



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Wednesday 3 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	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LDP	Tyrrell, Rikkie-Lee	Northern Victoria	PHON
Lovell, Wendy	Northern Victoria	Lib	Watt, Sheena	Northern Metropolitan	ALP

¹ Lib until 27 March 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; Nat – National Party of Australia;
 PHON – Pauline Hanson’s One Nation; SFFP – Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party

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Wednesday 3 May 2023

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

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

A Statutory Rule under the Corrections Act 1986 – No. 26.

Surveillance Devices Act 1999 – Inspection Report by the Victorian Inspectorate on surveillance device records inspected during the period 1 January 2022 to 30 June 2022, under section 30Q of the Act.

*Business of the house***Notices****Notices of motion given.***Members statements***More Trees for a Cooler, Greener West**

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-Prep, Minister for Environment) (09:41): I recently had the pleasure of joining a number of colleagues from the other place – Sarah Connolly MP, Natalie Hutchins MP, Luba Grigorovitch MP and Mat Hilakari MP – at Ardeer South Primary School to launch phase 3 of the More Trees for a Cooler, Greener West initiative, our plan to plant 500,000 new trees in the west. With over 190,000 trees already planted across phases 1 and 2, phase 3 will see over 131,000 new trees planted in the west, and Ardeer South Primary School teachers and students have done a magnificent job. They planted over 1700 native plants during phase 2 of the program in spring last year, and it was great to see how many of those trees have already grown quite substantially.

This \$2 million investment in phase 3 will see trees planted at 76 locations across six local government areas in the west, including Hobsons Bay, Maribyrnong, Brimbank, Melton, Moonee Valley and Wyndham. The Western Metropolitan Region has one of the lowest tree canopy covers in Melbourne, and by investing now in new trees outside schools, along trails, in parks and along residential streets we can create cooler and shaded spaces for local communities, improve the air quality, make the west more livable and combat climate change, helping to reach net zero emissions by 2045.

Berwick electorate schools

Matthew BACH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:43): I had a fabulous time the other day in Melbourne's outer south-east in Pakenham and in Clyde. I was invited to that part of the world by the member for Berwick, and I want to thank him for his invitation. Ms Hermans was there as well, and we toured a whole range of schools in that part of the world. There are all sorts of problems that schools are encountering in that part of the world – a workforce crisis that is really crippling so many of our schools. We know so many families after so many interest rate rises now are levered; they are under so much pressure because under the Andrews Labor government they pay more for what should be a free state education than parents anywhere else in the country.

But there were bright spots. In particular I had a fabulous time at Clyde Secondary College. Clyde Secondary College has teachers who were there through the Teach for Australia process, and I have long loved Teach for Australia. I am aware that one of the schools in the new part of our electorate, President, Mill Park Secondary College, has long been an advocate of the Teach for Australia project. My staff inform me that over 50 Teach for Australia teachers have gone through Mill Park; many are now in senior leadership positions. This fabulous program does such a good job of ensuring that its

ongoing teachers actually stick – stick in the workforce – which is such a problem for us given that our teachers are just drowning in red tape, if I am not mangling the analogy. So I want to thank my colleagues for inviting me to their part of the world. I want to thank Clyde Secondary College and in particular the leaders at Teach for Australia.

Fire Ops 101

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (09:44): Last week I had the opportunity to join my fellow colleague Ms Payne and other pivotal members of the Victorian community in the FRV Fire Ops 101 training. We were all buddied up with a qualified firefighter, dressed and kitted up with the essential personal protective clothing and equipment and sent out into the facility to undergo the same training scenarios that our firefighting cadets need to pass to become qualified firefighters. It was a physically challenging 5 hours but was entirely worth the experience to better appreciate the workload that our FRV members face on a daily basis. I would like to encourage all of my colleagues here in the chamber to consider partaking in the FRV Fire Ops 101 training day and be exposed to the tasks our emergency services perform to keep us safe every day.

Railway House, Beaconsfield

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:45): I am delighted to report that I have assisted the Beaconsfield community to save their treasured Railway House and bunya-bunya tree. The government is removing the level crossing at Station Street in Beaconsfield, which will see all level crossings removed along the Pakenham line and be one of 110 level crossings removed throughout Victoria. The preferred method of removal is to build a bridge over the line, and the location of the bridge will be right next to Railway House. This house was built in 1888 and is a local icon. The community's love for this house and the bunya-bunya tree is why so many campaigned to save it. I would like to acknowledge in particular Fran Healy, who dedicated many months to saving Railway House from demolition by advocating for her community. Cardinia Shire Council have the house listed as a historically significant property, and Cr Brett Owen also advocated to me on behalf of residents. The Beaconsfield Progress Association supported the campaign and held a public meeting that attracted over 70 people. On 21 March, in an adjournment in this place, I called on the minister to save the house and the tree. I spoke of the historical significance and of the people's passion to ensure that this property is retained. I am so thankful for the minister's intervention as is the Beaconsfield community. This house will now continue to be a point of pride next to Beaconsfield station, and I also look forward to working with the local community on plans for its future use.

Farm My School

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:46): Recently I saw the literal fruits of community efforts of the first successful pilot of Farm My School on the grounds of Bellarine Secondary College in Drysdale. Farm My School is the brilliant initiative of Geelong permaculture and sustainability gurus Ben Shaw and James McLennan. Driven by their passion for climate action, they identified that schools have access to land that could be used for food production. Students benefit by learning about food growing and waste practices and the creation of vocational career pathways, as well as weekly veggie boxes for school families and food for the school canteen. Communities get access to a commercially viable market garden, and the climate and environment benefit from reduced food miles and wastage.

In October last year I joined the local community who came together to build a farm in a day, a 24-hour farm building blitz that turned an empty field into rows and rows of garden beds. At the official launch in April, where we were joined by living gardening legend Costa, I was blown away by the transformation since last year. Ben's and James's vision had become a reality. Congratulations to everyone involved. There are so many other schools who want to be part of Farm My School, and I hope that we will see the program grow.

Melton multicultural community

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (09:48): I recently had the pleasure of meeting two very important community leaders in the Melton area. Mr Melvin Mata, a leader in the Filipino community, is a very active and engaged man. He cares deeply about his community and improving the lives of locals. I would like to acknowledge him as a man of integrity who works hard to ensure local Filipino communities' concerns are heard at every level of government. I look forward to working with Melvin in the future. He is an outstanding man, and he has got great prospects.

Mr Chander Sharma, a member of the local Indian community in Melton, is also a very caring, active and engaged man. When I met with Chander and his family I was touched by his commitment, his care for his local community and his love of family and spirituality. Chander is making a great contribution to the community of Melton, and I would like to acknowledge his dedication as a wonderful individual who makes a massive contribution.

The importance of our multicultural communities cannot be understated. I recently attended a citizenship ceremony for the City of Melton, and my message to the new citizens was this: you are welcome, you are respected and we love that you have chosen our community to build your future in.

Greek-Australian community

Sheena Watt (Northern Metropolitan) (09:49): In this job I am truly lucky to have worked with and celebrated the many different cultures that make up our diverse northern suburbs community. In the area of the Voice to Parliament referendum, it is now my turn to be sharing my culture and inviting others to help us move forward together as a nation. It was recently Greek Orthodox Holy Week, and to celebrate I gathered alongside Greek Australians in our local community at Philhellene restaurant, accompanied by music from a local Greek band and delicious 'nostimo' food. I was generously given the opportunity to share my story and speak from the heart about how my people want to be heard in a way that means we are truly listened to and in a way that cannot be taken away and that values our unique and special place in our nation.

I want to especially thank restaurant owners John and Susie Rerakis for inviting us to their amazing venue and extend my gratitude to local community activist Helen Politis for all that she does. Our nation must heal in order to move forward, and I want to thank the Greek-Australian community for standing with us on this journey.

Duck hunting

Georgie Purcell (Northern Victoria) (09:50): Last Wednesday I joined duck rescuers at Lake Connnewarre for the opening day of the Labor government's annual recreational duck-shooting season. Despite there being only a handful of shooters, rules were still broken: native waterbirds were shot and injured but not retrieved. After 10 am, when they were permitted to do so, volunteer rescuers entered the water to commence the almost impossible task of searching for wounded birds in the vast waters and thick reeds.

At wetlands across Victoria the reports of wounded birds came flooding in, with Wildlife Victoria reporting over 70 unretrieved birds across just five wetlands in the first five days, including eight threatened and protected species. Blue-winged shovelers and freckled ducks – threatened species – are legally shot and left to suffer at the hands of this dying so-called pastime. This season around 80,000 birds will be killed in Victoria, and with a wounding rate of 40 per cent, reported by the RSPCA, at least 32,000 birds will be shot and horrifically injured but not killed over the next five weeks. With shooters failing to retrieve birds, it is volunteer rescuers that save as many as possible from the prolonged suffering. May this year be the very last that birds suffer at the hands of this government.

Stella Young

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (09:52): You cannot be what you cannot see. There are more men, dog and horse statues than there are of women. Stella Young – writer, comedian, feminist and activist – was celebrated by her home town of Stawell last month. It was a privilege to witness the tributes and take part in the joyful celebration when the Minister for Women Natalie Hutchins unveiled the magnificent statue of Stella.

This was the first statue to be unveiled through the landmark Victorian women's public art program, a \$1 million investment through the Community Support Fund. Artists Sarah Barton, Jillian Pearce, Janice Florence and Fayen D'Evie collaborated with Lynne and Greg Young, Stella's parents, to develop the vision for the project, and local sculptor Danny Fraser created it. It is incredibly poignant to see photos regularly appearing on social media of children climbing on the statue in Cato Park in Stawell. Stella would have loved that. Stella said:

The journey towards disability pride is long, and hard, and you have to practise every single day.

She let us know:

I am not a snowflake. I am not a sweet, infantilising symbol of fragility and life ... I am a strong, fierce, flawed adult woman. I plan to remain that way, in life and in death.

And that she was. I am very proud of the Andrews government's commitment to increasing the profile of women in our society, and it is so fitting that Stella Young has been immortalised.

International Workers Memorial Day

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (09:54): In the past year 60 Victorians died from work-related incidents. It is a sobering number on paper, but a simple statistic does not do it justice. For every death there is a grieving family, there are friends who will never see a mate again and there are communities changed forever. Many more are seriously injured, suffering amputations and other life-changing trauma. Many of the workers who died in the past 12 months worked in construction, farming, manufacturing or transport. The number is even more shocking when we recognise that workplace death and injury is preventable.

Last Friday we paid our respects to these people and to the grieving families at an event for International Workers Memorial Day run by the Victorian Trades Hall Council. We were privileged to be joined by a garment worker from Bangladesh who spoke of the horrifying ordeal she suffered when the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka collapsed 10 years ago. Her words were incredibly powerful. She spent 18 hours under rubble before being freed, an event most of us could not even imagine. 1138 people who went to work that day never went home.

International Workers Memorial Day serves as a reminder to never take workplace safety for granted and to appreciate all that the labour movement has achieved in fighting for workers rights and safer workplaces. Much like with road safety, we have come a long way, but we still have much to do to ensure that every worker, no matter whether here or abroad, gets home safely to their loved ones at the end of a day's work.

Container deposit scheme

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (09:55): Start collecting your cans, Victoria, because the 10-cent container deposit scheme is coming. Almost half of all litter in Victoria is made up of drink containers, and that is why I was particularly pleased that the Andrews Labor government recently announced details of Victoria's container deposit scheme to start in November this year. I was very pleased that I got to try out one of the new reverse vending machines at the launch at Life Saving Victoria with the minister and my colleague Mr Berger and the member for Albert Park. I was excited to see that there are going to be more than 600 collection points across the state, meaning lots of people in my region of Southern Metropolitan but also regions right across the state will have easy and

convenient access to recycle their containers. It is part of our commitment to a cleaner Victoria and the next step in our ambitious recycling plan, backed by an investment of almost half a billion dollars, with the goal of diverting 80 per cent of material away from landfill by 2030.

Under the scheme Victorians are going to receive a 10-cent refund for every container they put into one of the reverse vending machines or drop off at a collection point. There will be a range of ways to dispose of containers – the scheme will be designed to be as convenient and accessible as possible. It will include reverse vending, over-the-counter collection points at shops and small businesses and pop-up points run by community groups, sports clubs and charities. It will increase the volume and quality of our recycling and reduce the litter that pollutes our streets and waterways.

Duck hunting

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (09:57): Last Wednesday I too attended the opening of the duck-hunting season at Connewarre in Geelong. I guess I took a different thing from my colleague in that there was no shooting until 8:01 am, which was after the time they were meant to start. I did not see any wounded birds, and in fact the only attitude I really saw was towards the hunters. The take I got from that – and that was my first opening, I have got to point out – was (a) it is not a bloodbath and (b) the hunters were checked. There were not many of them – two or three – but it is a big lake, and none of them were in breach of anything. I think the only really good thing I took from it was that the hunters did the right thing, as they generally do; they do not all do it. I am not supportive of the hunters that do not do the right thing, nor am I supportive of the protesters. I just want to point out that Geelong Field and Game, particularly Trent Leen, did a sterling job of hosting us there.

Bills

Operation Daintree Implementation (No. 1) Bill 2023

Statement of compatibility

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (09:58): 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 Operation Daintree Implementation (No. 1) Bill 2023 (the Bill).

Clause 12 of the Bill “New sections 98B to 98E inserted” (into the Public Administration Act 2004) under subsection 98E “Ministerial officers to co-operate with investigation of complaints” seeks to implement recommendation 9 of the Operation Daintree special report by requiring Ministerial officers to co-operate with an investigation into a complaint made against the Ministerial officer or any other Ministerial officers.

This clause protects the human rights of Minister advisers with the important proviso, drawing upon the Ombudsman Act 1973, that a Ministerial officer is not required to give information to, or otherwise co-operate with, such an investigation if the giving of the information or the other co-operation would tend to incriminate the Ministerial officer or make them liable to a penalty.

In my opinion, the Bill, as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with the human rights protected by the Charter.

David Davis MP
Shadow Special Minister of State

Second reading

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (09:59): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Victorians were shocked when the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) released its *Operation Daintree* report, a special report in April 2023.

The report was in response to a complaint received by IBAC alleging the procurement process and awarding of a contract by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to the Health Education Federation (HEF) constituted serious corrupt conduct.

IBAC made 17 formal recommendations through *Operation Daintree*. This bill does not seek to respond to all of those recommendations but responds to many in full and others in part and recognises that further work is required to fully respond to all of the recommendations made by IBAC. It is envisaged that another bill will be brought forward to deal with these matters but that in the interim a start must be made.

The opposition accepts that this bill and indeed IBAC's recommendations from *Operation Daintree* are part of a wider matrix of reform that draws from a series of IBAC and Ombudsman reports seeking to deal with corruption in the Victorian state government and to prevent corruption in the future.

Cost of corruption

The cost of corruption is significant in terms of the public standing of Parliament and government, but it is also significant in terms of the financial cost where projects and contracts are awarded which are either not in the public interest or produce costs and wastage at the expense of taxpayers. The need for proper procurement is clear with the scale of state government spending. Every dollar squandered through corrupt decisions or spending is a dollar that cannot be spent on health, education or other services and cannot be returned to taxpayers as lower taxation.

Government response to *Operation Daintree* report

The Premier, in responding to the Daintree report, dismissed it as 'educational'. This disgraceful approach ignores the fact there are literally dozens of findings and conclusions in the report, many highly negative and many concerning the Premier and former ministers as well as ministerial advisers in the Premier's office and advisers in the offices of former health ministers.

The Victorian Ombudsman has said:

It was not an educational report. It was a damning report about misconduct of ministerial advisers and ministerial responsibility for those advisers. It was not what I would have described as an educational report.

What *Operation Daintree* found

The investigation ultimately interviewed Premier Daniel Andrews, former health ministers the Honourable Jenny Mikakos and the Honourable Jill Hennessy, ministerial staff working in the offices of the ministers and the Premier and DHHS employees as well as others. Health Workers Union officials were also interviewed.

Whilst the investigation found the conduct did not reach the threshold – the high threshold – of corrupt conduct as defined in section 4 of the IBAC act, it did make serious findings of fact. It found:

The investigation substantiated the factual allegations in the original complaint. It also substantiated the suspicion in the Ombudsman's notification that a ministerial advisor working in the Health Minister's office exerted pressure on DHHS staff to award the contract to the HEF. It also found that an advisor in the office of the subsequent Health Minister and an advisor in the office of the Premier (acting through the Health Minister's office) intruded into DHHS' management of the contract in ways favourable to the HEF and against the public interest.

...

It did however reveal a range of concerning conduct and omissions in breach of the public duties and ethical obligations of ministers and ministerial advisors. It also identified conduct by senior public servants that fell short of the required Victorian public sector standards.

...

The secretary of the HWU lobbied a senior advisor in the Premier's Private Office (PPO) and a senior advisor to the Health Minister in favour of the HEF being contracted to develop and deliver the training. The senior advisor to the Health Minister helped the HWU to shape an unsolicited proposal that HEF be contracted to

deliver training to 575 healthcare workers. The senior advisor then submitted that proposal to DHHS for consideration.

Whilst staff in DHHS had significant concerns about the proposal, the contract was signed in the hours before the caretaker period commenced in 2018. The contract entered into was for \$1.2 million.

Ministerial responsibility

Ministerial responsibility is the bedrock of the Westminster system of government. The convention of ministerial responsibility holds that ministers are responsible to Parliament for their actions, the actions of their departments and the actions of their staff.

It is widely held that Victorian standards of ministerial responsibility have slipped or deteriorated over recent years.

A key issue determined by IBAC is ministerial responsibility and the need for proper ministerial oversight over ministerial staff, with the *Operation Daintree* report saying:

The evidence of Ms Mikakos on this issue was revealing. While she accepted responsibility for the conduct of her office and DHHS, she said it was not her role to supervise ministerial staff, as that was the role of her Chief of Staff. As this and other evidence from the investigation illustrates, it is necessary to again refer to ministerial responsibility for the conduct of advisors, including their Chief of Staff and their department. The conventions of individual ministerial responsibility (and the Code of Conduct for Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries) required the minister to ensure that her advisors understood the boundaries within which they could operate.

At a minimum, the convention requires a minister to answer questions from the parliament about the conduct of their advisors and its consequences (in the sense of any remedial actions that have or can be taken to address any problems it has caused or prevent a recurrence of such problems in the future), even where they are ignorant of such conduct. In addition, where the conduct has serious consequences, some commentators suggest the convention is that the minister ought reasonably to have known about the conduct and be held personally responsible for it. That is a matter for parliament to determine. In any event, Ms Mikakos is no longer a minister or a parliamentarian, so the application of the convention or the code to her is now theoretical. Nevertheless, her office's intervention in DHHS management of the HEF contract does raise issues about the adequacy of the supervisory arrangements in ministerial offices, which is addressed in the next chapter.

It is of particular concern that the Premier's submission to the draft report suggests there is a 'modern' and 'nuanced' –

his words –

approach to the convention, but does not articulate what the standards now are that should be applied. These are matters which require parliament's urgent consideration, so there is clarity for ministers, parliament and the public about the standards that are now to be applied if they have changed.

The Premier was similarly accountable for the conduct of his advisor within the PPO, even if he was unaware of how the stakeholder was engaging with his advisor and the action the advisor was taking in response.

IBAC's recommendations on ministerial responsibility are substantially implemented in this bill.

The influence of third parties

IBAC was of the view that the influence of third-party stakeholders could give rise to conflicts of interest that needed to be properly and transparently managed. IBAC said:

The governing party in Victoria at the time of the events investigated in Operation Daintree was the ALP. Trade unions, many of which are affiliated to the party at a state level, continue to exercise considerable influence over the ALP in a variety of ways, such as voting rights at state and national conferences, supplying candidates for preselection and operating as something of a 'training ground' for advisors.

...

In response to the suggestion that the Labor government might have a conflict of interest between acting in the public interest and acting to implement ALP policies that affected a union stakeholder, both the Premier and HWU submitted that policies formulated by the ALP, while influential, are not binding on a Labor

government. IBAC accepts that submission. However, IBAC observes that the special relationship between the union and a Labor government can create an actual conflict of interest when the government contemplates conferring a benefit on the union, which needs to be carefully managed.

The Premier's, HWU's and Health Advisor A's rejection of the existence of a conflict of interest between the government and the HWU, by reason of the HWU being an affiliated union, is difficult to reconcile with the evidence before IBAC.

IBAC went on to say:

Some of the hallmarks of the union's privileged status relative to other stakeholders were evident from when it first started lobbying government on its training proposal, and during the procurement and contract management phases ...

...

Regardless of the Premier's view of the HWU's importance, it was plainly given preferential treatment by his and the Minister for Health's advisors, which resulted in an outcome that did not serve the public interest.

Recommendation 1 of the *Operation Daintree* report is implemented in this bill.

The Premier's memory

Operation Daintree is yet another report that reflects on the integrity of the Premier of Victoria, particularly his erratic memory. The Premier has been called to give evidence at four recent IBAC inquiries, of which Daintree is one. He also had difficulty with his memory at the COVID-19 hotel quarantine inquiry headed by the Honourable Jennifer Coate. In *Operation Daintree* IBAC found:

The Premier had no recollection of what he discussed with Ms Asmar, no recollection of any discussion with his advisors that led to this announcement and no awareness that they and the Minister for Health's advisor had discussed a detailed proposal including costings ten days before the announcement that the HEF should deliver training to 1,000 workers over a four-year period.

It is highly likely that the Premier was informed of the commitment proposal as formulated by his advisors and conveyed the substance of the intended commitment to Ms Asmar when he met her before making the announcement. During his examination, the Premier ultimately accepted that he may have done so.

The report goes on:

After the Premier realised that his recollection of what he announced was faulty he left open the possibility that he may have made a commitment to Ms Asmar but remained quite uncertain that what he announced amounted to a commitment. He maintained that what he said was not a 'tender announcement' and that if the union was to be the provider, he would have been very clear about that.

It is deeply concerning that the Premier cannot accurately recall a commitment of taxpayers funds exceeding \$1 million.

Concerning failures and breach of public duties

The conclusions of *Operation Daintree*, as outlined at 4.8 in the report, state:

The investigation did, however, reveal a range of concerning conduct or failures to act in breach of the public duties and ethical obligations of ministers and ministerial advisors. It also identified conduct and omissions by senior public servants that fell short of the required Victorian public standards. IBAC considers that such conduct, if not addressed, makes Victoria more vulnerable to corrupt conduct as defined in the IBAC Act.

It is clear that tighter obligations are required on ministers and ministerial advisers and sharper direction is required for Victorian public servants. IBAC is right to point to the risks of corrupt conduct unless these matters are addressed.

Grey corruption – inadequate systems, policies and controls

Operation Watts drew attention to the issue of grey corruption. Other IBAC reports have pointed to weaknesses in systems, policies and controls. With respect to the adequacy of systems, policies and controls, at 5.1 *Operation Daintree* found:

... ample evidence of the misuse of power and influence by ministerial advisors and departmental executives who breached codes of conduct and established conventions, and a lack of appropriate supervision and control within those ministerial offices and departments, for all of which their ministers were ultimately accountable to parliament.

The pursuit by advisors of the perceived interests of their ministers, including the Premier, at the expense of proper process and standards is another example of the phenomenon of grey corruption that is of increasing concern to integrity bodies around Australia. As the Operation Watts report observed, grey corruption involves the bending or breaking of rules, even if that might not amount to criminal behaviour, but that unfairly favours the allies, friends and networks of decision makers. It corrodes standards of public governance, decision-making in the public interest and trust in government, and if left unchecked increases the risk of corrupt criminal offending.

While the specific issues of public governance are different to those explored in Operation Watts, they can nevertheless be assessed against the same general integrity model used in that investigation.

The grey zone of ministerial adviser power and influence needs to be addressed to root out corruption, including grey corruption. This bill responds not just to *Operation Daintree* but to repeated integrity agency reports.

Clause-by-clause summary

Clause 4 of the bill, ‘Guidance regarding ministerial accountability’, seeks to implement recommendation 2 of the *Operation Daintree* report by making, at a minimum, the Privileges Committee of each house responsible for preparing and issuing guidance regarding the scope of the convention of ministerial accountability and the application of that convention to Victorian ministers.

Clause 5 of the bill, ‘Ministerial code of conduct – consultation’, seeks to implement recommendation 6 by requiring the Premier to consult with the Victorian public sector commissioner (commissioner) and the Secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet in preparing any ministerial code of conduct.

Clause 6 of the bill, ‘Ministerial code of conduct – contents’, seeks to implement recommendations 3, 12 and 13 by requiring the Premier to ensure that any ministerial code of conduct is consistent with the guidance issued under clause 4 above; sets out the relevant procedures and conventions for ministers to observe when communicating with public sector bodies and public sector employees; and provides that each of the following is a breach of the ministerial code of conduct:

- intimidating or victimising a person who has reported the conduct of, or made a complaint about, a ministerial officer;
- interfering with an investigation or inquiry into the conduct of a ministerial officer for the purpose of influencing the outcome of that investigation or inquiry; and
- treating a person detrimentally or less favourably because that person has made a legitimate report or complaint about a ministerial officer.

Clause 7 of the bill, ‘Mandatory induction and training’, seeks to implement recommendation 7 by requiring the Premier, in consultation with the commissioner, to ensure that there is a mandatory induction program for new ministerial officers and a training program and relevant guidance for public sector employees who communicate with ministerial officers; and requiring the commissioner to:

- keep records of attendance by ministerial officers at induction programs;
- publish attendance numbers annually on the internet;

- keep records of attendance by public sector employees at training programs; and
- publish attendance numbers for each public sector body annually on the internet.

Clause 8 of the bill, ‘Unsolicited proposals to supply goods or services’, seeks to implement recommendation 16 by requiring the Secretary of the Department of Health to prepare, issue and publish on the internet guidelines regarding the assessments and management of unsolicited proposals to supply goods or services on behalf of the Victorian government, regardless of how the proposals are received or by whom they are made.

Clause 9 of the bill, ‘Review of implementation’, seeks to implement recommendation 17 by requiring the Premier to table a report of a review of the implementation of all of the recommendations in the *Operation Daintree* special report no later than 31 October 2023 and again no later than 30 June 2024; and requiring the Premier to ensure that the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission is consulted during the conduct of the reviews and the preparation of the reports.

Clause 10 of the bill, ‘Codes of conduct’, seeks to implement recommendation 14 by amending the Public Administration Act 2004 to require the Victorian Public Sector Commission to ensure that a code of conduct that applies to public sector employees prohibits the making of frivolous, vexatious or malicious complaints about, or allegations against, a ministerial officer.

Clause 11 of the bill, ‘Register of lobbyists’, seeks to implement recommendation 1 by amending the Public Administration Act 2004 to require the Premier to ensure that the Victorian government professional lobbyist code of conduct requires that an association of employers or an association of employees, including a trade union, that conducts or intends to conduct lobbying activities is registered as a lobbyist.

Clause 12 of the bill, ‘New sections 98B to 98E inserted’, into the Public Administration Act 2004:

- under subsection 98B, ‘Ministerial officer code of conduct’, seeks to implement recommendations 4, 6, 12, 13 and 14 by requiring the Premier to:
 - prepare and issue a code of conduct for ministerial officers in performing their functions that:
 - (a) contains principles for ministerial officers to observe when dealing with public sector bodies and public sector employees; and
 - (b) prohibits a ministerial officer from directing a public sector employee; and
 - (c) provides that each of the following is a breach of the code of conduct:
 - (i) intimidating or victimising a person who has reported the conduct of, or made a complaint about, a ministerial officer;
 - (ii) interfering with an investigation or inquiry into the conduct of a ministerial officer for the purpose of influencing the outcome of that investigation or inquiry;
 - (iii) treating a person detrimentally or less favourably because that person has made a legitimate report or complaint about a ministerial officer; and
 - (d) prohibits the making of frivolous, vexatious or malicious complaints about, or allegations against, a ministerial officer;
 - consult the Secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the commissioner in preparing the code of conduct and any amendment of the code of conduct; and
 - ensure the code of conduct as amended or reissued from time to time is publicly available;

Subsection 98B also determines that a contravention of the code of conduct by a ministerial officer is capable of constituting misconduct; permits the Premier to amend and reissue the code of

conduct or issue a new code of conduct in substitution for a previously issued one; and requires the Premier to review the code of conduct at regular intervals and at least once every four years;

- under subsection 98C, ‘Annual report’, seeks to implement recommendation 5 by requiring the Premier to cause the following information to be included in the report of operations of the Department of Premier and Cabinet for each financial year:
 - (a) the number of ministerial officers and other staff working in each ministerial office as at the end of the financial year; and
 - (b) the total cost of employing ministerial officers and other staff in ministerial offices for the financial year;
- under subsection 98D, ‘Mechanism for complaints against ministerial officers’, seeks to implement recommendation 10 by requiring, at a minimum, the Privileges Committee of each house of Parliament to establish a mechanism for the making and investigating of complaints against ministerial officers; and
- under subsection 98E, ‘Ministerial officers to co-operate with investigation of complaints’, seeks to implement recommendation 9 by requiring ministerial officers to co-operate with an investigation into a complaint made against the ministerial officer or any other ministerial officers with the proviso that a ministerial officer is not required to give information to, or otherwise co-operate with, such an investigation if the giving of the information or the other co-operation would tend to incriminate the ministerial officer or make them liable to a penalty. Subsection 98E also states a failure to comply with this section by a ministerial officer is capable of constituting misconduct.

Clause 13 of the bill, ‘New section 28A inserted’, seeks to implement recommendation 11 by amending the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 to state a joint investigatory committee may compel the attendance of a ministerial officer and may compel the ministerial officer to give evidence on oath or affirmation.

Clause 14 of the bill, ‘New section 51A inserted’, also seeks to implement recommendation 11 by amending the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 to state:

- (1) A standing committee established under the Standing Orders of the Council or the Assembly, or a sub-committee appointed by any such standing committee, may compel the attendance of a Ministerial officer and may compel the Ministerial officer ... to give evidence on oath or affirmation.
- (2) Subsection (1) applies irrespective of whether the Minister in whose office the Ministerial officer works is a member of the Council or the Assembly.
- (3) The Procedure Committee of the Council and the Standing Orders Committee of the Assembly must prepare and issue guidance material for their relevant standing committees and Ministerial officers in relation to the attendance of Ministerial officers before those committees.
- (4) This section is in addition to, and does not take away from anything in, the Standing Orders of the Council or the Assembly.

The clauses in this bill do not deal with all of the issues raised in *Operation Daintree* but make a significant start and should be understood in the context of other recent integrity agency reports.

Conclusion

This bill, Operation Daintree Implementation (No. 1) Bill 2023, takes a further step in cleaning up the mess of corruption and grey corruption left by the Andrews Labor government, a government that has achieved new low standards of accountability and transparency.

I commend the bill to the house.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:22): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for two weeks.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for two weeks.

Motions

Regional sitting

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (10:23): I rise to speak on my motion 48, which reads:

That this house:

- (1) acknowledges the serious impact of the recent floods in Victoria;
- (2) meets and sits in a flood-affected community in central northern Victoria for one day by April 2024;
- (3) requires the President and the Clerk of the Legislative Council to consult with the Mitchell Shire Council, the Greater Shepparton City Council, the Campaspe Shire Council, other flood-affected local government areas in northern Victoria and parliamentary staff in relation to choosing an appropriate date and specific location for the regional sitting to occur; and
- (4) authorises the President to do all things necessary to facilitate the Council sitting in central northern Victoria.

With this motion, the Liberal Party is calling for the Legislative Council to sit in a flood-affected community in northern Victoria. Of course this is not unprecedented, as during the last Parliament I moved a similar motion requiring the Council to sit in a bushfire-affected community, which resulted in the Council sitting in Bright in April 2021. Previous Parliaments also held regional sittings, between 2001 and 2012, until the Andrews Labor government decided to scrap them.

In 2001 an initiative of the Bracks government was to introduce regional sittings of both houses of the Victorian Parliament. Since that time, six regional sittings have taken place. The first regional sitting was held on 16 August 2001, when the Legislative Council sat in the City of Ballarat and the Legislative Assembly sat in the City of Greater Bendigo.

On 30 October 2002 a regional sitting of the Legislative Council was held in Benalla, and on 17 November 2005 the Legislative Council travelled to Colac and the Legislative Assembly to the City of Greater Geelong for regional settings. Then on 6 September 2008 both houses travelled to Gippsland, where the Legislative Council sat in Lakes Entrance and the Legislative Assembly in Churchill. During the 57th Parliament, on 6 September 2012, the Legislative Council sat in the City of Greater Bendigo and the Legislative Assembly sat in the City of Ballarat.

During the 58th Parliament I actually called on the Premier to hold a regional sitting in Greater Shepparton; however, the response that I received from the Premier was advice to me that the Andrews Labor government had scrapped regional settings. This decision by the Andrews government was extremely disappointing as regional sittings provide a great opportunity for the areas that are chosen to host these visits. The sixth regional sitting was of course the regional sitting in Bright in April 2021 following the bushfires and was a result of the motion that I moved in this chamber in February 2020.

Given the floods of October 2022 caused major damage in many of the communities throughout northern Victoria, it is only right that the Parliament should also visit these communities to provide locals with the opportunity to speak directly with political leaders and to show practical support for local economies, just as we did following the bushfires. Flood-affected communities deserve the respect of having Parliament meet with them and a chance to tell members of Parliament face to face what support they actually need to help them recover. Parliament has done this before; we know it can be done. It is a good thing to take Parliament to the people.

