

PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

**PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT

FIRST SESSION

WEDNESDAY, 9 FEBRUARY 2022

hansard.parliament.vic.gov.au

By authority of the Victorian Government Printer

The Governor

The Honourable LINDA DESSAU, AC

The Lieutenant-Governor

The Honourable KEN LAY, AO, APM

The ministry

Premier.	The Hon. DM Andrews, MP
Deputy Premier, Minister for Education and Minister for Mental Health	The Hon. JA Merlino, MP
Attorney-General and Minister for Emergency Services	The Hon. J Symes, MLC
Minister for Transport Infrastructure and Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop	The Hon. JM Allan, MP
Minister for Training and Skills and Minister for Higher Education	The Hon. GA Tierney, MLC
Treasurer, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Industrial Relations.	The Hon. TH Pallas, MP
Minister for Child Protection and Family Services and Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers	The Hon. AR Carbines, MP
Minister for Public Transport and Minister for Roads and Road Safety .	The Hon. BA Carroll, MP
Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change and Minister for Solar Homes	The Hon. L D’Ambrosio, MP
Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services and Minister for Equality	The Hon. MP Foley, MP
Minister for Ports and Freight, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Gaming and Liquor Regulation and Minister for Fishing and Boating	The Hon. MM Horne, MP
Minister for Crime Prevention, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice and Minister for Victim Support	The Hon. NM Hutchins, MP
Minister for Local Government, Minister for Suburban Development and Minister for Veterans	The Hon. SL Leane, MLC
Minister for Water and Minister for Police.	The Hon. LM Neville, MP
Minister for Industry Support and Recovery, Minister for Trade, Minister for Business Precincts, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events and Minister for Racing	The Hon. MP Pakula, MP
Assistant Treasurer, Minister for Regulatory Reform, Minister for Government Services and Minister for Creative Industries	The Hon. DJ Pearson, MP
Minister for Employment, Minister for Innovation, Medical Research and the Digital Economy, Minister for Small Business and Minister for Resources.	The Hon. JL Pulford, MLC
Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Community Sport and Minister for Youth	The Hon. RL Spence, MP
Minister for Workplace Safety and Minister for Early Childhood	The Hon. I Stitt, MLC
Minister for Agriculture and Minister for Regional Development	The Hon. M Thomas, MP
Minister for Prevention of Family Violence, Minister for Women and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs.	The Hon. G Williams, MP
Minister for Planning and Minister for Housing	The Hon. RW Wynne, MP
Cabinet Secretary	Ms S Kilkenny, MP

Legislative Council committees

Economy and Infrastructure Standing Committee

Mr Barton, Mr Erdogan, Mr Finn, Mr Gepp, Mrs McArthur, Mr Quilty and Mr Tarlamis.

Participating members: Dr Bach, Ms Bath, Dr Cumming, Mr Davis, Mr Limbrick, Ms Lovell, Mr Meddick, Mr Ondarchie, Mr Rich-Phillips, Ms Shing, Ms Vaghela and Ms Watt.

Environment and Planning Standing Committee

Dr Bach, Ms Bath, Dr Cumming, Mr Grimley, Mr Hayes, Mr Meddick, Mr Melhem, Dr Ratnam, Ms Taylor and Ms Terpstra.

Participating members: Ms Burnett-Wake, Ms Crozier, Mr Davis, Dr Kieu, Mrs McArthur, Mr Quilty and Mr Rich-Phillips.

Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee

Ms Burnett-Wake, Ms Garrett, Dr Kieu, Ms Maxwell, Mr Ondarchie, Ms Patten, Dr Ratnam and Ms Vaghela.

Participating members: Dr Bach, Mr Barton, Ms Bath, Ms Crozier, Dr Cumming, Mr Erdogan, Mr Grimley, Mr Limbrick, Ms Lovell, Mr Quilty, Ms Shing, Mr Tarlamis and Ms Watt.

Privileges Committee

Mr Atkinson, Mr Bourman, Mr Davis, Mr Grimley, Mr Leane, Mr Rich-Phillips, Ms Shing, Ms Symes and Ms Tierney.

Procedure Committee

The President, the Deputy President, Ms Crozier, Mr Davis, Mr Grimley, Dr Kieu, Ms Patten, Ms Pulford and Ms Symes.

Joint committees

Dispute Resolution Committee

Council: Mr Bourman, Ms Crozier, Mr Davis, Ms Symes and Ms Tierney.

Assembly: Ms Allan, Ms Hennessy, Mr Merlino, Mr Pakula, Mr R Smith, Mr Walsh and Mr Wells.

Electoral Matters Committee

Council: Mr Erdogan, Mrs McArthur, Mr Meddick, Mr Melhem, Ms Lovell, Mr Quilty and Mr Tarlamis.

Assembly: Ms Hall, Dr Read and Mr Rowswell.

House Committee

Council: The President (*ex officio*), Mr Bourman, Mr Davis, Mr Leane, Ms Lovell and Ms Stitt.

Assembly: The Speaker (*ex officio*), Mr T Bull, Ms Crugnale, Ms Edwards, Mr Fregon, Ms Sandell and Ms Staley.

Integrity and Oversight Committee

Council: Mr Grimley and Ms Shing.

Assembly: Mr Halse, Ms Hennessy, Mr Rowswell, Mr Taylor and Mr Wells.

Pandemic Declaration Accountability and Oversight Committee

Council: Mr Bourman, Ms Crozier, Mr Erdogan and Ms Shing.

Assembly: Mr J Bull, Ms Kealy, Mr Sheed, Ms Ward and Mr Wells.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Council: Mr Limbrick, Mrs McArthur and Ms Taylor.

Assembly: Ms Blandthorn, Mr Hibbins, Mr Maas, Mr Newbury, Mr D O'Brien, Ms Richards and Mr Richardson.

Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee

Council: Ms Patten, Ms Terpstra and Ms Watt.

Assembly: Mr Burgess, Ms Connolly, Mr Morris and Ms Theophanous.

Heads of parliamentary departments

Assembly: Clerk of the Legislative Assembly: Ms B Noonan

Council: Clerk of the Parliaments and Clerk of the Legislative Council: Mr A Young

Parliamentary Services: Secretary: Mr P Lochert

MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT—FIRST SESSION

President

The Hon. N ELASMAR (from 18 June 2020)

The Hon. SL LEANE (to 18 June 2020)

Deputy President

The Hon. WA LOVELL

Acting Presidents

Mr Bourman, Mr Gepp, Mr Melhem and Ms Patten

Leader of the Government

The Hon. J SYMES

Deputy Leader of the Government

The Hon. GA TIERNEY

Leader of the Opposition

The Hon. DM DAVIS

Deputy Leader of the Opposition

Ms G CROZIER

Member	Region	Party	Member	Region	Party
Atkinson, Mr Bruce Norman	Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Maxwell, Ms Tania Maree	Northern Victoria	DHJP
Bach, Dr Matthew ¹	Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Meddick, Mr Andy	Western Victoria	AJP
Barton, Mr Rodney Brian	Eastern Metropolitan	TMP	Melhem, Mr Cesar	Western Metropolitan	ALP
Bath, Ms Melina Gaye	Eastern Victoria	Nats	Mikakos, Ms Jenny ⁶	Northern Metropolitan	ALP
Bourman, Mr Jeffrey	Eastern Victoria	SFFP	O'Donohue, Mr Edward John ⁷	Eastern Victoria	LP
Burnett-Wake, Ms Cathrine ²	Eastern Victoria	LP	Ondarchie, Mr Craig Philip	Northern Metropolitan	LP
Crozier, Ms Georgina Mary	Southern Metropolitan	LP	Patten, Ms Fiona Heather	Northern Metropolitan	FPRP
Cumming, Dr Catherine Rebecca	Western Metropolitan	Ind	Pulford, Ms Jaala Lee	Western Victoria	ALP
Dalidakis, Mr Philip ³	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	Quilty, Mr Timothy	Northern Victoria	LDP
Davis, Mr David McLean	Southern Metropolitan	LP	Ratnam, Dr Samantha Shantini	Northern Metropolitan	Greens
Elasmar, Mr Nazih	Northern Metropolitan	ALP	Rich-Phillips, Mr Gordon Kenneth	South Eastern Metropolitan	LP
Erdogan, Mr Enver ⁴	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	Shing, Ms Harriet	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Finn, Mr Bernard Thomas Christopher	Western Metropolitan	LP	Somyurek, Mr Adem ⁸	South Eastern Metropolitan	Ind
Garrett, Ms Jane Furneaux	Eastern Victoria	ALP	Stitt, Ms Ingrid	Western Metropolitan	ALP
Gepp, Mr Mark	Northern Victoria	ALP	Symes, Ms Jaclyn	Northern Victoria	ALP
Grimley, Mr Stuart James	Western Victoria	DHJP	Tarlamis, Mr Lee ⁹	South Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Hayes, Mr Clifford	Southern Metropolitan	SAP	Taylor, Ms Nina	Southern Metropolitan	ALP
Jennings, Mr Gavin Wayne ⁵	South Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Terpstra, Ms Sonja	Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Kieu, Dr Tien Dung	South Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Tierney, Ms Gayle Anne	Western Victoria	ALP
Leane, Mr Shaun Leo	Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Vaghela, Ms Kaushaliya Virjibhai	Western Metropolitan	ALP
Limbrick, Mr David	South Eastern Metropolitan	LDP	Watt, Ms Sheena ¹⁰	Northern Metropolitan	ALP
Lovell, Ms Wendy Ann	Northern Victoria	LP	Wooldridge, Ms Mary Louise Newling ¹¹	Eastern Metropolitan	LP
McArthur, Mrs Beverley	Western Victoria	LP			

