: unable to meet patient demand due to maximum capacity being reached. Patient wait times have exceeded 12 hours. This is unacceptable, because patients do not have the choice to go to another hospital due to their remote location. In contrast to the Liberal and National coalition election commitment of \$750 million to construct a new Mildura Base Public Hospital, the Andrews Labor government has no plans and has committed nothing. The Treasurer has a chance to rectify this in the upcoming state budget. The current hospital no longer meets the health needs of the Sunraysia community, and a new world-class hospital needs to be built. I urge the Treasurer to include in the budget an appropriate funding commitment that will deliver a new Mildura Base Public Hospital, which the people of the north-west both need and deserve.

Anti-vilification legislation

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:53): (223) My adjournment matter is for the Premier, and the action I seek is for the Premier to take on the growing threat of far-right and transphobic ideology by passing anti-vilification laws that protect trans and gender-diverse people as a matter of priority. Earlier this year I stood in this place and I asked for action against the vile comments made against the queer community. A month later I asked again for action after neo-Nazis gathered on the steps of our Parliament calling my community freaks and paedophiles. Now I stand here because I have to, again, because multiple family-friendly events held by queer people for the community have been cancelled due to threats from the same people we have been calling on you to take action against: events intended to celebrate the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia, which as many of you has noted is today.

Not only am I here as a member for North-Eastern Metro, where the Eltham Library was targeted today by these vile anti-queer bigots, but I am also here as a queer person. This is my community. I am seeing my community being called paedophiles and groomers and receiving threats of violence just for existing. I have to watch these hateful people call me a groomer for just defending my community's right to exist – a community of love, of acceptance.

You say this hatred does not stand in Victoria. Then why are you allowing it to continue? I invited drag performer Belial B'Zarr to Parliament last week to talk to them about what the community is going through right now. Belial is an incredible performer and fashion designer. They have had multiple of their events targeted and cancelled this year. He told me queer people are being harassed

and assaulted in the streets. He told me the community needs action now, because they are terrified as to how much this violence will progress. Just look how much it has escalated in six months because these groups feel that they are winning.

We are human beings and we are in danger. It is not hyperbole. We are in danger. You have a duty to protect the community, so where are you? You keep saying you are here for us, that our rights are non-negotiable. But where are you? An 18-month time frame for action is an absolute joke, especially for something you have known about for years. You have had years to take action, and instead you are dragging your feet and getting angry about the Greens putting public pressure on you to act whilst my community has had to learn to protect itself, whilst my community is scared to be themselves for fear of being harassed in the streets. No more cupcakes, no more chalk butterflies on pavements. You have the power to change this. Where are you?

Child protection

Matthew BACH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:56): (224) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Child Protection and Family Services, and it is regarding another quite amazing community meeting that I attended in Dandenong just last week. The minister was invited to this meeting, but she could not attend because she was at the Yoorrook Justice Commission giving important testimony. I was very pleased at this meeting to see some departmental representatives, because the purpose of this meeting with the Indigenous community in Dandenong was to provide feedback to government about a meeting that I attended last November.

Now, last November when this current minister was not the minister for child protection, the then minister was invited. He could not come. He was defending the seat of Bundoora, which I think has a margin of, I do not know, about 16 per cent, so he needed to be on campaigning matters. Members of the department were invited. They could not come. They erroneously told the organiser Kylie Bell that it was because of the fact that the election was upcoming, because in the caretaker period they could not possibly turn up to such an important community meeting and just listen to Indigenous elders and the broader Indigenous community at the epicentre of Labor's Indigenous child removal crisis.

We know that in Victoria one in nine Aboriginal babies are removed by this government – the worst rate in the country, but things are even worse than that in Dandenong. It was an extraordinary meeting last November. Notes, which I am currently holding, were provided to the members of the department who were good enough to finally show up last week – as I showed up again and as Ms Hermans showed up. Numerous members of the Labor Party in addition to the minister – who had a very, very good excuse for not attending; I am not criticising her for a moment – were invited to attend. None of them could. The local lower house member was invited to attend, I was informed by the organisers, but she was too busy. Ms Hermans was not too busy; she showed up. And so we sat there and we listened.