The economies of flood-affected communities need assistance to recover, and a regional sitting would provide a significant boost due to the hiring of venues and catering and the need for accommodation for members of Parliament, their staff and the staff of the Parliament. This is not cost prohibitive for

the Parliament, but it would provide a great benefit to local communities in the flood areas. Even sporting clubs, service clubs and other businesses have recognised the importance of supporting flood-affected communities. The Richmond Football Club came to Shepparton earlier this year, engaged with flood-affected residents and ran a training exercise with children in Mooroopna. The CWA were in Rochester last weekend providing support to that community. Clubs and businesses recognise that going out into flood-affected communities to hold conferences or training exercises benefits those communities. This support provides a great boost to the morale of the community as well as tangible benefits to the local economy. It is the right thing to do, and Parliament should do it too.

As we know, when a natural disaster hits a community the region suffers a significant loss of visitors, revenue and job opportunities. Whilst a visit by Parliament will not replace all of the lost revenue and visitation, it will contribute to local economies and benefit them. We as MPs should set that example to encourage the rest of Victoria to also visit our flood-affected regions. Unfortunately, while floods are equally as devastating as bushfires, fires tend to stir up much more emotion than floods. I think that people think that the water recedes and residents just return to their homes, but this is not true, and many of our residents are still displaced from their homes and will continue to be displaced for many months to come. I would encourage all of you to visit the flood-affected area now as well as coming up to the region for a regional sitting. Bring your empty eskies, stay overnight, spend some money in our communities and fill those eskies with some of our great produce to bring back to Melbourne. Support our tourism industry, support our local economy and support jobs for our people who have suffered so much because of the floods. Come to the footy in Rochester and support the community. I know the president Justin Cleary would welcome you with open arms.

Let our young people know that you are behind them and that you support the recovery efforts in their town. A regional sitting is not just about MPs visiting, it also provides an education and cultural benefit for the region by providing opportunities for residents and students to actually experience firsthand the sitting of the Victorian Parliament. Many of our schools, particularly the smaller schools, do not get the opportunity to come to Melbourne and visit Parliament, but if a parliamentary sitting is held in their own area, they can actually attend, see Parliament at work and see how democracy works. A regional sitting also provides a wonderful opportunity for local community members to have access to members of Parliament who are coming up to the area for the sitting.

But the greatest benefit for the community of hosting a regional sitting is having the entire Legislative Council focused on the issues of concern to the areas that we are visiting. Holding a regional sitting in the flood-affected areas will give the people of these communities the opportunity to have access to not only government members but also opposition and crossbench MPs. As I said, it will focus every member of this chamber on the issues of those communities that have suffered so much because of the floods. A regional sitting will also give my constituents access to members on the crossbench from parties that they do not normally have access to. Whilst Northern Victoria Region has two crossbenchers – a One Nation and an Animal Justice representative – constituents do not have any interaction with the other crossbench MPs. My electorate of Northern Victoria does not have a representative from the Greens party or the Legalise Cannabis party, so I am sure many of my constituents would greatly appreciate the opportunity to interact with those parties, to have meetings with their MPs and to speak to them about their concerns – speak to them about what has happened in the floods and about how members of the Greens or Legalise Cannabis can assist them to recover.

Usually what happens when there is a local sitting is that MPs take advantage of that sitting day to actually do some visits to the region. They travel up the day before, stay overnight and meet with the locals. Committees may hold public hearings the day before or the day after the regional sitting, which gives further advantages to the region and provides additional opportunities for people to learn about how democracy works. A regional sitting also provides the opportunity to have a community reception, and that has been part of every regional sitting that I have participated in. The reception is usually quite a large event the night before the sitting, where the Parliament invites people from the community to come along, and every member of Parliament is there. So even those people who have

not had the opportunity to organise a meeting with a member of Parliament can approach them at the reception and have access to all of the MPs.

I have not stipulated a town where the sitting should be held and I have left the dates open for a specific reason, and that is because I know there is a lot of work that has to be done by the clerks to find the right location for the sitting and a secondary location for the reception. The motion charges the clerks with the task of liaising with the flood-affected councils to find a location and to set a date prior to April next year. Personally, I would prefer the sitting to be held later this year, but the clerks will establish the right date – and of course they need to consult local communities, as we would not want the sitting to clash with another event in the area.

A regional sitting in the flood-affected area will demonstrate to these communities that we are actually listening. It will give them confidence that we as the decision-makers will act to refine processes to ensure better responses to floods in the future. The people in the flood-affected area have been through enough. We should not expect them to have to make appointments and then travel to Melbourne or other areas of the state, perhaps on several occasions, to access members of Parliament and to have their voices heard. It is only right that we take Parliament and the entire membership of the Legislative Council to them. A regional sitting brings government ministers. It brings shadow ministers. It brings every backbencher and every crossbencher. It brings every member of Parliament to the community for local residents to be able to have access to them and to have their say. I encourage all members of the chamber to support this motion.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:33): Today I rise to speak on the damaging floods that hit communities across northern Victoria. I want to make it clear that the government does not oppose this motion, but I want to make it clear that the government does not need an excuse to visit and support flood-affected communities across northern Victoria. We are already putting in that work. While a regional sitting represents an opportunity for members of this house from non-flood-affected regions to hear directly from those Victorians impacted by the floods, we are already visiting, talking, acting, investing in what matters and supporting them. I encourage all members in this place to be doing so already.

I grew up in northern Victoria. I know what these floods meant. Homes were flooded, businesses and livelihoods were put on hold and there was wall-to-wall news coverage. It was shocking; towns and communities in northern Victoria were left devastated. I would like to commend the proactive work of the Victorian SES, who hit the doors, warning residents of the oncoming storms as well as pushing warnings to locals through the VicEmergency app and through the website in the days leading up to the flood. The VICSES had a hard job. The scale of their operation was incredible. They established more than 50 sandbag collection points across the state, helping families fortify homes against the oncoming storms. In the end over 1 million sandbags were handed out to members of the community – 1 million. Within 24 hours they saw 3049 requests for assistance, including 1766 flood incidents and 128 rescues. This is dangerous stuff, but the Victorian SES did not back down.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Victoria Police for their life-saving work, Life Saving Victoria, ESTA and the countless community members who performed almost 1000 water rescues. Much of Victoria had received its highest October rainfall on record during this time. It was record-breaking stuff – a once-in-a-generation event which saw homes destroyed, businesses closed and lives changed forever. The people needed help and VICSES, alongside many other emergency services, answered the call. The government was also quick to act. The Premier himself took active involvement, urging Victorians to be prepared for the floods through media and meeting with the Commonwealth to discuss support in our regional communities.

In the wake of this once-in-a-generation event, the government, community groups and countless volunteers were faced with a task of cleaning up, rebuilding and helping communities recover. As many of us know, the road to recovery is long, but we are making inroads. We have committed over \$1.8 million of support to help communities, businesses, farmers and not-for-profits to rebuild. There

are payments of \$75,000 for primary producers and \$50,000 for eligible businesses and not-for-profits to help pay expenses concerning fixing significant damage incurred by the floods; \$15 million will help people who have complex needs to secure alternative accommodation and will also deliver additional counselling services; and \$22 million will help establish up to 16 recovery hubs. The clean-up task has been massive, but teams have been working around the clock. Over 50 per cent of this work has been undertaken by local contractors, and \$150 million was announced to support this work.

We on this side of the chamber acknowledge the serious effects of floods. This goes to the heart of the motion. Where homes were lost, we opened temporary accommodation for residents. Our very own Centre for National Resilience in Mickleham was open for emergency accommodation up till mid-March. But the reality is these floods are getting worse and worse by the year, and the cost of cleaning up the damage is rising each time. It is more important than ever that we as a state work together to build long-term strategies to mitigate the effects of floods, which is why I want to talk about the implementation and the effectiveness of the government's 2016 *Victorian Floodplain Management Strategy*. We understand that future climate change – the change in our climate – has serious implications for Victoria. The very nature of it will see floods happen more often and hit our communities harder. That is why a long-term strategy for managing these disastrous events is so important. Supporting local residents and businesses building back is essential, but it must go hand in hand with larger efforts to mitigate the effects of persistent flooding brought about by climate change.

The *Victorian Floodplain Management Strategy* was released in April 2016. It set the direction for flood plain management in Victoria, outlining what this government is prepared to do over the coming years to protect regional Victorians. It was ambitious, no doubt, but we are an ambitious government, and since the last floods our government has done a lot. We have installed over 150 monitoring devices across Victoria; constructed five levees – at Euroa, Wodonga, Quambatook, Robinvale and Warracknabeal; and undertaken other flood works at Charlton and Donald. Our 2020–21 budget also provided \$26.7 million over four years to prepare for future floods in critical areas.

Our flood plain management strategy also set forth our commitment to working with the Victorian SES, local governments and local communities in developing regional flood plain management strategies to ensure local priorities are met. Local voices are important, especially in areas as large as northern Victoria. Under our flood plain management strategy, 59 flood studies were conducted for various areas around the state, working hand in hand with those very local communities, and since 2018 the implementation of these regional strategies has commenced, led by the respective communities. Listening to regional communities and the experts who have studied our vast environment throughout their lives is essential to this process. The catchment management authority is expected to deliver its mid-term report soon, five years on. Our government listened to the concerns of the communities across the state, then we acted. We are only half the way through the flood plain management strategy, and we have delivered so much, as I acknowledged earlier. Our government recognises the impact the floods have had on the livelihood of communities. It is why we have taken and will continue to take decisive action preparing Victorian communities against these devastating floods.

The work done by our state and Victorians is unmatched. It is no easy task, and I would like to once again thank the hardworking men and women who have devoted countless hours to studying our regions and helping develop dozens of local plans to ensure devastation of this magnitude never happens again. This hard work of course cannot continue without the continued support of a compassionate government, and I am also proud of the work that our government is doing with the resources of our SES. Our last budget alone provided a record \$28.5 million in funding for the VICSES. This means new facilities, new vehicles and new and more comprehensive training, including swift water rescue courses – how important, considering the sheer number of water rescues delivered. The work done by the VICSES is awe inspiring – truly it is – and I am proud to be part of a government which not only cares about but listens and responds to their needs. These new resources will go a long way to helping our state. They will save lives, businesses and entire communities.

I earlier touched on the scale of the operations VICSES conducted throughout October and beyond in northern Victoria; it still amazes me. But what worries me is that events like this will only become more common with climate change. Faced with that, training our next generation to the best of our ability is vital if we hope to fight the effects brought upon us by our changing climate. It is the right thing to do. If we just protect these communities from future flooding, we have to think about the future and how we can prepare ourselves to meet those challenges. Greater investments in VICSES resources and their training program is integral.

We have also invested \$110 million in volunteer emergency services equipment program grants for volunteer groups since 2015. This year alone nearly \$15 million is available to the various volunteer organisations operating in Victoria, including VICSES and Life Saving Victoria. As these floods get more and more common, it is important that we as a state also continue to fund these vital programs to make sure that extra assistance is available to those who need it when the time comes. The additional support that comes from the VESEP towards our many vital community organisations helps them deliver aid when it is needed as well as helping them acquire any additional resources they may need on the ground when it matters the most. All of these initiatives go a long way towards ensuring that communities, including those across northern Victoria, are prepared for when the next flood, whenever that may be, arrives.

This government, I am proud to say, has an incredible record of adhering to these values. As I said before, listening to the community and then acting goes a long way. When the devastating Black Summer bushfires hit in late 2019, this very chamber had a regional sitting in Bright. Members had an opportunity to visit local schools, businesses and community organisations to hear from those impacted firsthand. It is important we stand united as a state when a crisis hits. Through the devastation, which many of us saw unfold, I was proud to see Victorians from across the state come together to help one another.

When a regional sitting does happen, I encourage all members to make the most of it. It is a massive logistical exercise, so let us take advantage of it. It is what we do; it is what makes us Australian and what makes us Victorians. I acknowledge the pain and suffering residents across northern Victoria felt throughout the crisis, and I again commend the work and the effort of countless volunteers and community and emergency services workers towards helping them throughout the emergency and the ongoing recovery.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (10:43): I rise to speak in support of this motion. The floods in northern Victoria have cut a swathe through the community, and I think it would be good if we do turn up there when it is appropriate for the people there – we do not want to be interrupting what they are up to in their recovery efforts – to show them the attention that a Parliament and their representatives should give. My contribution will be relatively brief today. One of the things is that we did visit northern Victoria last time, and I guess it is to my own embarrassment – I should not call it embarrassment, but that it is the best word I can come up with – that I have been too distracted to mention that we perhaps should do a regional sitting in one of the other places, perhaps in eastern Victoria and somewhere nice like Mallacoota, which had the fires go through it relatively recently. There is still a lot of recovery to be done there. They too would like to see the representatives of their Parliament turn up.

I do like the idea of a regional sitting. I do like the idea of us going out there. I know it is a lot of trouble. I remember that there are a lot of things that you probably would not appreciate that the clerks and the staff have to go through, but they got it done and they got it done well last time, so I am sure they will rise to the occasion. But again, we have got to do it so it works for the people of northern Victoria, not for us.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (10:45): I am pleased to support this motion put by Wendy Lovell for the President and the clerks to consult with local councils in flood-affected communities to facilitate a parliamentary sitting in central northern Victoria. In the last few years our region has been

severely impacted by drought, bushfires, COVID and floods. Communities have experienced significant loss and have rallied together to survive these challenging times. As I meet with people right across the region it is evident that local communities have felt left behind under this government. To host a parliamentary sitting in the region would be a step in the right direction.

Regional sittings have been held before and were part of the usual process when the coalition was in government. There have only been two regional sittings of the Legislative Council in the past 10 years – one in Bendigo on 6 September 2012 and one in Bright on 29 April 2021 for the bushfires. According to the Parliament of Victoria website, the last regional sitting of the Legislative Council was declared an overwhelming success. Members of the public and local students watched the proceedings, and the local CWA branch and the Lions Club provided catering. It would be great to host a parliamentary sitting in our region again.

The Victorian floods last year had a devastating impact across Victoria, particularly in north-central Victoria, where thousands of homes were flooded and livestock and wildlife perished. The floods impacted 63 local government areas across the state, in particular the towns of Rochester, Mooroopna, Shepparton, Echuca, Wangaratta, Seymour, Bendigo, Charlton and Kerang. At an Anzac Day service last week I met David from Echuca, and he is still living in temporary accommodation and remains on the waiting list for public housing.

Six months on, it is important that we do not forget these regional communities impacted by floods. When the floods first occurred people came to assist from across the state. In Rochester shortly after the floods I met people who had driven up from Melbourne to bring food and supplies, but as the months roll on and local communities continue to rebuild, it is important that we continue to support them. People are still battling with insurance companies to get assistance, homes are still to be rebuilt and businesses are doing their best to stay strong.

For those who might be worried that a regional sitting will not be official, in terms of how regional sittings are conducted, they are very much a sitting of the house. So all the same rules about forming a quorum to start the day would apply. The clerks would arrange a proclamation from the Governor to declare the venue and its surrounds part of the parliamentary precinct for the day. Any business conducted by the house would be official, so if we passed a bill, it would be considered passed. A regional sitting would be a great opportunity to invite people of all ages to come and see Parliament in action.

I was recently with a group of young adults visiting Melbourne from central Victoria, and one of them was very surprised to learn that Victoria actually had a Parliament House. It is time that we got out of Melbourne and into the regions and let people know that this Parliament governs for all of Victoria. I trust that members of this chamber will demonstrate their support for regional Victoria following the devastating impact of the floods and vote in support of this motion.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:49): I also rise to speak on what is a very timely motion. I am happy to contribute on this matter, noting that I am speaking in support of the motion. I thank Ms Lovell for raising this in the house. I am pleased to be taking part in what is a very worthy discussion about having both the Council and the Assembly have a sitting in regional Victoria, specifically, as the motion says, in central northern Victoria. There are clear benefits of holding a session of this house in a regional place. Many areas across our state would be suitable for the Council and Assembly to sit in. There is much benefit to be had by us all from sitting in such places, from the benefits that we as parliamentarians obtain from sitting somewhere we are not used to to the benefits of many of us visiting areas that we normally would not visit otherwise.

I do note that with our parliamentary committees we do undertake various regional tours as well, which is a thing that I have particularly enjoyed so far, as has been mentioned by two colleagues in members statements this morning. I was amongst a delegation that visited Lake Connnewarre this time last week for the opening of the duck-hunting season, which was a good opportunity to get out and see more of

the state and more of the people that make up our wonderful state. So this is a very, very worthy thing to be supporting.

Specifically as well, acknowledging the considerable impact that the 2022 floods had on these communities in the central north of our state, having a sitting in that region does strike me as very reasonable. I also note that the last regional sitting, as Ms Broad mentioned, was held in Bright, and that was following the fires that occurred in that region in the Black Summer bushfires. Obviously neither I nor Ms Broad were there for that sitting, not having been elected to this place yet, but from those colleagues that were there I understand the event was a terrific success.

Speaking in a more general sense, holding a regional sitting is, as a matter of course, a good practice for us as parliamentarians to be doing. Victoria is still, despite being relatively small by national standards geographically, a very large and diverse place. It is irrefutable that Melbourne is the population and economic centre of our state, and it is also in Melbourne that the majority of us represent our electorates, me included. But we have a vast and diverse state, which it is important that we reach every corner of. So I would suggest that having this house – the members, our electorate officers where appropriate and the clerks of the Parliament – going to regional communities helps us all to gain a better understanding in and out of every aspect of the state in which we live.

In addressing the first part of the motion specifically, I would also like to acknowledge the astounding resilience of our flood-affected communities. It is a testament to the spirit of those communities and their determination to rebuild, to support each other and to work together for a common good. I would also like to add my voice to pay tribute to those communities and to those close to the two people from Rochester and from Nathalia who tragically lost their lives. When I think of the community spirit on display over the past four years, and in particular during those floods of last year, I am reminded of what the American civil rights campaigner Coretta Scott King once said, which was that:

The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate action of its members.

Of course the bravery of the emergency services and other responders to these devastating floods deserves our acclamation as well. The efforts of the SES, CFA, FRV, Forest Fire Management Victoria, Victoria Police, Life Saving Victoria, Ambulance Victoria, community volunteers as well as out-of-state volunteers, all rightfully deserve our gratitude, knowing full well that that is not why they did it.

The flood impact on communities, on businesses and on individuals is far-reaching, considerable and ongoing. Not only is this clear in reports and statistics, but the ongoing impact is visible when visiting affected communities. The Andrews Labor government has delivered considerable support to flood-affected communities across northern Victoria. Members of the government have visited, consulted and worked in association with communities to ensure support is direct, effective and successful. Members on this side of the chamber will always work alongside regional communities, invest in and develop initiatives to support them and, most importantly, listen to them. We know that regional and rural communities face unique challenges and have too often been left out of conversations about growth and investment.

In speaking on our flood support, I would also like to acknowledge the efforts of our Minister for Emergency Services and of our Minister for Water Harriet Shing. The devastating floods affected communities across Victoria. This includes Maribyrnong in Melbourne and communities in the regions, from Shepparton to Seymour and from Rochester to Echuca. Family members of mine that live out in the Echuca region have told me directly of the impacts that they had and that they saw their friends and neighbours deal with, including one family in Rochester who tragically had their house flooded not once but twice. Major flooding occurred on the Goulburn River, the Campaspe River and the Loddon River. There was considerable damage from floodwaters to farms, townships, infrastructure and communities. These floods were undeniably devastating to communities across this region. During the flooding the water sector responded to over 220 incidents of a varied nature, from fish death incidents to sewer spills and water service disruptions.

Emergency accommodation was a key focus as well of the government's initial flood recovery response. This meant ensuring accommodation was available for people in hotels, in caravan parks and of course at the Centre for National Resilience in Mickleham. Emergency Recovery Victoria, a body that operates in the Department of Justice and Community Safety, oversaw and continues to facilitate a range of support programs, including the clean-up program which managed street debris, sandbag removal and structural assessments for impacted properties. The flood recovery support program was established as well to provide a trauma-informed service to help people to navigate the range of supports available that were provided at the time.

The Andrews Labor government is continuing to work closely with Victorian communities still affected by last year's flood, working towards ensuring that the swiftest possible recovery can take place. Much work has of course already been done, and the work rightly will have to continue to ensure those communities get the best possible outcome. From the \$500 million business recovery package, the \$6.3 million small business concessional loan program and the \$1.78 million of funding to help tourism and event industries, this government has provided considerable financial support to businesses and communities to support their recovery from the impacts of these 2022 floods. With 5500 small business flood relief grants paid out already, and with the rollout of various support programs, the support by this government has been steadfast and will continue to help to ensure that the best recovery outcomes for our communities can happen. All up, over \$1.8 billion in joint state and Commonwealth funding has been announced to date to support directly impacted individuals, businesses and communities. This considerable investment was initially focused on meeting the immediate needs of those affected – the needs of the individuals themselves and the needs of families and communities.

There has also been support for councils and emergency management agencies to ensure essential services continued with the least practical disruption. Various grants make up this funding, including those I have already mentioned. These grants are providing important support for the rebuilding of critical infrastructure and are supporting businesses and of course communities. Amongst other things, they include personal hardship payments; grants for primary producers, medium and large businesses and those providing accommodation; flood support services; funding towards 16 recovery hubs; and the flood recovery program as well as an additional \$21.8 million paid out in water bill assistance.

I have already spoken about the initial flood response provided to these communities in my contribution to a motion by Ms Crozier in a previous week, and so whilst I will not reflect on the response to the flood in further great detail, I will note that the scale of the floods in October constituted a significant test of our emergency services. Again, it is worth acknowledging the dedication, selflessness, skill and compassion of our emergency service personnel and volunteers as well as community members and government agency workers, who all came together and all worked together with these 2022 floods.

So returning to the crux of the motion, I would like to further comment that, as I have already said, this is a terrific opportunity for us to get out to the regions. It is also a terrific opportunity for us to show the very best of this place too. I would urge all members when out in the communities – wherever that might be; on a committee or in a sitting – to act with the absolute highest standards of decorum, of civility and of professionalism so we show that this Parliament is a respectful place. I would urge all members to keep in mind that this is not a trip for our own personal benefit or gratification to go off on a wild spree; this is a chance for us to show the very best of what this place is. In supporting this motion, I ask all members to bear that in front of mind when we do hopefully visit northern Victoria soon.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (10:59): I am standing today to support Ms Lovell's motion for a regional sitting. First I would like to touch base on how it boosts our regional economy – regional Victoria knows how to make our dollar go far. The local economy will benefit greatly from a regional sitting – our hospitality industries, our petrol stations and even the local pharmacy, should we hit the town hard on our sitting night. It is also good to provide a regional sitting to those who have

difficulty accessing Parliament here in Melbourne. It is a big job for schools to organise a trip to Melbourne, as it is for those with disabilities and the elderly who find it hard to travel.

I would like to quickly finish up by saying it will be beneficial for our local residents to have access to the MPs here. As Ms Lovell and others in the house have said, we in regional Victoria do not have access to all the parties here. We are not represented by all of them, so our residents will benefit from having access to, say, the Greens and the Legalise Cannabis parties. Once again, I would like to put my support behind Ms Lovell's motion.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (11:00): I am very pleased to be able to speak to my friend Ms Lovell's motion. I think it is a very good motion, and I would like to thank Ms Lovell for the work she has done in bringing this motion to the Council for debate and the work she does for the constituents in northern Victoria.

I speak on this motion as a member for Northern Metro and from a somewhat privileged position because every sitting week is in my electorate. I am very grateful for that as someone who lives in the Northern Metropolitan Region, but I think everyone should get to experience what my constituents get to experience here in Northern Metropolitan Region in enjoying and interacting with Parliament and interacting with members of Parliament, getting to see members of Parliament from other constituencies as well. I get around quite a bit in the Northern Metropolitan Region and my constituents see me around a lot, which is a good thing. But as you said, Wendy, Northern Victoria Region is a wonderful part of our state, and as a member for Northern Metropolitan Region, which shares a border, I find myself crossing over to shared areas, including Mitchell shire.

Wallan in the far north of my electorate is a great part of our state. I have had the pleasure of visiting locals in places like the Wallan market and meeting with businesses, meeting with different groups like the Wallan Environment Group – I would like to acknowledge the chair of that group Claudia James – and visiting the Wallan Neighbourhood House. That might be a location for a joint sitting, somewhere like that. I would like to acknowledge my friend Pauline Cornish, who of course runs the neighbourhood house there. But I have also visited northern Victoria a number of times, particularly as a member of Parliament. I greatly enjoyed a recent visit to Broadford with my wonderful colleague the very popular member for Euroa Annabelle Cleeland where we were able to welcome new citizens at a citizenship ceremony in Broadford with Mitchell Shire Council. It was great to be able to welcome new citizens from both of our constituencies, particularly the growth areas of my constituency, to Australia and to congratulate them on what a great achievement that is.

I enjoy travelling with committees as well. I too was at Lake Connewarre for the opening of the duck-shooting season. It was quite an educational trip for me as I did not know the first thing about duck hunting until this committee. It has been quite enjoyable for me to get out into the regions and interact with people like the field and game groups and the people that make it all work and to see some of the great vegetation and conservation work they do.

As I said, I think the Council making a trip to northern Victoria is a great idea. We all need to get a better perspective on the challenges in our state by going out and hearing directly from communities, and as Ms Lovell said, particularly from flood-affected communities that have done it really tough. I think the government could use this perspective to get out beyond the tram tracks, if I can borrow a phrase from a learned colleague. Why I say that is I look at examples in the far north of my own electorate, like the Wallan diamond ramps to the Hume and I see that Labor has promised this project at about four elections, both federal and state. I saw in the *Herald Sun* yesterday they are on a federal government hit list of projects that are in the planning phase and could have funding removed. I know my constituents in Wallan have been begging for this project for ages, so has the federal member for McEwen. He has a tagline that he is 'here for us', but he has all of a sudden gone silent on the Wallan diamond ramps and whether they will be funded.

Harriet Shing: Is this relevant?

Evan MULHOLLAND: It is relevant, and I say it is relevant because I think the whole Parliament going to that part of the world could enlighten members. I would love for all of Parliament to go to Donnybrook station, for example, and watch trains be cancelled.

In conclusion, I say that this is a terrific motion. I am very pleased that it has support from both sides of the house. I am very much looking forward to it and looking forward to sharing that opportunity with my colleagues.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Water, Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Commonwealth Games Legacy, Minister for Equality) (11:05): I rise today in a couple of capacities to speak on this motion from Ms Lovell, one as a member of Eastern Victoria Region, which covers the area from Mooroolbark out to Mallacoota and which has sustained significant damage as a consequence of natural disasters and emergencies for as long as records indicate. Whether it has been from droughts, bushfires, floods or indeed earthquakes, it has been an area riven with challenge, and those challenges continue. I am also in the position of great honour and responsibility as the Minister for Regional Development to be able to lean into the work that is happening across rural and regional Victoria and to invest in, support and provide visibility to rural and regional communities, including as the work continues to deliver the momentum that furthers the lowest unemployment rates that we have on record, the lowest payroll tax rates in Australia, the greatest level of investment in infrastructure programs and services, and indeed the sorts of investments that are necessary as our population grows and changes.

The other capacity in which I want to speak to this motion today is as the Minister for Water, and that is apposite given the context of the motion, relating as it does to the floods and to the impact of the floods in north and north-eastern Victoria. In October last year we saw events of a magnitude not contemplated in any record around various parts of the state. We saw communities devastated by the impact of the floods, and the devastation continued for a really significant period of time. We saw rivers break their banks with enormous force. We saw levees give way. We saw towns inundated. We saw homes with over-floor damage and flooding. We saw communities come together in a range of different ways to work throughout the day and throughout the night in rescue, relief and recovery.

On the ground, despite the other work of election campaigns and processes of democracy, that work around relief and recovery continued. It was of profound importance that government be visible and be on the ground, not in a performative sense, not with a flotilla of cameras in tow, but to talk about the impact of flooding on communities; to work out where the temporary accommodation was going; to partner with local government; to work alongside community organisations, neighbourhood houses and the frontline emergency responders – SES, CFA – on the work associated with our schools; and to go in and do the very things that involve preservation of opportunity for the students, the teachers and the staff as they returned. This was about rescuing books and drying them out page by page. This was about making sure that people had the food that they needed and could get rid of rubbish as they cleared it from their houses – once treasured items that were lost and that now needed to be collected.

We responded to the needs and the challenges as they arose, in a way that reflected ongoing improvement from the 2011 floods, that reflected a continuous improvement and a commitment from those impacted by the floods in New South Wales and that indicated a sense of interoperability and cooperation the likes of which had not been seen but will continue to be the basis for ongoing improvement into the future.

Turning now to the motion, it is incumbent upon us as a Parliament to ensure that any attendance at a sitting of Parliament in regional Victoria occur with the respect and the integrity that communities deserve. This should not be an exercise in grandstanding, in inappropriate behaviour or in creating distress to workers in and around regions because people cannot act appropriately. It should not be about having a lend because you are away from home and think that therefore you can get away with being a social encumbrance. It should not be a get-out-of-jail-free card to act like a slob. It should not be anything that leaves a sour taste in the mouths of communities who open up their facilities, who

volunteer their time and who make themselves available to show the Parliament in the best light that we would have it shown in.

It should be about making sure that there is accessibility and that there is not drunken and appalling behaviour that occurs out of hours. It should not be something which interferes with or detracts from the important work of the Parliament as it relates to the joint inquiries of committees, as it relates to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee and the Electoral Matters Committee. It should not be something which comes at the expense of the very inquiry into the floods and the purpose by which this motion is established, which is in the process of being constituted and moving its way around Victoria. It should not be at the expense of the 10 inquiries that are currently on the notice paper which are geared toward addressing – or purport to be geared toward addressing – a range of issues, including as they relate to and impact upon regional Victoria.

So let us not lose sight of the best intentions that should underpin this motion. Let us not lose sight of the fact that parliamentary committees require assistance from the same parliamentary staff who will be required to do hundreds of hours in order to set up a one-day sitting of the houses of Parliament. Let us make sure that a regional sitting of the Parliament is not performative, is not superficial, is not cosmetic and is not simply a reason to head out to rural and regional Victoria and treat it like rubbish. Victorians deserve better than that.

We know and we have seen the best of rural and regional Victoria in resilience in the face of some of the most devastating circumstances you can imagine. Let us never forget that after Black Summer, when 1.8 million hectares were destroyed, that parts of the community in Bright deserved better than they got with the last sitting of Parliament that occurred there. Let us not forget, when we are attending communities to provide that direct access to Parliament and to the work that happens here – to make law, to interrogate law, to provide opportunities to contribute – that we are doing it, and we must do it, with the gravitas that this responsibility requires. Let us not allow slovenly and disgraceful behaviour to taint the work of this Parliament. Let us not make the pages of the newspapers again because people cannot act appropriately. Let us not have individuals become the centre of a story when this should be about the collective and this should be about an institution which is beyond one single person.

In supporting this motion, let us make sure that the substantive work of the Parliament, the granular detail and the business-as-usual of this chamber of the Parliament as a whole continues. And to that end I thank the people who work so tirelessly to make sure that this Parliament is equipped with the resources that it needs in order for this work to continue. Parliament is an institution. It involves and requires so many hands on deck. This is about Hansard operators. It is about attendants. It is about security. It is about technology. It is about the clerks. It is about the staffing and it is about the logistical exercises that underpin something of this magnitude. So let us be clear that in heading to regional Victoria for a sitting like this we never lose sight of the objectives that are there: to provide support, to be visible, to show up and indeed to demonstrate the respect that rural and regional Victoria deserves.

I have had dozens of visits to rural and regional Victoria since the term of government began, since I was sworn in. There is an enormous amount of work occurring to make and keep the recovery efforts on track. This is a long process. It is a process akin to recovery from bushfires. It is a process which deserves the longevity and the stamina required of people to recover now and into the long term. It is about more than infrastructure and more than individual connection, it is about rebuilding a part of the state that was devastated. I would hope that in sitting regionally the members of the Parliament who attended last time will do better.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (11:16): I speak here on this motion and note that the government will be supporting this motion, and I also wish to thank Ms Lovell for the motion. Like my colleagues I would like to start by first acknowledging that the recent October floods last year and any floods – for individuals, businesses and communities – are enormous in the way that they impact

communities and are also quite far-reaching. We know that since the devastation of these floods there have been many industries and people that are doing it very, very tough.

I want to start by paying tribute to the loved ones and communities of the two people who tragically lost their lives, from Rochester and Nathalia. I want to acknowledge the bravery of those who responded to the devastating floods, particularly our emergency services, including the SES, CFA, FRV, Forest Fire Management Victoria, Victoria Police, Life Saving Victoria and Ambulance Victoria, as well as the many people who came from other states to lend a hand and the community members sandbagging and preparing.

In proposing a regional visit I would like to declare that I was born and bred and have lived in the outer regional community of Warrnambool every day of my life other than when I studied in Melbourne and started my career, and I can confirm that that is a unique experience. We are a diverse community, and the experiences of outer regional communities have a uniqueness that is quite different to those of inner regional communities and also metropolitan communities. So it is definitely worthwhile listening to those experiences. In fact when we look at the Australian Institute of Company Directors, they have a list of 10 good governance principles, and principle 9 says the board, which in this case would be the Parliament:

... should ensure that the organisation communicates with members and other stakeholders ... so that they have sufficient information to make appropriately informed decisions regarding the organisation.

The AICD also goes on to articulate in further detail just how important site visits are – and I think everybody here that has spoken today on this motion has endorsed the concept of site visits. We definitely learn about a single particular issue from multiple perspectives in doing those site visits. So it is a matter of good governance to be out amongst the communities that we are serving.