¹ Appointed 5 March 2020

² Appointed 2 December 2021

³ Resigned 17 June 2019

⁴ Appointed 15 August 2019

⁵ Resigned 23 March 2020

⁶ Resigned 26 September 2020

⁷ Resigned 1 December 2021

⁸ ALP until 15 June 2020

⁹ Appointed 23 April 2020

¹⁰ Appointed 13 October 2020

¹¹ Resigned 28 February 2020

Party abbreviations

AJP—Animal Justice Party; ALP—Labor Party; DHJP—Derryn Hinch's Justice Party;

FPRP—Fiona Patten's Reason Party; Greens—Australian Greens; Ind—Independent;

LDP—Liberal Democratic Party; LP—Liberal Party; Nats—The Nationals;

SAP—Sustainable Australia Party; SFFP—Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party; TMP—Transport Matters Party

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Wednesday, 9 February 2022

The PRESIDENT (Hon. N Elasmr) took the chair at 9.35 am and read the prayer.

Announcements**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY**

The PRESIDENT (09:36): On behalf of the Victorian state Parliament I acknowledge the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of this land which has served as a significant meeting place of the First People of Victoria. I acknowledge and pay respect to the elders of the Aboriginal nations in Victoria past, present and emerging and welcome any elders and members of the Aboriginal communities who may visit or participate in the events or proceedings of the Parliament.

Committees**LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE***Reference*

The PRESIDENT (09:37): I have received a letter from the Legal and Social Issues Committee:

RE: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee self-referral for an Inquiry into children of imprisoned parents

I write to advise you that on 20 December 2021, pursuant to Standing Order 23.02(4)(a) and Sessional Order 22, the Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee moved a motion to adopt the following terms of reference as a self-referenced inquiry:

That the Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee inquire into and report, by 1 July 2022, on the adequacy of policies and services to assist the children of imprisoned parents in Victoria, with particular reference to:

- (a) the social, emotional and health impacts on affected children;
- (b) what policies exist and what services are available, including consideration of those in other jurisdictions;
- (c) how effective these services are, including—
 - (i) consideration of evaluation of work already done in this area; and
 - (ii) identifying areas for improvement.

It is from the chair, Ms Patten. I have a second one, also signed by the chair, Ms Patten:

RE: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee self-referral for an Inquiry into Right Wing Extremism

I write to advise you that on 7 February 2021, pursuant to Standing Order 23.02(4)(a) and Sessional Order 22, the Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee agreed to a motion that an Inquiry into Right-Wing Extremism be adopted as a self-referenced inquiry:

That—

the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquire into, consider and report, by 31 May 2022, on the following—

- a. the rise of the far-right extremist movements in Victoria in the context of—
 - i. social isolation and growing economic insecurity;
 - ii. racist scapegoating;
 - iii. the role of mainstream and social media;
 - iv. the distrust of governments and politicians;
- b. their methods of recruitment and communication;
- c. how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the growth of far-right extremism in the Victorian context;

- d. the risks their plans and actions pose to Victoria and especially to Victoria's multicultural communities;
- e. the violent potential of these movements, including the potential for targeted violence against politicians and public figures;
- f. the links between far-right extremist groups, other forms of extremism, and populist radical right and anti-vaccine misinformation groups;
- g. what steps need to be taken in Victoria to counter these far-right extremist groups and their influence, including, but not limited to consideration of—
 - i. the role of early intervention measures to diminish the recruitment and mobilisation prospects of far-right extremist groups;
 - ii. the role of social cohesion, greater civil engagement and empowerment, and community building programs;
 - iii. the submissions made to and, when tabled, the report by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security's Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia; and
- h. any other related matters.

Dr Cumming: On a point of order, President, I have a question on the referral by Ms Patten to the Legal and Social Issues Committee. That was a motion that was on the actual agenda—

The PRESIDENT: That was already referred to us, all right? The Legal and Social Issues Committee referred it to themselves, and they can do that.

Dr Cumming: So, for clarification then, just to understand that that was a motion that was sitting on the agenda that people had amendments to. How do we actually get amendments to that?

Mr Davis: On the point of order, President, there are no formal mechanisms to amend it, but I will give notice to the chamber that I am writing to the chair of the Legal and Social Issues Committee with a proposal for a reference to be considered parallel to the current reference. It would refer to left-wing extremism, and they could be considered together. If Dr Cumming has additional proposals, she should perhaps write in parallel with that.

The PRESIDENT: I agree.

Dr Cumming: Just to let the house know, I do have additional intentions, and I would hope that that committee's scope would be broadened.

The PRESIDENT: Thank you, we have got it.

Bills

CONSTITUTION AMENDMENT (PRAYING) BILL 2022

Introduction and first reading

Ms PATTEN (Northern Metropolitan) (09:42): I move to introduce a bill for an act to amend the Constitution Act 1975 to modernise and replace the terminology of 'praying' within that act and for other purposes, and I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Ms PATTEN: I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

**DRUGS, POISONS AND CONTROLLED SUBSTANCES AMENDMENT
(DECRIMINALISATION OF POSSESSION AND USE OF DRUGS OF DEPENDENCE)
BILL 2022**

Introduction and first reading

Ms PATTEN (Northern Metropolitan) (09:43): I move to introduce a bill for an act to amend the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 to provide for certain offences to be dealt with by way of a drug education or treatment notice and to make consequential and related amendments and for other purposes, and I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Ms PATTEN: I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

**PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AMENDMENT (TRIAL OF A FOUR-DAY WORK WEEK)
BILL 2022**

Introduction and first reading

Ms PATTEN (Northern Metropolitan) (09:44): I move to introduce a bill for an act to amend the Public Administration Act 2004 to permit a discrete trial of a four-day work week within the public service and for other purposes, and I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Ms PATTEN: I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Papers

PAPERS

Tabled by Acting Clerk:

Border Groundwaters Agreement Review Committee—Report, 2020–21.

Climate Change Act 2017—Adaptation Action Plans, 2022–2026, under section 40(1) of the Act for—

Built Environment Climate Change.

Education and Training Climate Change.

Health and Human Services Climate Change.

Natural Environment Climate Change.

Primary Production Climate Change.

Transport Climate Change.

Water Cycle Climate Change.

Business of the house**NOTICES**

Notice of motion given.

Members statements**GREATER SHEPPARTON SPORTS HALL OF FAME**

Ms LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (09:46): It was a very special honour to attend the third Greater Shepparton Sports Hall of Fame induction ceremony held at the Eastbank centre in Shepparton last Friday night. This year's event was a wonderful celebration of the exceptional sporting achievements over many years by inductees originally from Greater Shepparton. To make the evening extra special for me and my family, my nephew Sam Brown was inducted into the Hall of Fame for his many accomplishments in dancesport. It was a very proud moment for Sam's parents, my sister Louise and her husband, David, Sam's brother Rodney and our entire family. It was also wonderful to celebrate the career and achievements of Steele Sidebottom, whose family have been long-time family friends.