I am currently in the process of putting every single element of feedback on the record into a question on notice to the minister, who always responds to my questions on notice – and I am sure she will in due course. My adjournment matter, though, tonight is this: the action that I seek from the minister is to commit to the significant reorientation of child protection funding that has been called for by the Indigenous community in Dandenong, which of course has been called for by me and those of us on this side of the house for many years.

In the feedback that was provided to the minister's officials the other day, members of the local Indigenous community said this. They had great concern that:

... the funding in OOHs is being placed in the wrong place 86% placed on removing children –

this is the language of the local Indigenous community –

and 14% to community services to support these children and placements.

This is a matter I have been talking about for years. The Indigenous community has been talking about it for years. I would love a response from the minister.

Preston Market

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (17:59): (225) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Planning, and the action I seek is that she formally responds to the Darebin community's request for Preston Market to be publicly acquired. Preston Market has been a much-loved local landmark since it was built in 1970. The people's market, as it is known, is an important community hub that provides locals with access to fresh food and community connections. But the market has been under threat from its current owners, property developers Salta Properties, who are seeking to demolish most of the market and replace it with apartments.

Last month the Victorian Planning Authority Projects Standing Advisory Committee released its report on the future of the Preston Market precinct. It recommended that more be done to recognise and protect the character of the market, including its heritage status, and that a much more substantial proportion of the market be retained. In response, the government announced that a heritage overlay would be applied to the market to retain a significant portion of the existing market and protect its heritage value. Understandably, the Darebin community, who have been fighting to save the market for years, view the standing advisory committee recommendations with some scepticism. They and I still hold serious concerns about the shape of the development and what it will mean for the market's future. The standing advisory committee missed an opportunity to push for much more public and affordable housing and nation-leading environmental sustainability at this site, instead agreeing that that up to – not a minimum of but up to – 10 per cent of affordable housing on the site was sufficient. In a housing crisis, when we desperately need more public and affordable housing in central locations close to public services, not pushing for more mandatory affordable housing at the Preston Market precinct is incredibly short-sighted. While the government has indicated that a significant proportion of the market will be retained, it is unclear as to what this will actually mean. Given that so far the government has been more interested in progressing the redevelopment, the community has understandably lost confidence that the planning framework will deliver fair outcomes.

The stall operators and the community stand to be the biggest losers in all of this. Salta has demonstrated little regard for the welfare of stallholders and the interests of the community. Even after the standing advisory committee report was tabled and the government indicated their support for protection of more of the market, fliers were being handed out that seemed to threaten stallholders with an early shutdown of the market. This has been intimidating and stressful for stallholders and the community.

While we now have the standing advisory committee report, they are just recommendations. The ultimate decision about the market's redevelopment remains with the government. The community has put forward an alternative to private development: that it is brought into public hands through a compulsory public acquisition. They argue the markets are an important public space and public service and that other local markets like the Queen Victoria Market are publicly owned and managed. We need community spaces like Preston Market now more than ever. We cannot let short-sighted planning turn the market into a developers paradise that makes them squillions of dollars and leaves the community socially and economically poorer. The community is seeking a response from the government to their alternative plan. I ask the minister to formally respond to the Darebin community's request for public acquisition of the Preston Market.

SBS headquarters

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:02): (226) Today I want to raise a matter for the Minister for Creative Industries, and it concerns our government-funded national broadcasters. Both of these are important organisations, and despite the issues that many conservatives have with the behaviour of the ABC, not least in the recent period during the coronation – leaving all that aside – they are very significant economic generators and spenders of taxpayers money in key industries.