There is certainly significant value in visiting communities and listening to their experiences and needs and opportunities, and this government is very proud of its record of engaging with communities, whether it is asking nurses what they think will help promote more people to take up that profession through to my own visits in Western Victoria to Casterton, Portland, Port Fairy, Stawell, Warrnambool and other places. In Casterton I was involved in the opening celebration of a redevelopment of their fire station, and it was a great honour to hear from that community about the issues that they faced in developing their fire station. Every fire station is different and every firefighting situation is different, and hence it is wonderful to listen to those stories. Visiting multiple organisations in each of these communities provides a multilens understanding of an issue, so visiting flood-affected areas in northern Victoria will provide diverse perspectives on how the floods have been experienced differently.

In relation to the motion before the house, it is important to point out that ministers and members of this government do not need to go and visit regional communities as part of the Parliament but rather they do that as part of their ordinary roles in their portfolios and as MPs. Certainly in northern Victoria that occurs on a regular basis. A regional sitting does present an opportunity for members of this house from non-flood-affected regions to hear directly from those Victorians impacted by floods, but our government has already been putting in place that work. We on this side have been visiting, returning home to and working alongside regional Victorians, and not just talking to people but listening to them and, where we can, investing in programs and initiatives to support them.

A thriving Victoria means thriving regional and rural towns. The Andrews Labor government knows how important it is as a government to support and invest in these communities to ensure their continued growth and prosperity for generations to come. A great example of this is that south-western Victoria, which is a part of the western region that I represent, in 2021–22 was the highest value region for food and fibre production in the country. If you count the population of that region, you may see less significance than the population of Melbourne, but if you count the value of the product that comes out of that region, there is a significant national level contribution, and the stories and the lives and the experiences of those communities have a legitimate contribution to make.

I would like to express some concern about inflicting the sometimes exciting tedium of the Parliament on a community. Not all of us are enlightening when we are speaking all of the time – some of the time perhaps. I am trying to be very honest here: I do not think there has always been extreme value in everything that I have said in this place. In that regard it may not be something that local communities can relate to, but I can see the value in adding extra activities during the non-parliamentary sitting time, to visit communities and engage with them.

The October floods were devastating for so many communities across Victoria, particularly in northern Victoria. The flood events most heavily impacted the regional townships and cities of Shepparton, Seymour, Rochester and Echuca and additionally impacted the suburb of Maribyrnong in Melbourne. The Goulburn River, the Campaspe River and the Loddon River all experienced major flooding, with floodwaters causing significant damage to farms, towns, cities, roads, water supply infrastructure and communities. This included the town of Skipton in south-west Victoria. The Skipton community were significantly impacted by the October floods. The town's shopping precinct was flooded, with 17 houses impacted and commercial and community buildings inundated. The rail trail is an important asset for the Skipton community and, as such, the Skipton community flood recovery committee has identified that the repair of the rail trail is a priority project to support the community's flood recovery. The Corangamite shire manages the section of the Skipton to Ballarat rail trail that extends from Skipton North to the municipal boundary. The recovery plan identifies that the repair of the rail trail will help bring back visitors to the town, which will support local businesses who have been directly impacted by the floods, and it is very pleasing to see our government supporting that project.

These supports were many and varied, but first and foremost the most pressing area was providing emergency and temporary accommodation in hotels, caravan parks and even the Centre for National Resilience in Mickleham. Emergency Recovery Victoria, a body which operates in the Department of Justice and Community Safety, oversaw and continues to facilitate a range of support programs such as the clean-up program, which managed street debris – (*Time expired*)

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:26): I move:

That debate on this motion be adjourned until later this day.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned until later this day.

Production of documents

Duck hunting

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (11:26): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes that:
 - (a) duck hunting in Victoria is tightly regulated by the government;
 - (b) every year the government engages relevant eminent scientists to provide data based on scientific principles to the Game Management Authority, who produce a report outlining recommended seasonal changes based on that scientific evidence to the government;
 - (c) the seasonal changes announced for the 2023 duck-hunting season were incompatible with the report provided by the Game Management Authority, which was based on the evidence from the government scientists; and
- (2) requires the Leader of the Government, in accordance with standing order 10.01, to table in the Council, within four weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution, all documents relating to the 2023 seasonal changes to the duck-hunting season for all ministers involved in the decision, including but not limited to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation, Minister for Environment, Minister for Agriculture and the Premier.

When I started in this place I never thought I would end up spending most of my time in here supporting duck hunting. At the time I was not a duck hunter, whilst I obviously supported it. But in 2014 I recall the Premier stood up and supported duck hunting. I would suggest in 2018 before the

election a similar thing was done, and also there was not a mention of it before the 2022 election. So imagine my surprise when we got back and away we went. It all started falling down on us. I started hearing about hunter misbehaviour and all this sort of stuff, and I was going, 'Oh, okay. From what I've read on the Game Management Authority website that wasn't really a big thing.' I think what they had up there at the time was if every offence had been caused by a hunter and a hunter only, it was 0.012 per cent or 0.12 per cent of hunters. When I looked at that I was wondering what was going on.

We move on, and now all of a sudden we have got an inquiry forced upon us. Now, I am a little bemused about the inquiry just for the simple reason that the government has its own scientists. I did not pay for these scientists. The hunting organisations did not pay for these scientists. These are all government scientists saying that we need to have a duck-hunting season and why. So we cruise around, and we get the extremely short announcement. I asked a question in here, and the response was effectively something about precautionary principles and hunter misbehaviour, all this stuff I am a little bit dubious about, for want of a better term.

Moving along from that, then all of a sudden the quail season gets done. Now, quail had not been mentioned at all in any of this. As far as I am aware, there is no suggestion quail are endangered. Stubble quail are the only quail you can hunt, and suddenly that got done. So I went sniffing around, as did many other people, looking for the release of the data. I think it was the Game Management Authority that released a fair tranche of stuff. But what was not released was the interesting stuff, and that is what I want out of this.

One of the best documents I have ever seen released was the waterfowl hunting reduction action plan. It had a face sheet, and the next 30 or so sheets were redacted – nothing. I do not even know why they bothered putting it in there. I have got a fair idea what that was about, because it was produced by the government. I would suggest that at some point in time someone, including the government and other organisations that are involved with this – and not just hunting organisations – has come up with a plan to address one of the so-called issues, wounding. I also know there was a wounding study done, and from the results it was very near impossible to interpret anything. It is probably something that should have been done a long time ago to have a dataset built up. Somewhere between, I think it was, 2 and 40 per cent was the possible wounding rate. It is impossible to draw a conclusion from that, because you cannot be aware of ducks that have flown away and died. In fact it was impossible to draw a conclusion; between 2 and 40 per cent is just going nowhere.

The reason I did this motion is I have looked at some of the wetland closures and have decided to go ahead with this even though we have got most of what we want. It is what we have not got, including emails between the ministers and other parties, that I want to see. Let us have a look at Anderson Inlet, for instance. Anderson Inlet is in my patch and is one of the hunting areas in East Gippsland. It was closed, I believe, because someone thought they saw an orange-bellied parrot. I am not into studying ornithology – I think that is the term – but I believe the orange-bellied parrot was last seen in Tasmania. Someone may well have seen a rosella, they may have seen a parrot of another sort, they may even have seen an orange-bellied parrot, but to shut down the whole wetland to hunting because someone thought they saw something is not really defensible. And that is the sort of thing I want.

Another area in Gippsland that was shut to hunting was shut because – I find this one very farcical – there was a colony of bats. I cannot remember if they were flying foxes or fruit bats or whatever they were, but they are the same thing that the government is issuing authority to control wildlife permits for. So apparently we are not allowed to scare them there, but we can shoot them, or whatever method we use, elsewhere.

There is something really going on in this whole thing that is not gelling with good principles of wildlife management, game management and government. This just stinks highly of political interference. I am going as far as suggesting that a minister's personal opinion is now colouring their output. I have seen other ag ministers whose personal opinions I understand about duck hunting but

who went with the science. That makes me respect them more as people and politicians because they actually, against their own impressions, their own thoughts – whatever you want to call it – went with what the scientists said. The scientists do say – and some of these scientists are no fans of duck hunting – we need duck hunting for a number of reasons. I am not going to go too far into this just for the simple reason that no doubt we will get into this in the inquiry. I do hope we will invite them. But it is not like it is not sustainable. If cruelty was a problem, then why did we have a wounding reduction plan that a whole lot of people agreed on? Basically, something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

I went to the effort of doing my waterfowl identification test and passed it and have now got a duck-hunting licence, which is something I had started to feel compelled to get because the attack on duck hunting is an attack on hunting. The amount of times I have heard, ‘If duck hunting goes, you can go deer hunting.’ I am pretty sure shooting a deer is just as cruel as shooting a duck, if you are into that sort of thing. I am pretty sure the deer would agree with that. So it is not about ducks, it is about hunting. In fact recently on Facebook – the fount of all information; if it is on Facebook it is true! – someone said, ‘Go shoot deer.’ I said, ‘What’s different about shooting deer to a duck?’ and they said, ‘Well, they aren’t blasted out of the sky.’ They are shot on their feet because deer cannot fly.

The whole issue is a non-issue. Some people do not like it, I understand that, but if you do not like duck hunting, do not do it. I also understand that not all hunters do the right thing, and I actively encourage the government to catch them and prosecute them to the fullest, just as I encourage the government to get all the protesters that are breaking the law, to catch them and prosecute them to the fullest. I think any member of Parliament, no matter who they are or what party they represent, should have the same stance – you should not be advocating for law breaking.

A minor segue here: I have noticed a very disturbing new trend. A friend of mine who went duck hunting on private property had trespassers that were following them around on private property, and they were being, let us call it, harassed. I am not aware of that happening before. If it is on Crown land where there are rules and regulations – whether you stick to them or not is another thing – there are avenues to make your point known. Private land is private land. This is one of the things where I am noticing a very large change in attitude by people who think that bad laws are there to be broken. Some laws, whether you think they are bad or not –

Georgie Purcell interjected.

Jeff BOURMAN: Yes, that was deliberate. Some laws whether you think they are –

Georgie Purcell: I said that as a joke.

Jeff BOURMAN: You might have said it as a joke, Ms Purcell; not everyone does.

Harriet Shing: Look at you two, getting along over there.

Jeff BOURMAN: I know. Moving right along, we have laws for a reason, and I can say that if duck hunting does get banned at the end of this, the vast majority of people will not go hunting ducks. It is just the way it is. There will be some that will go and hunt or shoot them – they will be culled under an authority to control wildlife. The numbers will have to be reduced; that is just a fact. If the numbers get out of control, nature basically fixes it by giving them botulism. We saw, just before the original start of the hunting season occurred, an outbreak of botulism in the northern part of Victoria. I think it was 400 ducks. Everyone was screaming, ‘It was hunters, it was hunters’ – no, it was nature. Nature takes care of it, and I have to say botulism cannot be a pleasant way to go.

Georgie Purcell: Neither is duck shooting.

Jeff BOURMAN: I will take up that interjection. I would say getting shot is probably preferable to going down with botulism.

Georgie Purcell: A 40 per cent wounding rate.

Jeff BOURMAN: Between 2 and 40 per cent. You have got nothing to stand on.

I am running out of time. I did have another motion regarding duck hunting. Basically I think I have gone through the majority of that. But to recap, there is a whole lot of stuff going on that I do not think passes the sniff test from a government point of view. No matter what your personal opinion is on these things, there is a rule, there is a regulation, there is a way of doing things. I am absolutely stunned that the government has gone to the adaptive harvest model plan. They have got all the scientists, everyone has agreed to it and then all of a sudden it is not happening. It is just, 'No, we'll do what we want instead.' I do not think that is a good look for anyone, because if they are doing it for this, then what are else are they doing it for? That is something the government needs to think about on a wider level, and it does not engender trust.

Moving on to the quail season, I have got to point out that I did ask a question, 'What happened to the quail season?' – that is paraphrasing it – and I got a response the day before yesterday or something like that saying something about a 'precautionary principle', that it was shortened due to the precautionary principle. I had a bit of research done about the precautionary principle. The application of the precautionary principle is often cited as a rationale for government decisions that do not accord with all the available evidence. The principle is central to international environment law. In Victorian law, the principle is laid out in the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act, which requires decision-makers to give consideration to the precautionary principle, such as: if there are threats to serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation. You could say that is a reason why they use the precautionary principle, but what it is saying is that lack of evidence is not a reason to do something. If there was any evidence about quail hunting, then I am sure it would have come up. We sit here in this place and we dispute about duck hunting and hunting in general, but at least there is evidence we can throw backwards and forwards. In the end I do not think any of us are going to change our mind on this, but it is kind of how it works.

The whole thing – being up here – is starting to get old. I want to do more than just duck hunting, but I cannot let this go. So I am going to finish up, and I am going to quote from an inaugural speech. It is just a part of it, not the whole thing; we do not want to be here for 20 minutes. Blah, blah, blah, blah:

... the value of democracy and the need for public institutions to uphold the highest standards of integrity, discipline, accountability and transparency. People in public office are in positions of trust. It is incumbent upon each and every elected representative in this Parliament to put the public interest of Victorians above all else – even politics.

Well, for those that do not like duck hunting: happy days. You do not have to like it. I do not expect you to like it. If you do not like it, do not go duck hunting. I have heard 'If you don't like something, don't do it' in this place so many times it makes my ears bleed. But if you do not like it, do not do it. It is regulated. But I want out of this whole motion. I do not want in four weeks to get something from the government saying they have not got time. Well, they gave us an inquiry with not enough time, but we will get it done.

The government can give us what we need. The government should give us what we need, and in that documentation it should be explaining why, against its own evidence, these things are happening. It should be explaining why the precautionary principle is being used when there is no evidence, using the quail example. It should be explaining why it is now May and it is almost impossible to get meetings with the responsible minister, and that is not just me; it is all hunting advocacy people. If we were talking about fishing here, we would not be having this thing. Fishing is hunting, whether you like it or not. Fishing is one of those things. Now, I understand the Animal Justice Party has a thing about fishing, so I am leaving them out of this, but fishing is hunting. You can sit there and say, 'Oh, they're not fluffy, they're not cute.' Culling deer is hunting or culling, but hunting deer is hunting. Hunting or shooting rabbits is. There is no real difference, except that ducks are possibly cuter.

Georgie Purcell: And they are native.

Jeff BOURMAN: The numbers have still got to be controlled. You are helping me with running down my time, thank you. Yes, they may well be native. Let me use my 3 minutes to discuss that. Let us go back to what I said – the numbers. One thing is that white men came here in the 1700s – a bit earlier if you went over to the west – and what we brought with us were our farming methods amongst other things, and that has taken water like you would not believe in a continent that is known for its droughts.

Duck numbers: I am not going to say that they are better; they are probably better than they ever were back then but not since we have held records. Habitat destruction is the clearest danger to the ducks, if you want to get down to that. I mean, look at Connewarre, where we were. Habitat destruction: when suburbia gets there, and it is not going to be long, at some point in time someone is going to drain that swamp and turn it into a paved paradise or turn it into a parking lot, and then at that stage the ducks will move on somewhere else. At that stage habitat reduction will be a problem. Shooters shoot thousands. I am sure Ms Purcell will help me with the number.

Georgie Purcell: 80,000.

Jeff BOURMAN: Eighty thousand out of how many millions is the question. Where would those 80,000 that have been cut go, if they lived? They are going to go elsewhere, and eventually they are going to run out of habitat.

Georgie Purcell: No, conservationists will just keep doing their work.

Jeff BOURMAN: Actually, it is the hunters that do their work, thank you very much. I defy anyone to show the people, particularly at Connewarre, that a conservationist other than a hunter has done anything. But moving right along – I am getting well and truly off track here.

I understand this will end up probably going through on the voices, but I think it is important that the government does not just give me another letter in four weeks and tell me they cannot do it because there is not enough time. I also think it is important for transparency that we see the actual reasons why the minister or ministers – I am not going to point fingers just at one person all the time – have done this against their own advice. I think that is hugely important. Because otherwise ministers can pick a portfolio and do what they want, and I do not think that is a good thing for any government.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:45): I rise, perhaps with some trepidation, to speak on this motion put forward by Mr Bourman today. I do thank him for putting this motion forward. It does allow me to speak on a matter which I know has been very contentious amongst the community. It is a matter of great interest to a number of people. I love the juxtaposition every time I look over at this corner of the chamber and see the two of you sitting there, but for hunters and animal justice advocates as well as the broader community, this is a particular area of interest. That is one of the reasons why we have the select committee on Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements. As many members may know, I am a member of the committee, as are Mr Bourman and Ms Purcell. I also see Ms Cosey and Mr Batchelor in the room, and they are on that committee as well.

Jeff Bourman: And Ms Watt.

Michael GALEA: Sorry; I did not see you over there, Ms Watt. Ms Watt is also a fellow member of the committee. Given that as a government member of the committee I am speaking on this today, I will keep my remarks relatively circumspect. I think it will be important to provide some broader context on the committee's work and the purpose of the committee. Of course this issue has become a big area of debate within the Parliament and outside it as well. Over the past few years – and I note in particular during the term of the previous Parliament – there has been lots of discussion over the issue of recreational native bird hunting. As with any issue that arises at this level of debate, there are many passionate people from both sides, and I do want to commence my contribution by going over some of the parameters of what this committee actually is and is not looking into – what those

parameters are. The select committee into Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements is not looking at deer hunting and it is not looking at fishing, just to be very, very clear from the outset. I know there has been some conjecture in some elements of the community to say, 'Oh, this is all about going after deer hunting.' It is not. The clue is in the title: this is a committee on Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements.

What does that cover? Well, there has been some discussion by Mr Bourman about quails as well, and I do note that quails are also a topic of discussion that we are looking at in this committee. It also does look at a number of species of duck. The species of duck that can currently be hunted in this state in a regular season are the blue-winged shoveler, the grey teal, the chestnut teal, the hardhead, the mountain duck, the pink-eared duck, the Pacific black duck and the wood duck. Those eight species of duck, plus native quail, are covered by the scope of what the committee is looking into. I do note as well, for the sake of clarity, that two of those species of duck, the blue-winged shoveler and the hardhead, are both exempt from this year's hunting season on the grounds of low numbers. I think in providing this context it is really, really important that all members remain relevant to what we are actually here to talk about. This is not in any way looking at other hunting arrangements. It is not looking at deer, it is not looking at other game species and it is certainly not looking at fishing. Those things are well outside the scope of this inquiry. 'Native birds' means native birds – start of and end of.

Many people are dedicated to having their views heard and reflected in the future of recreational native bird hunting. The regulations surrounding duck hunting in particular have been a primary focus of community interest. That concern and interest is now extending to the recreational hunting of those other birds, as I mentioned, including the stubble quail. As a member of this select committee, I am particularly looking forward to the hearings that we will be having in possibly several weeks time. We have already received a very large number of submissions to this inquiry, and I would like to take this chance to remind people that submissions to the inquiry into Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements are still open and close on 8 May, so quite soon now. I do urge all interested parties to make sure that you have your say either by registering yourself for a hearing or by putting a submission through. You can refer to the Parliament website for details on how to do that. As a member of the committee, as I say, I am definitely looking forward to those hearings and hearing in more detail from both sides of this argument.

The regulation around duck hunting as well covers a few separate areas of government, so I think it is worth covering what that actually looks like too. So each year, as members may know, the government makes decisions taking into account the consideration of advice particularly received from the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions, the Game Management Authority and other government agencies and including the Minister for Agriculture, Minister for Outdoor Recreation and the Minister for Environment, all having coverage of this area. They receive the advice and take the proper care and consideration into determining what the duck-hunting season will look like. Beyond the advice given by the DJSIR and the GMA, and I would note that the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action also have some involvement here, the government has listened to and consulted with stakeholders. Engaging with these stakeholders from both sides is crucially important, and that is why we have already engaged as a government with numerous groups both in favour of and against duck hunting, including Field and Game Australia, Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting, the RSPCA and the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia, amongst others.

The consultation process has demonstrated the increased concern and contention surrounding recreational native bird hunting. Amongst Victorians there has been growing concern surrounding the wounding rates of native birds, instances and risks of illegal hunting behaviour and the overall effect that recreational hunting has on native bird populations, and I really do believe that it is important to acknowledge that all sides of this debate have expressed concerns and have raised arguments, which we are here to listen to. I also do want to acknowledge that many different supporters from many different sides have also raised concerns about wounding and, as Mr Bourman referred to earlier, ways in which we can address that issue.

The current hunting and stubble quail season has opened for 2023, and as has been widely reported and mentioned in members statements this morning, along with my fellow committee members I did go to the Lake Connemara wetlands near Geelong last Wednesday. We had the opportunity to observe the commencement of the hunting season by visiting three locations around that lake, starting at the Reedy Lake, I believe it was called, and then going around to the south side near Baensch Lane as well. We got to meet with the animal rights protesters and with some hunters as well. Whilst – I am not going to say it was a little bit of a circus – we had a lot of news crews there, and it was very good to see interest from the media as well and was certainly welcome to have the attention on it, it may not have been perhaps the most accurate reflection, seeing a parliamentary committee stomp around the wetlands followed by TV cameras in tow. Nevertheless, though, it was still a very valuable insight into exactly how this operates and how it works. As other members have said, there was a relatively low turnout at those wetlands on the day, but it was still nevertheless a good opportunity for us to meet with and engage with people and even the Game Management Authority as well over how they propose their compliance and monitoring of duck-hunting activities. I know I speak on behalf of certainly the Labor committee members and possibly others as well when I say that we all found that experience to be valuable in spite of the fact that it possibly was not the normal picture of what you might see without Channel 7 watching you the whole time.

There will be many more lines of inquiry that this committee will be looking at within those scopes and those parameters that I have already mentioned and, as I said, in particular those hearings which will be taking place over the coming months. Our committee is due to provide a report back to this chamber by 31 August this year, so I know there is going to be a power of work to be done by all committee members, notably our chair Mr Batchelor as well, and we are all putting our minds very seriously to this task to ensure that whatever outcome we do deliver is the best outcome for Victoria as well.

This current hunting season, as mentioned, did start last Wednesday, on 26 April. It will be running until Tuesday 30 May. Ordinarily you have a limit of 10 ducks that you can shoot and bag in a day. This season it has been reduced to four, and as I also mentioned earlier, both the blue-winged shoveler and the hardhead ducks are exempt from this year's duck-hunting season as per regulations under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988.

In closing I would just like to say again that we do have a committee that is looking at this very issue. It is important that we do so. It is an important area of discussion that the community from all quarters of this state have raised, and as a member of the Select Committee on Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements I am very much looking forward to further engaging with both sides of this debate as well as the broader community over what the future of this activity looks like in Victoria.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (11:55): I am really pleased to rise to show the Nationals' and the Liberals' support for this documents motion. Normally documents motions are non-controversial; they are about accessing information that is hidden from public view but is of significant public interest.

I might just say at the outset of my discussion on this topic that Mr Bourman has moved the motion and we are happy to support Mr Bourman, but he was not happy to support the Nationals or the Liberals in the seat of Morwell. Indeed his candidate's second preference went to the Labor Party. Here we have a member of the upper house from the Shooters and Fishers, and they were supporting the government, which has stated on this inquiry – I have heard Mr Galea talk about the upper house inquiry and the minister at the table the Honourable Lizzie Blandthorn has said:

My views on this issue are well known. I do not need convincing and I am certainly not for turning. My view is that I believe native waterbird hunting should be banned ...

That is an interesting partnership where we had the Shooters and Fishers directly supporting the Labor Party. They did not get up. The member for Morwell is the Nationals member Martin Cameron. They

were directly supporting them in one context, and then we have got the Labor Party saying this about the shooting and hunting fraternity and that native bird hunting should be banned.

Nevertheless I am very interested to follow this line of conversation in relation to ministers. There seems to have been a vacuum on ministers. I was reflecting earlier today on a picture that popped into my head: the Chinese proverb about the three wise monkeys. Three ministers must sign off for there to be a variation on the duck season and the quail season – the native bird hunting seasons. They are the Minister for Outdoor Recreation, the Minister for Environment and the Minister for Agriculture. In reflecting on the three wise monkeys in no way am I suggesting to this house that the ministers are monkeys, not at all – that is the furthest thing from the truth – but nor am I saying that they are wise in this decision, because clearly there has been compelling information, documentation and scientific evidence delivered unto them and they have turned away from it. They have rejected it.

My vision of that was that they have closed their eyes to a clear recommendation from the Game Management Authority (GMA) about a full duck season. They have closed their ears to compelling evidence from independent scientists, and a great array of them, and they have zipped their mouths shut in relation to this season. We did a bit of a fact check, and nowhere in this new Parliament, in the 60th Parliament, has any of those three made any mention to hunting in outdoor recreation or in any of their portfolios, so here we have this vision of the alternate version of the three wise monkeys.

The GMA has presented a comprehensive paper to the Andrews government, to those ministers. It has presented a full season for 2023, it has presented a four-bag daily limit in duck season, and it has presented from 15 March to 12 June for the full season – a tad over two months – and that was because of the midweek opening on 8 May. It also recommended the blue-winged shoveler and the hardhead be prohibited from the species that could be hunted during this season.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Decriminalisation of public drunkenness

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:00): (113) My question is to the Attorney and Leader of the Government. I refer you to reports of startling comments made this week by senior health bureaucrats that your government's health response measures to public drunkenness will not be fully in place by Melbourne Cup Day, with a Department of Health deputy secretary stating, 'We will be learning as we're going,' and the department's executive director of strategy and policy saying, 'Some people describe it as building the bike as we're riding it.' Why are you and your government not listening and being so insistent on Melbourne Cup Day being the designated day for the commencement of the new system, when clearly the new system will not be ready and, as a result, community safety will be at risk?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:01): I thank Ms Crozier for her question on our decriminalisation of public drunkenness, a piece of legislation that has been considered by this chamber twice, most recently last year in agreeing to postpone the commencement by 12 months to ensure that the enactment will be on or before 7 November 2023.

Decriminalisation of public drunkenness is something that the government has been looking at for some time. It is something that has been on the agenda for many advocates, and what we wanted to do was to ensure that people that were just drunk were not sobering up in police cells. We know that there are some dire consequences for individuals. I do take the opportunity to, once again, acknowledge the passing of Tanya Day as one of the issues that really prompted the strong advocacy in relation to ensuring that a better approach to people intoxicated in public – a health approach – was something that we agreed to progress, and I am very proud that we have legislation.

Ms Crozier, we have delayed the commencement because of, effectively, the impacts of COVID. We knew that we had a strained health system, and that is why we brought legislation to the Parliament to delay it by 12 months. A lot of people were upset that we had to delay it, but we wanted to get the system right. I am on the record as saying it is difficult to get laws such as this perfect, but to suggest that we should not have a health response is not something that I agree with.

In relation to the laws, there will still be opportunities for Victoria Police to retain existing powers to respond to individual and community safety concerns and problematic behaviours. This is not a get-out-of-jail-free card if you are drunk. If you are committing another crime or if you are behaving inappropriately, it is still of course expected that police would respond to such behaviour, but we want to make sure there is a proper response to people that are intoxicated, and we believe that that is a health response. This is a system that we are building. There have been some trial sites, which are underway, and we will continue to build and learn as the system unfolds, but having a health response to this is good public policy.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:03): I thank the Attorney for her response. I note that you said that the implementation of these new laws was delayed because of COVID, but there is considerable concern in relation to how these laws will actually work, and they are the concerns that I highlighted in my substantive question. I again ask: why is the government going ahead with the introduction of these measures if the system is not ready?

Jaelyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:04): Ms Crozier, it is May, and these laws are coming into effect in November. We have a lot of work to do – I acknowledge that – in both the health system and in working with VicPol in relation to education in relation to de-escalation and responding to public intoxication in a decriminalised environment. Everyone is working together to ensure that this can be as successful as possible. As I said, it is complex law – we are responding to human behaviour – but we think that this is the best approach to have a health response to people that are intoxicated in public, and where people are committing crimes, police will still be able to respond to disorderly conduct and the like.

There is a lot of work to do, but that work is targeted and the government is committed to assisting all agencies in ensuring that they can best enact this legislation. We will have ongoing evaluation and monitoring of these reforms because we know that there will be instances that we want to learn from to improve the system, and we are not going to shy away from ensuring that we build the system and continue to learn to make sure that these laws can be the best possible.

Corrections system

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:05): (114) My question is to the Minister for Corrections. The Andrews Labor government tells us that the budget situation is so dire that a slash-and-burn budget with cuts to essential services is necessary. Noting this narrative, it is worth remembering that a 2021 Productivity Commission report found that Victoria has Australia's highest prison costs, at \$204,035 per prisoner per year, much of which is paid to profiteering corporations. Despite having the highest costs, Victoria actually has the poorest outcomes of any state in Australia. More Victorian ex-prisoners return to corrective services, with 58.2 per cent of those released from jail returning to prison or receiving a new community correction order within two years. This is both fiscal and social madness. The Parliamentary Budget Office has advised that the Greens policy, including to close Barwon and Loddon prisons and redirect prisoners to existing prisons, would save \$1.3 billion over the four years of forward estimates. Can the minister justify why he would not adopt this responsible policy and redirect those funds into crime prevention and other justice reinvestment initiatives?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:06): I thank the member, Ms Copsey, for her question. It is a really good topic in talking about the investments our government has made in our corrections system. We do not shy away from that. We have invested in significant infrastructure across our corrections

system – whether that be Dame Phyllis Frost, whether that be in new facilities – because we know that to give prisoners the best chance to turn their lives around is to make sure that support services are available whilst they are having their time in custody, to put that to productive use. We have invested significant amounts in medical services, educational facilities, trade schools and employment-type settings in our corrections facilities. I have been out to Loddon Middleton as well and many of the other premises. It is during our term in government that we have invested in these facilities. They give people the best chance to turn their lives around. Obviously more can always be done, and I appreciate constructive feedback in that regard. If you have any proposals to make, I look forward to you forwarding them to me, and I will consider them.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:07): I thank the minister for his answer. Can the minister advise if they are allocating additional funding to crime prevention in the upcoming budget and what new activities those funds will be spent on, or will Victorians need to accept that we will continue to have a shamefully broken and criminogenic corrections culture and the worst recidivism rate in Australia?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:08): I thank the member for their question. I think in terms of our government’s record, we have invested significant amounts into diversionary programs. The question specifically is in terms of crime prevention. There is a Minister for Crime Prevention in the other place, Minister Carabine. Nonetheless, I think it is an important discussion that we have about the criminal justice system and how it operates. I can say that there are a number of programs that we do run in relation to diversion and in terms of early intervention as well, whether that be in terms of housing support, family support – across the different portfolios across the whole of government. I think there is always more that can be done in this space. Like I said, if you have proposals to put, please forward them to me if they fall within my portfolio, but crime prevention is actually for the Minister for Police.

Ministers statements: Australian Corrections Medal

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:08): I rise today to recognise the achievements of one of the many dedicated staff that work right across our corrections system. Last month I had the honour of attending Government House for the investiture of our newest Australian Corrections Medal recipients. The corrections medal recognises the efforts of staff who have provided distinguished service in their home state’s corrections system.

I was pleased to have the opportunity to congratulate Kerrie Frank as she was awarded her medal by the Governor of Victoria. Kerrie has worked as a case manager and supervisor at the Wodonga community corrections office since 2004 – almost 20 years of service. During her career Kerrie has supervised numerous people on corrections and parole orders. She has a reputation for professionalism, leadership and dedication. At the height of the pandemic when state borders were closed, Kerrie went above and beyond in dealing with stakeholders and agencies working on both sides of the border. Kerrie has also been a leader in her local community, guiding her team through major reform processes and improving the services they provide. I want to take this opportunity to again congratulate Kerrie Frank on being awarded the Australian Corrections Medal. I thank her for her tireless work serving the Wodonga community throughout her career.

Our corrections officers are working 24/7 across Victoria to keep our community safe, both in custodial settings and in the community. They do remarkable work in often challenging circumstances. I thank each and every one of them for their commitment and dedication to making Victoria a safer and better place to live in.

Dairy industry

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:10): (115) My question is for the minister representing the Minister for Agriculture today. Like any other mammal, to produce milk female cows

and goats must become pregnant and give birth. For the dairy industry, these animals are often kept in a continuous cycle of pregnancy so that their milk can be used for human consumption. Since male calves and kids cannot produce milk, they are considered waste to the dairy industry and are usually slaughtered in the very first week of their lives. Victorian guidelines recommend so-called humane destruction of waste animals to include firearms, captive bolt or blunt force trauma, and investigations across Victoria have found baby animals being routinely bludgeoned with sledgehammers and thrown against walls. Currently this is completely legal. A 2020 parliamentary inquiry recommended a review into the use of blunt force trauma on male baby animals in the dairy industry. The government supported this recommendation. Now three years since the report, can the minister advise on the progress?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:11): I thank Ms Purcell for her question for Minister Tierney. I will endeavour to pass that on to her office and get you a response.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:11): Thank you, Minister, for referring that on. My supplementary is: the Victorian dairy industry does not report how many animals it kills as waste products. Can the minister confirm how many male calves and kids are killed by Victoria's dairy industry each year?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:12): I thank Ms Purcell for her supplementary question. It will join her substantive.

Decriminalisation of public drunkenness

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:12): (116) My question is again to the Attorney and Leader of the Government. I refer you to recent commentary by the police association secretary Wayne Gatt that your government has failed to listen to warnings that the new system is not ready and has not yet answered a range of critical questions. I am referring to the public drunkenness laws. He stated that:

... the community-at-large will be the government's guinea pigs.

... the government has willingly buried its head, in the sheer hope that nothing will go wrong.

It will.