I would like to congratulate all 26 inductees on this wonderful honour and recognise their contribution to Greater Shepparton's rich sporting history. Aiden Blizzard and Raelee Thompson were inducted for cricket; Sam Brown, dancesport; Stacey Collier and Terrie Crozier for lawn bowls; Leigh Egan, BMX racing; Narelle Gosstray, baseball; Julie Staudenmaier, nee Gross, for basketball; Matthew Higgins and Connor Holland, hockey; Steven King, Steele Sidebottom, Stephen Tingay and Adam Yze for AFL; Jarrod Lyle, golf; Dennis and Barry Myers, speedway racing; Emma O'Keeffe, sports aerobics; Alan Rossignoli, badminton; Xavier Russell, clay target shooting; Tom Spark, squash; John Sutherland, trapshooting; Val Sutherland, netball; Bryan Thompson, motorsport; Doug Tuhan, athletics; and David White for volleyball.

LGBTIQA+ EQUALITY

Ms SHING (Eastern Victoria) (09:48): At this point in our legislative cycle we are seeing debate occur, particularly on a federal stage, which is causing enormous damage, distress, hurt and injury to some of our most vulnerable people. In particular I am talking about trans kids and the impact that current public debate is having upon them in the context of the religious discrimination bill. Today I want to stand up to express my solidarity and my grief and my love to everyone who is having such a tough time in the debate that is taking place on our federal stage at the moment.

I was proud and we were proud to speak in support of significant amendments and progressive reform to the equal opportunity legislation here in Victoria. These are necessary reforms. These are reforms which will make a difference and do provide the recognition, dignity and respect that everyone is entitled to. That is the essence of equal opportunity under our law. In expressing my love and support for those people within our LGBTIQA+ communities who are finding this debate hurtful I also want to acknowledge the steadfast work and determination from many religious organisations to not only be inclusive, warm and supportive but to make that position publicly known around making inequality something that we need to do something about and equality not negotiable.

ANAM CARA HOUSE

Mr MEDDICK (Western Victoria) (09:50): Over the last couple of weeks it has been a pleasure to again be out in my electorate, meeting with councils, animal shelters and rescuers and also some incredible organisations. I had the pleasure of visiting Anam Cara House in Colac, whom I have advocated for to receive funding in this year's budget, and toured the almost complete Anam Cara Geelong—two separate entities with the same extraordinary level of care for those in palliative care and their families. What they provide is simply unmatched in the system and should be adopted Australia-wide.

MURTOA

Mr MEDDICK: It was also a pleasure to meet with parents and children at the Dunmunkle childcare centre in Murtoa, and I am chuffed to advocate for funding for their vitally important new building, which will enable many to have a childcare place who currently have to travel hours in that district so that they can simply go to work. I was also pleased to meet with the fantastic local students from Murtoa College who are fighting hard for a new skate park and pump track at Rabl Park.

VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY

Dr KIEU (South Eastern Metropolitan) (09:51): On 27 January this year the FIFA World Cup qualifiers match between Australia and Vietnam took place at AAMI Park. Many Vietnamese Australians turned up to support the Socceroos, only to be targeted by private security and even some police, who forced them to remove garments having on them the symbol of Co Vang, or the Yellow Flag, which is the heritage symbol of the Vietnamese community. This is both inappropriate and unacceptable to the Victorian Vietnamese community and indeed to former Vietnamese refugees all around the world. The symbol serves to tell the story of our journey and speaks to our identity as Vietnamese Australians. We also honour the symbol in memory of those who sacrificed their lives for the cause of our freedom, which includes the 521 Australian soldiers who lost their lives fighting beside this flag, and to pay tribute to the surviving veterans of the Vietnam War. In fact the heritage symbol is formally recognised not only by the cities of Maribyrnong, Brimbank, Yarra and Greater Dandenong but also throughout Australia.

On behalf of my constituents, the Vietnamese community and Vietnam veterans I want to express the shock and insult resulting from these violating acts. These must be investigated thoroughly, and corrective action should be taken accordingly. For this symbol to be stripped away from us is to strip away our pride, heritage and history.

COVID-19 TESTING

Dr CUMMING (Western Metropolitan) (09:52): I rise to speak today about rapid testing. For months I have advocated for the use of rapid tests, and my office was actually told by Associate Professor Joseph Boyle that rapid tests could not be used as they were inaccurate and they did not work in all settings—and this was during the pandemic bill debate, mind you, just a week before. Yet now the government has adopted rapid testing and it is used for schools, child care, health workers and a wide range of industries. Now, I do not know what has changed. As far as I know, rapid tests have not changed, and neither has their accuracy. But I do know that this government has failed to manage the supply of rapid tests and the use of them. Despite the fact they mandated rapid testing, they blamed the federal government. Initially this government ordered 2.2 million rapid tests for health workers and its pet projects but then another 37 million by the end of December. But on 6 January the Premier announced that he would actually move away from PCR testing and go towards rapid testing. Now, this Andrews government took another two weeks to order 166 million kits. It is simply a supply-and-demand issue. When is this government going to realise that rapid tests are the way to go for allowing people to work, rest and play, rather than worrying about their vaccination status?

SCHOOL SHADE SAILS FUND

Ms TERPSTRA (Eastern Metropolitan) (09:54): I rise to update the house about some great news affecting schools in the Eastern Metropolitan Region. Seven more schools in my region are rolling out new shaded outdoor learning spaces thanks to the School Shade Sails Fund. Templestowe Heights Primary School, Templestowe Park Primary School, Croydon Hills Primary School, Kilsyth Primary School, Beverley Hills Primary School, Donvale Primary School and East Doncaster Secondary College will be seeing new shaded areas very soon. The School Shade Sails Fund is part of our \$190 million investment to support ventilation and outdoor learning in Victorian schools, and this is just one of the measures we will be taking to make sure schools are as safe as possible for all Victorian students.

SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Ms TERPSTRA: Further, I just want to update the house on a fantastic visit to Swinburne University recently. I attended with the Honourable Gayle Tierney, Minister for Training and Skills, and we visited Swinburne University to look at the new supercomputer. The government is investing \$5.2 million towards this project. This means astronomers will be able to monitor space in unprecedented detail and researchers can explore areas including bushfire detection, natural disaster planning and response, neuroscience, cancer detection and defence. It is pretty incredible, and we are fortunate to have such amazing technology right here in Victoria. The computer will be able to run models and simulations within a few days that would take most other computers many, many years to run. So it is a fantastic investment, and it is just another example of how the Andrews Labor government is supporting research in Victoria.

COMMERCIAL PASSENGER VEHICLE INDUSTRY

Mr BARTON (Eastern Metropolitan) (09:56): The last 12 months have not been good for the taxi industry. We have lost a lot of very good people. Earlier in January a very good friend of mine, John Fitz, passed. John set up Wodonga Taxis. I am not suggesting that he did it a long time ago, but I think it was horses and carts when he started. To the very end there were not many days when John and his wife, Eleanor, did not contact me and tell me how bad things were and talk about the struggle the taxi industry was having. They were really good friends, and I am really sad. I am here because of people like them. I want to send my regards to Warren, their son. They have had a terrible time with the reforms and the battles we have had with the regulator. I just want to say to the industry—I hate to say this—I am now one of the grown-ups. It is like when you lose a parent; you have to step up. That is what we have lost.

I also just want to mention Mr Gange, owner of Silver Top, who passed just prior to Christmas. It is the second-largest taxi company we have here in Victoria. Things are changing, and it is very sad.

MICHAEL BEAHAN

Ms WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (09:57): I wish to mark my respect for the Honourable Michael Beahan AM, senator for Western Australia and a previous President of the Australian Senate. Michael sadly passed away last week after a battle with cancer. Michael was a proud educator both of students at high school and later in the WA Teachers Centre for Further Education. He was active in and came up through the Australian Teachers Union. He had a formidable parliamentary career and with it gave many years of service to the Australian community, and after Parliament he remained a strong voice within the Labor movement, especially at a local level. He was a proud and active member of the Brunswick branch. He loved the Labor Party, attended as many times as he could and embodied the values that make our movement so strong. But to me he will be remembered for his service and contribution to Merri Health, both as a board member and later as a patron. Not long after I entered this place Michael reached out and was so generous as to spend an afternoon with me discussing his time in politics and offering advice and counsel to me. In every conversation one had with Michael what was quickly apparent was his commitment to helping people, to working for something larger than himself. He will be sincerely missed. I send my sincerest condolences to his partner, Margaret, as well as his children, stepchildren and grandchildren. Vale, Michael Beahan.