What irritates me here in particular is that both organisations are headquartered in Sydney. They both spend a significant share of their funding. In the case of the ABC 50 per cent of their staff are located in New South Wales and only 17 per cent are located in Victoria. In the case of the SBS 82 per cent of their staff are located in New South Wales and just 14 per cent of their staff are located in Victoria. This is important because there are jobs and linkages to the production areas of a number of key areas like writing and to the multicultural communities that are so significant in Victoria in the case of SBS. I make the point that Victoria is the most multicultural state of any state. We have the highest growth rate of any state in the country and will have going forward, and the number of migrants coming from all over the world is very significant.

The other point that I would make to the Minister for Creative Industries is that this does have a significant effect, given the huge disparity of spending by SBS in the two states. This is what troubles me at the moment. The federal government, the Commonwealth government, has a plan to move the SBS headquarters from central Sydney to western Sydney, from Artarmon to somewhere yet to be described in central western Sydney. They have also put out a working party to deal with this.

I say that instead of moving to western Sydney the SBS should be moved to Victoria, and I think the Andrews government should join us in advocating for those resources to be moved to Victoria, for the SBS headquarters to be here. We are the most multicultural state. We have people from all over the world. Our population is growing, and on some measures Melbourne is already the biggest city. You might want to have that debate. But what is clear is the trend is very much in our direction and in terms of the multicultural communities that we have, so I would seek that the Minister for Creative Industries join with us in actually moving forward to push and pressure the federal government, to advocate to the federal government, that SBS be located in Melbourne – perhaps in the Monash or Dandenong corridor but certainly in Melbourne – not in western Sydney.

COVID-19 vaccination

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:06): (227) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health. Last sitting week I called upon the government to adopt more lenient measures in relation to COVID vaccine mandates for nurses due to ongoing workforce shortages. I was amazed at the number of emails I received in response to this from nurses and medical staff who shared their stories, and as a result I will adapt my request. A constituent from Evelyn who, according to his doctor, suffered vaccine-induced myocarditis said that he was granted a six-month exemption from all COVID vaccines, expiring May 2023, but that as long as Victoria's mandates remain in force he has no long-term prospects of employment in hospitals. Another constituent said that after suffering 15 weeks of pericarditis they were given an ongoing exemption. They said that nearly all hospital groups require mandatory vaccinations. If it were not for the fact that they work through agencies, they would also have no real choice but to leave their chosen career of 19 years. Given this feedback, I conclude that it is in fact time to drop vaccine mandates altogether. Shortages of nurses and midwives in Victoria have led to the closure of Epworth HealthCare's maternity services in Geelong. Last year Victoria University stated that Australia's nurses shortage had reached critical levels.

Nurses in my region have spoken to me regarding the secondary effects of staff shortages. The problem goes beyond people not being able to work in their chosen field. Secondary effects include nurses on wards being at too low a number, resulting in lower standards of care for patients and higher stress for staff. Nurse burnout is being seen at an unprecedented level. Nursing managers have said they have had to employ nurses from overseas while their former and skilled colleagues are unable to work, and nurses have been called out of retirement to fill this void. Research done by Health Workforce Australia shows that due to the ageing workforce and many other factors there could be a shortfall of more than 100,000 nurses by 2025 and 123,000 nurses by 2030. So the action I seek is that the Minister for Health ends the current COVID vaccine mandates in the healthcare sector.

Road safety

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:09): (228) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure and concerns the urgent problem with road infrastructure in Victoria, particularly country Victoria. This is not an impending crisis, something terrible which might happen one day if we do not deal with it now. It is an immediate problem. It is happening now. We know about problems of driver behaviour – speed, drink, drugs. But the condition of the roads is a critical factor, as those of us who drive on them regularly understand, and on this day dedicated to our SES volunteers I pay tribute to the brave and committed men and women who deal with sometimes horrific and distressing situations and yet keep putting themselves out there to keep us safe. We owe it to those volunteers, as well as the victims and families of serious and fatal road accidents, to do everything reasonable in our power to reduce the road toll.

So I was shocked to read the minister's response to my adjournment debate of 8 February, when I asked for a breakdown of the percentage of serious and fatal road accidents where investigating officers identified road conditions as a contributing factor. I was told the data is not available:

... while road conditions are assessed by Victoria Police as part of serious and fatal road accident investigations, the overall evaluation of the environment is holistic in nature and does not allow for the requested data reporting.