In light of such extraordinary comments that point to the risk to community safety, will you now admit that your government's reforms are flawed and that they should be postponed so that community safety is not at further risk?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:12): I think, as I alluded to in my earlier response, this is legislative reform that has been on the agenda for a very long time. Other states have acted on this, and we are proud that Victoria finally has caught up. The underlying policy basis for this legislation is to ensure that people are not placed in police cells when they are drunk. We have evidence of catastrophic results involving people dying. In relation to the laws, they will commence by November this year. We have work to do to ensure that the health system alternatives for people that are drunk in public are established.

I can assure the house that I have regular meetings with the president of the TPA as well as the chief commissioner in relation to the implementation of these issues. The health bodies are having regular meetings as well into how the interaction between police and health bodies can work. We have many months to ensure that it is ready to go, and we will have continual monitoring and observation of these laws to ensure that we can continue to respond. Of course community safety is a part of this policy, which is why I can confirm that just being drunk in public does not get you out of the attention of police if you are acting inappropriately or conducting yourself with problematic behaviour. Indeed any risk to community safety would still be responded to by Victoria Police.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:14): Mr Gatt, I believe, wrote to the Premier with these concerns in January and has had no response. You say that you have met with him regularly. But why is the government again ignoring an important stakeholder such as the police association secretary Wayne Gatt, who has said, ‘It will evaporate when the first preventable tragedy occurs’? If you have met with him, why are you not listening to this very important stakeholder?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:15): Ms Crozier, yes, I meet regularly with Mr Gatt. I have met with him this year. When you are in government you actually have to balance a range of stakeholder views. Not agreeing with someone is not ignoring them. I will continue to work with all stakeholders in relation to the delivery of this policy, as will the Minister for Health, who has a lot of responsibility in relation to the health delivery, as will the Minister for Mental Health and Minister for Ambulance Services. This government is committed to getting this legislation right and will continue to engage with police on the ground, including Mr Gatt and the chief commissioner.

Ministers statements: Victorian Disability Advisory Council

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers, Minister for Child Protection and Family Services) (12:16): I rise to update the house on the Andrews government’s continued consultation with the disability community and in particular the wonderful meeting I had on Thursday 20 April with the Victorian Disability Advisory Council, or VDAC as they are commonly referred to. This is an amazing group of people who are working so hard for the benefit of the communities that they represent and advocate for. Chaired by Chris Varney, the founder of I Can, the largest autistic-led organisation in the country, the council provides independent advice to the government on issues that affect disabled people in Victoria and plays a key role advising the government on the implementation of *Inclusive Victoria*, our state’s disability plan. This plan is designed to make Victoria a more inclusive and accessible place for the 1.1 million Victorians living with a disability.

The Labor government has invested in new Changing Places around the state, which now number over 100, with more to come. Victoria has nearly half of all of the Changing Places facilities that exist across Australia. We have also provided grants for 27 universal design projects around the state. These include beach wheelchair access matting in Anglesea, a dementia-friendly sensory garden in Chiltern and accessibility upgrades to playgrounds and play equipment right across Victoria. We have also continued to support the Change Your Reactions public education campaign, which promotes better attitudes towards people with autism.

At our meeting, the VDAC members shared their passions and priorities for disability inclusion, and over the coming weeks the members will introduce themselves to the public more widely through a series of online videos. These videos provide an opportunity for the members to tell their personal stories and highlight the ongoing work to make Victoria a more inclusive community for people with any form of disability. As Martin Heng says in his video, disability inclusion is a mindset that everyone can adopt. We value the voices of those with lived experience of disability, and I look forward to working with VDAC to progress our important work together.

COVID-19 vaccination

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:18): (117) My question is directed to the Minister for Emergency Services. A number of Fire Rescue Victoria and emergency response staff have been excluded from work because they did not get vaccinated for COVID-19. All are desperate to return to work and suffering from financial distress. Minister, if professionals such as teachers and police are having unvaccinated workers return to work, why is Fire Rescue Victoria still excluding able firefighters from returning to work?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:18): Ms Hermans, whilst I understand why you have directed this question to me, it is not actually a matter

for me. I do not have any policy responsibility in relation to the vaccination status of staff at FRV. It is a matter for the employer, being FRV, and in relation to health advice the Minister for Health would be able to provide you with more details in relation to –

Members interjecting.

Jaclyn SYMES: It is a matter for the health minister.

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:19): Thank you, Minister, for your response. While I did not find the response satisfactory, I would like to ask a supplementary question: what impact has the loss of unvaccinated FRV and emergency staff had on keeping Victorians safe?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:19): There is a slight difference in the questions that you have asked, because your –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! The minister is trying to answer the question.

Jaclyn SYMES: I am. I do not have a role in the employment decisions in relation to vaccinations or not. That is made by the employer directly, FRV, in conjunction with the health department. Therefore, in relation to health advice, that is why it would be appropriate to refer that to the Minister for Health. But in relation to the question that you have asked, of course I have asked similar questions, and I am assured by FRV and indeed all of our emergency services organisations that, for any requirements in relation to vaccinations and in relation to keeping the community safe in who they regularly interact with, there have been no operational issues in relation to keeping the community safe as a result of any of the vaccination requirements. I have had reassurances again and again because I continue to ask the question as you have asked it of me.

Corrections policy

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:20): (118) My question is for the Minister for Corrections. Could the minister please outline the processes and procedures which currently allow biologically male criminals who identify as female to be imprisoned in female prisons?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:21): Thank you, Ms Deeming, for that question. I think your longstanding interest in this topic is well publicised. What I will say is that, with the policies and procedures in terms of prisoner placements more broadly, there is a department obviously that looks at these matters, and prisoner placements are made in the interests of the individual prisoner, with obviously the safety and security needs of the system as a whole, including the safety of other prisoners, also considered. Broadly speaking, that is the broad policy. But that is a decision for Corrections Victoria to make, and it is not my place to go into individual prisoner placements.

I know the context in which you are asking this question because you have been quite public about it, but what I will say is that as a government we are committed to the safety of all prisoners and everyone in our system, including trans prisoners. I think that is important to point out as a government. We have a number of policies as well for looking for improvements in relation to this area. Our government has established a trans, gender-diverse and intersex prisoner reference group to monitor issues such as those that you have raised in the past and consider opportunities for system improvements related to the management of trans, gender-diverse and intersex prisoners. As a government we are proud to embrace all Victorians.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:22): I look forward to hearing about a reference group for women prisoners' rights. We all know that being a male at all is a risk and an unacceptable denial of sex-based rights to privacy for female prisoners, and we already know that there is one twice-convicted male rapist in the Dame Phyllis Frost correctional centre. Could you please provide an

estimate of the total number of biologically male criminals that are currently housed in women's prisons in Victoria?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:23): I thank Ms Deeming for her supplementary question. As I stated in my substantive, it is not appropriate for me to go into individual prisoner placements. That is a decision that Corrections Victoria make in line with their policies about ensuring the safety of prisoners, the prisoner's own preference for their placement, also other broader considerations as well as a system and the safety of other prisoners too. You need to understand that there are emerging factors in our prison system, and I think that is why the reference group is important.

It is not appropriate to take just a populist stance on these issues or what you think is a populist stance. I think it is important to take a principled stance, and as a government we are not going to take a step backwards. We are going to embrace all Victorians. We are committed to that and we will continue to do that work. We have got this reference group, and I look forward to working with them as well in terms of getting their feedback on these issues and how we can make improvements in the placement of prisoners. But there are policies in place to ensure the safety of all Victorians, and I am committed to that.

Ministers statements: Commonwealth Games

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Water, Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Commonwealth Games Legacy, Minister for Equality) (12:24): I rise today to talk in my capacity as the Minister for Commonwealth Games Legacy. This is an opportunity through Victoria 2026, the very first Commonwealth Games ever to take place in a rural and regional setting that will deliver the eyes of the world to rural and regional Victoria, with a return on investment of around \$3 billion. What this represents is an unprecedented opportunity, and it is unfortunate that those opposite are so busy –

Members interjecting.

Sonja Terpstra: On a point of order, President, I cannot hear the minister. The noise in here is inappropriate. I would ask that those opposite allow the minister to continue in silence, and I think she should be allowed to start from the top.

The PRESIDENT: I uphold the point of order. There was too much noise. I think the minister can start from the top where she says 'building on the previous minister's good work'.

Harriet SHING: I note your ruling, President, in relation to the pathway that was set for the work that is now happening. Indeed the inaugural speeches of a number of members who sit in opposition have really been very complimentary of the opportunities that the Commonwealth Games, as part of Victoria 2026, will deliver to rural and regional Victoria, and that is why when we turn the eyes of the world to rural and regional Victoria and to the electorates of a number of people here on the opposition benches, who say they prioritise their communities, a return on investment of \$3 billion is no laughing matter. An opportunity for volunteers, for schoolchildren, for jobs and indeed for a whole range of opportunities to come to the regions is no laughing matter.

Those opposite may well seek to criticise the Commonwealth Games from here, but what I think we should do is unite around this very special opportunity to get behind the procurement pipeline and the opportunities for expressions of interest that are now available. Employment suppliers and group training organisations can register via the Buying for Victoria website. This is at buyingfor.vic.gov.au. I would also encourage people to really get on board with Apprenticeships Victoria and the skills and training pathways that that will deliver. I know that my colleague Minister Tierney has been doing a power of work in that space. The reference, should anyone be playing along at home, is apprenticeships.vic.gov.au.

What we are seeing here, beyond the record investment that we have made in rural and regional Victoria, is an opportunity to create a lasting legacy through infrastructure, through community pride, through the telling of stories and through the localised opportunities for everything from food, produce, wayfinding, cultural identity and First Nations engagement right through to inclusion and accessibility. This is about the best games of our lives, and I look forward to everybody jumping on board.

Charitable organisations

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:27): (119) My question is to the Minister for Environment. Minister, why won't the Andrews government provide 100 per cent financial protection to Victorian charities to offset the impact of the government's proposed waste levy?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-Prep, Minister for Environment) (12:27): I thank Ms Crozier for her question. Can I, from the outset, just acknowledge the very important work that our charities do in Victoria, not only when it comes to addressing pollution and the significant role they play in our circular economy but also of course for the really important work that they do supporting some of Victoria's most vulnerable community members. It is, I think, very important to point out that since 2014 the Andrews Labor government have supported charities in their efforts to divert literally hundreds of thousands of tonnes of recycling from landfill. This is something that we are very committed to continuing to support the charitable sector on, and we are in the process of determining the most appropriate way in which to do that going forward.

It is also important for context to note that the recent announcement of our container deposit scheme, CDS Vic, will also provide a number of additional opportunities for charities to raise important funds, and that can be done in a number of different ways. Of course there can be container drives that charities are the beneficiaries of. They can also run refund collection points across one of the 600 collection points that will be rolled out across our state as part of our container deposit scheme, and also the reverse vending machines that will be introduced actually allow individual Victorians who are doing the right thing with their recycling to provide that refund to the charity of their choice. These are a number of different ways in which the Andrews Labor government is supporting our charitable organisations. Specifically, in relation to our charitable recyclers, we have been backing them since 2014, and we will continue to support them in the important work that they do to help Victoria divert 80 per cent of landfill by 2030.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:30): Minister, that was an extraordinary answer to a very simple question. The charities divert over 158,000 tonnes, for your information –

Ingrid Stitt: I am aware.

Georgie Crozier: well, you did not say it – from Victorian landfill and contribute to the circular economy by giving 68 million products a second life every year through charity op shops. They make a huge positive impact on our environment. Why is the Andrews Labor government going to war with Victorian charities in order to make the smallest dint in its bankrupt budget?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-Prep, Minister for Environment) (12:31): I must say Ms Crozier is gilding the lily somewhat here. It is like she is actually repeating my answer back to me, because I just spent 3½ minutes explaining that the Victorian government has backed our charitable organisations in their recycling efforts since 2014, and we will continue to do so. And in fact it is our circular economy policies that are helping them to support delivery. So it is an absolute flipping of reality that Ms Crozier is presenting in the chamber today. We have been engaging with the organisations and the peak bodies associated with these charitable recyclers, and we will continue to support them.

Charitable organisations

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:32): (120) My question is again to the Minister for Environment. Minister, this morning on 3AW's Neil Mitchell program Omer Soker, chief

executive officer of Charitable Recycling Australia, said that they had asked to meet with you nine to 10 times. You just said that you have been engaging, but he said they have asked to meet with you nine to 10 times. Why have you continuously refused to meet with the charity sector regarding their concerns about the Andrews Labor government's tax on charities?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-Prep, Minister for Environment) (12:32): This is not a laughing matter. I find it extraordinary that Ms Crozier could assert the things that she has just asserted about my engagement in this important policy matter.

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Ingrid STITT: Ms Crozier, if you would let me actually get a few words out in answer to your important question about my engagement in this issue, I am very well aware that there have been significant amounts of correspondence. I have actually written to the CEO of the peak body recently about these issues and reassured him that the government will continue to support the efforts of charitable recyclers not only because it is the right thing to do but because it is an important part of our circular economy efforts to reduce the amount of landfill. I understand the issues that the charitable recyclers are advocating for and that their peak body is advocating for. You are misrepresenting my position in relation to these matters, Ms Crozier. I will continue to make sure that our charitable recyclers are supported.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:34): Minister, I am acknowledging the fact that you have written, but you have not actually had the time to meet face to face even though they have requested a meeting nine to 10 times. So, Minister, has your reluctance to meet with the sector face to face been because you know that the cost-benefit ratio of imposing the Andrews Labor government's charities tax will have a significant negative impact on the sector?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-Prep, Minister for Environment) (12:34): No. I completely reject that assertion. My office has met with the organisation that is the peak body for charitable recyclers in this state. I cannot be any clearer than I already have been. Since 2014 our government has made sure that charitable recyclers can continue their important work without an impost on them, and we will continue to do that important work to support them.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:35): I move that the minister's answer to the op shop tax question be taken into account on the next day of meeting.

The PRESIDENT: Do you want to rephrase that as a motion that I can put?

David DAVIS: I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Ministers statements: early childhood education

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-Prep, Minister for Environment) (12:35): I would like to rise today and inform the house that free kinder enrolment for 2024 is now opening at services in every corner of our state. On Monday I had the pleasure of joining AFL great and community leader Bachar Houli at Altona North Children's Service, the very service that Bachar went to himself as a little kindergarten kid, to talk about the importance of families from all cultures and backgrounds enrolling their children in three- and four-year-old kinder. Along with thousands of other Victorians, Bachar is enrolling his son Mohamed in next year's three-year-old kinder program so that he can enjoy the proven benefits of two years of early education.

At kindergarten, children learn through play-based learning. Play encourages children to use their imagination and make discoveries while learning to listen, share and take turns. Children also learn about numbers, words and language and develop key social and emotional skills that set them up for

a lifetime of success. And now with free kinder available right across the state families will save up to \$2500 per child each year. This means even more children will be able to access the lifelong benefits of early education without putting pressure on the household budget and that more parents and carers, particularly women, can return to work if they choose. This year in Victoria free kinder will benefit up to 140,000 three- and four-year-old children. Only the Andrews Labor government is making sure that every Victorian child can get the very best start in life no matter where they live, and I encourage all families to get in touch with their local services and enrol their children in kinder in 2024.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:37): I thank Minister Symes, who will get written responses from the Minister for Agriculture for both the supplementary and substantive questions from Ms Purcell.

Constituency questions

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:38): (132) My constituency question is for the Minister for Crime Prevention, and it relates to an increase in crime in the Mornington, Mount Eliza and Mount Martha areas. Craig Vanstone owns a fantastic cafe down at Mount Eliza. In the early hours of 17 April Craig's cafe and 12 other small businesses were broken into and vandalised, and cash was stolen from them. Traders are highly anxious about the safety and security of not only their own staff but their customers as well. With retail crime escalating over the past 12 months, Craig attributes soaring costs of living to some of this additional crime. He says – and he has spoken with me – people are struggling to get money by any means to fund their lives. He and other retailers are calling for additional CCTV, so will you work with the Mornington Peninsula retail sector to fund additional CCTV to deter crime activity in that area?

Western Victoria Region

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:39): (133) My question is to the minister for transport. Ballarat residents have long called for a review of the bus network. A 2018 Public Transport Users Association report identified problems like infrequent and unreliable services, lack of coordination with V/Line timetables, very limited hours of operation and no cross-town services. For example, a 15-minute car trip or 25-minute bike ride from Delacombe town centre to Stockland Wendouree takes 1 hour and 7 minutes on a bus. Lack of adequate public transport compounds inequality and entrenches car dependence for residents of Ballarat and surrounding rural towns. Lack of action from the state government has led Ballarat City Council to undertake their own project to advocate for a better bus network that actually meets local needs. My question to the minister is: will you undertake an immediate review of the Ballarat bus network and ensure that local community needs are actually met?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Matthew BACH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:40): (134) Cleanliness is next to godliness, and the Eastern Freeway is practically satanic. I recently received correspondence from one of our constituents called Marnie. Marnie travels every day along the Eastern Freeway, as I do – perhaps not every day, but regularly I travel along the Eastern Freeway – and she has been struck by just how much trash there is along the side of the freeway. Obviously this is bad for the environment. It is unpleasant to look at, but it is also dangerous. I have regularly witnessed cars swerving to get around the trash in a way that is clearly dangerous. It is interesting to note that as soon as you get onto the private part of the road, things become much cleaner. I want to applaud ConnectEast for the way that they keep their section of the road, but I will ask the minister this – the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, that is – why won't your department apply the same level of diligence as ConnectEast for the public portion of the Eastern Freeway?

Western Metropolitan Region

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:41): (135) My constituency question is for the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure. My constituent is a resident of Gladstone Park and is concerned about the impacts of the proposed third runway at Melbourne Airport. Studies show a third runway would have a detrimental impact on the health and amenity of residents like my constituent who live under the proposed new flight paths. My constituent asks: what studies have or will the state government undertake to assess the potential health and amenity impact on residents and communities arising from the proposed third runway?

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:42): (136) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety and concerns the current condition of the Heathcote-Rochester Road, also known by locals as the Corop-Rochester Road. In yet another example of the deplorable state of regional roads, one of my constituents brought the state of the Heathcote-Rochester Road to my attention. The constituent states that the southern end of the Heathcote-Rochester Road near the Midland Highway now has a permanent speed limit of 80 kilometres due to the terrible condition of the road surface. The constituent states that the northern end of the road between Howard Road and Webb Road has been resurfaced twice in the past two years, and the road surface is still unsatisfactory. He adds that he hopes that the regional sitting is in Rochester so that members of Parliament have to travel on this road to see the state of this road. Will the minister provide funding to ensure the road surface of the Heathcote-Rochester Road is properly repaired?

Western Victoria Region

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (12:43): (137) My question is to the minister representing the Minister for Public Transport and relates to the poor connectivity that young people, particularly in my electorate, face. I recently visited Hamilton and had a discussion with concerned locals and council. One of the significant problems faced locally, especially for young people, is access to TAFE. We know how the government loves free – aka subsidised – TAFE. The closest TAFE is South West TAFE in Warrnambool. There is one bus service from Monday to Thursday to Warrnambool and one on Friday. The bus leaves Hamilton at 10:30 in the morning and the second bus, on Friday only, leaves at 2:22 pm. Buses return to Hamilton at 1:38 pm, and then the second bus service on the Friday gets back at 6:22 pm. If you do not take a bus, you can pay a few hundred dollars for a taxi, or it is about a 3-hour round trip in a car. My question is: will this government commit to reviewing the public transport timetables with the view of improving accessibility for young people, particularly in regional areas like Hamilton?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:44): (138) My constituency question is to the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure in the other place. I ask the minister to review the decision which the government has made to block the road at the intersection of Progress Street and Nathan Road in Dandenong South because the government considers it part of its program to remove ‘dangerous and congested level crossings’ on the Pakenham and Cranbourne lines. This particular section of the road is not dangerous and not congested, and blocking this intersection will cause more hardship to local traders and create more traffic problems than this action seeks to resolve. Will the minister meet with me and local traders to review this decision?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:45): (139) My question on behalf of my constituent is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and I ask: is the duration of the pedestrian light cycles in High Street, Berwick, adequate for a slower walker or someone with a walking aid? Whilst I was holding a street stall mobile office along with my colleague Mr Tarlamis last week at La Baguette cafe, where we had a number of constituents helped with the \$250 power saving bonus,

I was approached by a constituent who is 80 years old. On a number of occasions she has found that she has not been able to make it across the road in time without being aggressively honked and tooted at by some drivers. This has understandably left her feeling less confident and has affected her independence, so my question again is: is the duration of these pedestrian light cycles adequate? These are the traffic lights between Gloucester Avenue and Lyall Road in Berwick.

Southern Metropolitan Region

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:46): (140) My question is for the Minister for Community Sport in the other place, Minister Spence, and by asking the question I pay tribute to the Get Active Kids voucher program. This program helps young children get involved in organised sport and physical activity by providing vouchers for up to \$200 to help eligible families cover the cost of memberships and registration fees. The program provides for up to 100,000 vouchers. We know that 80 per cent of children in Victoria are not doing the recommended amount of physical activity, so I am proud to say that this program makes it possible for more kids to get active and to be happy and healthy. Currently parents can apply for the voucher or reimbursement between 21 February and 10 May. So my question to Minister Spence is: how many people in my community of Southern Metro Melbourne have applied for and received this voucher?

Eastern Victoria Region

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (12:47): (141) My question is for the Minister for Public Transport in the other place. Minister, can you please provide the constituents of Eastern Victoria with an update on the benefits of the V/Line fares cap? Capping V/Line fares to metro prices was an election commitment which has already been delivered, with the fare cap having come into effect on 31 March this year. Eastern Victoria constituents are excited that the upgraded Gippsland line will also host new V/Line trains made in Victoria and that there is an election commitment for more weekend services. I grew up in country Victoria in the 1990s, and there could not be a bigger difference between the commitment to country Victoria from Labor and the reckless cuts and gut kicks of the previous Liberals and Nationals. With this policy country people can go to the city with more money in their pockets, including for great sporting events like the record-breaking Anzac Day match last week. And I must say I was very pleased with the result.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (12:48): (142) I rise to ask the Minister for Housing whether he can provide an outline of plans to increase the supply of social and affordable housing in the Southern Metropolitan Region. Building more social housing is one of the most important things governments can do to support those who do not have a home of their own. Social housing provides a vital safety net for thousands of Victorians and is essential to a fair and inclusive Victoria. Some of our public housing stock is old and no longer fit for purpose; it needs to be rebuilt. That is exactly what the government is doing in places like Brighton, Prahran, Hampton East and Port Melbourne. Social housing residents should not be denied access to the benefits of new, energy-efficient homes and their cheaper energy bills and homes built to modern accessibility standards, and opposing social housing redevelopment means denying them these rights. Rebuilding social housing also increases the supply of new social housing dwellings. I am a strong supporter of building more social housing right across the Southern Metropolitan Region.

Production of documents

Duck hunting

Debate resumed.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:49): Post question time I am pleased to continue my contribution. I was speaking before question time about the GMA's – the Game Management Authority's – report that it has presented to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation. Indeed it covers off

on and it goes to Mr Bourman's point about the scientific evidence and the scientists who undertake this analysis and that it has multiple layers of assessments. It has an eastern Australian waterbird survey (EAWS) by Professor Richard Kingsford, it has an interim harvest model output report assessed by both Professor Marcel Klaassen and Professor Kingsford, it looks at BOM and it looks at other areas and jurisdictions including New South Wales and South Australia.

It also looks at hunting fraternities; they come and present. Environmental and animal welfare organisations are also able to make submissions. The GMA has stated that it has taken a precautionary approach. Unfortunately what has happened is this government has taken that precautionary approach and then multiplied it to a reduction of season which is out of line and unreasonable based on this high degree of analysis through the GMA. I know my friends in the hunter conservationists feel that this overprecautionary approach from GMA was in itself unacceptable. I appreciate that fact, but the government has gone out on a frolic and taken off even more weeks to diminish the season, and this is unacceptable. I think what we on this side feel is most unacceptable is that there has been a code of silence on this issue. The government has not justified why it has done this. The GMA offered in writing a full in-person briefing from its staff and board to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation and/or the Minister for Environment and Climate Action and/or the Minister for Agriculture. We also see that Brian Hine, the chairperson, has resigned – I believe in frustration over this – prior to the expiry of his contract.

We see the BOM, the EAWS, the New South Wales quotas and the interim model all saying that there is high rainfall, that there are favourable climatic conditions for waterbird breeding. Indeed the report goes into great detail on that. What it also highlights, which I think is really disingenuous of the government, is that in September last year the GMA provided a waterfowl wounding reduction action plan that was a collaboration of welfare organisations and hunting organisations. They presented that to the government, and it is still tardily sitting on somebody's desk not being assessed. We would like to see that information and why that is happening. We have spoken about the high regulation of this industry and pastime, and we see legislation, regulation, variations on wetlands being opened, compliance and authorised officers and Victoria Police coming during the season.

Just on the point of compliance, we see that the GMA a few days ago put up on its website some details around compliance. It was stated on that website – this has since been removed and has gone into the ether – 795 game licences checked and 652 hunter bags checked, with one bag which was over the limit. There were 197 protesters, and they were checking around the 173 wetlands available. Now, 800 checked, one game bird over the limit. We also know that of 197 protesters two were booked for dangerous behaviour, so it is not all one way as they would have us believe. We do expect compliance. All citizens should comply. If there is any recalcitrance, it will not be among the law-abiding hunters that I meet with who work so very diligently to improve the wetlands, improve a whole vast array of wetlands and game reserves, including Heart Morass, including Connewarre and including the Shepparton state game reserves. There is a lot more to be said about this that needs to be explained and expanded for the Victorian community.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:54): I rise to speak in support of this important documents motion today. I must say it is not often Mr Bourman and I vote the same way when it comes to decisions relating to the duck-shooting season, but I too want access to the documents relating to this shameful and disgraceful decision to proceed with a season this year. While we do not know all the details, what we do know is that the government made a decision that flies in the face of community sentiment, public safety and animal protection.

Mr Bourman states that duck shooting in Victoria is tightly regulated by the government, and that is where our disagreement will start on this. A 2017 independent review of the Game Management Authority by Pegasus Economics recommended that the GMA should be disbanded. Despite growing taxpayer subsidies, the GMA is incapable of monitoring hundreds if not thousands of sites where shooting occurs and has been historically criticised for being neither impartial nor independent. Recommendations by the Game Management Authority informed by the interim harvest model are

untried and untested. It has never once recommended cancelling a season despite years of drought prior to this, bushfire and subsequently very low bird numbers. The Pegasus report found non-compliance within the shooting fraternity to be commonplace and widespread. Throughout eastern Australia, waterbird abundance and breeding pairs have consistently shown significant decline. Researchers actually estimate numbers to have fallen by as much as 90 per cent in the last four decades, but this is not being taken into consideration when making a decision on a duck-shooting season.

Good governance is reliant on transparency. It is time that the vast majority of Victorians are listened to over a vocal minority and that the data that is used to endanger countless native waterbirds is made available to the public and to members of this place. We also believe the government ignored the science, just like Mr Bourman does, that shows duck shooting is not only unbearably cruel but unsustainable and decimating our environment. We want to know how this unjustifiable decision was reached, and that is why I commend this motion to the house today.

Sitting suspended 12:57 pm until 2:02 pm.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (14:02): I am very happy to speak to Mr Bourman's motion on the production of documents in relation to matters relating to the 2023 duck-hunting season. It gives me the opportunity, I suppose, to talk a little bit not just about the motion that Mr Bourman has moved in relation to the seeking of these documents but also, more broadly, about the issue of duck hunting – a topic on which in coming to the Parliament it is fair to say I knew not a lot but now, as chair of the new select committee that has been established on these arrangements, I am learning more and more by the day, as are other members of the committee. I think it is safe to say that it is very clear from the work the committee has done so far – in terms of the submissions we have received and the people we have spoken with out in the community on the field visit we made last week at the opening of the season – that there is obviously a range of very deeply held views in relation to the recreational hunting of native birds here in Victoria, whether they be ducks or stubble quail, and those views are being very well expressed to our committee.

As of last week, when we last spoke about these matters, there had been more than 1700 submissions to our inquiry. I am reliably informed by the committee secretariat that that number has now nudged up a little in the intervening week. With five days to go until submissions close we have now clocked – at the moment – just over 3000. We are anticipating a few more to come through in the last few days for the committee's deliberations. I am sure all members of the committee are diligently working their way through those submissions, which have come with a range of viewpoints, obviously some very strongly in favour and some very strongly against, mainly from individuals at this point it is fair to say. Many of the organisations with an interest in this area are yet to lodge their submissions, but we hope that they do so by the close of submissions on 8 May.

Last week the committee took a field trip to Lake Connearre, just out of Geelong, nestled between Barwon Heads and Leopold, and observed the opening of the 2023 duck-hunting season, the season for which Mr Bourman's documents motion seeks to elicit further details. It was great to see all members of the committee there present. We got to witness firsthand the way that the Game Management Authority and Victoria Police go about their task of regulating game hunters here in Victoria, with the checking of licences before they entered the wetlands, the monitoring of the time frames for the commencement of hunting and then also the way that, once the hunters came off the wetlands, the Game Management Authority and the police went about their business of both checking the bags that the hunters were bringing off and making sure that the birds that were shot by the hunters were shot in accordance with the regulations, and also there were some firearms inspections undertaken by Victoria Police.

Obviously it was a slightly different set of circumstances for most of those hunters on that Wednesday. When they walked out of the wetlands, they probably were not expecting to see quite the crowd that was in the car park at Baensch Lane and the attendant camera crews and reporters who were there following us around on the day. I think it was a really interesting opportunity for members of the

committee to speak with representatives from Field and Game in Victoria and with representatives of the local duck rescue, who had been out that morning hunting and also observing and then after 10 o'clock attempting to rescue birds that had been part of the morning's hunt.

I think what I hope we will see through the inquiry is a very thoughtful consideration of the range of views that people have out there in the community. As I have said, there are a lot of people who have got a very strong view on this topic and who are making submissions to our inquiry. The first tranche of those submissions is now on the Parliament's website, so if other members are interested in the topic and would like to sit there and read through some of those views, they are available. I note that a couple of members of the press wrote a pretty good summary, I think, yesterday of some of those submissions that have been received so far.

What we hope to see from here is a range of expert evidence being led by researchers, academics and organisations who are involved, either for or against the recreational hunting of native birds here in Victoria. The committee itself has invited submissions from a wide range of these groups, and we are hopeful that those organisations will provide us with the sorts of information that we need to continue our deliberations and to assess the environmental issues around the recreational hunting of birds – the social impact and the environmental impact but also the economic impact of the activity – and what it provides in terms of economic impact as an activity held in the state of Victoria and other associated matters related to the activity here.

We are also going to spend some time looking, obviously, at how the regulatory framework itself operates and the role that the Game Management Authority plays in the licensing and monitoring of hunters of native birds here in Victoria.

There is also a range of other matters associated with the practice and the controls that are put in place on hunters. There has been particular interest obviously in the issue of bird wounding and how wounded birds are dealt with on game reserves and in wetland environments. For many it is a subject of quite a bit of contention – that is clear from the evidence that we have seen so far about these sorts of practices and how they are dealt with by both the regulator and, at a policy level, by government.

We do hope that over the course of the next few months, as the committee turns from the written submission phase to the public evidence phase, the focus of the committee's activities and the focus of the information and the evidence that is before us – and we do acknowledge that there is a lot of passion in this debate – is a debate grounded in evidence, led by the science and led by facts and that we deal with each other, as I think we have thus far, in a respectful way. Whilst this is a topic on which passions clearly run deep and on which there are a lot of very firmly held views, I am hopeful that we can continue this inquiry into a matter that is of obvious great interest to a great many Victorians in a respectful way and in a way that relies upon the evidence that is presented to us as the basis on which we will form our views about the matters before us. It is very clear that being led by the evidence on this topic is something the government has taken very seriously. I think it is good that these matters are being debated both here today in this motion but also more broadly in front of the committee. I look forward to the next couple of months worth of work and to presenting our report to the Parliament when the inquiry is concluded later this year.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (14:12): I rise today to support this motion, as the Greens do in principal support the release of documents to aid in transparency, although I will note for the record that that should not be taken as an agreement with some of the more editorial assertions in this motion. I will just take the opportunity to reiterate the Greens' record of advocacy on this topic. Bringing about the end to duck hunting has been a pillar of the Greens policy platform for as long as the Greens have been in Parliament. Indeed Sue Pennicuik, former MLC for Southern Metropolitan, mentioned it as a priority in her inaugural speech back in 2006. There is a long history of debate on this topic. In Parliament and in our campaign work the Greens have consistently backed community calls for duck shooting to be banned, and our MPs have also visited wetlands in person to see how barbaric this practice is and to assist volunteer rescue efforts.

This year, as we all know, the government once again announced that the season would proceed, but the community's calls are having an impact. In February, as has been spoken about at length, the government established a select committee on Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements and, as you know, I am a member of that committee. I do echo the previous calls that have been made in the debate today urging members of the public to have their say in that inquiry by making a submission prior to 8 May. The committee will be undertaking consideration of all submissions received on this topic, and it has been fantastic to see the level of participation so far. I would urge everybody to have their say before the deadline.

Just last week, along with the other committee members, I too spent the morning at Lake Connewarre in western Victoria. We were there early, and we heard the first gunshots as the season opened. Despite the rules around conduct in shooting seasons, we know that each season we frequently see multiple breaches of the regulations: the killing of protected species, the shooting of birds and their being left to die in painful conditions or indeed the use of hot-shot illegal lead ammunition. More than two-thirds of Victorians – 68 per cent, we know – agree that duck shooting should be banned. The practice has been banned in New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia, and not recently either but decades ago – Western Australia in 1990, New South Wales in 1995 and Queensland in 2005.