CHATTY CAFE SCHEME

Mr ERDOGAN (Southern Metropolitan) (09:59): We all understand how vital mental health is to every aspect of our lives. Among the leading mental health challenges in our society today are social isolation and loneliness, with an estimated one in four people experiencing feelings of isolation or loneliness every week. Last week I had the honour of attending the launch of the Chatty Cafe in Sandringham with Minister Leane and Fiona Patten. The Chatty Cafe Scheme aims to connect communities and increase social interactions by getting people chatting, both at their favourite local venues and while travelling. The program encourages hospitality venues across Australia to provide a

shared table where customers can sit if they are happy to talk to other customers and just have a chat. The Bayside Chatty Cafe was funded as part of the Metropolitan Partnerships Development Fund, with project support in the 2020–21 budget geared to aid Melbourne's suburbs to recover from the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic. I extend my thanks and congratulations to Bayside City Council, including mayor Alex del Porto, Cr Clarke Martin and CEO Mick Cummins, for their support and encouragement of this program. If you are local to the Bayside area, get down and have a chat.

CHATTY CAFE SCHEME

Ms PATTEN (Northern Metropolitan)

Incorporated pursuant to order of Council of 7 September 2021:

Last Wednesday, along with Minister Leane, I was very pleased to attend the launch of the Chatty Cafe project at the Chatty Cafe at Sandy Beach Kiosk in Sandringham.

The Chatty Cafe Scheme aims to get people chatting to build and encourage social connections within the local community, and to help reduce social isolation and loneliness.

Australian venues that sign up offer 'Have a Chat' tables—a space for people to talk, whether it is for 5 minutes or an hour of good friendly conversation, while you drink a brew of your choice and/or eat a snack or meal.

I like to think of it as the opposite of a quiet carriage on the train!

I have been a fan of Chatty Cafes and the formidable Australian organiser Glenys Reid for some time and have seen firsthand the beautiful connection formed. It was just great to hang out with the Chatty volunteers.

I have spent years now advocating for change to alleviate loneliness, a silent killer as deadly as smoking tobacco or being obese. This is one fabulous initiative that forms a piece in that loneliness puzzle.

I look forward to continuing working with the Victorian government to implement the key elements of my motion to elevate the problem of loneliness—and facilitate the solutions—in part by allocating it a portfolio.

Meanwhile, I will continue my regular sessions with the fabulous Chatty Cafe organisation, and commend it to you all. It's a lot of fun.

Motions

EMERGENCY SERVICES TELECOMMUNICATIONS AUTHORITY

Ms CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:00): I rise to speak to my motion 699. It is an important motion, and I hope all members of this house will support it, because of what has been happening over not just the past few weeks and months but the past few years. I move:

That this house:

- (1) expresses its serious concern at the:
 - (a) inadequate operation of the Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority's (ESTA) 000 service and the failure of ESTA to maintain acceptable response times;
 - (b) worrying number of cases where lives have been put at risk by the extraordinary time delays in responding to calls in country Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne;
 - (c) failure to promptly dispatch an ambulance in a timely way;
 - (d) cases that have come to public notice where lives have been lost through what appears to be delayed emergency services dispatch;
 - (e) resources provided by the government to ESTA and Ambulance Victoria and the consequent delays in response times; and—

this is an important part of the motion—

- (2) respectfully requests that the Auditor-General examine the operation and management of ESTA and the interaction between ESTA and Ambulance Victoria.

I could have put more points into this motion, but it is clear that what I am trying to say here is that we know that ESTA has been plagued with problems. We only have to look at the reports that have come out in the last couple of months. I have been talking about this for many months. I have put questions

in the house. I am pleased that the Minister for Emergency Services is in the house. Yesterday I put forward a question about the 43 staff that were to be provided by February, and the minister's response was that some of them were still in training: 16 were in the dispatch centre I think—or 13. I might have the numbers a little bit skewed, but nevertheless they are not all in place. I think the point is that it is February and they are not all in place. By the end of the month they will hopefully be in place. This is way too late because of the impact on Victorians.

As we know and as we have seen, the latest data just demonstrates the delayed response times, but importantly it is the stories from Victorians that really point out what is going on. Just a few weeks ago a damning article in the *Age* spoke about the real impacts on Victorians but also the absolute crisis that is in our emergency services response—the 000 program. It has been acknowledged even at a federal level, where it has been said that the faults and problems here in Victoria are having an impact right around the country. A federal minister has said that. He wrote to the minister last year about the concerns, saying that it is having a ricochet impact right across the nation and through the other services that 000 provides.

In this article that I referred to, about 000, it says seven out of 10 callers are left waiting. It just highlights, as I said, seven out of 10 calls not being answered on time during some shifts and the deaths or serious injuries of up to a dozen people in recent months suspected to be linked to delays in answering calls—a dozen people dying because they cannot get that care response. Mr Davis yesterday spoke of the tragic case of Nick Panagiotopoulos, who had to wait 25 minutes for an ambulance to arrive. Of course it is a terribly sad situation and that was a very sad circumstance, but there have been other cases. A child in Bendigo died. These are real people, real Victorians. These are not just numbers and statistics, they are people who are losing their lives because of the failures of the system.

The article I referred to a few minutes ago states that there are senior people within the system that say there have been so many problems within ESTA for a long time—for years in fact—and it has highlighted what they say is a longstanding failure of ESTA to build a surge-resilient workforce. I have been talking about surge capacity within the health system and within these systems for years in this place—talking about, 'Where is the surge capacity?'. And I have been speaking about the ability to plan and prepare for what is happening and what has happened over the last few weeks, particularly with the omicron wave. Of course the first case of that was detected in Victoria in early December, and the government was telling us, 'Expect cases to rise'. Well, they have known about this and yet they have failed to put in place the adequate resourcing, whether it is within the 000 service, ESTA, whether it is in Ambulance Victoria or whether it is in our health system or community health. Right across the system this government has continued to fail to prepare to enable us to be able to deal with this crisis despite the fact that the Premier and the then Minister for Health said, 'We have the surge capacity. We are ready to deal with this' back in March 2020. That was two years ago, and yet we are in this situation where our state is absolutely on its knees. Whether it is the mental health crisis, whether it is the health crisis, whether it is the economic crisis, whether it is the social crisis that has absolutely driven this state to despair, this is because of the government's lack of planning and preparation.

I am not going to go over old ground about what has happened previously. I want to stick to the important issues around this motion because these cases are worrying. When you have got the numbers that have been linked—the number of people that have died because of the failure of the service to be able to respond—this has to be looked at seriously. It cannot be brushed off by the government saying, 'We're dealing with it. We're putting in more resources'. This should have been done. It should have been done not just in the last few months but years ago. This is years of underinvestment. The government cannot hide behind COVID as the excuse, saying, 'Well, COVID has caused all of this', because as we know the health system was under huge stress before COVID, and COVID has really tipped it over.

This article, which again I am going to refer to because it has actually got some relevant points about where it is at, says there are cases in the Coroners Court being investigated and that:

A senior health source said they were aware of eight deaths and ... serious events since October.

What has happened since October has also been damning because of what has occurred in the last few weeks. I know that because my office has been inundated by people who are talking about their experience, what they cannot receive within our health system. This is again a damning indictment on this government's administration and ability to respond to COVID but more importantly its ability to properly plan and prepare. It goes to the heart of that.

Why should we be surprised that there are so many issues when of course the ICT projects—again, botched 000 upgrades—have put this system under more pressure? This government botches ICT projects all the time. Whether it is HealthSMART or Myki—now this—there were so many issues around the botched projects. It is extraordinary how they just cannot get anything right. These failures are costing people's lives. There is no doubt about it. These ICT projects were to improve response times, and being hampered by the blowouts and delays has really had a massive impact on the ability of these services to operate.

Now, I know that there have been many other cases where Victorians' lives have sadly been lost because of a delay in response, but when you see the latest data, in the last 12 months the minutes it takes for an ambulance to respond, for our 000 to respond, it is really damning. Fifteen minutes to be able to get through to 000 to get someone to dispatch an ambulance demonstrates the extent. Now, it was the Premier in 2014 that said every second counts. Well, yes, it does, Premier, and when you are talking about minutes, sometimes 30 minutes, that is 1800 seconds. So when you have got someone hanging on the line desperate to get through to a 000 operator to get an ambulance, when their child is choking, when their loved one is having a heart attack or when their wife is bleeding, it is alarming and it is frightening for those people.