How can this be? With the bureaucracy imposed on police officers, and with a transport department full of officials and statisticians, do we really have no figures on how often road conditions contribute to serious road accidents? And what exactly does a 'holistic in nature' assessment tell us? Simple figures showing when accidents result from the condition of the road should be routinely collected.

Accidents can be caused by hitting potholes, by dangerously uneven road surfaces, by crumbling road shoulders or by vehicles swerving onto or driving on the wrong side of the road to avoid these hazards. These factors are apparent to investigators, and they must be recorded. How else can we tell what is truly causing the road toll? How else can we determine where to allocate resources in dealing with it? Serious and fatal road accidents have many, various and complex causes, but understanding the extent to which road surface conditions affect the statewide toll is an essential prerequisite to dealing with the problem properly. So the action I seek from the minister is a commitment to revamp the system and to record in a quantifiable way the impact of road conditions on serious and fatal road accidents.

Mickleham–Somerton roads, Greenvale

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (18:11): (229) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. The action I seek is for the minister to commit to an expedited replacement of the roundabout intersection of Somerton Road and Mickleham Road with traffic lights, not three years from now, not subject to being saved by federal Labor's infrastructure cuts – sorry, review. This needs to be fixed right away.

Earlier this month I was delighted to welcome Leader of the Opposition John Pesutto to the electorate of Northern Metropolitan in the suburb of Greenvale, and what a warm reception he had. What I heard and what we heard from Greenvale residents was that many of them are afraid to actually drive down Somerton Road and drive down Mickleham Road and go through that roundabout. Witnessing the roundabout firsthand, it is not hard to see why. Every day locals experience near misses on the roundabout of Somerton Road and Mickleham Road. If you manage to avoid the potholes, you are confronted with a roundabout that is too small and poorly marked. It creates endless confusion for drivers and is an accident waiting to happen. Indeed over the last few years there have been quite a few accidents, and it concerns me greatly. It is only a matter of time before there is a fatality, and that is the view of many Greenvale residents. Gemima, a local resident, dubbed it a 'Russian roulette roundabout'. Another, Margie, called the road more a deathtrap than a convenience. Kerime said that she is always on pins and needles entering the roundabout with two small kids in the back.

Members of the chamber would be unsurprised to hear that this dangerous roundabout forms part of the over-budget, long-delayed and less-than-half-committed Mickleham Road upgrade project – the same project on the federal government hit list that could be scrapped by the federal government entirely. I will note the government have said that they will install traffic lights, but we still do not have a time line. We still do not have a firm date, so locals feel like they have been left in the lurch. Once again Daniel Andrews and Labor are too focused on pumping up massive cost overruns on inner eastern Melbourne pet projects, and it is the people of Greenvale who lose out.

The government needs to, as I have been saying for a long time in regard to this project, stop taking the micky with Mickleham Road. Let us not forget Victoria's interest bill on our debt is costing us \$10 million a day. Over three weeks, the banks are receiving the same amount as their costing of the Mickleham Road duplication. So the action I seek from the government is to expedite the replacement of this dangerous deathtrap of a roundabout with traffic lights and stop taking the micky with Mickleham Road.

Responses

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers, Minister for Child Protection and Family Services) (18:14): A number of members have raised matters, and two members have raised matters for me, so I will deal with those first.

Dr Bach raised a matter for my attention as Minister for Child Protection and Family Services regarding a meeting that he attended in Dandenong last week. I do at the outset thank him for acknowledging that I was not at that meeting. I was at the Yoorrook Justice Commission providing important and I hope helpful evidence to the commission. I take this opportunity to thank the commission and the commissioners and their council for the work that they are doing. I am disappointed. I thought Dr Bach was interested in the answer to this question, but he is not here. But I do thank him for acknowledging why I was not at the meeting that he had last week. I did pick up on Mr Tarlamis's interjection as well that he was not actually invited to this meeting either, even though it falls within the area that Mr Tarlamis represents. I note that in the future perhaps Mr Tarlamis would like to be invited by Dr Bach to such a meeting as well. I will also acknowledge that Dr Bach acknowledged that at the time he met with these constituents and organisations back in November last year I was not actually the responsible minister, but I am very concerned about the same issues that he is.