Yesterday I joined duck rescuers from the Coalition Against Duck Shooting outside the Premier's office where they laid out 73 birds, victims so far of the 2023 Victorian duck-shooting season. These victims include eight illegally shot protected and threatened species. They were all collected from the wetlands over the first few days of the duck-shooting season recently approved by the government.

We know already that thousands of waterbirds are under environmental stress with climate change and drought conditions destroying habitat, and continued shooting seasons have exacerbated this threat to waterbird populations. Aerial surveys have confirmed that waterbird abundance in our wetlands is well below average and in long-term decline. To conclude, today the Greens will support this documents motion as we believe the community does deserve transparency, especially around the practice of duck shooting.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (14:16): I rise to speak on the motion from Mr Bourman, and in doing so I will echo the very eloquent words of my colleague Mr Galea and, as a member of the government, keep my comments and contribution today somewhat circumspect. I am also conscious that there is an ongoing inquiry into this very issue. While the government will not oppose this motion, there are a number of points I and my government colleagues would like to make on the issue, and I did have the opportunity to hear from both Mr Galea and Mr Batchelor in their earlier contributions. Firstly, over the past number of years the issue of recreational native bird hunting in Victoria has become increasingly contested. Furthermore, the Andrews Labor government recognises that many people have deeply held, passionate and diverse views around duck hunting. We also acknowledge these concerns extend to the recreational hunting of other birds such as the stubble quail. We respect those views, and we welcome hearing from all sides of the debate.

Taking all this into account, the Victorian Parliament has established a select committee into recreational native bird hunting in Victoria, which many members of this chamber are members of. I myself am a member of that committee, which is very capably chaired by my colleague Mr Batchelor, accompanied by a multipartisan collection of members, including another government member Mr Galea, and Georgie Purcell, Katherine Copsey, Bev McArthur, Melina Bath and Evan Mulholland, and lastly Mr Bourman himself. I know that Mr Bourman and many others in this place hold strong and very sincere beliefs around this issue, and many if not all of us have been in contact with and contacted by passionate constituents who care very deeply one way or another on this issue. The select committee will inquire into, consider and report by the end of August on Victoria's recreational native bird hunting arrangements.

I will take a moment to say that we certainly appreciate the important work that all members of the select committee are undertaking, including contributions from a member for Eastern Victoria.

Importantly, this select committee is holding public hearings to hear from hunting associations, animal welfare groups, traditional owners and regional communities. I too welcome stakeholder input into this process and encourage members of the community from all sides of this debate to get involved and have their say. If you would like to get in contact with me – I know that many folks are listening today as we debate this motion in the chamber – I can point you in the right direction of where to go to make a submission. They are still open. The committee will be accepting submissions until 8 May, so get in quick and have your say. I know that it has been almighty popular already with members of the community.

This is a really important process, and it is even more important that we get it right. The select committee has in its work wide-ranging terms of reference including but not limited to the operation of the annual recreational native bird hunting arrangements, what the arrangements look like in other Australian jurisdictions, their environmental sustainability, the end impact on amenity and their social and economic impact.

As I said, I am a member of that select committee, and as a member I recently visited the Connewarre game reserve near Geelong to tour its grounds with all the other committee members. On the opening day of the season I spoke with environmental experts – in fact internationally renowned environmental experts – and duck rescue volunteers about their role and how the inquiry may affect them and the work that they do. I want to thank the Game Management Authority for hosting me and my colleagues and thank all involved for making the day work, including the good folks from the secretariat of this inquiry. And also, you know, there were of course many folks involved that let their opinions be known.

It was a new experience to me, I must confess. The first day on that early morning heading out to Reedy Lake I got the gumboots out, and they came in handy. It was really something else for me to hear the gunshots in the sky when the clock ran past 8 am. Yes, it was just a very new experience, and I will find some words for it at some point I am sure. We followed that with another visit, which was somewhat more successful, to Baensch Lane, where we met animal rescue volunteers, and can I just send my thanks to them for being so generous in sharing their insights and knowledge about their understanding of the native bird hunting arrangements in our state. I actually saw some hunters bringing in and declaring their bags for the relevant officials. Thanks for those folks that did brave it, because as you mentioned, Mr Galea, there were cameras and media and a parliamentary group arriving, so that would have been a new experience, I reckon, for them.

Of course I would like to take a moment to extend my thanks to Geelong Field and Game for hosting us at the third site visit to their facility at Lake Road at the Connewarre Wetland Centre – I did better then, thank you, Mr Bourman. There, members of the Geelong Field and Game outlined their original vision for the wetland centre, the works undertaken to get it to its current state as a homeland to many duck and other bird species and the volunteering undertaken, the thousands and thousands of hours of volunteering undertaken by many of its members to restore that land. I had an opportunity to meet with some of those members and discuss a little bit about their partnership and work with traditional owners, and I did outline my particular interest in understanding traditional owner impacts. There is of course more to be said on that visit, but it was good to see that Geelong Field and Game site and all the work that they do and to meet some of their members. So thank you to them again.

Of course on 24 February 2023 the settings for the duck season for this year were announced by the Game Management Authority. The season, as I said, opened on Wednesday 26 April – that was a day when many of us in the committee were there – and will continue to run until Tuesday 30 May. The season this year is a modification of the duck season arrangements provided in the regulations, with a shorter season and a reduced daily bag limit of four game ducks per day. That is in place, and we have certainly seen that impact, having talked to some folks in that inquiry. Hunting the blue-winged shoveler and hardhead is also prohibited for the entire season as both species have been declared threatened in Victoria under the arrangements of the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988.

I would also like to note that the Andrews Labor government has listened to the stakeholders from all sides and in addition will continue to listen to stakeholders as the work of this inquiry continues on, and of course we will read all of those contributions as best we can, which have come from right across the state. We have met with a wide range of representatives from pro- and anti-hunting stakeholders, including Field and Game Australia, the group known as the Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting, the RSPCA and the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (Victoria).

Stakeholder consultation has shown the issue of recreational native bird hunting arrangements in our state has become incredibly contested. In fact I am sure if we were to check *Hansard* for this chamber, we would note the enormous amount of questions asked and contributions made on the seasonal arrangements for duck hunting. Victorians have also shared their concerns with members of Parliament around the native bird wounding rates, illegal hunting behaviours and the impact of recreational hunting on native bird populations, including those threatened species.

Now that the 2023 duck and stubble quail hunting seasons are officially underway, it is important to reiterate that this government will not tolerate poor or illegal behaviour by hunters or protesters alike. There are examples of what that looks like, but they have been discussed by other members in their contributions today. I will continue that work, and I look forward to playing my part to get the duck-hunting arrangements in our state much clearer.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (14:26): I want to thank everyone for their contributions, but before I go into it I am going to give a reminder to the Nationals member here, who seems to feel that every time she starts on something that involves me she needs to remind us that we worked with the Labor Party. The coalition put the Greens in front of Labor in nearly every seat, and their shenanigans ended up with the first ever Greens member of Parliament from regional Victoria. It might be handy if they just cool their jets and keep to the relevant stuff, or it will come back to bite them.

Transparency is what this is all about. Yesterday and I think in my contribution today I mentioned that there was a thing on the Game Management Authority website about enforcement outcomes. I did not have a copy of it then. During the lunch break I got a copy of it. Blah, blah, blah, blah – the one that interests me is ‘Fail to immediately kill game which is alive when recovered’. There were two instances. One was when a protester did it. This protester was not worried about the pain and suffering of the animal. This protester picked it up and walked off with it instead of humanely dispatching it. These people are not animal welfare people. These people are needlessly keeping alive a bird that has been wounded and should have been killed outright. They can still take it to whoever they do – the Wildlife Victoria people – and have all of that. But in the interest of a humane world, it should have been done then and there. On the whole – I am not going to go through all of this – protesters were twice as likely to get an enforcement outcome from the government. This was taken down from the Game Management Authority website. Thankfully someone did screenshot it.

Clarity and transparency are important, and I again urge the government not to just send me a letter in a month saying, ‘We can’t do this because we haven’t got enough time’ or to send me something like the wounding reduction plan, which is all redacted. This is their time to come clean. It is fair. Something weird has gone on. We can work through this, but if not, how can we trust them?

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Regional sitting

Debate resumed on motion of Wendy Lovell:

That this house:

- (1) acknowledges the serious impact of the recent floods in Victoria;
- (2) meets and sits in a flood-affected community in central northern Victoria for one day by April 2024;

- (3) requires the President and the Clerk of the Legislative Council to consult with the Mitchell Shire Council, the Greater Shepparton City Council, the Campaspe Shire Council, other flood-affected local government areas in northern Victoria and parliamentary staff in relation to choosing an appropriate date and specific location for the regional sitting to occur; and
- (4) authorises the President to do all things necessary to facilitate the Council sitting in central northern Victoria.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:29): I am very delighted to be in the chamber this afternoon and speak to the motion that you have put on the notice paper, Deputy President, about a very important matter, and that is taking the Parliament into the regions. Now, the Parliament has done that in previous times. Obviously through COVID there was some disruption, and of course we had the devastating bushfires just prior to COVID. But the Parliament, this chamber in fact, went to Bright in 2021 I think it was, and it was a tremendous opportunity to take the Parliament to the regions and really have an understanding of the impacts and be able to speak to community members and stakeholders and affected groups that were involved with not only the bushfires themselves but the recovery about how that impacted on services and on the communities themselves.

I know that many people in the chamber who were in the Parliament then and who did that got a great benefit out of it. From memory, it was the most beautiful autumnal weather that we had, and Bright was absolutely spectacular. I am looking at the clerks who were there; they did a tremendous job. It was a huge effort, and it really was wonderful. It is a big effort to take the Parliament into the regions, but it is an important one. It says that our Parliament is going to the people, and I think that is why this motion put up by Ms Lovell is incredibly important.

The motion itself does go to various aspects, and I think that is also important to get on the record. It reads:

That this house:

- (1) acknowledges the serious impact of the recent floods in Victoria;
- (2) meets and sits in a flood-affected community in central northern Victoria for one day by April 2024;
- (3) requires the President and the Clerk of the Legislative Council to consult with the Mitchell Shire Council, the Greater Shepparton City Council, the Campaspe Shire Council, other flood-affected local government areas in northern Victoria and parliamentary staff in relation to choosing an appropriate date and specific location for the regional sitting to occur; and
- (4) authorises the President to do all things necessary to facilitate the Council sitting in central northern Victoria.

Those aspects to the motion are important, because like the previous time when we had the regional sitting in Bright, when we acknowledged the impacts of the devastating bushfires of that summer period of 2019–20, this is recognising the floods of last October. They had a very big impact, and some of those communities are still recovering; I was just having a look at an article. Because of the widespread devastation of the floods, I was pleased that I was able to move a motion for an inquiry into those floods and that the Parliament is undertaking that important work, and that also is reaching the communities that have been impacted by this natural disaster.

When understanding the widespread nature of the floods, the devastation they caused to local communities and businesses and the impacts they had on those communities in the northern areas of Victoria, where most of the floods had a very, very big impact, of course we cannot forget the impacts to the city areas, the Maribyrnong. I know that member for Western Metropolitan Region Mr Trung Luu and others – Mr Mulholland – who have spoken to their communities, and indeed other members, have been very concerned about the impacts of those floods on their local communities around the metropolitan areas, and that is what the inquiry will look into.

But this motion goes to the heart of taking the Parliament into the regions so that all MPs can have an opportunity to speak to affected communities and stakeholders. Indeed that will be an enormous benefit for those communities – to understand that the Parliament does take this seriously and that the

Parliament is prepared to go into the regions and to hear from the communities so that they do not have to come to us. Of course they can come to us via telecommunication means, but being physically there, reaching out to communities and speaking to them, meeting with them and really getting a feel for the community where the Parliament may sit is, I think, terribly important.

So, Deputy President, I want to commend you for putting this motion on the notice paper to say that this Parliament should be going into the regions and for understanding and acknowledging the impacts of the floods in those particular areas that you have highlighted in your motion.

I also want to commend the government, who I think are in support of this motion, and other members of the chamber who have also lent their support to it. Everyone has acknowledged the important role we do play in this house and how taking the Parliament into the regions will be of benefit not only to all of us to understand and to learn from those communities but also to those communities to understand exactly how we work.

With those few words, I am very pleased that it seems that the house is in agreement that this motion do pass. If that is the case, it will be in the hands of the President and the clerks, with their excellent abilities to get things moving so that we can go into the regions and sit before the date that is indicated in the motion, April 2024 – so in 12 months time.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (14:36): I support this motion. We are all Victorians, every one of us. I do not care where people were born, at what age they moved to this state or in what part of it they live. As Victorians it is incumbent upon us all to come together and look after each other when crisis hits, no matter where it is or what part of the Victorian community it affects. I grew up on a farm, and my first memory is of fire trucks coming up our driveway to put out a fire 24 hours after a neighbour's burn-off spread to our land, so I have a deep appreciation for our local volunteers and the importance of them in our regional and rural communities.

The impacts of the recent October floods on individuals, businesses and communities have been enormous and far-reaching. We know that since the devastation of these floods many industries and people have been doing it very, very tough. I want to start by paying tribute to the loved ones and communities of the two people who tragically lost their lives in Rochester and Nathalia. I also want to acknowledge the bravery of those who responded to these devastating floods, particularly our emergency services, including the SES, CFA, FRV, Forest Fire Management Victoria, Victoria Police, Life Saving Victoria and Ambulance Victoria, as well as the many people who came from other states to lend a hand.

In relation to the motion before the house, it is important to point out that the ministers or indeed any members of this government do not need and have not needed a regional sitting to visit and provide support to flood-affected communities across Victoria. I note the work that the Minister for Emergency Services, Minister Symes, has done in northern Victoria and also that of Minister Shing, who like me is also a member for Eastern Victoria Region. The work she did during this time in her position as Minister for Water was incredible. There were a lot of hours she put into that, so I would just like to recognise that. A regional sitting does provide an opportunity for members of this house from non-flood-affected regions to hear directly from those Victorians impacted by floods, but our government has already been putting in a lot of work. We on this side have been visiting, returning home to and working alongside regional Victorians – not just talking to people but listening to them and, where we can, investing in programs and initiatives that support them.

I spoke earlier about my deep appreciation for regional volunteers. I also have a deep appreciation for my party's commitment to regional Victoria. In the 1990s on the farm where I was, we were suffering drought, and unfortunately at that time I watched as the government of the day removed train lines, hospitals and schools. As they disappeared, so too did banks. Smaller farms were selling up. We were seeing smaller communities. Pubs were closing, takeaway stores were closing and buildings were being left, some abandoned to literally rot into the ground. As I said, I support this motion, and I do

believe this government focuses on what we can put into regional areas, never thinking about what it is that can be ripped out.

A thriving Victoria means thriving regional and rural towns. The Andrews Labor government knows how important it is as that a government support and invest in these communities to ensure their continued growth and prosperity for generations to come. We know that regional and rural communities face unique challenges and have too often been left out of conversations about growth and investment. It is why we are backing our regional and rural communities and investing in places across this great state to support jobs, infrastructure, investment, tourism and vibrant local communities.

With regard to the flood recovery, the Andrews government is committed to working with flood-affected communities. Whether it is support for households or clean-ups of local roads, we are delivering the support that these Victorians need. We know that even now that the water has subsided the work must continue to ensure that those affected by these devastating floods are not left behind. We will continue to work closely with Victorian communities who have been affected by last year's floods to ensure the swiftest recovery possible. Already the Labor government has provided a range of flood recovery initiatives to businesses and communities that have been impacted by the 2022 floods, including a \$500 million business recovery package and a \$6.3 million small business concessional loan program as well as \$1.78 million to help the tourism and events industry. Preliminary data collected by Emergency Recovery Victoria suggests the flood response is being successfully implemented, with more than 5600 small businesses having immediate flood relief grants being paid out, as well as other support programs progressively being paid out. We will continue to provide support and help to ensure our regional and rural communities that have been impacted will recover.

The October floods were devastating for so many communities across Victoria, particularly northern Victoria. The flood event most heavily impacted the regional townships of Shepparton, Seymour, Rochester and Echuca and additionally impacted the suburb of Maribyrnong in Melbourne. The Goulburn River, the Campaspe River and the Loddon River all experienced major flooding, with floodwaters causing significant damage to farms, townships, roads, water supply infrastructure and communities. Throughout the duration of this event the water sector responded to over 220 incidents, ranging from flooded assets like sewage pumping stations, private and public dam safety events, fish death incidents, sewer spills and water service disruptions. The government put in place many and varied supports in response to this emergency, which I know are currently being examined by the Environment and Planning Committee made up of members of this place. These supports were many and varied, but first and foremost the most pressing area was the providing of emergency and temporary accommodation – in hotels, caravan parks and even the Centre for National Resilience in Mickleham.

Emergency Recovery Victoria, a body which operates in the Department of Justice and Community Safety, oversaw and continues to facilitate a range of support programs, such as the clean-up program, which managed street debris and sandbag removal, and structural assessments for impacted properties. The flood recovery support program was established to provide a trauma-informed service to help impacted people navigate the range of supports available. The Flood Recovery Hotline, which so far has received over 8700 calls, has served as a central place for people wishing to access these supports. The program provides access to financial support, the clean-up program, temporary accommodation, mental health support, business support, support for farmers and translated information for CALD communities. Over \$1.8 billion in joint state and Commonwealth funding has been announced to date to support directly impacted individuals, businesses and communities. This investment has focused on meeting the immediate needs of individuals, families and communities, providing support to councils and emergency management agencies to ensure continuity of essential services, restoring critical and community infrastructure, providing loans and grants to small businesses and primary producers and meeting short-term community relief and recovery needs.

Grants provided include personal hardship payments for emergency accommodation; \$75,000 for primary producers, \$50,000 for eligible businesses and \$200,000 for medium and large businesses impacted; and \$15 million for people with complex needs to help secure alternative accommodation and deliver additional counselling services. The Council Flood Support Fund is supporting impacted councils, helping with the considerable clean-up and rebuilding task. \$22 million will help establish up to 16 recovery hubs. The flood recovery program will get an \$11 million boost, helping more people to get support with housing, health and wellbeing and financial and legal counselling. The Victorian government has also provided \$21.82 million in water bill assistance. Priority recovery work continues throughout the water sector, focusing on residual floodwater and water quality assessments in what will be a long recovery effort across multiple public and private portfolios. We have provided \$26.79 million for waterways to address immediate safety risks and hazards and to support communities.

The scale of the October floods tested our emergency services and demonstrated the amazing dedication, skill and compassion of our emergency services personnel, local councils and government agency workers, and of course local community members and volunteers who banded together to support each other and the broader community in the immediate aftermath of this emergency. Now we find ourselves in the recovery and rebuilding stage.

A regional sitting located in a flood-affected community in northern Victoria will provide an opportunity for those that have been impacted and those communities to share their experiences with people in this place. It is an opportunity for us to acknowledge and appreciate what these regional communities contribute to our state and how they step forward in their recovery. Events such as the October 2022 floods have had a traumatic impact on the wellbeing of residents, so for us as politicians to see firsthand what these communities have encountered is very important. Therefore, as I said at the start of this contribution, I am very happy to support a regional sitting.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:46): I rise to also speak on this motion brought forward by the Deputy President, and I would like to thank her for bringing this motion to the house, because, as we all know, this is very important motion. The motion does talk about the need for Parliament to attend for a regional sitting in flood-affected areas, and everyone in this chamber who has spoken on this motion today has very well articulated all of the devastating and tragic events that occurred with the floods that happened in October 2022. I speak in support of this motion, as I note many of my colleagues have.

The impacts of the flood event have been devastating, tragic and far-reaching. I will go through in a moment some of the support and resources that the government has put in place to ensure that regional communities who are affected by these floods can recover. But I can say that I am someone who has experienced natural disasters. I was living in Canberra in 2003 at the time bushfires came through there. I was living in Duffy at the time, and effectively those bushfires destroyed that community. A number of people died. There were people who were providing services in the form of firefighting and rescue – those sorts of things – and there were people caught in the bushfires as well, so I understand firsthand the impacts of traumatic natural disasters and what that means not only in the actual event itself but in the aftermath of it.

I sympathise deeply with people who were impacted by the floods. It is a long road back when you lose your property or have damage to your property. Often dealing with the after-effects – things like wrangling with insurance companies and trying to get property rebuilt or even trying to go and replace items that you have lost that had sentimental value – can be very, very difficult. It is a long tail. The event that happened might have occurred over a number of days – sometimes these events can occur in a couple of hours – but there is a long tail that continues, and often people will struggle with mental health and the like. But I can say, as someone who has been through a traumatic event, there is hope and there is recovery. It is not easy, but you can go on. I think that is the thing that is important to focus on, that there is recovery.

Australians and Victorians are a resilient people as well. Sadly, we are seeing the impacts of climate change, meaning that we are having severe weather events more often. You often hear people talk about a one-in-100-year flood. We are certainly seeing that in the likes of what we saw towards the end of last year with this flood event. We may see these things more often now. I know myself as I experienced the bushfires in Canberra I had never seen anything like that in my lifetime.

The idea that perhaps you can stay and defend property I think needs to change as well. Some of the effects of some of these things are unprecedented. Even in speaking with people after the fires that came through Canberra many people remarked that they had never seen anything like it. I have seen fireballs come out of a forest. I have seen trees blown out of the ground. I have seen oxygen taken out of the air and birds drop from the air to the ground.

These things are unprecedented, but what we know is, through climate change, these types of events are going to occur more often, and I think we are all going to be well served if we can make sure that we prepare ourselves properly when we are faced with these sorts of events. Sometimes I think the decision to just go and get out is the best decision, because you cannot replace a life. You can replace property and things, but if someone loses a life, that is a really terrible tragedy. Returning to the motion – and I appreciate the indulgence of the chamber just while I gave that personal anecdote – I just want to pay tribute to the loved ones and the communities of the two people who tragically lost their lives in Rochester and Nathalia. As I said, these are tragic events, and it is always terribly tragic when someone loses their life. As I said, there is a long tail to these things and particularly when someone does lose their life.

I also want to acknowledge the bravery and the help of those people who responded during the floods to provide assistance and support to people who were affected, particularly our emergency services people – the SES, the CFA, FRV, Forest Fire Management Victoria, Victoria Police, Life Saving Victoria and Ambulance Victoria – and of course the many, many hundreds of other people. This is, I guess, what happens sometimes in these events: it brings out the best in us, where people just jump in and help and provide support. I know in the flood events, some of them around Maribyrnong, there were people filling sandbags and the like, and they were helping people get those things out to others who could take them and then go back to their houses. So it brings out the best in us. Even though they are sad and tragic circumstances and terribly stressful, people do come together and help one another, and that sense of community really does shine through.

A regional sitting does present an opportunity for members of this house from non-flood-affected regions to hear directly from those Victorians impacted by the floods, but our government has already been putting in the work. I note my colleague Mr McIntosh very aptly went to a lot of the detail about a number of the things this government is doing. I note that I and the Deputy President, Ms Lovell – I am the chair of the Environment and Planning Committee – are dealing with the inquiry into the floods, and I note Ms Bath is as well. So we will hear firsthand, and we have got a number of submissions that we will all get to read and will be visiting some regional areas as well and will hear directly from those Victorians who were flood affected.

Lee TARLAMIS: I move, by leave:

That the debate on this motion be extended by 15 minutes.

Motion agreed to.

Sonja TERPSTRA: As I was saying, we know that we on the Environment and Planning Committee will travel to a number of flood-affected areas to hear directly from Victorians who were affected by this unprecedented disaster. It will be difficult and challenging, but it is important that the committee travel to these areas to hear directly and firsthand the experiences of Victorians who were affected.

I might touch on a few things just briefly. As I said, I know Mr McIntosh went to a lot of detail in his contribution, but it is important just to run through a few things that the government has already done to support flood-affected communities. There has been over \$1.8 billion in joint state and Commonwealth funding provided, and this investment has focused on meeting the immediate needs of individuals and families. As I have said, often when you have an event like this, there is an immediate response that is required, which is that people need housing because their houses have been destroyed and there are health and other concerns. For example, the grants that have been provided already include personal hardship payments for emergency accommodation. Obviously that was pretty important. When your house has been flooded and there is mud, dirt and just a horrible stench everywhere, you definitely need a roof over your head. So there was \$75,000 for primary producers and \$50,000 for eligible businesses who were affected, \$200,000 was provided for medium and large businesses who were impacted and \$15 million will help people who have complex needs secure alternative accommodation and deliver additional counselling services as well.

The Council Flood Support Fund is supporting impacted councils, helping them with the considerable clean-up and rebuilding task. It is always incredible to see footage on the news of just the tonnes and tonnes of refuse that comes when a flood happens but then the damaged property as well. So all that needs to go somewhere and it needs to be cleaned up, and councils are doing an amazing job in supporting communities in helping to deal with that. So \$22 million will also help establish up to 16 recovery hubs, which people will be able to access, and the flood recovery program will also get an \$11 million boost to help people to get support with housing, health and wellbeing, and financial and legal counselling. The Victorian government has also provided \$21.82 million in water bill assistance.

There is the immediate event, but then there is the long tail and there is the aftermath, and we have got to help people recover. As I said, we are a resilient people, and I think it is good to see people be optimistic about the future. It is very difficult, though, because whilst they are in this process of recovery and rebuilding it can be very heavy going sometimes, working with different organisations such as insurance companies and the like to get to where you need to be. But once you get through that there is the opportunity to rebuild and for life to continue on.

I have 24 seconds on the clock, so in closing I will just say it is obviously a good idea for the Parliament to go and attend a regional sitting. The whole thing is that Parliament needs to be accessible to the people, and going to a regional sitting is one way of doing that. So I would support this motion, and I look forward to the continuation of this debate on this matter.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:56): Deputy President, I do thank you for not only calling me as the last speaker but for raising this as a motion and bringing to the house's attention the need to go to regional Victoria, and in this case to northern Victoria, to show our love, show our consideration and show our empathy for flood-affected towns, communities and victims and for the region. I would also like to congratulate and thank – and I will not speak for too long – my National Party colleague Gaelle Broad for her very eloquent speech on this debate and her in-depth knowledge of the people in her community in that northern region who have been so devastated by these floods.

Indeed we saw on our television the towns of Rochester and Echuca, of Shepparton, of Mooroopna, of Nathalia – and our heart does go out to the families of those two lovely people who lost their lives as a result of these devastating floods – and Seymour and the broader community in the north. It is absolutely devastating to see the loss, the grief, the emotional stress that people face when an environmental issue – a flood – is coming down the valley, coming down the river, and you cannot stop it. We saw the emotional turmoil that they were in, the physical exhaustion of preparing for the inevitable, the sandbagging, and we saw so many community members, first responders, the SES – and we could go in depth into all of their magnificent work – and also the football and netball clubs, whole towns, rally to save homes, to literally sandbag in a variety of ways, and we thank them for that work. And then there was the event, then of course the devastation and then the mop-up that people

had to face, and then there was the discussion with their insurance companies and the need to unpack, remove rubbish and then rebuild. It is an absolute marathon for those people to have to recover.

Indeed I am familiar with this in terms of the fires of 2019–20. Also I think I heard Ms Terpstra speak about her personal experience of the fires in Canberra some years ago. Thankfully my home was not endangered in 2019–20, but the people of my electorate were under incredible stress from those horrendous fires that took out 1.5 million hectares in both East Gippsland and the northern area.

In short, the fact that this Parliament, this house, came to Bright some years ago was not only a signal that we care, it was also an economic stimulus for that town, although it is a pity we cannot do a rolling visitation and take Parliament right across the regions that were devastated. But it says that we are listening, and it does provide the accommodation and the meals, and people and businesses are able to highlight their various amazing goods on offer – local produce et cetera.

We are very pleased that this looks like it is going to have an endorsement by this chamber. But also, as I think Ms Terpstra just said, we should be the house of the people, and even though we are the red house, the royal house, we should be out listening to community. We need to be out listening to community, because so often, I know, people of Eastern Victoria Region feel like Melbourne forgets them. So this is one opportunity to listen, and not listen perfunctorily but actually get down and meet and hear the testimonies of various people.

I was up in the northern region. I did not need a leave pass I hope, Ms Broad. But I did go up there fulfilling a commitment only last weekend – up to the Barmah Forest and the Barmah Muster, which attracts an amazing group of people, country people, who want to maintain their traditions and their skills and show those wonderful traditions and skills of horse and rider, of dog and animal and owner. It is truly amazing. It was the first time that my family had stayed in this lovely Airbnb, this cottage, and it was the first day back that the owners had actually been able to remove the junk – they were flooded out entirely – and recarpet, repaint and renew. Thankfully it was not totally trashed, but after that huge effort they were exhausted. So they need us to go and visit. They need all of Victoria, like we asked from the eastern side during the fires, and they need Melbourne and anybody else who would like to come to the northern region and experience the hospitality but also put their good hard-earned cash into their economy.

Finally, the floods: we do have the flood inquiry, and it is really important that we listen and that we go to the regions. I know we have got a number of hearings in those towns. Again, it is a pity we cannot go to each and every one, but it is really important that a variety of people, not only people from council and emergency services but individuals, have the opportunity to speak and provide their testimony to this inquiry. What I do not want to see, and I am quite fearful about this, is that various people within the community who might be in the SES feel they will not be able to speak openly and honestly about this in case there is some retribution down the track from the Andrews government. Now, I hope that is not the case. I do not want that to be the case, but I think there is an element of ‘I better not actually speak my truth because I’m not sure what will happen in the future.’ So I put that on the record. That is my concern. I hope that this government deals with people respectfully, and with that I am very pleased to support Ms Lovell’s motion.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (15:04): Thank you very much to everyone who has contributed to this motion. I am heartened that the entire chamber seems to be supportive of the motion and very supportive of regional communities and the need for the Parliament to go out into those regional communities to engage with them, to listen to them and to ensure that we refine our processes as we go forward with responses to natural disasters.

There are still a lot of people in our communities who are hurting. They are hurting because they are not in their homes, and they will not be in their homes, some of them, for probably another 12 months. They are hurting because their businesses have been badly affected, and if many of you had come with me down the main street of Mooropna days after the floods, you would have seen the devastation of

all the windows and the businesses flooded out. We spoke with those devastated businesspeople, many of whom have not been able to reopen their businesses yet.

It is very important that we do choose a flood community to sit in. The communities of Seymour were absolutely devastated. I know Strathbogie are feeling that they have kind of been a little bit overlooked as a flood community because perhaps their devastation was not as visual as the devastation in Seymour or in Mooroopna and Shepparton and Echuca and Rochester – particularly Rochester. The people of Rochester are absolutely desperate for people to assist them. They have had their town severely impacted. Ninety per cent of the homes there were inundated. No-one is really sure exactly how many, because the government did not do a count, but 90 per cent is the estimation of the number of houses that were inundated. And there are other communities. As I said, Echuca was badly affected. We had two very tragic deaths during those floods, and our hearts go out to the families of those people.

But the floods continued on along the river long after people sort of got over the visuals on the TV, and we saw the communities in Kerang and Charlton and even in Mildura impacted by these floods. For those of us who are members for Northern Victoria Region, we saw these floods travel right throughout our state. They started up where the Murray starts and travelled down the Murray River. They started up at Lake Eildon and travelled through the Goulburn River, through the Campaspe River or through the Loddon River. There are so many rivers in our areas that the water is just unbelievable when you see it. Thank you to everybody who has contributed today. I really appreciate the input of everyone, and I look forward to this motion passing.

Motion agreed to.

Committees

Economy and Infrastructure Committee

Reference

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (15:07): I move:

That this house requires the Economy and Infrastructure Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 30 June 2024, on local government funding and service delivery in Victoria, including but not limited to:

- (1) the effects of cost shifting from the state and federal governments to local councils in an examination of vertical and horizontal fiscal imbalances;
- (2) the services local councils should, and should not, be delivering for their communities;
- (3) whether local councils are adequately delivering on their core service delivery objectives;
- (4) the overall revenue structure of local government;
- (5) whether the existing revenue structure is sustainable and appropriate or if alternative models of funding would be more sustainable and appropriate;
- (6) the accountability of local councils in the use of revenue to deliver core services; and
- (7) any other related matters.

I am happy to move this motion on behalf of Ms Crozier. I guess I come to this debate as someone who has served as a local government councillor. I know there are others in here like Ms Mansfield and you, Acting President McArthur, and Ms Deeming as well, who have served as local government councillors. I served for six years, and I have served as a mayor and a deputy mayor in the past as well. This motion is really about going back to the drawing board and looking at what local government does and how services are best delivered to maximise value for those that are paying for them – the ratepayer. I will try and work through each of the points of this motion as they sit in a logical way, and we will go from there.

The first part of this motion talks about cost shifting. I guess ‘cost shifting’ is defined as when Commonwealth or state governments transfer programs or service responsibilities to local

governments with insufficient funding or provide grants that do not keep pace with the actual delivery costs incurred by councils. This is not a new occurrence by anyone's standards; it is something that has sort of crept in over time. I do not downplay the importance of the services that I am about to talk about; my comments are more about who should be responsible for providing these services.

The sector commonly talks about services such as school crossing supervision – you could argue that that could be run by the Department of Education; maternal and child health – the Department of Health; early years infrastructure – again the Department of Education; building reform, planning – obviously a state department of planning; housing, particularly social housing – the department of housing; infrastructure, urban stormwater, environmental protections and flood overlays, road network projects – again we have got a department of roads and major projects; disaster response and recovery – we have got a state department of emergency management; aged and older persons care – again we have got state departments to deal with that; and even the management of ports, which in my experience local governments have managed as well. In my particular experience it was the Port of Apollo Bay that the local council was responsible for managing on behalf of the state.