As one person put it, Mr Withington, who said how traumatic an experience it was:

I no longer go around with the confidence that if we need an ambulance ... we will be able to contact one. That is an awful feeling to have with you all the time, particularly as you get older and you're dealing with health issues more regularly. It's quite disgraceful.

He said this back in December after his wife, as I said, had a very serious injury and they could not get an ambulance. She was bleeding profusely.

As we know, the delays in elective surgery are having a major impact on people's worsening health conditions, so of course people as their health conditions worsen will require 000 response for an ambulance when they are in these dire situations. When you have got people very, very sick, when you have got people with heart conditions who cannot get their heart valve replaced because of the bans on elective surgery, these are causing more emergency responses to be requested. Now, the government says if it is not an emergency—and I totally agree with it—go to the GP or ring Nurse-on-Call. But you cannot get through to Nurse-on-Call either. It is hours. One woman told me 6 hours; she just could not get through. Now, if you are going to say that, put the resources in place so that people can get the support that they need.

These issues are just so damning. The government has failed in every respect, and I know that so many people are now worried about what is actually happening, that the response from the government is too little, too late. They can talk about the money they have put in. That is not dealing with the crisis that is here. It is too late. You cannot fix these problems by just saying 'We're writing a blank cheque' when you have had years to prepare for this and you have not done it properly. People have died. People have died because of the lack of planning and preparation, and that is why, in my last few moments that I have, we do request that the Auditor-General examine the operation and management of ESTA and the interaction. They have done it before. The Auditor-General's report came out in March 2015. He was looking at services at that time including police, firefighters and ambulance, and

there were issues that he highlighted with ambulance response times then. Seven years on we are still in this situation, but it is a lot, lot worse. And if the government argues, 'Well, we've got Graham Ashton looking at this and we've got others looking at it', we need an independent person. With all due respect, Graham Ashton was the former Chief Commissioner of Police, and he has been linked to the emergency services. He understands this, because he was part of that review—

Ms Symes: Doesn't that make him perfect?

Ms CROZIER: No. That is exactly the point. We want true independence.

Members interjecting.

Ms CROZIER: No, it is not a reflection on Mr Ashton. The government argues it is a reflection on Mr Ashton; it is not. It is because of his previous position that he has held in police. He knows this. We need to have somebody like the Auditor-General looking at this.

Ms Symes interjected.

Ms CROZIER: I take it from the government that they are not going to support my motion. I would urge the government to support my motion to have the true independence of the Auditor-General so that Mr Ashton and others who have been involved in the emergency response—

Ms Terpstra interjected.

Ms CROZIER: It is not a disgrace. It is actually—

Ms Terpstra interjected.

Ms CROZIER: I am not going to take that. I am not casting aspersions on Mr Ashton. I am saying that the independence of the Auditor-General will give this review the absolute ability to look at that, because Mr Ashton was involved in the previous review with the previous Auditor-General, so he knows. So I say, again, I urge the government not to cover up again. We are sick of the cover-up. We are sick of the media management. We are sick of the PR. We are sick of the spin. We want some true independence and some truth about the emergency services here, because people have died. Too many Victorians have sadly died because of the lack of response and the failures of this government to be able to prepare and plan properly. I say, again, this is an important motion. It goes to the heart of the safety of our Victorian citizens. They deserve to know the answers, and I request that all members support this motion.

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (10:16): It is an important motion; I do not take that away from Ms Crozier. It is a topic that we have had a few conversations about in the chamber, so this is a good opportunity to get some more detail, I guess, on the record, because it is often difficult to get the extent of the work and the complicated workplace that these important people work in on the record in detail in such a short time. So hopefully I have the opportunity to do that a little bit this morning.

It is not the government's intention to support this motion, not because it is not important but because it is misguided and it is in no way going to provide any benefit to the service or to the public. As I said, I welcome the conversations, but I do not welcome the politicisation of this important issue. I want to put on the record my gratitude for the amazing staff at ESTA. I have done this many times; they are amazing. Coming to the role of Minister for Emergency Services I knew there were fire trucks and the people in orange. I was used to that even in my work as a local member. And I knew that people answered 000, but then I went out there and talked to them about the diversity of the role, the stress of that role, the 24/7 requirements of it. It is an incredibly complex, stressful job, and I think we need to celebrate them as much as we do our people in uniforms—our firefighters, our nurses and our SES volunteers, for example. They are heroes, and I really do want to thank them for their efforts and their continued efforts to ensure that Victorians get the service from ESTA that they deserve.

I do want to take the opportunity to inform the house of the many ways that our government is supporting this workforce during a period of unprecedented demand. We know that ESTA provides a vital service to the community and the employees dedicate themselves to keeping Victorians safe day in, day out. The staff at ESTA are wonderful people. They do this job because of how rewarding it is, how much they care and how much they know they can help people. I spoke to Sam when I was out their recently—they let me patch in and listen when 000 refers the calls to the ambulance call takers—and she said she has been there four years. She used to be a hairdresser, and she said, ‘Look, I liked being a hairdresser. I got to chat to people. It was good, but it was nowhere near as rewarding as knowing that I am helping people in dire need’. That is pretty amazing, and she was a pretty good example of most of the staff out there and the reason they do this job.

It is true to say that like the rest of the health system, and indeed health systems across the globe, ESTA has come under significant pressure as a result of the pandemic. It has seen call volumes spike across the country, and ESTA has exceeded previous records regularly—often more on a given day than during the thunderstorm asthma event of 2016. I am sure people recall the impact that had on the system. The daily average number of ambulance calls in October 2020 was 2200. The current COVID-19 omicron outbreak has massively increased this demand, with daily average ambulance calls through December and January nearing 4000. Facing this huge surge in calls, we have been providing extra funding and have supported a number of initiatives to help ESTA’s service delivery.

You have heard me speak regularly about the investment of 43 new FTE to significantly boost the call-taking capacity. All these positions are either on board or about to finish their training right now, including 13 new call-taking positions and 16 ambulances dispatchers. What it would be useful probably to understand as well is that this is 43 FTE; this is not actually 43 people. It is much more than that, because within the workplace of ESTA if you are a call taker it is sometimes an advancement to go on to the ambulance dispatch team, which is a team that is highly trained and experienced in giving advice and support to those people while they are waiting for an ambulance. A lot of the people transition through, so when we say we have got 43 new positions a lot of the people moved around, which meant you were actually recruiting more and more people up to, I think, more than 50 to actually get to those 43 new positions that we funded.

Obviously with attrition, as in any workplace, you are continually filling places. So I am proud to say that last week there were 21 new ambulance call takers in training at ESTA, and there are more to come. We have filled the training capacities until July, and we will continue those efforts and continue to keep those important people rolling out.

We have recently provided \$27.5 million. That was outside of the budget process. That was from negotiations between me and the Treasurer to ensure that we could get some funds into ESTA immediately to allow them to train even more call takers, and as I said, this will result in more staff, more quickly, coming onto the floor. But it is also important to note that many of these call takers have to have the specific training. You cannot just pull someone from the street and say, ‘Hey, answer the phone and dispatch an ambulance’.

As I said, it has been great to get out to ESTA and listen to the people and patch in on some of the really stressful calls and just see the care and expertise that they put into this role. Of course ESTA and I as minister acknowledge that delays for the public in getting calls answered are unacceptable, and we are working very, very hard to ensure that we have improvements in this space. As I said, we have got new staff, new people in training, and we are also looking at a series of other options in terms of the calls being made quicker, surge capacity from interstate and a range of issues that I think I have gone through several times in this case.

I think the concerning part of Ms Crozier’s motion for me is asking the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office to come in and do a review. I took offence and I think probably Mr Ashton would take offence at Ms Crozier’s aspersions on his ability to conduct an independent review of this organisation. Bringing his expertise in the emergency management framework to this is going to be invaluable. We

also have the inspector-general for emergency management maintaining oversight of ESTA, and they can conduct reviews when deemed appropriate.

This is an organisation that has new management. Stephen Leane is acting CEO. He is doing a great job. He has brought in some further expertise from Emergency Management Victoria. If you think about an organisation that is very focused on improving, they get calls from me asking, 'How are you going?' and they get calls from Graham Ashton asking, 'How are you going? Can you participate in a review?'. Management are continually asking them questions. You have got the Coroners Court, which they have to participate in. My big concern is that when I am confident the management have got practices and resources and funding in place to make improvements, the more people that are asking them, 'How are you going?', the more it distracts them from actually getting on with these important reforms. So to say that there needs to be another investigation into an organisation that I think has substantial oversight is actually going to be quite damaging and goes against the intention of Ms Crozier's motion, which is to bring about improvements. I think we should wait for Mr Ashton's review, which will be helpful.