We do all agree, and I think everyone in this chamber agrees, that there is an over-representation of Indigenous children in the child protection system. As we have all said, and as I said at the Yoorrook hearings last week, this is completely unacceptable, and our government has already indicated that we are committed to doing what we can to ensure that these shameful numbers are reduced. To that end I have been really pleased in the time that I have actually been the minister to meet with Aboriginal community controlled organisations and talk to them about what they think are the things that would assist in reducing the over-representation and ensuring that we protect the human rights of First Peoples children and that they get access to holistic family and child protection services that will ensure the safety and wellbeing of First Peoples children and indeed their families and their whole communities. I have been really touched by the generous and informative interactions that I have had, and indeed those that I have had with the Premier and many ACCOs, in relation to the things that they think would assist in improving the system, from things such as flexible funding and place-based solutions through to whether we look at the system as a whole. I completely agree that we need more early intervention and we need greater wraparound services, and as I have said a number of times, we need to be concentrating on the reunification of families. I thank Dr Bach for his matter. I can assure him that these are issues that our government is committed to and is working on, and when he is next in the chamber I will perhaps update him to that end.

Can I also thank Ms Bath for her adjournment matter in relation to the men's shed. I thank you for being here to hear the response to your adjournment matter, Ms Bath. It was indeed a wonderful event

upstairs and a culmination of the wonderful setting that we have had in Queen's Hall this week. The items on display really show the breadth of skills and talent that exist in our men's sheds. As was discussed by me and indeed the shadow minister, the work of men's sheds is broad. It extends not just to works such as the beautiful wooden items that we have in Queen's Hall but, as the shadow minister talked about in terms of his own electorate, to a sausage-making men's shed as well. The contributions of our men's sheds are truly wonderful. They are amazing. They provide an amazing service for men, ensuring that we provide not only outlets for their mental health and wellbeing but a forum in which they can also contribute to great social objectives. Some of the other ones that I spoke about upstairs I also spoke about in the chamber this morning, such as the Belgrave Men's Shed and their commitment to protecting local wildlife by making boxes for the birds to be housed in while the forest recovers from storm damage, as well as the one in Tatura and the work that they have done in relation to the installation of some local Indigenous art.

In relation to Traralgon, which the member raised, I will repeat the words that I said upstairs, which were that among the many projects we have recently supported – and I listed a couple of others – is a new shed in Traralgon after theirs was flooded in 2021. We were certainly very pleased to support this project through the 2022–23 grants round. My advice is that this application saw \$80,000 towards a \$120,000 fit-out of a new men's shed to be constructed by the council and that the new facility will replace the existing Traralgon Men's Shed facility, which was heavily impacted by flooding in June 2021 and can no longer be insured against damage caused by flooding. If the information has not been effectively communicated to Traralgon, we are more than happy to ensure that that explanation, as you have requested, is provided, and I can also point you to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing website, where that information is included.

On the other matters that have been raised, Mr McIntosh raised a matter for the Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-Prep, Ms Hermans raised a matter for the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC, Mr Limbrick raised a matter for the Attorney-General, Mr Galea raised a matter for the Minister for Employment, Ms Payne raised a matter for the Minister for Police, Mr Berger raised a matter for the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure, Ms Lovell raised a matter for the Treasurer, Mr Puglielli raised a matter for the Premier, Ms Ratnam raised a matter for the Minister for Planning, Mr Davis raised a matter for the Minister for Creative Industries, Ms Heath raised a matter for the Minister for Health, Mrs McArthur raised a matter for the minister for transport and Mr Mulholland raised a matter for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and I will pass all those matters on.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 6:21 pm.