Here is a good example of cost shifting over time. In 1975, public libraries, which I bet everyone has a very keen interest in, were funded 50-50 by state and local government. Victorian government funding has since declined to just 17 per cent, with local government having to make up 83 per cent, which is equal to about \$73 million. Local government has to find that annually to cover the state funding shortfall. That is quite a significant shift in the cost allocation. Peak industry groups such as the VLGA, the Victorian Local Government Association; the MAV, the Municipal Association of Victoria; and the Australian Local Government Association, the ALGA, have all been on the record as saying that cost shifting is an extremely significant issue that needs to at least be thought about and considered. We have got to remember that this motion is about an inquiry. It is not a predetermined outcome, and all these issues should be considered. Cost shifting is one of them.

I know that probably one of the more contentious matters that is outlined in this motion is the second matter, which is regarding the services that councils should and should not be delivering for their communities. This is not about cutting any service whatsoever. It is just about who is best placed to deliver it. And the place that we should really look to figure out who runs what in local government is obviously the Local Government Act 2020 itself. So according to section 8 of the Local Government Act, what is the role of a council? Section 8(1) says:

The role of a Council is to provide good governance in its municipal district for the benefit and wellbeing of the municipal community.

It goes on to talk about what is good governance and that sort of thing. But that is basically the direction that is given to the sector about what local government is responsible for.

It probably would not be a bad thing to look at what the role of a councillor is in this, as an elected representative. Under section 28 of the Local Government Act it says:

The role of every Councillor is –

- (a) to participate in the decision making of the Council; and
- (b) to represent the interests of the municipal community in that decision making; and
- (c) to contribute to the strategic direction of the Council through the development and review of key strategic documents of the Council, including the Council Plan.

Again, these are all very broad matters, which does not really give the sector too much direction on what would be considered higher priority or lower priority, and given that challenge it is a bit hard for any local government area to define what is core business and what is essentially not core business. I guess with that we also should know that because there is no clear indication of what is core business, the resourcing of such priorities is also vastly different across the sector.

I guess because of the lack of clarity in the act, those in the community who take an interest in local government have a mixed view of what local government is actually about and what it delivers. From my own experience across the sector and having spoken to a number of current and former councillors over a number of years, core business is generally seen by the sector as local roads, and they are both sealed and unsealed roads; the levying and the management of rates; waste collection and the whole management process around how we deal with waste; advocacy on various projects that might need funding by federal or state grants; the maintenance of local amenities like parks, gardens, footpaths and those sorts of things; the maintenance of local drains; building control and planning; and also animal registrations.

I know that that might be a bit of a subjective view, but that is basically the feedback that I get from a lot of the local government areas in my particular area of the world. The whole point is that others may have a different view on that. The point is that it is not clearly defined, and the fact that other people do have a different view on that does sort of add weight to the idea of having an inquiry to find out what is and what is not core. So until we do have that clarity, there will continue to be a confused view of what local government is and is not responsible for.

The third point of the motion is about the issue of council and their ability to deliver core council services. The real problem is that because there is no identification of what is core and what is not core, there is no general and accepted understanding of how you resource that. Some councils across the state have delved into other areas like flags, for example. I have seen some councils conduct free laughing classes. Some councils have got involved in federal government matters, which I would consider completely out of their remit. In essence, councils have a freedom and ability to delve into areas that others might think are not really appropriate when basic infrastructure like roads and footpaths are probably not being managed as best as they could be.

Another impact that many local governments have to contend with is cost shifting, as I have said, but also imposed costs. That probably sounds like a funny term, but what does 'imposed costs' actually mean? I will give you an example. Under the act, at the start of a council term, each council is required to undertake community consultation in order to develop a community vision, a council plan and documents that basically set it up for the next four years. Under the act it is specified that a council must undertake what is known as deliberative engagement. I remember going through this, because I was a councillor at the time and I asked the question, 'What is deliberative engagement?' No-one really knew across the sector, and I have got to say, with respect, that Local Government Victoria were not particularly helpful in coming to a view on what deliberative engagement was. So you have got an unclear view of what deliberative engagement is, and most councils at that point in time thought, 'Okay, that's a community panel.' Most – not all, but most – councils around the state decided to convene a community panel. I have got to say there was a conga line of consultants just salivating over this; you could see them lining up with dollar signs in their eyes.

I know that in the shire that I was a councillor for we spent at least \$150,000 on this process. In the great scheme of things, \$150,000 may not sound so significant for a local government area, but for a large regional council like mine, that was very significant, and that money could have been put towards any manner of things like fixing roads and footpaths and those sorts of things. When we talk about imposed costs, those are the costs that I am talking about, which are entrenched in the act and really inhibit the ability of local government to prioritise funding for areas that really do need it.

The overall revenue structure of local government – this has been such a challenging area for a long period of time. Rates are the primary source of income for local councils. Rates are essentially a property tax. Rates consist of your actual rate in the dollar. They consist of the fire services levy, and they all consist of the waste charge as well. Councils have control over two of these three things. They have control over the rate in the dollar, and they also have control over the waste charge. It is actually an unusual system that councils have when they do their rates, because when we talk about an increase in rates, it is not a particular category of rates that get increased. How it works when working with the Victorian Auditor-General's Office and those sorts of bodies is that you have to actually look at the

total rate take from one year and, depending on what the rate cap is, increase it by whatever it is. This year I think the rate cap is about 3.5 per cent. I was part of a council that actually kept rate increases on hold at zero and was one of only two in the state that did so at the time. It was a challenge, but we heard from our ratepayers that they were continually struggling with paying rates. We heard them, and we made sure that we did the right thing.

Principles that are looked at when rates are set include capacity to pay and access to local services. An issue about the rating system too is about equity. Rates are based primarily on the value of a property and also the rate in the dollar. I look at a place like Colac Otway, where I was a councillor, and a place like the City of Yarra. You can look at the number of dwellings in a place like Yarra and in a place like Colac Otway, which has a lot less dwellings and they are a lot more dispersed. Oddly enough, rates in Colac Otway were about \$300 on average more expensive than those in the City of Yarra. Why was that the case? If you look at the provision of services compared to rates, you could say, 'Well, it's not like for like.' But over a long period of time large rural shires – particularly mine – have felt they have had to increase rates just so they could keep up with paying for things like thousands of kilometres of road network. You can compare that to a metro council that has sometimes under 100.

So the funding model for local government is flawed because, particularly with federal assistance grants, it does not take into account the full remit of what a local council has to do – particularly the formula, I might add, which basically gives local governments reasonably fair per person funding; it does not look at all the commitments that a shire has to fund over the course of its entire municipality. For my old patch in Colac Otway a significant part of our shire is actually state land, Crown land, which as you might know is unrateable, so the ability to draw income from that land does not exist, which further creates challenges. That is not unique just to my municipality back in Colac Otway; many rural councils face that as well, which is a big challenge to contend with.

Going back to the federal assistance grants, I want to talk about the ability to pay for other local services as well, such as drainage systems and local roads and footpaths. All of those things face challenges because of an inequity in the revenue streams that are coming from the grants system.

The last major aspect of funding for local government is user fees and charges. Some of these charges are statutory charges. They are usually levied in the planning sector of local governments, but there are others that are not; they are optional. The discretionary ones are usually ones to do with pools, leisure centres, libraries, pet registration and those sorts of things. Those aspects of revenue raising are actually quite small compared to the larger aspects of local government. That needs to be considered as a whole part of this process as well, and very importantly the ability to raise revenue in local government but also how it is spent are critical and would form part of this inquiry.

The fifth part of this motion talks about the appropriateness or the sustainability of local government funding and the appropriate alternatives for raising funds. Many in the sector will actually say that the local government model for raising revenue is broken, and they will say that because essentially rates are a property tax. It is just completely bizarre that the 2018 review into local government was a rating review that talked about how we can do rates better. It did not really produce much, and largely it was ignored, with respect. I have a copy of the Local Government Rating System Review and what it means for ratepayers – this was on the local government website – and it does talk about various different things with regard to implementation of the Local Government Act 2020. There were some small outcomes about better payment arrangements for rates, and rebates and concessions, rating exemptions and farm rates, but that is probably not going to bring about meaningful change in the sector. What probably needed to happen was a much more, dare I say it, zoomed out view of how we raise rates or how local government is funded in the sector.

There have been a number of discussions across the sector regarding the future of revenue structures; for example, instead of having a property tax, consider having some revenue-raising capacity relating to income generation. This is particularly relevant to a lot of rural constituents – farmers. Farmers by nature are asset rich – they have a lot of land – but, due to the seasonal nature of their work, can be

income poor. Regardless of whether there is a good season or a bad season, farmers have to pay rates, and that is a big challenge.

The last point I will make is about the accountability of local councils in the use of their revenue. I have been through many budget processes in local government. Usually how it works is that the council will develop a budget over the course of probably four or five months. They will put out a draft to the community for consultation – minimum usually four weeks, but sometimes it can go to six. The public have an option to comment, and then the council gets the feedback and usually there is not much change because it is very difficult to change, and it goes through. I had better hurry up. That to me is not genuine consultation. There have got to be ways to have consultation to the input of that rather than actually just having it once it has been put on draft. There have got to be other ways to think about that. Really it is not just how the budget is formed, it is how the money is acquitted as well. Members of the public do have the right to ask questions in councils, but usually they are very structured and limited. The reporting is also very difficult to understand because – *(Time expired)*

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:28): I rise to make a contribution in opposition to this motion. I have had the benefit of listening to Mr McCracken's contribution, and I think it was a very thorough and considered contribution. Nevertheless we disagree on a range of things that you put, but I thank you for your contribution. It was, as I said, very considered.

The motion that is before the house today is a motion that is seeking to refer another inquiry to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee in regard to local government funding and service delivery in Victoria, and there is a range of items that are set out within the motion. As I said, I have listened to what Mr McCracken had to say. Local government is an interesting area. In discussions, what I have found is that sometimes local government is much maligned. People have very strongly held views about whether councils should be just simply rates, roads and rubbish, but councils do perform other very important functions. As I said, I was listening to Mr McCracken's contribution but, for example, child and maternal health is something that is delivered at a local level by councils. Every one of us here who has children has made many a trip to the child and maternal health services. Those sorts of things are important, and of course those services receive funding from other sources to make those things happen. Of course libraries are a really important part of local communities. Not only do libraries obviously provide books, but there are other services. I can remember as a child going to story time at my local library, growing up.

I think what is concerning in this debate is that there seems to be this notion that you cannot walk and chew gum at the same time. It is like you should only do these things and only have certain funding streams dedicated to certain things. But as I said, councils do perform a range of very important functions that are not just related to rates, roads and rubbish – for example, planning. One of the primary functions of a local council is to be the planning authority; they make planning approvals in regard to development.

Just back on libraries for a second, libraries are funded to perform a very important function. We saw, for example, throughout the course of the pandemic that libraries lifted and did an amazing job. We saw libraries doing outreach services so people could get their books. They would deliver them to them, or they would see if they could get them electronically if that was possible. Libraries are such a core part of people being able to engage in their communities locally. It is a very simplistic approach to say libraries are just for books. They are not; they provide a range of other programs. I heard Mr McCracken mention something about a library providing a laughing program. So what? That is a good thing, right? I have seen libraries also do things like tai chi programs or, like I said earlier, story time.

I know there was a recent incident with Monash council where some extremists were wanting to stop a story time that was being run by drag queens. We have got to give some flexibility to councils to be able to run programs within the areas for which they are funded. You give funding to libraries, and yes, they are going to provide that service of books, but they do provide these other services. It is a

very simplistic kind of line just to say, 'Well, they shouldn't do anything else.' Libraries provide a really important access point for people who might be struggling with mental ill health as well. They provide services for students who might be living at home or in small apartments and do not have space. If they are living in a noisy environment, they may not have a private space or a quiet space to go and study.

The tone that is being struck in this debate is quite critical of councils. I have just been reading through some of the notes, and there are all sorts of attacks saying services are 'woke'. Honestly, it is really disingenuous for this motion to be moved on the premise of saying, 'It's about making sure we have proper funding and appropriate funding,' when the undercurrent that is running through this motion is really about culture wars – any opportunity to keep the culture wars going in attacking councils or any other entity. As parliamentarians we have been the subject of these sorts of culture war attacks as well. We are not all daft. We can see what is going on and the real motivation that is running through these sorts of things.

As I said, on Tuesday I made a members statement talking about Manningham council deciding to withdraw from the Commonwealth in-home support program for residents. They are saying, 'Well, we've got a funding cut,' but the bottom line is if you look at the history of councils providing that service, they have actually been providing that service for a very, very long time. And it is a very important service because it allows elderly residents to stay in their homes longer and be supported in their homes. They develop relationships with the carers or the people who provide Meals on Wheels and come into their houses, and sometimes for those elderly residents it may be the only human contact that they have in the whole entire day because they are isolated or their families may not be living around them. Sometimes interactions with those sorts of care or support services are the only meaningful human interaction an elderly person might get.

It is a simplistic kind of sledgehammer approach, just saying, 'It's all bad and it's all got to change. It's all hopeless.' There is so much more nuance to it. But the one thing I will just touch on is that I often get concerned about the amount of executive salaries that get paid in local government. If there was any opportunity to review those sorts of arrangements, that would be one. I know that the government has had in place for quite some time rate capping, because that was one of our policies – that we wanted to reduce wasteful spending and the like – and that is obviously very popular with communities. When I am out and about in my community I quite often get people talking to me about rates, and they often comment that they feel they cannot make arrangements with their local council or their council is quite inflexible about hardship measures that they might be experiencing. I note Mr McCracken said this earlier: there are people who might be asset rich but they can be cash-flow poor. If you are a pensioner and you are on a fixed income, you have still got to pay your council rates, and sometimes even the discounts that pensioners can get may not be enough for those people. They have still got to service their property and have money available to service their property.

So all of these impacts can be felt on different levels. But I am disappointed, as I said, that this motion really is about trying to continue the culture wars and using councils as a mechanism for that. In my region I have spoken to Knox council, for example. They have been having some issues with extremist groups turning up to their meetings and disrupting those meetings, being very hostile and threatening towards councillors and raising issues like 5G and those sorts of things. All of that is inappropriate, and the problem we are going to get is that councils will end up closing their public meetings because they are fearful of being attacked or threatened. Whilst you have got to make sure that people can operate in a workplace or environment that is safe and free from threats of violence and harm, you then lose those important aspects of transparency and accountability and things being open to the public so they can actually understand what is going on and see what decisions a council is making and why it is making those decisions. Often it is very important to listen to those debates. I know during COVID councils moved to online meetings, and that was because we had to, obviously, because of COVID. But it is important that those opportunities for the community are there so they can come and sit in on council meetings and participate, ask questions and the like.

As I said, I think this motion is rather disingenuous. I think really it is the opposition dog whistling to some of the dark elements in the community by bringing this motion to the house. As I said, it is pretty obvious what the true motivation is behind this.

I will leave it to other contributors today to go through the many and varied financial supports that government gives to local government to continue to operate. There is the continuation of a range of services that we fund for them, and I know our government regularly supports councils via upgrades to sporting clubs and sportsgrounds and the like. That aids councils. I know some councils struggle with upgrading their asset base, but nevertheless there are important ways that government continues to provide support for the community. Councils are usually the owners of sporting grounds, but government contributes to the upgrades – to sporting clubs, football clubs, netball clubs and those sorts of things. They are all grounds that are owned by local government and very well used.

In Croydon we recently went to Dorset reserve and did an opening of an upgraded sport room there. The University of the Third Age is using those clubrooms as well to have classes for elderly people who engage with the university. So they offer important services, as I said, and it is not something that I really think is necessary to be referred for an inquiry. As I said, I think it is dog whistling to extremist elements and is something that really is undeserved. I know it is a thankless task sometimes to be a public representative, but I just want to thank all the councillors in the sector for standing up and being reps on council.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (15:38): I welcome this motion and congratulate Ms Crozier on bringing it. It is an incredibly important issue. As many of you know, there are many of us who were local government councillors before coming to this place. I was a councillor myself for two years, and I will never forget that when going through the budget planning process I asked a very simple question: which specific services and facilities are local government councils actually required by legislation to provide? I was told by a very, very fancy and very, very expensive budget expert that the way the Local Government Act 2020 is written actually makes this question legally and logically impossible to answer. Rather than creating crystal-clear areas of responsibility, the act actually states that councils can perform any functions that the council determines are necessary. But without clear laws, without clear responsibilities, residents lose out. Nobody can be held accountable for the failure to deliver crucial services. The state government can blame local government. Local government can blame the state. And who is stuck in the middle? Ordinary families, with garbage-quality roads, overcrowded schools and no-one who will take responsibility.

In my discussions with other councillors all over Victoria I was shocked to discover that although councillors are the people democratically elected to represent residents – they are mandated to set the strategy and direction of their local government councils – it is actually bureaucrats that make important decisions, such as signing the entire organisation up to memberships with third-party organisations that then have access to internal data and influence over internal policies and even the spending that is done by councils. I discovered that councillors are impeded from performing their oversight and transparent governance responsibilities by being refused access to the data that they need to make those important decisions. And recently I have heard that council lawyers – the same lawyers that many councillors themselves rely on for advice – were contracted to write a council CEO's submission to the Minister for Local Government asking that the power to control, regulate and punish councillor behaviour be vested in the hands of that CEO alone. Some people would even go so far as to say that local government is broken, because we have a minister in government that consults only the CEO and admin, and not the ratepayers and the councillors. So I welcome this motion.

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (15:41): I rise today to talk on the local government funding and service delivery at the local government level. My concern basically with this motion is the cost shifting and service delivery and who should deliver the services the councils are assigned to do. When speaking about funding and service delivery at a local government level, the transfer of financial responsibility from other levels of government to local government is remarkable, requiring local government to find their own way to fund various types of service without adequate resources. This

results in the reduction of service, the increase of fees and fundamentally a reduction in quality of the services provided to our community.

Over a period of decades, we have seen the Andrews government take extreme cost-shifting measures and impose them on local government without adequate support. Victorian councils spend more than \$8 billion each year providing more than 100 community services and maintaining over \$110 billion on local roads, facilities and infrastructure. The impact of cost shifting on local governments is profound. Local governments are then responsible for the delivery of essential services such as waste management, libraries and community centres, and the cost shifting extends to other matters such as climate change response mitigations. In recent years there have been local disaster response and recovery and compliance and other indirect costs which local councils have to consider and find the funds to service.

In my electorate alone, the Western Metropolitan Region, two of the largest growing local government areas in Australia – Wyndham City Council followed by Brimbank City Council – have been hit quite hard by these measures of local government funding in relation to rate capping, which does not take into account the rising CPI over the years. By the end of this decade, Wyndham City Council itself will lose more than \$300 million due to rate capping. The loss of these funds means that Wyndham cannot build the desperately needed facilities and services that are not being provided.

Residential aged care is another issue when it comes to community services. Council services provide entry level support at home. This provides more complex support to older people who are otherwise unable to continue living independently in their own home. With the assistance of a range of care options, they are able to continue to live independently in their own home. Again, we see this service reduced through the cost shifting imposed by the Andrews government.

Public libraries are another service in Victoria which is owned and operated by councils, and there we see the cost shifting. I will give you some examples of the results of cost shifting. In the past, public libraries were funded 50–50 with the state government, and now councils are basically paying 80 per cent of the costs of servicing the public libraries. Maternal health services traditionally were a 50–50 split with the state government, and yet now they are looking at 60–40. School crossing supervisors are basically now thought to be the responsibility of councils. Most recently, the onus for the responsible compliance of pool safety fences has been put on councils to enforce and ensure that compliance occurs within their municipalities – without any financial support.

At the last election the Liberal Party recognised this shortfall and took a policy that committed to a \$185 million package which was designed to assist local government to support and provide these services. Addressing issues with cost shifting which the Andrews Labor government has done, the package was to include a detailed review of the overall revenue structure of local government and support for the provision of high-profile community assets and services. The package also assisted councils to provide and administer assets and services. It also considered reviewing the user-pays system, including voluntary payments by users of individual community assets and services. It also considered freezing all existing local government business fees, charges and levies. The package also included a four-year suspension of the introduction of new government fees, charges and levies.

It is not about whether this motion is blaming councils for what they can and cannot do, but it is basically about the amount of financial support for them to actually cover all of these services for their community. It is crucial that we move into this committee and review the effect of cost shifting from the state and federal governments to examine the fiscal imbalances as well as the services that local councils should or should not provide and what they can deliver to their local communities. It is also vital that the committee examine the revenue structure of local government and its sustainability and ultimately the various models of funding which they require to fulfil the core service delivery of local government.

I was a councillor prior to entering this Parliament, and I have directly come across various services which the government has proceeded to pass on to local government. I support this inquiry by the Economy and Infrastructure Committee. Hopefully this inquiry will have some recommendations in relation to what councils should or should not deliver to our communities and in relation to the effectiveness of the funding behind these services and whether the existing revenue structure models are sustainable to fund all of these services relating to councils.

On the impact of cost shifting by the Labor government, I will just mention again that it is something that needs to be clearly looked into and investigated. I would just like to emphasise that the one crucial thing is the services that local councils should or should not be delivering in relation to the appropriate funding which they have in their annual budgets. I support this inquiry being undertaken by the Economy and Infrastructure Committee.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:50): I also rise to speak on the motion as put forward by Ms Crozier and as introduced to us today by Mr McCracken in what was a very interesting speech as well, and I thank him for that. I do not mean that sarcastically; it genuinely was.

Right from the start I would like to say that councils provide a wide range and quality of services and infrastructure for our local communities, as they of course ought to do. They do not just provide the bin collections and issue parking fines, they support local sporting clubs and they promote inclusive community programs for children, the elderly and community members with disabilities – many of these my colleague Ms Terpstra referred to in her contribution just before – and our culturally and linguistically diverse communities as well. Councils help to shape our local communities. ‘Local government’ means exactly that: government focused on providing for, representing and delivering for local communities at the most local grassroots and close-knit element of our democratic system.

I am a little wary of the basis that the motion is working from, in particular section (2), which refers to ‘the services local councils should, and should not, be delivering for their communities’. I feel that this indicates something of a contempt for councils. It all but states the desire to have local councils not function fully as a level of government. The motion would prefer to see councils deliver on a list of highly defined authorised services dictated by the state government. As Mr McCracken referred to in his speech when decrying the lack of such a list, it is actually ratepayers that fund councils, and it is residents that elect councillors and whom councils are there to represent. Different areas have different needs, and it is appropriate for councils to represent their communities in the decisions that they make and in the priorities that they put forward. That does not mean that local government cannot or should not work beyond the core services; in fact they should do that. The core services should always be paramount – that being the standard: the recycling, the rubbish, the roads, everything else, library services – but that does not mean further services cannot be brought in, such as things operated by our wonderful local libraries.

As Ms Terpstra referred to, a number of programs have come under quite a significant amount of attention recently when there have been some disgraceful attacks on local councils and absolutely outrageous scenes at council meetings where people with, frankly, very little interest in democracy have stormed places demanding that councils overrule decisions and targeted vulnerable parts of our community to do so. It has been, quite frankly, disgusting, and that has happened in my area too. The administrators’ meeting of Casey council was affected by that, and Knox council, as Ms Terpstra referred to, as well as others in the region, including Yarra Ranges.

In terms of keeping councils responsible and accountable, I do note that there are already a number of mechanisms in place, and this government does have a strong record on that as well. Further to which, so does this Parliament, and I note that earlier this year we did have a Victorian Auditor-General’s Office report into the results of council spending. The Victorian government also has a track record of working productively to deliver these better amenities and services, working with councils to provide benefits for all local communities across the state. The Growing Suburbs Fund is a prime example of

that. It is how we work with councils, in many instances beyond what some might call the 'core services' that this motion demands they be restricted to.

There has, as has been noted, never been a defined set of core council services. Not all councils provide the same mix of services. There are many services that councils deliver in partnership with the state government and many examples of programs supported by the state government which are created and initiated by councils. We understand this because, unlike what was demonstrated by the opposition when they were last in government, we are committed to providing services to our communities. Unlike them, we understand and respect local democracy. Councils are vital for the delivery of services to local communities. Local governments know their community's needs better than any other level of government. They are often the best placed to determine what services they need, which is why their input is so invaluable to government at all other levels in the construction of programs and services.

I do want to mention again the Growing Suburbs Fund, which has provided a number of investments, including in my region. For those unaware, it is a significant amount of funding – \$450 million through this fund – for interface councils which has actually generated and worked towards investments of over \$1.5 billion over the course of the program. In my electorate alone we have had some recent initiatives, including with the Orana Community Place in Clyde North.

This is a project where, in one of the new estates in the regions that Mr Tarlamis and I look after, a new community place has opened with significant support from the state government, with funding of \$535,000 in total, \$353,000 of which came from the Growing Suburbs Fund. This is a project that has been really beneficial for one of our brand new communities. This community is still not even on many maps, but if you go out there you see the services that are starting to take place. As our city is growing, so too do the services that need to match, and in many of these communities there is a backlog in infrastructure. In time the community around Orana and others like it in Clyde North will no doubt benefit from full-scale local facilities – community centres, libraries et cetera – but whilst these areas are literally still being built, we are putting in the infrastructure and the investment in these community places, such as the Orana Community Place, which will have a huge impact for the community. This is a small-scale, house-sized community centre that in time will be able to be put back towards housing for the local community, but in the meantime and before the further, bigger investment takes place in the area, this is a valuable source of connection and activity for the local community. It is fantastic to see this already up and running and busy. I had the very big privilege of helping to open the centre, along with council, back on 1 April, and there was a huge number of activities already taking place there, including a social enterprise cafe. The outer suburbs of Melbourne are often characterised as soulless or as there being nothing going on out there, but quite the contrary, there are really, really good things happening in the outer suburbs in these new developing areas. I would encourage all members to check out facilities like Orana to see for themselves what is going on and what can be done in our outer suburbs.

Further to Orana, there have been a number of other projects in my area which I have taken quite a bit of interest in. One in particular is the Upper Beaconsfield recreation reserve (UBRR). The community of Upper Beaconsfield, again a very close, tightknit community, has been lobbying for years to get their, frankly, dilapidated community facilities completely overhauled and rebuilt. Very excitingly, last year the state government, the Andrews Labor government, committed \$3.35 million out of this Growing Suburbs Fund towards a full rebuild of the Upper Beaconsfield recreation reserve facilities. This is actually the single largest project currently in that Growing Suburbs Fund. We partnered with Cardinia Shire Council to do the project, and there is a huge number of users that will benefit from that facility, including obviously football and cricket but also groups such as Auskick, the pony club, Scouts and adult riding clubs as well.

Sadly, though, recently Cardinia Shire Council presented an alternative plan to the user groups of the UBRR, despite this funding being in place, which significantly reduced the project in size and pricing. The amended plan proposed a partial redevelopment, which would not have been a full rebuild, as had

been committed and as had been supported by the government, and it would have been a far worse outcome for the community. It would have left the existing structure in place, and what new elements of the building would have been there would not have been up to standard. The boys changing rooms would have to have been accessed through the kitchen and the girls changing rooms would have to have been accessed by walking around outside the building to the back. So concerned stakeholders of the reserve contacted me to ask for assistance, and I joined with a lower house colleague Emma Vulin, who shares a border with Upper Beaconsfield, and we demanded and advocated to council that the full rebuild be put back on the table.

I visited the facility. I saw firsthand the condition of the property and was definitely even further convinced that this complex must be rebuilt. I also met with Cr Brett Owen, who has been a passionate advocate for this project and for his community. I also wrote to and met with the Cardinia CEO Carol Jeffs, who was very receptive, and engaged with mayor Tammy Radford, who was incredibly interested in this project as well. We lobbied and continued to provide that campaigning assistance to the local community, and I am very happy to advise that after those discussions council has now come back to the community with a full commitment to rebuild this centre, to fully maximise and fully utilise those Growing Suburbs Fund funds that the Andrews Labor government is offering, and I look forward to working with the council. I know they are working through their budget process at the moment, and along with the member for Pakenham I will be continuing to push for this project for our local community. This is just one example of the many ways in which the Andrews Labor government is supporting our councils, particularly our interface and peri-urban councils, to deliver the services and infrastructure that our growing communities absolutely need.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (16:00): Legalise Cannabis Victoria welcomes this debate, which ultimately pivots on the centrality of local government to the lives of all Victorians. As I have said in this place previously, I believe local government to be a critical element of the warp and weft of our democratic society. There is no level of government that is more accessible or I believe more responsive to the local community. I have also expressed previously my concerns over the propensity of state governments of both persuasions to unilaterally overrule local governments. As a local resident activist in Melbourne for more than 25 years, I have regularly witnessed planning ministers sweep aside proposed planning schemes or planning approvals that have often been the product of months or even years of consultation and negotiation.

In speaking to this proposed referral as it appears on the notice paper, I would firstly note that we have not had anyone from the opposition approach us about this proposal. I note that likewise no conversation has been initiated by the opposition with Ms Purcell, the chair of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee, either. That said, we would offer some observations about the proposed terms of reference.

Term of reference 2 identifies ‘the services local councils should, and should not, be delivering for their communities’. Councils understand all too well the expectations of their residents as to essential and basic service provision. Further, on a range of more discretionary expenditures it is up to the democratic process at that local government level to determine how resources are allocated. In the absence of regulatory non-compliance or malfeasance, Legalise Cannabis Victoria believes it is not for a committee of this place to determine what services a council should or should not be delivering.

Term of reference 3 refers to ‘whether local councils are adequately delivering on their core service delivery objectives’. All too often over the years we have seen the education debate in this country dumbed down to simplistic notions of the three R’s. While I am not suggesting that the opposition is proposing any such simplistic approach to the complexities of local government, it does concern me that such a term of reference could be interpreted as telling councils to stick to garbage, rates and animal waste by-products. As was noted before, local government is a democratic institution, and if councillors fail to deliver on core services, there is an inevitable consequence: they get voted out. And that is as it should be.

Terms of reference 4 and 5 strike to the question of the structure and sustainability of funding for local government. These are very important questions that are of great concern across councils and their communities.

Term of reference 6 refers to 'the accountability of local councils in the use of revenue to deliver core services'. Once again I feel my spidey senses tingling and the hairs on the back of my neck rising. Recently we have all witnessed examples of reprehensible and intimidatory behaviour at some council meetings. Much of this has referenced the discretionary use of revenue by councils. While I am sure it is not the intention of the opposition to grab a big slab of raw, bleeding meat and to throw it into those public debates, many might see such a term of reference as doing just that. As I said before, in the absence of regulatory non-compliance or malfeasance, accountability is through councils engaging with their communities and ultimately through the ballot box.

To sum up, there are important issues that this place should consider on the question of local government. For example, in my region of Western Metropolitan, local councils are wrestling with the complexities and challenges of multiple growth corridors. For these councils there are critical questions, including rate capping, the distribution of developer contributions and inadequate coordination and collaboration between councils and state government on the delivery of services and infrastructure, to name but a few.

There are terms of reference contained within this referral motion that do strike to important revenue and resource issues. However, they commingle currently with terms of reference that, as I have raised previously, cause us major concern. Accordingly, we will not be supporting the referral but would welcome the opportunity to explore these issues in the future to enhance and strengthen the role of local government.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (16:05): I am pleased to stand and speak in support of this motion. I thank the members of this house for their contributions to this important debate. I want to move amendments on behalf of the Liberals and Nationals. I move:

1. Omit paragraphs (2) and (6).
2. In paragraph (5), after 'appropriate;' insert 'and'.

These will be circulated in the chamber.

I am pleased to stand and speak in support of this motion for the Economy and Infrastructure Committee to examine local government funding and service delivery in Victoria by 30 June next year. The terms of reference include the effects of cost shifting from the state and federal governments to local councils and the overall revenue structure of local government, and if that existing structure is sustainable or if alternative models of funding would be more appropriate. The electorate of Northern Victoria that I represent covers nearly half of the state, and there are 27 local councils in the region. This inquiry will provide an important opportunity for feedback – to examine what is working well with the delivery of local council services and what can be done better. I have met with many councils across the region and understand that it is not always clear who pays for what or how much each should pay.

The school crossing system is an example of a state government program, but local councils are being left to pick up the bill. In March this year the Strathbogie council decided to exit the school crossing program because it was costing local ratepayers about \$50,000 each year to deliver. By doing so, they sent a strong message to the Victorian government to deliver the school crossing supervision program to ensure the safety of local kids. The council was paying about 62 per cent of the program cost to deliver this state government service, and they have now joined 28 other local government areas across the state seeking the restoration of funds for this critical service. The survey undertaken late last year of 40 councils found that 97 per cent of councils have unsupervised crossings, putting our children at risk. It is clear that the system is not working. In 2016 the Victorian government said we needed a new

model. They committed to a strategic review of the school crossing system, but the review has not progressed.

Local councils often go cap in hand to the state government seeking funding, especially after the floods. Our regional roads were already in disrepair and the floods made them even worse. The same could be said for the repair of levee banks that exist to protect assets from flooding. The state government needs to undertake urgent work to repair these levies, and various authorities are involved, including catchment management authorities, Parks Victoria and local councils. Another example is committees of management that voluntarily look after Crown land reserves owned by the state. There are over 1000 of these committees of management in the state. I have been involved on these committees, and I know how frustrating it can be to get action. Local council defers to the state government, the state government defers to the local council, and who pays for what? These are just a few examples of the cost shifting that occurs between state and local governments.