But that is not to say that we have not been getting on with the job. I have assured families and I have assured ESTA that, along with management, all of the initiatives that we are bringing into place are not waiting for people to have a report to tell us to do so. We are getting on with the job, and we will only continue to improve. We do not need further political frustration.

I think one of the other points that is important for me to note is that putting on the record and using victims to make political points is very fraught and you have to be very careful. Saying that there is a cause of death because you suspect there is is doing no service to victims. I will reflect on a recent email I got from a federal coalition MP who wrote to me cc'ing the son of a father who had passed away, complaining about ESTA's inability to dispatch. It was not ESTA's issue. I was not going to go and have an argument about whose fault it was that there was a contributing factor to this death, but to get a political email cc'ing the family saying, 'How dare your agency, Minister, cause this death?' was outrageous. This is the type of questioning that is starting to filter in here, and I would urge caution in this regard. When I speak to family members, many of them tell me they do not want their cases articulated and bandied around in this chamber, so I would caution about that. And when they do want their stories told, absolutely, that gives us an opportunity. To have the real-life experiences of the impacts of these things is what drives me to make improvements, so of course I want to hear their stories, but you have to be careful about how you use them, and if you use them for political gain, I think you should have a good, hard look at yourself.

As I have said, this is an important motion. There are lots of things Ms Crozier said that I agree with. I am absolutely focused on improvements here, but we cannot support this motion because, as with the last motion, bringing in yet another review of this organisation is not going to provide any benefit to Victorians, and that is what I am focused on.

Mr BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (10:26): I rise to speak on this motion. It was actually interesting listening to the Attorney-General. I agreed with a lot of what she said. Having said that, I still am supporting this. I am also going to bring some real-life experience in this, because when I finished in the police force on 1 January 2000, shortly thereafter I went to work for the predecessor to ESTA, being Intergraph, as a police call taker and a police dispatcher. Also my wife had been a fairly long term ambulance call taker and dispatcher when I met her.

We talk about things that you do not expect to see in here. Even for someone that had been a police officer for four or so years, you pick up the phone and—I did not hear it, but thankfully they play these things to you so you know what you are in for—you hear someone being murdered or someone dying in a car accident, because particularly in this day and age of mobile phones people will call you from all sorts of places. The people at ESTA, from the call takers to the dispatchers, deal with things that no normal people should ever have to. It is a credit to them that they can do it with as few problems as we get, and I think that is the thing. There is always time for review. I believe ex-commissioner Ashton

is doing one, and I do not particularly see a great problem with asking the Auditor-General to examine this because as time goes on things change, people get things wrong and you need to keep looking at it. You need to keep on reviewing what is going on. It is one of those things.

I was listening to the Attorney-General talking about the number of FTEs and things like that, and I have also heard some questioning from the opposition, ongoing questioning about when people are going to be available, when they are going to be taking calls and dispatching and things like that. One of the things that is not really mentioned a lot is that there is a fairly large drop-off in ability to continue for a lot of people. They can take a phone call, write some stuff in there, but they cannot deal with the violence on the phone. They cannot deal with—let us just call it the ‘death and destruction’. It takes a special kind of person, and then that person has to be taught the system, particularly with the ambulances. I do not know if they are still using what they call ProQA. It is a very structured call-taking thing. The police call taking was fairly easy for me, having been a police officer. It was just more or less stepping into another part of the job, but with the ambulances they have a very structured thing and flow charts—inside the software of course—and it drives them to a certain outcome, whether it is a priority zero, 1, 2 or possibly 3. Things change. I am not casting aspersions about what has happened recently, but the way I see this, it is another opportunity to keep on looking at these things.

I do believe it can never be said enough of emergency services people—and I include ESTA people in that—that they do a tough job. I still do not think many people, if any people, in this room would really get it. Certainly the vast majority of the population would not get it, and thankfully for them they will never get it. Anyway, that is just a congratulations to all those that do it.

Ms TERPSTRA (Eastern Metropolitan) (10:31): I rise to make a contribution on motion 699 sitting on the notice paper in Ms Crozier’s name in regard to ESTA. I have had the benefit of listening to the contribution of Minister Symes and also the contribution of Mr Bourman, and I want to commence my contribution in similar terms by noting the work that call takers do at ESTA and did at its previous iterations.

I was just looking at some of the detail on the ESTA website about what they actually do. They are emergency services call takers. This motion focuses on ambulance services, but as Mr Bourman said—and certainly from what I was looking at on the website—this type of call taking is not for everyone. As Mr Bourman said, can you imagine being on the end of a phone and receiving a phone call from perhaps someone being murdered, perhaps a parent who has realised their child has drowned or is drowning in a backyard pool and is calling for an ambulance, or someone who is having a heart attack? You are dealing with stressed people, people who are in highly emotionally fraught situations. I know the people who want to come to work at ESTA and who have worked in emergency services call taking are extraordinary people. They want to help. They want to go to work to help people who are in distress and to connect them up with the emergency services that they need at the time they need them.

I share the concerns of Minister Symes around this motion, because whilst we need to look at what is going on in terms of delays in dispatching emergency services, we cannot take away from the fact that these people are doing extraordinary work and they need our support. And I am just concerned that this motion is overly critical. It tends to focus in on the call dispatchers. I mean, Ms Crozier talks about a review by the Auditor-General—again, it is a ridiculous notion. We have had reviews in the past, but the next review that is coming up is being done by somebody who has experience in this field—and you could not ask for someone who is more eminent and better suited and more qualified. He is just about to finish this review.

Again, what is behind this motion is a political stunt. The rationale for it is not to actually assist people to do their job and to get Victorians the services they need when they need them, it is just to ventilate a pathetic attempt to try to attack the government on any grounds. We have got to talk about, as well, the war that the opposition went to with our ambulance services. That was an absolute atrocity, and it took this government to settle the ambulance dispute. The record funding that this government has put

into public health cannot be compared to the approach of those opposite. I have said it before, and I will say it again: those opposite hate anything with the word 'public' in it. They hate public health, public education, you name it. If it is 'public', they hate it. So again, it is just a very shallow attempt to politicise something that is a very sensitive issue.

I really take issue with the amount of people sitting opposite saying, 'Oh, the number of people that come to me'. Honestly, it is just a straw man argument from those opposite. I listened very carefully to the contribution Ms Symes made, and I agree with her comments. We have to be very careful about publicising some of the emergencies that are dealt with and the families attached to them, because we may be retraumatising those families, given the experience that they have found themselves in and perhaps losing a loved one. So the politicising of this issue by those opposite is actually very, very fraught.

I will just talk about the funding that the government has put in place for a number of immediate initiatives to address any concerns around the timeliness of dispatching of calls. The immediate initiatives that we put into place last year were in regard to a surge in demand, and these included offering overtime shifts to all workers and recalling operational employees seconded into projects across the organisation to help meet demand; re-skilling police and fire call takers to take ambulance calls during peak demand; and rolling out the Save 000 for Emergencies campaign, because we know—and we have heard stories of this—some people during the pandemic could not find a rapid antigen test and rang 000. That is not really what you have 000 for; 000 is for emergencies. Again, for those playing along at home, I am just putting the message out there: 000 is just for emergencies. If you cannot find your medication or you cannot access a RAT, you do not ring 000. You can ring Nurse-on-Call perhaps if you want some general advice from a nurse or you cannot get to your GP or whatever; Nurse-on-Call is really the best place for those sorts of calls. But we really need to save 000 for emergencies only.

We are also working with Telstra to introduce a recorded voice announcement when calls are received to encourage non-emergency callers to seek alternative assistance, which has contributed to a drop in demand of as much as 5 per cent. So again that just underscores the previous point that sometimes the calls that are coming through to 000 are not really coming through to the best place for those calls. We are also working closely with Ambulance Victoria on new shorter scripts for peak times and sharing call data with Ambulance Victoria so that paramedics are aware of the increase in demand.

The emergency management commissioner, Andrew Crisp, has also stood up a multi-agency task force of representatives from Emergency Management Victoria, Ambulance Victoria, Victoria Police, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and the ESTA board to ensure that all avenues and options are being explored to bring call wait times and delays down, because as I said, there are a whole multitude of reasons for why these things happen. So with the leadership of acting CEO Stephen Leane and deputy CEO Deb Abbott and the additional support provided by this government, we are doing everything we can to reduce any wait times for 000 emergency calls. There is huge support as well for Ambulance Victoria, who are also facing higher demand, with the busiest quarter to December last year, including a staggering 91 397 code 1 call-outs—smashing it. Recently the Minister for Health announced a further \$35 million for Ambulance Victoria, who welcomed a record-breaking 700 new paramedics last year, with more on the way.