The inquiry would also be an opportunity to look at the disparity in funding models where inner-city councils benefit from high-density housing but regional councils have fewer properties that cover a much larger area. The same as well with parking revenue – that is something that can be raised in the city and not in many of our regional areas. I know some residents are concerned about the amount of council rates that we pay and also when councils go beyond the role of roads, rates and rubbish. But as mentioned by my colleagues in this chamber, the Local Government Act 2020 is not very clear and it needs to be clarified. This inquiry would give an opportunity to residents across Victoria to provide feedback. We need to address the cost shifting between state and local governments and use this inquiry to work with Victoria's local councils to deliver better quality and more affordable services for us all.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (16:10): I am pleased to continue the debate on Ms Crozier's motion in relation to a reference to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee which proposes an inquiry into local government funding and service delivery here in Victoria. In opening, I think it is fair to say that we agree wholeheartedly across the chamber that local governments play an exceptionally important role in our democratic system of government. They are an important part of our democratic structures here in Australia and also a place of important service delivery and community advocacy.

I know, Acting President Berger, that you and I upon our election to this place as new members for Southern Metropolitan Region spent quite a while visiting our local councils talking with mayors and CEOs about the range of services they provide and the issues and challenges that our communities confront. Through those meetings we got to understand quite well, I think, the dynamics that are at play between state and local governments but also between federal, state and local governments and the inevitable challenges that exist for different governments, different elected representatives, with occasionally differing perspectives on the mandates that they have been delivered to advocate on behalf of, deliver services to and prioritise the allocation of resources within their local communities. Those meetings, Acting President, I think have given both of us a really good understanding of the challenges and the issues that our local councils face. It is the kind of advocacy and engagement I look forward to continuing over the remainder of this parliamentary term.

In relation to the motion that is before us, a motion that we now appear to have amendments to, I think what has been demonstrated quite clearly through the contributions that others in the chamber have made are some of the problems that we see exist with this motion and particularly some of the consequences that we would see from an inquiry such as this examining these matters. I find it interesting that the opposition have decided that they have made a little bit of a mistake in suggesting the terms of reference for this inquiry. Obviously they no longer believe that they want some sort of Victorian parliamentary inquiry determining what local government should be doing, because that is the effect of paragraph (2) of the proposed terms of reference here. The inquiry was going to look at the services that local councils should and should not be delivering for their communities – sitting in judgement over the top of our elected councils and telling them what it is that they should and should

not be doing. We think that having a committee of the Victorian Parliament doing such an interrogation of our local councils is not a recipe for harmony or for improving service delivery at a local level; in fact we think it is more likely to be the source of significant antagonism and debate across local government. Also the proposed amendments seek to remove paragraph (6) of the proposed terms of reference, which would remove the proposed function of the committee to look at whether councils are being accountable in the use of their revenue to deliver core services.

We do not know why the opposition has decided that it needs to change the terms of reference to its own proposed inquiry. Clearly the contributions from this side of the chamber have been so persuasive in demonstrating just how flawed this proposal would be that they have been forced to come into the house and propose amendments to their own motion because of just how ill thought through it was in the first place. I am also across the insertion of 'and' after the second 'appropriate' in paragraph (5). I think I have figured that one out, so I do not need any further clarification from them on that.

But I do think the house would benefit from some clarification from the opposition as to why they found that their original motion needs to be changed. Why did they get it so wrong in their original proposal? Certainly what we have seen from this side is a reasonable critique of what they have been proposing – a critique that has been so reasonably effective that they have decided to change it. I think we would all welcome a contribution from the opposition explaining exactly why they feel it is no longer necessary to do the things that a short time ago they felt were necessary, which brings me to a broader point about how we reflect on what decisions some of our local councils are making in terms of their prioritisation and the services in their communities.

The advocacy that we have seen from many community groups has been about some of the unfortunate decisions that councils are making, particularly in relation to the provision of home and community care services in our community. It is a great shame that so many of our councils, particularly across metropolitan Melbourne, have been taking decisions to back away from home and community care services in our community, and I certainly think that those sorts of decisions are raised in our conversations with our local councils. When we go and meet with them we say that we think the services they provide are actually pretty good and we think that they should continue to provide them. The absolutely splendid advocacy we have had from the Australian Services Union has highlighted just what value highly trained home and community care workers have for members of their community who may be elderly or sick and may need support in their homes, and we see some of our local councils here in Melbourne walking away from their local residents by shutting down these services and vacating the field. We do not think that that is the kind of prioritisation that is in anyone's interests, let alone ratepayers of these communities.

In making those comments, though, I do want to make special mention of the City of Bayside, which, unlike pretty much all of their neighbours, have made the decision to stay in home and community care services and stay in the aged care system and are actually expanding their role in our aged care setting and expanding the range of services that they provide. I think it is a credit to the City of Bayside for taking that approach.

The last thing I want to do in my contribution today is just make some reflections on the topic of council conduct and how our local government authorities are engaging with their communities – reflecting on a report from the Ombudsman that we saw tabled in Parliament just the other day – in relation to one of the councils in the Southern Metropolitan Region, the City of Glen Eira. It is particularly in relation to complaints from a resident who had some issues with a contractor that the city had engaged to undertake some works on their street. The unfortunate practice that we see – which the Ombudsman has highlighted in this instance but is replicated across other local governments across Melbourne – is where councils appear to be willing to contract out the complaints process to the contractors instead of standing up for their constituents.

I thought I would read a short passage from the Ombudsman's report, which was tabled only a couple of days ago, which says:

As public authorities, councils have an enduring obligation and interest to handle complaints about the delivery of their services. This is perhaps even more so where the services are contracted out. It is surely in councils' best interests to be alert to service delivery performance.

The Ombudsman went on to say at paragraph 81:

The 2020 Act outlines that councils are responsible for dealing with complaints about contractors. A council cannot exclude itself from the complaint process. Councils should always assess whether a complaint process is required and, if so, ensure that an internal review pathway is provided.

The report goes on to say:

Ultimately, many Victorian councils have work to do in developing and adequately explaining the process for contractor complaints in their complaint policies.

It is worth mentioning in the context of a debate about local government service delivery that the Ombudsman has only this week indicated to our councils that they cannot contract out the complaints processes when they contract out their services. That is the kind of role that the Ombudsman can play in making our service delivery here in Victoria improved. It is a practical contribution to improving public service delivery here in Victoria. It is the kind of way that we can improve service delivery at local government level without the need to resort to establishing a parliamentary committee that will lord it over our local councils and start meddling in their affairs.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (16:20): There are a few things I would like to address there. There is a lot in local government, and I am very proud to speak on this motion. My mother Jenny was actually a local councillor for some 16 years at the City of Banyule and a former mayor as well; I kind of grew up around local government.

I just want to respond to a couple of things, because I know we have seen cost shifting from this government around local councils, whether it is in kinder or waste or maternal health services. As someone who is using maternal health services at the moment, you see that going on, you see that around. I note Mr Batchelor's comment that we are somehow sitting in judgement of local government. This is the same side of politics that has been briefing out about taking over local government planning processes. Is the Deputy Premier sitting in judgement of every single local council? Because that is what they are briefing on that side of the aisle. They are briefing out that they are going to take over local government planning controls. So they are the side that is quite clearly sitting in judgement of every single local government council in Victoria, and they have done the same thing in Boroondara, as I know Ms Crozier said. You have even got this side of politics sitting in judgement of Labor-aligned councils like Darebin, calling for ministerial intervention into planning decisions where there is a Labor mayor. So they are even sitting in judgement of their own councillors. I would say on the 'sitting in judgement' line, this government does plenty of sitting in judgement of local government. They know they do. They talk about it all the time through media channels. So to say that we are somehow sitting in judgement and they are not I found quite amusing.

On the topic of local government, I think this is an important motion. We have done quite a bit of listening as Liberal and National parties, particularly to local government, and I was very pleased to have Leader of the Opposition John Pesutto come out to the northern suburbs to meet with the Northern Councils Alliance, representatives of councils across the northern suburbs, including Banyule, Darebin, Hume, Merri-bek, Whittlesea, Nillumbik and Mitchell shire. Together they represent over 1 million Victorians, and we know, through what local government is telling us, there is cost shifting from this government onto local government. They are using them to, I guess, carry a bit of the debt that they are carrying, which is costing Victorians \$10 million a day in interest repayments. No wonder the Premier is out there, angry at the RBA, because every time that increases, the \$10 million a day everyone is paying in interest to service the debt also increases.

We know that local government is having great difficulty adequately delivering on core service objectives. There are some instances where our local councils need to ensure the focus of things in their council and also still be able to do some of those advocacy priorities, particularly in the north. The government is very quick to blame councils, whether it be in Kalkallo, where they are blaming the council, or Mickleham or some of the planning issues. They are always blaming local government when things tend to be their fault, like the shocking state of Donnybrook Road or the shocking state of Mickleham Road or Somerton Road. I have said this before, but local residents always tell me they know the difference between a state government arterial road and a local government road just by looking at the length of the grass. Local government are keeping up with their end of the bargain, but it is state government roads that are letting people down, and that is certainly what local government has told me.

One thing many councils in the north have told me, which I am sure they have told Dr Ratnam as well, is they would love a duplication of the Upfield line and to look at the northern loop line which was proposed by Terry Mulder in a Public Transport Victoria development plan back in 2012, a former coalition transport minister. That would duplicate the Upfield line and extend that out to the Craigieburn line and electrify the track to Wallan. Certainly that is a significant advocacy priority, and we need local government to get back to being able to advocate for their communities, because they are also elected. I am very cognisant of the fact that they are elected as well, and as we transition to single-member wards we need to make sure that they can still be champions of their communities and we can listen to them and work with them, as the Liberals and Nationals are doing, working with our councils.

As a new member of Parliament I have taken the initiative of meeting with every single council and CEO. There is not one single mayor or CEO that does not have my personal phone number. I am constantly speaking and listening to my local councils. Even the Labor ones have strong criticisms of some of the cost shifting that they are having to put up with thanks to the debt and overspending of this government, which, as Ms Shing will know, is costing Victorians \$10 million a day just to service the interest on the debt. We know that there has been cost shifting going on, as I said, whether it be child and maternal health services, whether it be kinder or other services. I know just from speaking to my local neighbourhood house in Wallan that they are facing those pressures as well.

I do support this motion; it is really important. As a member of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee I am looking forward to working with colleagues to try to help solve some of those issues and highlight some of those issues that local government are facing.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (16:27): The Greens have long been hearing concerns from the local government sector, particularly with regard to cost shifting and structural impacts on their long-term financial sustainability, and we see merit in this inquiry. We did hold some significant concerns, like we have heard from Mr Ettershank and a number of members of the government, around the original terms of reference for this inquiry. We were concerned that it would have the potential to provide a platform for those who are intent on undermining and curtailing the role of local government in our democracy, and we thank the opposition for their willingness to take on these concerns and amend the terms of reference to remove those points that really suggested that the state government is somehow best placed to determine what services councils should and should not be providing.

The Local Government Act outlines councils' responsibilities and how to measure the adequacy of service delivery, and we would question the purview of a parliamentary inquiry to determine this. Surely it is for the community and for council to determine what services they need, and that is often best highlighted in rural communities where we see tremendous innovation and responsiveness to community needs. A local community transport service, for example, like the one run by Pyrenees Shire Council, is critical for more isolated residents who require access to health and other key services and has strong community support. What is a core service for one community may not be for another,

and the ability of councils and communities to determine this for themselves goes to the very heart of what local government is about.

We believe that the amended terms of reference for this inquiry better reflect the challenges that councils are facing, and they are very real. A growing number of councils are facing uncertain financial futures as a result of state and federal government policies. Councils are required to do more and more with less and less, and this is reflected in the trend towards underlying deficits and growing asset renewal gaps. State and federal governments continually expand the requirements of councils or make announcements about new capital projects or programs but expect councils to foot the bill through initial co-contributions and typically also the associated ongoing maintenance and operational expenses. Libraries, for example, used to be funded 50–50 local and state government. Now local government contributes 83 per cent of public library funding.

Rates are one of the very few sources of revenue for councils, and rate capping has severely constrained their financial capacity. Pegging the rate cap to predicted CPI increases fails to reflect the drivers of costs for councils, which are linked to growth in materials and labour costs rather than those of common household goods. The increases in costs of construction and labour were particularly evident during COVID, and all levels of government are feeling the pain of that. However, unlike other levels of government, councils have limited levers to respond to this.

I have many rural councils in my electorate, and the consistent message I hear from them is that the current system of rate capping is failing them and their communities. Rural councils serve relatively small populations over very large geographical areas. They comprise 11.5 per cent of the population but 77.2 per cent of the state's land area and are responsible for 62 per cent of Victoria's local road networks. They generally face higher costs due to a lack of economies of scale and can struggle to attract suppliers and workers. Many of these councils have to step in where markets and other levels of government are failing – for example, on affordable housing, local public transport and aged care services.

One result of rate capping is that councils often have to forgo things like asset renewal in order to keep essential services running. Another result of rate capping is that councils are increasingly reliant on government grants, which are also reducing and which are generally competitive. This system has many problems, the least of which is that they make it very difficult for councils to plan. They do not keep up with the actual costs of delivery either. This has been highlighted in recent years with escalating costs for capital and labour to deliver projects, but there has been no provision made in grant funding, so councils are left to foot the extra bill that is left over when the costs of a project go up.

Another message I have heard consistently from rural councils, in particular those that have experienced infrastructure damage incurred from climate-related events, is that recovery grants, which are again generally competitive, only provide like-for-like replacement and no incentive for funding to support improvements that build resilience and reduce the likelihood of damage to that infrastructure in the future. The local government sector has long been advocating for these and many other issues to be taken seriously by state government. The Greens will continue to advocate for measures that support our councils to thrive and serve the needs of their communities, and we welcome this inquiry with the amended terms of reference.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:32): Can I thank the Greens and those that will be supporting this sensible motion that stands in my name. It really is getting to the heart of what we do in this place, and that is to have inquiries into important issues, and this one is looking into local government funding and service delivery in Victoria. The Liberals and Nationals took a policy to the last election. We had a suite of reforms where we wanted to see local government have an ability to work with and improve on the services that they provide. This inquiry will be looking at the cost shifting that is occurring at the moment and how councils are really struggling to be able to do the service delivery that they are charged with.

A couple of examples come to mind. Maternal and child health nurses, who need to have those services delivered through local governments, are just not being provided in areas like Casey, Wyndham and Melton, where there are not enough maternal and child health nurses on the ground to be able to deliver those services. I have raised this issue many, many times. This is a core service of local councils that just cannot be delivered. So this is one of the areas that, for instance, this inquiry could look at future funding models or perhaps what needs to be done so that women in these areas, new parents and new babies can get those basic services. They are basic services that should be able to be provided, but the Andrews Labor government has let these new mothers, new parents and new babies down on too many occasions.

In my own area of Southern Metropolitan Region and indeed yours, Acting President Berger, there is Boroondara – that you know only too well. Mr Batchelor, you said councils have the decision-making process. Well, they do not in our areas, as you should know. In Boroondara the government has taken over the decision-making around planning decisions. They have had no ability to have a say on that, and it has really been terribly difficult for councils to be able to look at their planning needs, the local amenity and the concerns of residents and the community as a whole.

That is why this is a really important inquiry that can look at these issues. Obviously it is really looking, as the motion points out, at the effects of cost shifting from the state and federal governments to local councils; whether local councils are adequately delivering on their core service delivery objectives, as I have just highlighted; the overall revenue structure of local government; and whether the existing revenue structure is sustainable and appropriate or if alternative models of funding would be more suitable and appropriate.

So yes, we did amend this motion just very, very slightly, but the overall intent of this referral, which is a sensible one for the Economy and Infrastructure Committee to look into, is to look at those cost shifting structures and the cost shifting that is actually occurring.

With those words I would urge all members in the chamber to support the amended motion and get the Economy and Infrastructure Committee to undertake this important work on behalf of the entire Victorian community.

Amendments agreed to.

Council divided on amended motion:

Ayes (20): Matthew Bach, Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nicholas McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Aiv Puglielli, Samantha Ratnam, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Noes (17): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Shaun Leane, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Sheena Watt

Amended motion agreed to.

Bills

Public Administration and Planning Legislation Amendment (Control of Lobbyists) Bill 2023

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of David Davis:

That the bill be now read a second time.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:44): Today I rise to contribute to the debate on the Public Administration and Planning Legislation Amendment (Control of Lobbyists) Bill 2023, and in

doing so I want to discuss what the bill claims to do. According to the bill, it is aiming to amend the Public Administration Act 2004 and the Victorian Planning Authority Act 2017 to provide more control over lobbyists. This is an eight-page bill introduced by my colleague over there on the opposition benches Mr Davis.

Let us break down the eight pages. The first page is the table of provisions – standard stuff. The next page outlines the purpose of the bill. Now we are up to the third page, so we are more than a quarter of the way through the bill, and we are onto the definition of words. Skipping ahead to page 6, the bill talks about the repeal of the act, and page 7 has the endnotes, so we have three pages to talk about something very important, something that should have been done in a far more comprehensive manner.

This bill is just a political stunt. The bill is just a sound bite. It is political pointscoring. It is sloppily drafted and it is not worth the attention or the time of this important house, nor is it worth the time of its members. Why is that the case? Our government has already announced that it will support in principle the recommendations of the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission's *Operation Clara* report, which this bill claims to implement. We are doing the hard work now, the sound policy work to improve the framework under which lobbying occurs.

As I have said a lot this week, and we will continue to say, we will consult widely. We speak to the relevant stakeholders, listen to the community and then craft legislation that will last in the long run. It is important work. It should not be rushed for a cheap political point. We need to get the consultation right. We must ensure that the concerns outlined in the report are addressed and considered appropriately.

The bill claims to try and provide more control over lobbyists, but the question is: who is going to be doing the controlling – what body, with what money and where from? These questions have not been considered. It is a very strange purpose, and I am not a lawyer. It shows how rushed the process has been and how sloppy the opposition has been in drafting this bill. In *Operation Clara* the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission was not concerned with controlling lobbyists. They were concerned with issues of transparency and integrity, and I want to talk about what our government is doing to address this.

Our government is a government of action, and that is what we are doing. In fact our government regularly supports the recommendations of the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission. On 12 October last year the Premier said:

Victorians deserve to have confidence in the political parties and public institutions that serve them – which is why we're delivering funding to support the most significant overhaul of parliamentary oversight in the country.

The Minister for Local Government Melissa Horne said:

There is no place for corruption in local government, which is why we'll bring in donation and lobbying reforms.

What are the Premier and the Minister for Local Government referring to? They are talking about the Andrews Labor government acting on recommendations contained in a report into donations and lobbying, a report that was released by the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission on 12 October 2022. As we said at the time, the government supports in principle the IBAC report and its recommendations on lobbying reform. We also said at the time that we would work on implementation if we were re-elected. Thankfully for all of us involved we were.

Our government is dedicated to working to provide funding to help implement the nation's most significant integrity reforms related to parliamentary oversight. Our government has a history of supporting these sorts of recommendations. After receiving a report on IBAC's *Operation Watts*, the government immediately accepted all 21 of its recommendations. The government is committing to

strengthening the integrity and the ethical conduct of members of Parliament, ministers and their staff. As the Premier said, our government has:

... always stood ready to deliver necessary reforms to donation and integrity frameworks – that’s why we will act on every recommendation.

But on the adoption of these 21 reforms recommended by Operation Watts, I want to draw a parallel to the legislation that is being debated today. I want to associate myself with the remarks of the Attorney-General, who on these recommendations said:

These shouldn’t just be reforms that are driven within one political party – they should be the law.

These reforms deserve broad and bipartisan support. We’ll consult and engage with all Members of Parliament from all political parties to deliver the lasting change Victorians expect.

It is a shame that this bill ignores that work. On 20 July last year, 2022, the government committed to working with the Parliament, including representatives of the opposition and the crossbench, to establish a joint parliamentary ethics committee that would comprise equal numbers of members from this house, the Legislative Council, and the Legislative Assembly. Did you catch what I said? We would work with members opposite to deliver this. We would work with the crossbench. This bill does none of that. You see, with Operation Clara the government announced that it was concerned with the issues that had been brought to the fore.

I want to note that Operation Clara, the operation run by the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission, made no adverse findings against any current or past Andrews Labor government ministers or MPs. The commission stated in its *Operation Clara* report that lobbying is a legitimate activity, something I know the opposition and particularly those on the crossbench would agree with. But that does not mean that lobbying can be done in any fashion; it must be done in accordance with the law and the code of conduct.

The bill provides for amendment to the appointment and remuneration guidelines. These amendments aim to:

make a lobbyist ineligible for appointment as a director of a public entity that has any functions that relate to any matter on which the lobbyist has conducted any lobbying activities in the previous 12 months; and

require a person making a declaration of private interest under the Guidelines ...

to disclose whether they are on the lobbyist register and, if they are, give details of the clients and the industries for which the person has conducted lobbying activity in the previous 12 months.

The bill is also providing for amendments of the lobbyist code of conduct. Let us talk through this as well. It will:

prohibit a director of a public entity from conducting any lobbying activities on any matter that relates to the functions of the public entity; and

require a director of a public entity to comply with integrity requirements, including conflict of interest provisions, in relation to any lobbying activities conducted by them prior to their appointment as director.

The bill also aims to provide for amendments to the directors code of conduct. It would:

prohibit a director of a public entity from conducting any lobbying activities on any matter that relates to the functions of the public entity; and

require a director of a public entity to comply with integrity requirements, including conflict of interest provisions, in relation to any lobbying activities conducted by them prior to their appointment as director.

All members of government boards are required to declare any conflicts of interest and not use their board positions for personal advantage. We know that overwhelmingly members of government boards take integrity matters very seriously. They act in the interests of the organisations on whose boards they serve and, by extension, the broader Victorian community.

Finally, the bill provides for proceedings for an offence under the Victorian Planning Authority Act 2017 which may be commenced within three years after it is alleged to have been committed. Our government is pursuing these matters appropriately, methodically and in the appropriate way, consulting with those who must be consulted. We will get legislative reform, and we will do it in the right way. We will not rush it, not for political points.

I would like to associate myself with the remarks of my colleague Ms Ermacora, who last sitting week during the debate on this very amendment defined what a lobbyist is. I think it is important for me to talk about what they are. The government has established a register of lobbyists. This is important as lobbyists have a duty to act ethically at all times. There is a professional code of conduct to ensure all conduct is conducted with the highest degree of transparency, because remember, as my colleague Ms Ermacora said, *Operation Clara* did not dispute the legitimacy of the role lobbyists play in society, but they must perform ethically.

We have to get this right to ensure lobbyists can perform their role to the best of their ability in a way that continues to be in good line with ethical standards at all times. Getting the code of conduct right is essential to this. The code of conduct underpins the register, as it defines the lobbyists, their activities and government representatives and indicates what will be available on the register publicly. It is registered publicly for the purposes of ensuring transparency of who their clients are and what interests they may have when conducting business with others. It is essential to our democracy.

Before I move on, I want to note that I agree with my colleague on the crossbench Dr Ratnam, who welcomed any chance to strengthen integrity measures. I agree. Our government has taken those chances to deliver reforms. We have taken them, and we have strengthened our systems. You see, less than a decade ago our government was sworn in, in 2014, and the Minister for Racing at the time, Minister Martin Pakula, made a visit to Japan, where a key aspect was to learn from integrity practices successfully implemented at the Miho training centre. In 2020 we continued to further investigate how to better create integrity in our racing industry. How? A review of the integrity structures of the Victorian racing industry undertaken by Paul Bittar was handed down. The purpose of the review was to consult with the industry and develop a set of recommendations to enhance collaboration between the codes, provide greater transparency of integrity service functions and consider the separation of integrity functions from commercial operations.

Following extensive consultation – that is the word again, ‘consultation’ – Mr Bittar recommended the establishment of a new racing integrity unit, and of course our government accepted the principles and the integrity recommendations made by Mr Bittar. In 2017 the Minister for Sport at the time John Eren released the *Victorian Integrity in Sport Action Plan*, which addressed the risks to integrity in sport and laid out a clear plan to maintain integrity in the sporting industry. That plan built on the Andrews Labor government’s determination to preserve the integrity of sport at all levels and was evident in the Victorian code of conduct for community sport.

This bill emanates from an opposition that have no grounds upon which they can stand. They have thrown away any semblance of bipartisanship on this and have engaged in cheap political pointscoring. They should not be lecturing anyone on integrity or related matters. Let the house reflect on the record of those opposite. Let us remember the four long years when they had the chance to govern. They did show leadership – on inappropriate behaviour. No-one can forget the four wasted years of the Baillieu and Napthine governments, a period notable for former planning minister Matthew Guy attending \$10,000-a-head dinners with property developers and botching planning decisions – lobster with a mobster. One of the finest pieces of artwork in the Victorian Trades Hall Council reminded us of this each and every day in the lead-up to the 2018 state election. These were decisions that ultimately cost the Victorian taxpayer millions in legal settlements.

This bill introduced by Mr Davis is also notable as he was health minister at that time. Notably, he had other entities pay his personal legal bills – inappropriate behaviour, let alone for a minister. But the list goes on. This sort of behaviour never ends from the opposition: dinner with mobsters, with the former

opposition leader sensationally referring himself to IBAC; the opposition leader's chief of staff having some Liberal donors top up his salary – another matter which resulted in the former opposition leader being referred to IBAC; or Mr Davis again, on his final warning for attending an important community event so plastered that he was touching guests inappropriately. This bloke had to be told to leave by colleagues. Seriously, this legislation is not worth the paper it is written on.

David Davis: On a point of order, Acting President, the member well knows that if he wants to make a substantive attack he needs to do it by a motion.

Harriet Shing: Further to the point of order, Acting President, Mr Davis had only just wandered into the chamber, having missed what I think was a large part of the sentence that he is now saying requires a substantive motion. I was listening very carefully. Mr Berger did not in fact name anybody. Mr Davis might have a name he wants to put onto the record, but as far as I am aware, there was not actually any substantive allegation.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Sonja Terpstra): There is no point of order.

John BERGER: We will not be lectured by those opposite on matters relating to personal propriety. Importantly, the bill is rushed, sloppy and trying – quite badly, I might add – to do the work that the government have said that they will do already. It must be done in the right way; there is no way around it.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:58): I move:

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

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

Business of the house

Notices of motion and orders of the day

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:59): 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

Australian Grand Prix Corporation

Report 2021–22

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:59): Tonight I rise to speak on a topic close to my heart, the Australian Grand Prix, held right in my community of Southern Metropolitan Melbourne at Albert Park. In doing so I highlight the annual report on the Australian Grand Prix Corporation for the year 2021–22. I was on the steering committee for the grand prix way back in the day, so I know much about what this event means to Melbourne: the culture, the tourism, the economic benefit and just a great time had by all. It is no secret just how lucky Melbourne is to hold the Australian Grand Prix, nor is it a secret how lucky Formula One is to have Albert Park as its backdrop for the Australian leg of the world championships. I was lucky enough to enjoy the 2023 grand prix the other week – and what a time it was.

For several decades the Australian Grand Prix has been a cultural fixture, not just for my neck of the woods but for the whole of Melbourne. Last year was a reminder of just how important the grand prix is as a cultural institution after generating some \$92 million directly into the economy and raising Victoria's GDP to the tune of \$171 million. Unfortunately, we could not hold the Australian Grand Prix in 2020 or 2021. However, the wait was worth it. In 2022 and 2023 we smashed records. With almost 420,000 people in attendance in 2022, we showed the world that Melbourne is truly the place

to be. The 2022 Australian Grand Prix put Melbourne tourism back on the map. The annual report noted that the government figures estimate hotel occupancy peaked at 90 per cent, and it mentions the Ernst & Young estimate that the grand prix boosted the state's gross domestic product by \$171 million. It is also estimated that this event supports 734 annual full-time jobs, and the circuit build and dismantle alone created more than 2500 temporary construction jobs and more than 400,000 hours of work. The Australian Grand Prix Corporation also used last year's record-breaking attendance as an opportunity to showcase Victoria's regions. Hundreds of thousands of people were exposed to breathtaking imagery from the Grampians, the Yarra Valley, Phillip Island and the Great Ocean Road.

The 2022 grand prix was not just notable for the records that it broke; the 2022 grand prix also represents a step closer to a greener future for Formula One. In accordance with the Australian Grand Prix Corporation's green prix strategy, 8.1 tonnes of food was donated to community groups, keeping it from being wasted. There was a 27 per cent decrease in single-use water bottles, thanks to the investment of the water bottle refill stations and messaging. The Formula One broadcast area was given a 90 per cent emission reductions makeover, thanks to the change from steel mesh to eMesh, a 100 per cent recyclable material. Additionally, a carbon compensation program was established in 2022, with funds going towards accredited climate action projects. The report notes that these projects were chosen by how their economic and social impacts fare against unsustainable development goals.

The Andrews Labor government is a proud supporter of the grand prix, which is why last year we fought to keep the grand prix on the shores of Albert Park Lake. With the current contract set to terminate in 2025, it is the Andrews Labor government that ensured that Melbourne and Victoria will hold the grand prix for another 12 years. Sydney might try their best to get it, but I do not think they have a shot. Albert Park has proven that is the only true home of the Australian grand prix. The Andrews Labor government is happy to keep it that way, and as an upper house member for the region encompassing the track, I am so happy to keep it that way.

It is safe to say that the annual report of the Australian Grand Prix Corporation in 2021–22 paints the picture of a cultural institution that overcame challenges thrown its way to come back strong, steady and ready for the future. As the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events in the other place, Minister Dimopoulos, has said, no state does major events like Victoria. Our calendar events are unparalleled. They provide a massive boost to the economy of around \$2.5 billion each year. This report shows the Australian grand prix is not just a race, it is jobs for Victoria. It is pride for Melbournians. It is a reminder that this is a cultural epicentre of Australia. I recommend the report to the house.

Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission

Operation Daintree: Special Report

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (17:04): Today I want to draw the chamber's attention to the Operation Daintree report, tabled out of session a week or so ago but tabled formally this Tuesday. It is a very important report. It is a report that lays out a government in chaos, a government that is using public money as an ATM for its own purposes. It feels it can reach in. This applies to the Premier, it applies to the former health ministers and it seems to apply to the advisers who were involved in Operation Daintree, both in the Minister for Health's office and in the Premier's office. It is very clear that what happened here is that some special commitment was made to the Health Workers Union and that commitment was actioned. And we had the outrageous situation of an adviser in the Premier's office through an adviser in the health minister's office directing staff in the then Department of Health and Human Services on how they would proceed with the procurement process of a training tender. This is actually corruption, pure and simple. It is the use of public money for nefarious purposes – for satisfying a range of other objectives which are not the same as the training objectives that are laid out.

I hasten to add here that the Premier's memory again has become a serious problem. We saw with the Jennifer Coate inquiry into hotel quarantine the Premier's memory – not only his memory in that case,

but the memory of a whole series of senior bureaucrats – seemed to be in real trouble. There must have been something in the water over at 1TP – 1 Treasury Place – because it seemed to affect a large number of people, that memory problem. We saw this re-emerge in the Daintree report, with the Premier unable to remember the details of a more than \$1 million contract – a \$1.2 million contract. He had met with the head of the HWU, and then a decision was made and there were instructions given via these ministerial staff. This was not a ministerial decision; the minister stepped back from this, but ministerial staff appear to have made the decision. Whether they were acting on instruction from the Premier, because he had met with the Health Workers Union just a few days before, or whether they were acting alone is hard to discern – but that is part of the point here. The truth is that ministerial accountability is the bedrock of the Westminster system, and in this case you have got ministers who are stepping back and claiming not to know.

The Premier was confronted with evidence by IBAC, and he had to change his testimony under oath. He had to change that testimony. He had to concede that his initial recollection was not quite right, and he had to backtrack on that. Again, this is the sign of corrupt behaviour in the worst possible way. He is trying to cover his tracks. He is a Premier who I think people should be very concerned about. He is using public money in this way. It is almost like the government feels they can reach into the Treasury and use public money like an ATM, just take money out for their own party political purposes. We saw it with red shirts. We saw the corrupt behaviour that occurred with red shirts, where they took at least \$380,000 of public money and used that to campaign to get Labor elected in 2014 – public money stolen.

Public money was stolen, and this is no different in essence. In this case you have got a bogus, phoney contract signed – a contract that the department said was against the interests of the Victorian community. They have taken that money. They have stolen that money, that is what they have done, and then used it for political purposes that are not in the community interest – and that is what IBAC has said.

So you have got a Premier who has got this chronic amnesia. What is going on here? The truth of the matter is he knows but he does not want to say. That is actually the truth of the matter. Everyone knows what is going on here. It is like the kid at home who is caught doing something wrong and then blames Mr Nobody. That is what the Premier is like on this. He is a crook.

Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission

Operation Daintree: Special Report

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (17:09): I also rise to speak about the corruption that is permeating far too widely across our state and speak to the *Operation Daintree: Special Report*.

Evan Mulholland: Tentacles.

Georgie CROZIER: Mr Mulholland calls it tentacles. That is exactly right.

Evan Mulholland: It's in the report.

Georgie CROZIER: It is in the report, and it was said by former health ministers Minister Hennessy and Minister Mikakos. That really blew the whistle on how far the power of the Premier's private office extends into government departments and agencies, and it really is corrupt and crooked behaviour when you look at the history that the Premier has got himself involved with.

If you look at the *Operation Daintree: Special Report*, under the section headed 'The nature of IBAC's findings', it talks about this very issue around corruption and corrupt conduct. The report says:

It includes conduct that involves a breach of public trust, such as the misuse of a public power or position, and can include misuse of information gained by a public officer. The misuse can be for private gain, or advantage of that person or another person.

And what we found with Daintree and the Health Services Union was that the Premier's office was involved with doing deals with the union – dirty little deals with the unions. Goodness knows what else was going on, but it became very evident that there was favouritism to this union by the Premier himself and his office, and this contract was given on the eve of an election. This Premier – frankly, I do not know how he can stand up –

Evan Mulholland: Quid quo pro.

Georgie CROZIER: Quid quo pro – that is right. I do not know how this Premier can stand up there and just keep looking down the barrel of a camera saying there is nothing wrong. Even worse than that, he said this was an educational report. How out of touch is he? Well, the Ombudsman put that to rest, didn't she? I have got a motion on this very issue, but what she said was:

It was not an educational report, it was a damning report about misconduct of ministerial advisors, and ministerial responsibility for those advisors.

...

I think it says a lot about the Premier's views on corruption and integrity.

They are damning words by the Ombudsman, who really, absolutely said it how it is, because you cannot dismiss this. The Premier has got a very nasty habit of dismissing people that are speaking out on these issues. He dismissed former IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich about the letter that he sent the Parliament. He dismissed that and started being quite –

A member: 'Some bloke'.

Georgie CROZIER: Yes, referring to him as 'some bloke'. I mean, how arrogant and how disrespectful to somebody who has held the office of this very important agency that looks to protect our state and the governance of this state. What we do know is that the more IBAC inquiries the Premier is involved in, the more it becomes further evident he has got his fingers involved in a whole lot of dodgy behaviours. I think that is unbecoming for a Premier of this state. I cannot believe what he has been involved in: four IBAC inquiries that we know of, potentially five. People say, 'No, there's another one he's been involved in.' Well, I wish he would come out and put that to bed: 'Yes, I've been involved in a fifth' or 'No, I have not'. But four – what Premier in this country would be still standing and holding their position, having been involved in four anti-corruption commission inquiries? People have gone for bringing a TV into the country and –

Evan Mulholland: A bottle of wine.

Georgie CROZIER: A bottle of wine. Having far lesser issues around corruption, they have done the right thing and actually left their positions, because that is the right thing to do to enable trust from the community and show how government should operate. But not this Premier – no, he just disregards any form of decency at all. And I have to say that I agree with Ms Glass, who said it says a lot about the Premier's views of corruption and integrity, because clearly he does not hold that in high regard. He has no moral decency around what integrity means and why we need to clean up corruption in this state. This is a very, very telling report, and I am sure there will be more to be said about this report.

Adjournment

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (17:14): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Drug and alcohol services

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (17:14): (170) Tonight my adjournment is for the Minister for Mental Health in the other place, Minister Gabrielle Williams, and the action I seek from the minister is to update my community on the progress of the state's first worker-led rehabilitation,

outpatient, outreach and suicide prevention service. I am proud to say that is an Andrews Labor government election commitment and something I am keen to see come to fruition. Our government has committed to investing \$12 million to create this purpose-built facility. How good is that?

We must confront the reality: drug and alcohol addiction ruins lives and in turn ruins livelihoods. That is why this initiative is being called for by a range of employers, public rehabilitation providers and industrial partners. I am proud that my own union, the Transport Workers Union Victoria–Tasmania branch, is a member of the board who will apply to run the centre. Along with that is the stalwart support and custodianship of the state secretary for the Health and Community Services Union Paul Healey, the assistant state secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Victoria branch, Tony Piccolo, and the hardworking Stephanie Thuesen from HACSU. It is clear this initiative has widespread support across many sectors. These sectors include construction, media, arts, emergency services, health, disability and aged care, transport, logistics, communication, community service, farming, retail, finance, hospitality and manufacturing, just to name a few.

In my role as member for Southern Metropolitan and former state secretary of the Transport Workers Union, I have seen and continue to see firsthand the negative impact that risky addiction to drugs, alcohol and gambling has on working people and their families. Oftentimes when employers and trade unions become aware of an issue, it is well progressed and the employer–employee relationship is untenable. Right now there is little to no option for working people to seek life-saving health care to combat these sorts of addictions without adversely affecting their employment, and without private health care it can come at an immense personal and financial cost. Young men and women among these groups are unlikely to seek support. Evidence shows this. So working in partnership with our industrial and business partners, we are aiming to destigmatise this. Our partnership with Odyssey House will go a long way in ensuring that working people and their families are able to access this vital health care that they need and with the support of their employer and trade union when they need it most.

So tonight the action I seek is for the Minister for Mental Health in the other place, Minister Williams, to provide an update on this life-saving initiative, and I hope this update from the minister on the life-saving initiative will demonstrate our commitment to amplifying the current suite of existing public sector services in Victoria.

Essendon and Essendon North road safety

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (17:17): (171) My adjournment today is directed toward the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the action I seek is to urgently draw the minister's attention to two increasingly dangerous intersections in Essendon and Essendon North. These are the intersections of Mount Alexander, Keilor, Bulla and Lincoln roads and of Mount Alexander Road, Leake Street and Glass Street. I ask this because the local member seems more interested in his share portfolio than his actual community.

These two intersections sit just 300 metres apart, and both feature a double-lane roundabout combined with two sets of tram tracks, two slip lanes, six lanes of high-speed traffic and six pedestrian crossings. There is also so much going on at these intersections that it is impossible to keep track as a driver or pedestrian, and it is a recipe for disaster. In February alone there were a pair of harrowing crashes at the intersections. One claimed the life of a 99-year-old local woman after her mobility scooter crashed into a tram, and in a separate instance a 30-year-old woman was hospitalised after her vehicle crashed into a route 59 tram. These incidents are unfortunately not the only ones of their kind. In 2018 an accident claimed the life of a 92-year-old Pascoe Vale South man who was struck at the Mount Alexander Road–Leake Street intersection.

For years residents, traders and councils have been pleading with state authorities to fix this mess. In 2016 Laura Taylor from the Essendon North Traders Association highlighted that at least two accidents were occurring weekly and warned, 'Someone will be killed here one day.' She was proved right, with two fatalities in less than four years. A 2019 report from Moonee Valley council on the two

intersections recommended installing a full traffic signal control at the Mount Alexander Road–Keilor Road–Bulla Road–Lincoln Road intersection. It also highlighted the poor performance of the existing crossing facilities at the Mount Alexander Road–Leake Street–Glass Street intersection, recommending an upgrade to pedestrian-operated signals.

After the February incidents deputy mayor Samantha Byrne took to social media to highlight that 57 reported incidents, numerous council reports and years of advocacy have fallen on deaf ears. I call on Minister Horne to work with Moonee Valley council, VicRoads, the local community and me to find a solution before another life is lost.

Medicinal cannabis

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (17:20): (172) My adjournment matter is directed to the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC, the Honourable Danny Pearson in the other house. My matter concerns Victoria's workplace drug and alcohol testing rules. Pam, as we shall call her, is a highly qualified systems engineer who secured a position with a multinational contractor to VicTrack last December. Her job is an office job. She sits at a desk behind a computer. Pam has a significant history of trauma, which I will not go into now. Suffice to say she has a range of mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, and she was prescribed benzodiazepines to treat her symptoms. She used these highly addictive drugs for many years, which led to severe and harmful dependency. Upon emigrating to Australia she was unable to obtain a prescription and was forced to endure horrific withdrawals. After trying nine different antidepressants she was eventually prescribed medicinal cannabis, CBD THC, for her insomnia and depression. This prescription provided life-saving relief for Pam's symptoms and allowed her to lead a full life as a contributing member of society.

In February Pam did what she believed was the right thing and disclosed to her employer her prescribed CBD THC use. She only uses it at night, which leaves a 12-hour gap before she attends work. Sadly, her employers treated her use of prescribed THC as being in breach of the rail safety law. Pam was immediately put on a work-from-home order, then suspended with pay. Most recently she was given a show cause notice. At this point, believing that she would be fired, Pam resigned from her job. The experience has been very traumatic, and perhaps not surprisingly Pam's depression and anxiety have spiralled. Pam was effectively forced to choose between leaving her job or going back onto the dangerous medications that caused her so much harm. No-one should have to make that choice. The VicTrack health and safety policy commits to providing safe and healthy working conditions for all employees, contractors and visitors for the prevention of work-related injury and ill health. If an employee is taking prescription medication in order to prevent their own ill health, surely VicTrack breached its own policy in pressuring an employee to resign for disclosing their prescription medication.

This is a systemic issue. Current workplace drug and alcohol testing rules are discriminatory. They make it impossible for a person to take legally prescribed medicinal cannabis and still hold down a job. They need to be overhauled as a matter of urgency. No-one should lose their job as a result of taking a prescribed medication. The action I seek is that the minister urgently address this issue, end the discrimination against medical cannabis patients in the workplace and stop the victimisation of great workers like Pam.

Social housing

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (17:23): (173) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers, Minister Blandthorn, and it is in relation to the allocation of disability housing. In 2021 the then Minister for Housing Richard Wynne announced a number of projects, 89 projects in fact, that he said would deliver over 2352 new social homes for Victorians who need them most and went on to say that the homes would be available to those most in need, including people living with mental illness or disability, people escaping family violence, Victoria's First Peoples and individuals experiencing homelessness. I have been speaking with my

colleague in the other place Mr Bull, who raised this issue with me. We were talking about it, and I wanted to raise it with the minister to get an understanding about how many of these homes that have been part of the government's Big Housing Build have actually been constructed and been provided to those with a disability, because as I understand it, since 2018 the number of public housing residents is just 74 who have been provided for in this vulnerable cohort. So there are a number of questions in this around those people with a disability that have had homes allocated, and I hope the minister will correct me if I am wrong, but if it is more than 74, as I understand, that would be good to get that clarification. But the real action I am seeking from the minister is: with the Big Housing Build, when it is complete, how many homes will actually be allocated to those with a disability?

Murray Valley Highway–Labuan Road, Yarroweyah

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (17:25): (174) Today I would like to utilise my adjournment matter to add additional strength to Ms Lovell's statement regarding the requirements for a remodelling of the Labuan Road and Murray Valley Highway intersection near Strathmerton. As such, it is directed to the minister representing the Minister for Roads and Road Safety.

With its long history of fatal accidents, this intersection is notoriously dangerous. Within the last 18 months two police officers have been seriously injured and one other driver has been killed. Most recently, on 20 April, a three-vehicle accident killed five people and was deemed by local emergency services the worst accident in the region for 12 years. A combination of speed and the blind crossing that the intersection creates has been reported as the cause of this specific accident. The driver of the allegedly speeding vehicle is reported to have been pulled over by police for speeding just minutes before this horror unfolded. After speaking to some of my constituents and local emergency services who traverse the intersection daily, capitalising on local knowledge, an unofficial general consensus has begun to formulate on best practice for the reparation of the hazardous intersection. With the removal of the hump on Labuan Road and its replacement with rumble strips and permanent warning lights, a significant reduction in risk to human life would ensue. As a matter of urgency, will the minister commit to ensuring these life-saving infrastructure measures are implemented within the next six months?

Neighbourhood houses

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:27): (175) My adjournment debate this evening is for the Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers and Minister for Child Protection and Family Services, and it relates to ongoing funding for the operation of neighbourhood houses throughout Victoria. The action I seek is for the government in this upcoming budget to fully fund all of the Eastern Victoria Region neighbourhood houses, which provide such an invaluable support to community members right across the electorate, and indeed, I request, those in the whole of the state.

There are over 400 neighbourhood houses in Victoria, and on average they service over 200,000 visits by people per week. They are the most wonderful places – safe, supportive environments for Victorians to come to and engage in a variety of ways, including through programs. It is true that they are individualised; no one neighbourhood house has an identical set of programs and services to the next. I have had the pleasure of catching up with many of my neighbourhood houses across Gippsland in particular. I will share with you some of the most amazing of those neighbourhood houses: Bass Valley, Churchill, Corinella, Gormandale Community House, Inverloch, Leongatha, Loch Sport, Manna Gum in Foster, Marley Street in Sale, Milpara in Korumburra, Moe, Morwell Neighbourhood House – and I will talk a little bit more about Morwell – Neerim district neighbourhood and community house, Phillip Island, Rosedale, Traralgon, Venus Bay, Warragul, Wonthaggi, Wurruk and the Yarram one. I was there a little while ago, and they were busy making food with the school students of the Yarram high school to teach and engage them in food production but also provide food nourishment for people with food insecurity. It is a fantastic place.

Another example is when Martin Cameron and I visited the Morwell Neighbourhood House. They really individualise their service to their community in the most wonderful way. One of the things that

Tracie Lund shared with us, and I just love the sense of humour that goes along with this, is that they have a lawn-mowing service where various businesses and organisations donate lawnmowers so that people can borrow them – the fuel is paid for – and have pride in their region if they cannot afford their own lawnmower, which is often the case. The brand new one is called Moe Yallourn. If you know that region, you will know that they are two amazing towns in my electorate. The government needs to fully fund and continue the great services of our neighbourhood houses.

E-cigarettes

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (17:30): (176) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, and the action I seek is an update on our plans to tackle the harm to our community arising from vaping and e-cigarettes and how the state is working with the Commonwealth to address the issue. In my inaugural speech to this Parliament in February I spoke of the dangers of e-cigarettes and the threat posed by vaping, especially to children and young people. Australia has been a global leader in tobacco control since the passage of the Tobacco Act 1987 in Victoria in the late 1980s. We have led the way in reducing harm caused by cigarettes and other tobacco products. Simply, these policies have worked. Five years ago rates of young people starting smoking cigarettes were negligible. Today youth vaping rates are exploding, as is the related harm. So much has changed so fast.

Vaping use is more common among people aged 18 to 24 than any other age group. Children are calling the Quit line addicted to nicotine. In the past 12 months Victoria's poisons hotline has taken 50 calls about children under four ingesting vapes. Talk with any secondary school teacher and they will tell you that vaping is one of the most important issues, if not the most important issue, that they are facing. Kids are vaping in class. The regulatory model that allows this to happen is broken and must be fixed. We know that inhaling substances into our lungs is dangerous. Whether it is nicotine, asbestos or silica dust, it kills. We do not have the luxury of time to wait and see a new generation of lung disease to know that we should have acted. E-cigarettes can contain up to 200 dangerous chemicals, including those found in weedkiller, rat poison, bleach, paint stripper and formaldehyde, which is used in morgues. These are inhaled deep into the lungs. It is not safe or harmless.

Vaping is a Trojan horse to allow a new generation to get addicted to nicotine. We know that many vaping advocates have been funded by big tobacco, and when you follow the money, you see a direct line back to those multinationals who have for generations profited from addiction and those who have strenuously fought against every single piece of tobacco control legislation and regulation. This time is no different. It is clear that these dangerous products are being deliberately targeted at our young people – flavours like bubblegum and popcorn, devices shaped like highlighters and USB drives, many colourful, some with lights. It is a far cry from what our cigarette packets look like these days, and it is doing our kids damage. In addition to the damage caused to young people's physical health, it can impact their mental health. Mena, a mother of a 14-year-old boy who lives in Bayside, told VicHealth researchers that:

The impact of vaping on my son and his friend's mental health has been very obvious and quite extreme. His symptoms included agitation, anxiety, vomiting and a loss of appetite.

Advocates say that e-cigarettes can be used as a smoking cessation aid. If they do play or can play a therapeutic role in smoking cessation, then e-cigarettes should be within a regulated therapeutic framework that is medically led. I am pleased the Commonwealth and states have been working together and with the announcements the federal health minister made yesterday – a suite of measures aimed at stamping out vaping and the growing black market. There will also be a public health campaign. This is very welcome news.

Drug harm reduction

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:33): (177) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Mental Health, and the action I seek is that more harm reduction information and

alcohol and drug youth workers be made available to young people specifically in relation to inhalants. When I was in high school just over 10 years ago we were never told about the risks of chroming, nangs and other inhalants. I know that these days schools are required to provide alcohol and other drug education as part of the curriculum, but there is absolutely more to be done. High school is the perfect environment to provide young people with information and support about inhalants and other substances to prevent harm. We want to offer young people information to guide them before they may be exposed to peer pressure, pushing them to use these substances, pushing them to take significant risk. This type of early intervention is critical and could help further tragedies such as that of Esra Haynes. Esra was just 13 years old when she suffered a cardiac arrest and subsequently died after chroming. It is a devastating reminder to us all that this practice is life-threatening.

Chroming, nanging, spraying – call it what you will – involves inhalation of paint, nitrates, glue or other substances. They are often regular household products that are easy to find and purchase. Inhaling them can cause hallucinations, blackouts, choking or asphyxiation, seizures, organ damage and death. Chroming is particularly common in young people in early high school. A study of Australian high school students in 2017 found that almost 20 per cent of students aged between 12 and 17 years had used inhalants at least once, and we know that some of these students are using much more regularly. We need to make sure that young people have access to evidence-based harm minimisation education that is tailored to their developmental and age needs. As I have already said, early intervention is key. That is why today I am calling on the government to provide easy-to-access harm reduction information in schools and more alcohol and other drug youth workers to focus on early intervention programs, specifically in relation to inhalants. We cannot bury our heads in the sand and pretend that young people are not going to come up against peer pressure or take risks. The result of young people not being educated of these risks is that sometimes they will become really unwell or even lose their life. But we can offer young people the information they need to make things safer. Introducing young people to youth workers in schools and other relevant environments helps reduce the stigma of seeking support and it can build relationships that save lives.

Esra was in year 8 at school. She attended Lilydale High School. She loved footy and had her whole life in front of her. I cannot imagine the devastation that her family, friends and community are feeling after losing her. I send my heartfelt condolences to Esra's family. I call on the minister to provide resources, youth workers, information – whatever is needed – to reduce the harm caused by inhalants and to work towards preventing further tragic deaths such as that of Esra.

Budget 2023–24

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (17:37): (178) My adjournment matter relates to the coming state budget. From all reports, we are in for a bumpy ride. Under this government our debt has soared to record levels and Victoria is now the highest taxed state in the nation. At a time when households are under pressure with rising living costs, my call to action is to the Treasurer to put a freeze on state taxes and levies. When Labor came to office in 2014 our state debt was \$22 billion. Now it is over \$100 billion and forecast to reach \$165 billion in three years. Victoria's debt is now more than Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania combined. This government has made some big promises. In the last eight years spending on major projects has increased from \$16 billion to \$106 billion. With over \$30 billion of waste and project cost blowouts, the Big Build has become a big mess. Labor has run up the state's credit card. As interest rates rise, so do our repayments. We are now paying over \$10 million a day in interest, and it is getting worse. This year the interest bill is over \$3.8 billion. By 2026 it is expected to be over \$7 billion. We have had 11 interest rate hikes in the past year, and the latest rate rise will add millions more to the state debt. Data from the ABS shows that Victoria is now the highest taxing state per capita in Australia. Victoria's tax take is set to double since this government was elected nine years ago. In 2014, when the coalition held office, total state taxes were just over \$18 billion. By 2026 state taxes are forecast to be \$35.6 billion.

Public service numbers have soared. Department heads are earning salaries of up to \$750,000. A report by the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry found that Victoria is now one of the hardest

places in Australia to do business. The CommSec *State of the States* report shows that we are now trailing behind other states on economic performance. Victoria is now a very fragile state with an unhealthy dependence – an addiction – to property-related taxes. They made up 60 per cent of our total state revenue in 2021, and now our housing and construction industry is under pressure. We pay our taxes because we expect the government to invest in health, in education, in building better roads and providing emergency services. We need more teachers, nurses and police. We need less debt and government waste and more support for industry and small business. Victorians are tired of paying more and getting less. At a time when families, businesses and households are experiencing a dramatic increase in the cost of living, our state cannot afford more or increased taxes.

Julian Assange

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:40): (179) My adjournment matter is for the attention of the Premier and is related to the ongoing imprisonment of Julian Assange in light of today being World Press Freedom Day. World Press Freedom Day is celebrated every 3 May. This year's theme is 'Shaping a future of rights: freedom of expression as a driver for all other human rights', signifying the importance of freedom of expression to enjoy and protect all other human rights. World Press Freedom Day is observed to raise awareness of the importance of freedom of the press and remind governments of their duty to respect and uphold the right to freedom of expression enshrined under article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Over the past 30 years World Press Freedom Day celebrations have given prominence to the right of free expression and emphasising various aspects of press freedom's importance. It seems odd to celebrate world press freedom when there is clearly no freedom of press or indeed freedom of expression as indicated in this year's theme. We know, at least here in Victoria, freedom of expression is increasingly under attack from media and people in this room demonising and silencing anyone with alternative views to their own.

In June 2019 the Australian Federal Police raided the home of journalist Annika Smethurst and the Sydney headquarters of the ABC. These raids exposed the fragility of freedom of the press in Australia. Australia is different to many other Western democracies, where press freedom is neither recognised nor protected under Australian law. World Press Freedom Day stresses to all Australian media workers and policymakers to make a stand for a free press and quality in ethical journalism. Our own laws fail in both press freedom and whistleblower protection. We must do more to fix these laws and show real transparency on these issues. It is true that efforts have been made to protect whistleblowers, including in this place; however, we still need to do more.

Julian Assange, a Melbourne man, has suffered greatly in detention. As a journalist with WikiLeaks he exposed terrible corruption and war crimes. In June 2019 I was the first member of this Parliament to call for the pardoning of Julian Assange, and it saddens me that four years later he is still not a free man. His mental and physical health continue to deteriorate due to his imprisonment. I request that the Premier of Victoria stand up for a Victorian when he next meets with his federal counterparts and urge them to continue diplomatic efforts to ensure the release of Julian Assange.

Electricity infrastructure

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (17:42): (180) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Energy and Resources and concerns the Australian Energy Market Operator's, AEMO, report on the Victoria to New South Wales Interconnector West (VNI West) route options. I have always argued that the basic poles and wires regulatory investment test for transmission methodology used in earlier assessments was woefully inadequate. Successive energy ministers have claimed that the environmental and social cost of proposals could always be considered later in the environment effects statement process. This was and is ridiculous. It is completely backwards. It means thought is given to the potentially catastrophic impact only after an economic decision has been made to proceed with the project. This matters particularly given the inherent, if difficult to avoid, unfairness at the heart of the argument. The impact of transmission is felt, sometimes catastrophically, in rural communities,

yet the benefits are shared across the state and the country, and the idea that compensation purely of landowners on the route itself is adequate is offensive. No money can ever provide truly sufficient redress, but at an absolute minimum it should be provided to entire affected communities.

I cautiously welcome AEMO's use in the VNI West document of multicriteria analysis (MCA), which considers each option against broader criteria, including land use, social and cultural environmental impacts, and not just the technical and cost-benefit considerations. It is a small step in the right direction and has caused AEMO to recommend an alignment which connects to the Western Renewables Link at Bulgana, thus removing the need for the new Western Renewables Link terminal station at North Ballarat. This development, however, raises two vital points, which the minister would be shamefully negligent to ignore. Firstly, if the North Ballarat link is no longer required, the entire route must be reassessed. Why should the Western Renewables Link need to route north of Ballarat to Sydenham through prime agricultural land and the residential growth corridor of the Moorabool and Melton shires? This is a vast project with a life span of decades, a cost of billions and a vast environmental and social impact, and this is just the latest of a number of material changes, any single one of which should have required recalculation from the start. Secondly, it is illogically and patently unfair to treat neighbouring communities differently, and the minister's own order of 20 February earlier this year means it is eminently possible for her to cause the review to happen.

So the action I seek, Minister, is application of an MCA review to the Western Renewables Link in conjunction with a thorough reassessment of the statewide possibilities for renewables generation, including the existing infrastructure linked to the Gippsland renewable zone.

Rosehill Secondary College

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (17:45): (181) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Education. The action I seek is for urgent funding to be provided from the Minor Capital Works Fund to rectify a major drainage problem affecting the Rosehill Secondary College student play area. In April I had the pleasure of conducting a school visit at Rosehill Secondary College. The school site is a large, attractive site with a view over the Maribyrnong River valley, and the school is part of the Moonee Valley network of schools in the south-western metropolitan region. The school is a single campus, with years 7 to 12, and has 1200 students evenly split between girls and boys. During my visit I inspected the school's areas and discussed with the principal how when it comes to the outdoor play areas the school has a very challenging matter after heavy rains and wet weather. The site is built on clay soil, and the recreation area in the middle of the school between the building structures becomes very waterlogged. With poor drainage in the area it is deemed hazardous to walk upon and too dangerous for any sort of play activity, and it is occasionally zoned off. This is evidence that funding is required from the Minor Capital Works Fund to rectify the major drainage problem of the recreation area, the suggested solution being for better drainage to be implemented as soon as possible. The drainage in the area needs to be rectified for groundwater and surface water. I ask the minister to consider this matter as urgent and have it dealt with as soon as possible.

Northern Victoria Region water infrastructure

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:47): (182) My adjournment matter is directed to the Minister for Water and concerns the management of levee banks in my electorate of Northern Victoria Region. The action that I seek is for the minister to provide definitive information as to which authority is responsible for the management and maintenance of every community levee bank in Northern Victoria and detail what plan she has to ensure these levee banks are repaired and upgraded to ensure they are at a standard to cope with future flood events of the magnitude of the October 2022 floods.

My electorate of Northern Victoria Region has been subject to many severe floods over the course of history, including the one-in-100-year flood event that occurred in October 2022. With the Murray River being the northern border of the electorate and with numerous other systems running through it, flood mitigation is vital in the lives of many of my constituents. Victoria's levee bank system is a major flood mitigation strategy that protects many communities – including both private property and,

importantly for the state government, state-owned infrastructure assets such as roads, hospitals, schools, public housing and many other state-owned assets – from the devastating impact of floods. While these vital levee banks protect many from the ravages of floods, questions always arise after an event as to which authority is responsible for the maintenance of the levee banks in Victoria.

I raised this very issue in this place after the 2016 floods on the Murray River and again on 9 December 2020 after receiving a briefing from the emergency management commissioner regarding emergency management concerns into the future. The briefing predicted that flooding rather than bushfires was expected to be our major natural disaster threat, particularly in Northern Victoria. Less than two years later many parts of Northern Victoria Region suffered one of the worst floods in living memory, and once again the condition of our levee banks came under scrutiny. Residents in Bunbartha and Kaarimba whose properties were not even in the flood zone flooded due to the Goulburn-Murray Water-owned levee banks at Loch Garry blowing out.

Recently I was contacted by a constituent who reported that during the floods he discovered four separate leaks in a levee bank close to his property. A levee bank designed to protect both private and state-owned infrastructure such as roads being the subject of four separate leaks during a flood event is completely unacceptable. It is not acceptable to place all of the onus on landholders for levee bank restoration, as the state is also a major beneficiary of the levee banks. The minister has an obligation to ensure that levee banks are consistently maintained, and the minister must detail who is responsible for each levee bank in Victoria and her plan to ensure that each is maintained to an acceptable standard.

Wonthaggi Hospital

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:50): (183) My adjournment matter is for the Treasurer, and the action that I seek is that he blocks any plans by the Labor government to cut the \$290 million upgrade promised to the Wonthaggi Hospital. The *Guardian* reported on 17 April that due to the Labor government's mismanagement of the state budget they are planning to make cuts in health and in infrastructure in the upcoming budget. Our health system is in crisis. Elective surgery waitlists have ballooned to over 80,000, it is nearly impossible to get a GP appointment in country Victoria and serious illnesses go undiagnosed and untreated, yet the Labor government thinks health and infrastructure are good places to make cuts.

Last election the Labor Party promised the people of Bass a \$290 million redevelopment of the Wonthaggi Hospital, and now my constituents are very concerned that these critical upgrades promised by Daniel Andrews are going to be cut or swept under the carpet. Instead of cutting funding to health and infrastructure, why doesn't the Treasurer consider making cuts to some of these areas? Maybe the \$150 million the government spent on advertising in 2022, the \$177 million that in the last year alone the government has spent on consultants or maybe the \$760,000 the government spends for diversity officers for Ambulance Victoria rather than giving them the resources that they need. I urge the Treasurer to block any plans to break Labor's promise to the people of Wonthaggi and to guarantee that we will get our \$290 million redevelopment in this year's budget.

Electricity infrastructure

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (17:52): (184) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Energy and Resources and concerns the proposed transmission line project between Bulgana and the New South Wales border known as option 5 of the Victoria to New South Wales Interconnector West (VNI). The action that I seek is for the project to be cancelled and to go back to the drawing board and for a thorough review to be conducted of the state's energy and transmission needs.

I recently attended a rally in St Arnaud which hundreds of concerned locals attended, all fearful of the impacts that this project is going to have. Massive tractors went down the main street, and placards were everywhere. Locals have a number of concerns with the proposed option 5, including the completely shoddy consultation process, the potential impact on land valuations, the bullish nature in which compulsory acquisition has been conducted in this state, the impact on the ability of farmers to

use prime agricultural land and the supposed need for transition lines when other options have not been fully explored. As a local MP, I was very happy to attend, and I acknowledge that the member for Mildura Jade Benham and the federal member for Mallee Anne Webster also attended. Let me make this very clear: nobody from AEMO, the Australian Energy Market Operator, attended. Nobody from the state government attended – no local MP, no minister, no parliamentary secretary and not even a token public servant, nothing. It is an absolute disgrace. They were all invited by organisers. The government does not even have the decency to turn up and listen to local concerns. What a complete kick in the guts to locals, a complete slap in the face.

You know, this government love to preach equality, but clearly they do not give equal treatment to country people. It appears as though the government just want to take the line of least resistance and bulldoze their way – quite literally – through country communities, country people and country concerns. Well, it is about time the government started listening. Even eminent experts have labelled this project ‘a monumental mistake’. The Victorian Farmers Federation are opposed to the project and have expressed grave concerns – need I mention the hundreds of locals. I call on the energy minister to come up with a long-term energy and transmission plan for the state, not just for the next election. I also call on the government to go back to the drawing board with VNI option 5. Apart from anything else, it is just not fair.

Transport infrastructure projects

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (17:55): (185) My matter for the adjournment tonight is for the attention of the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure, although it is a matter of great interest, I think, to the Treasurer, the Assistant Treasurer and likely the Minister for Industrial Relations as well. It has come to public attention through a series of articles in the *Australian Financial Review* that the CFMEU has been working through a number of projects to act with favouritism towards one group of Indigenous employees and firms as opposed to another group of Indigenous employees and firms.

There now appear to be as many as nine projects on the government’s major projects list. The Major Transport Infrastructure Authority has responsibility for a number of these projects, including the metropolitan roads packages and Mickleham Road and the extensions that are proposed there, and it is clear that the CFMEU is exercising its powers through the contractual arrangements and pressuring the contractors, likely with the connivance and support of the government, to choose between one group of Indigenous employees and another. This is a terrible approach that has been adopted here.

Obviously, this is a matter that has IBAC interest, and IBAC may well investigate this in detail. We certainly think they should and have been in communication with IBAC to ensure that the corruption aspects of this are dealt with appropriately. But there is also a cost element here. The CFMEU is inserting one group over another, but that is not necessarily the group that has been successful in terms of the best procurement and the best tender process. The action I am seeking from the minister is that she order an urgent investigation to make sure that these nine projects, and potentially more, are delivering the value for money that is required.

I saw the Premier’s strange and spooky comments on this today. He does not seem to be worried about value for money, and he does not seem to be worried about the fairness of different decisions being made about which Indigenous group is involved in a project and which is not. It is clear that the government is beholden to the CFMEU. It is responding to their pressure. I note that there has been work done by the auditor looking at the Mickleham Road business case and pointing to a number of deficiencies in that, and that is the one that came to public attention as the first of these sites where favouritism is being shown. But I say the government must act to return value for money and ensure that Indigenous groups are not treated less favourably than they should be because they do not have a link with the CFMEU.

Responses

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (17:58): There were 16 matters raised today: Mr Berger to the Minister for Mental Health; Mr Mulholland for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety; Mr Ettershank to the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC; Ms Crozier to the Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers; Ms Tyrrell to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety; Ms Bath to the Minister for Housing; Mr Batchelor to the Minister for Health; Mr Puglielli to the Minister for Mental Health; Ms Broad to the Treasurer; Mr Limbrick to the Premier; Mrs McArthur to the Minister for Energy and Resources; Mr Luu to the Minister for Education; Ms Lovell to the Minister for Water; Dr Heath to the Treasurer; Mr McCracken to the Minister for Energy and Resources; and Mr Davis to the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure, but he also emphasised that a range of ministers could possibly respond to his matter. In relation to that I will make sure that all those relevant matters are referred to the appropriate ministers for response.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 5:59 pm.

*Joint sitting of Parliament***Victorian Health Promotion Foundation
Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation**

Members of both houses met in Assembly chamber at 6:31 pm.

The CHAIR (Maree Edwards): We will begin proceedings with the election of members to the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. I advise members that the rules set out in joint standing orders 19 to 22 and 24 now apply. I invite proposals from members with regard to three members to be elected to the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

Daniel ANDREWS (Mulgrave – Premier): I propose:

That Bridget Vallence, Kathleen Matthews-Ward and Tim Read be elected to the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

They are willing to accept the nomination.

The CHAIR: Who seconds the proposal?

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition): I second the proposal.

The CHAIR: Are there any further proposals? As there are only three members proposed, I declare that Bridget Vallence, Kathleen Matthews-Ward and Tim Read are elected to the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

We will now proceed to the election of members to the board of the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation. I advise members that the rules set out in joint standing orders 19 to 22 and 25 now apply. I invite proposals from members with regard to three members to be elected to the board of the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation.

Daniel ANDREWS (Mulgrave – Premier): I propose:

That Kim O’Keeffe, Luba Grigorovitch and Michael O’Brien be elected to the board of the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation.

They too are willing to accept the nomination.

The CHAIR: Who seconds the proposal?

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition): I second the proposal.

The CHAIR: Are there any further proposals? As there are only three members proposed, I declare that Kim O’Keeffe, Luba Grigorovitch and Michael O’Brien are elected to the board of the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation.

I now declare the joint sitting closed.

Proceedings terminated 6:34 pm.