As you can see, our emergency services are incredibly busy. There are a whole range of reasons for that, but they are incredibly important people. I just want to thank them for the very important work that they do, and I think that really needs to come through in this debate around this motion today. I and my colleagues on the government benches here have the utmost respect for their professionalism. As I said, I thank them, and I am sure my colleagues join with me in thanking them for their invaluable service to the community. They save lives every single day—without doubt, they save lives every single day—and I am also glad to be part of a government that is supporting them every step of the way as call volumes have escalated to levels we have never seen before.

I cannot impress enough upon this chamber and any of those people who may be watching at home on the live broadcast that 000 is only for emergencies. Do not call it if you cannot find a RAT. Do not call it if you cannot find your medication. If you want to ask a question about having a temperature or whatever or if your child has got a snuffle or a runny nose, Nurse-on-Call is really the best place for those sorts of calls. If it is an emergency, if you are having a heart attack or a stroke—those sorts of things where you need urgent medical assistance—000 is really the best place for that.

I just want to underscore as part of this discussion today and the debate on this motion that I really do thank all emergency call takers, particularly those in ESTA: we know the amazing work that you do; we know that you do this work in the most difficult of circumstances sometimes. I think it does take a very special person to be able to cope with some of the calls that come through. I just want to echo the comments made by Mr Bourman previously as a former police officer and someone who re-skilled in this area—and I said this earlier—that perhaps listening to someone calling when someone may be being murdered or having a critical sentinel health event can be very distressing, so we need to make sure that we support our critical call takers in the very important work that they do on behalf of all Victorians. I know these people come to work every day wanting to do their absolute very best for every Victorian, for every call that they take, for every person that they speak to and for every emergency service they dispatch on behalf of Victorians. I know they want to do their very best, so we are getting on with the job of providing more funding, resources, training and facilities. That has been outlined by the minister.

As I said earlier, this motion is being put by the very same people who have been calling for us to ditch masks, the same people who have been taking pictures with anti-vax protesters on the steps of Parliament. I mean, honestly, you cannot make this stuff up. It is very jarring to have to listen to this. Really the sentiment behind this motion is to try and say that we are hiding things, we are failing at things and all the rest of it, but what those opposite need to understand is we need to support those people who work in our emergency dispatch services.

In closing, because the clock is against me, I would just like to reiterate that I oppose this motion, and I urge those opposite to see that this is really not an appropriate motion but also urge the crossbench members in this chamber to join with the government benches and oppose this motion.

Mr DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan—Leader of the Opposition) (10:41): This is a very important motion brought to the chamber by Ms Crozier. The first part of the motion is straightforward, and it seems broadly agreed across the chamber. There is legitimate concern at the moment about the performance of ESTA and the 000 service and the many cases that have been reflected in this chamber but more broadly across the community where the service has not functioned at a standard that the community can have confidence in. I think that is beyond question. I do not believe that anyone, including the Minister for Emergency Services, accepts that there does not need to be significant improvement in the performance of ESTA.

I know the minister has taken a number of steps, and she is relatively new in the portfolio; I note that. That is important, and I am glad that she is taking a number of steps. The point I would make, though, is that there are indeed, as is outlined at (1)(b), a worrying number of cases where lives are at risk. As at (1)(c), there has been a ‘failure to promptly dispatch an ambulance in a timely way’. As at (1)(d), cases have come to public notice where lives have been lost through what does appear to be delayed emergency services dispatch. Some of these are quite clear and they have been investigated, and indeed there is a clear link to poor dispatch processes. The resources have not been adequate, and the government has admitted that. The government is now providing more resources, and we welcome every step in that direction. This is not an attack on the call takers and the people at ESTA. They by and large do the very best job that they can with the resources they have and the position that they are in. So I pay tribute to their work, but that in no way is diminishing the importance of this motion. These problems need to be fixed, and they need to be fixed quickly. Indeed the community, I think, expect response times to meet the benchmarks that are required, and they are way, way, way away from meeting those benchmarks at this point.

The second part of the motion simply respectfully requests that the Auditor-General examine the operation and management of ESTA and the interaction between ESTA and Ambulance Victoria. Now, ESTA of course does more than Ambulance Victoria. We understand the 000 service and how that actually operates. The ambulance service obviously is only one part of ESTA's operation. Indeed ESTA has the police and other emergency services linked to it too, as it should have. Mr Bourman laid out his time at the old Intergraph service, which sought to provide that integrated management of those emergency calls.

I do want to put on record my developing concern about the government's decision to deflect as many calls as they can from 000. There is an appropriate role for such streaming, but that streaming can be overdone, and if it is overdone, it will put lives at risk. People should feel that they have the right to call 000 without being impeded. It is actually quite important that there not be any psychological impediment in people's minds in making that call to 000. If you make people concerned to call 000, there will be a percentage of cases that ought to have called 000 that do not call 000, and there are likely to be consequential negative and potentially seriously negative outcomes for some people who otherwise would have called 000.

I do understand the need to manage the flow of calls, and this is exactly the sort of material that the Auditor should look at. I understand that there have been a number of reviews, and I understand that Mr Ashton is doing a review. I have a high regard for Mr Ashton, but it is important to put on record his involvement, through the police, in the management and the operations of ESTA, given that police calls go through 000, are streamed, and both police and ambulance and the other emergency services are all part of the process with 000. It is important to understand Mr Ashton is a fine individual but an individual who has history with these services and actually thereby is not able to bring the fully dispassionate view that we would seek to have in place in this sort of review.

Consequently the Auditor is the one who should do the review. The Auditor did do a review of the ambulance service in 2010, and that was a very important ambulance service review that actually provided information to the community and enabled the community to judge and to take sensible and informed positions about ambulance services. I can indicate it was actually an important part of providing advice to government and opposition and the broad community on what needed to be done to fix many of the problems in the ambulance service at the time, in 2010, under John Brumby. So it is actually I think a very important point that the Auditor-General is in the position to do this review in the most significant way. He can actually bring a dispassionate view. He can bring the highest capacity to look at the data and the information, and he can do that with a set of recommendations coming back to the chamber and the Parliament.

Now, we cannot direct the Auditor to undertake such a review, but we can request it. We can say to the Auditor, 'Please look at this matter'. It is a matter of life and death. It is a matter of the best outcome for the broad Victorian community. It is a matter of ensuring that those services are of the highest standard, and the Auditor, as an independent officer of the Parliament, is able to make his own decisions. That is why Ms Crozier has thoughtfully framed point 2 as:

respectfully requests that the Auditor-General examine the operation and management of ESTA and the interaction between ESTA and Ambulance Victoria.

That is in effect a request respectfully within the parameters of the Auditor's independence and within the parameters of the Auditor's position as an independent officer of the Parliament. What the chamber can do here is only provide advice or an opinion in that sense and hence the very thoughtful way that Ms Crozier has framed this request.

I would urge the Auditor to look at these matters. It is clear that the 000 system is out of control. It is clear that the dispatch is not working. It is clear that lives are at risk. It is clear that in fact Victorians are dying because of the failures in the dispatch of ambulance services. So that is something that cannot be allowed to continue. We cannot wait for a review from a former senior policeman—a respected former senior policeman but a former senior policeman—who has his own history with these services

and in that sense is very much an insider. What we need is the dispassionate view of an outsider, somebody who is able to look at the ambulance service, look at the dispatch system, look at the interaction between the two and work out the best way to improve them.

I have made my points quite clear about the government's current direction, which is to defray or deflect as many calls as possible from the 000 service. I am not in any way diminishing some of the alternatives that are proposed, Nurse-on-Call and so forth. They have a significant place in the system, but we do need to be very, very careful in leaving the community with any intimation that they ought to be resisting calling 000 if they are in urgent need. Urgent need means that you should call 000. You should not wait. Campaigns have been run by the Heart Foundation and other groups to say, 'Call. Don't delay', and I say that that is a very, very important message. Somebody who is potentially having a cardiac event should not delay, should not pause, should not feel bound by the information that is out there talking about the congestion on the service. They should immediately call such a service—the 000 call service—and the service should have sufficient resources provided by government to enable it to handle the peaks and troughs of activity.

This is a very balanced, thoughtful motion. There is almost no pushback on the first part of the motion. It is only the independent review by the Auditor-General, the genuinely independent review that is requested, that seems to be something that the government is frightened of, that the government does not want to see in place. I say it is the right way forward and it will provide confidence to the community.

Ms MAXWELL (Northern Victoria) (10:51): I rise to speak on opposition motion 699 requesting that the Auditor-General examine the operation and management of ESTA and the interaction between ESTA and Ambulance Victoria. I would like to thank Ms Crozier for bringing this motion to the Parliament. At the outset I would like to acknowledge ESTA workers, paramedics, and in fact all our emergency services workers who work tirelessly, often in extremely traumatic situations. Their work and dedication are not being questioned here whatsoever. Just to reiterate, I personally would like to thank them for their ongoing diligence and commitment.

I have almost lost count of how many times I have raised issues relating to ambulance response times in Parliament over the past three years. Residents across my electorate contact me regularly with reports of long delays, hospital ramping and associated issues. I have brought to Parliament their frustrations that ESTA continues to use static scripts that do not inform residents how long they might have to wait for an ambulance and that they offer little direction or advice by way of alternatives. I have met with Ambulance Victoria and had these discussions several times. They are something that Ambulance Victoria has said they will give consideration to—those scripts.

But before COVID hit our regional services they were already under strain, and most regions could not be confident that a code 1 event would be responded to within the 15-minute benchmark. Across Northern Victoria's 27 local government areas paramedics attended 16 995 callouts to code 1 emergencies in the 12 months to 31 December. That in itself is an enormous strain on those very systems, on our paramedics, on the ESTA call service. This was up 9.6 per cent on previous years, which highlights the extremely large numbers that we are seeing. I would also like to in fact reiterate something that Ms Terpstra said: if it is not an emergency, please do not call 000, call Nurse-on-Call. I have actually asked my staff to make sure that that is on our newsletters, because I think it is important to continue to get that message across: if it is not an emergency, do not call 000.

It was approximately a year ago that it took almost 18 minutes on average for an ambulance to arrive at a code 1 emergency callout in Northern Victoria. Now that average response time has expanded to 19 minutes and 26 seconds. Now, 1 minute and 26 seconds probably does not sound like a lot. However, if you are having a heart attack or it is an absolute emergency, that time frame can be the difference, unfortunately, between life and death. I feel for our local paramedics and for the ESTA workers, and I have no doubt that they are working under constant pressure. They are often called on to do overtime and to work extra shifts. The public scrutiny does not make it easy and the work is

tough. I will just reiterate: this is not a condemnation of those workers at all. This is looking at a way in which we can fix this problem. For people trying to get through to ESTA, such as the case recently where a call went unanswered for 33 minutes—another person with chest pains waited 14 minutes for someone to pick up the phone—their panic, pain and fear can hardly be imagined.

These issues are being reported, unfortunately, nearly every week. It gives me no pleasure to give you a case study I was told about on Monday to illustrate this point. Last Sunday was a beautiful day to enjoy boating up at Mount Buffalo, which is in my electorate of Northern Victoria. In thinking about this landscape, it is important to note here that there is no internet or phone reception outside of emergency calls. This case that was reported to me was of a young adult who had severe sunstroke. After about an hour of helpful bystanders trying to treat this person, their condition progressed to hallucinations and vomiting as well as periodically passing out. At this point they called an ambulance. Their call was answered. The timing of that does not appear to be too much of an issue. They were told by ESTA not to move the patient and that an ambulance would be dispatched, but they were not told how long it would take or what alternatives they could pursue. I believe there was no recommendation to call Nurse-on-Call and no suggestion to transport them to the hospital that was 15 minutes away. They were told to stay put and wait. The phone call ended, and wait they did.

Another bystander suggested they put the person in the car and take them to the local hospital, knowing that an ambulance would be a long time coming. The people who took responsibility for this person did not take that advice on the basis that ESTA had told them not to move the person. In the end, some 2 hours into the overall incident, some local nurses walked past and thankfully offered their assistance. In the meantime the people trying to help this person had been back on the phone to ESTA, frantic because the patient's condition had deteriorated significantly and they were in and out of consciousness. The nurses' advice to these people was the same as that given by the bystander more than an hour earlier. They basically said, 'You won't get an ambulance out here' and recommended they take the person to hospital themselves. Thankfully that local advice was heeded. The person was treated at the local hospital and is now recovering, but only when the nurses suggested that they be driven to hospital did the ESTA workers suggest that would be okay and cancel the ambulance.

I think it can also be difficult for the ESTA call takers to know and understand the topography that these patients and the paramedics are working with. None of these people were trying to treat this person; that is the point of calling emergency services. The call at the start probably was not a code 1, but the person was clearly very unwell and needed treatment. It makes me wonder why, in a fairly remote area with no mobile phone reception and limited ambulance resources, they were not given different options or terms of advice. These people did not even know what Nurse-on-Call is; they had not heard of it. There was not even Dr Google available because there was no internet connection. All they had was ESTA's advice. So I would also encourage community members, when they are going into those areas where there is no internet connection, to have a plan organised for if something does happen. This is an enormous lake where people go waterskiing all the time. Have a plan.

For a life-saving service where every minute counts, every day counts in terms of fixing this system. I recognise the questions put to the minister yesterday and her commitment to improvements at ESTA, including more resources and more support. The Auditor-General provides a very valuable service to our public agencies, to our Parliament and to our state, and we feel this referral is appropriate given the challenges being faced by ESTA and the ambulance service. For a service that is taking up to 4000 calls a day, it is extremely important. We recognise that there is a review being run by former Victoria Police chief commissioner Mr Graham Ashton, and I hope the outcomes of that review will be made public and deliver some immediate solutions to the government. The government should also welcome a review by the Auditor-General. Every step we take towards understanding the issues and how the system can be improved will help protect the lives of our residents.

I will leave my contribution there, but I commit to keep bringing the issues to the government and to working with them, with Ambulance Victoria and with ESTA on the needs of Northern Victoria and what we can do to make improvements. There is no doubt here that lives depend on it.

Ms TAYLOR (Southern Metropolitan) (11:00): I concur with my colleagues and I think the sentiment to some degree in the chamber that this is actually a really, really important topic. It is actually good to be able to discuss these issues, and to get more facts on the table can only be helpful when we are talking about saving lives and extremely difficult circumstances that inevitably people, in spite of all the best efforts, will experience in their lifetime. It is likely to happen. Emergencies come and go as they do.

I want to address some points, though, that have been raised in the chamber that were of concern to me because I was not sure exactly how far they were going to be taken. I actually think there is some peril in some of the comments that have transpired from those opposite in the chamber today. One of the comments was somehow casting aspersions on encouraging people to use 000 for emergencies. What is wrong with people using 000 for emergencies and making it really clear what that service is for, noting that the purpose of that service is to ensure that those people who need that care can get through and can get the care they need? I do not understand, and I have been reflecting on it for the last few minutes as to why there is something wrong with our government encouraging those using a 000 line for emergency circumstances. So I really do think it is quite irresponsible of the opposition, and specifically Mr Davis, to somehow infer that there is something wrong with using 000 for emergency circumstances, noting that this specific service is prioritised for people in emergency circumstances—sorry, there are a lot of services and circumstances there—in an emergency situation, who absolutely need that care and support. So can we please resile from casting aspersions on the premise upon which a 000 service is provided, because I find that to be very irresponsible and inappropriate, and I think there is nothing wrong with helping the community to understand and reinforcing the purpose behind that service also to ensure its sustainability into the future.

I also took exception—and I think many of us have—to aspersions which you cannot back away from. If you say, ‘Graham Ashton, no, he’s not going to cut the mustard. We want this other person’, and then say, ‘Oh, no, no. We’re not casting aspersions, no, but we don’t want Graham Ashton’, what are you saying? You cannot have it both ways. He has had a very esteemed career. And let me say, that review has not been completed yet, but it is almost complete, so let us allow the process. It is like, ‘Oh, we’ll start a review, but we don’t want an answer; start another review, we don’t want the answer; start another review, we don’t want the answer’. Well, what is the point of that?

Further to some of the points that our Attorney-General was making, can we actually get the outcomes of the review, because we are not resiling from anything here. That was the other claim, that somehow we are running away from this issue when in fact we have fully endorsed a review. We are looking at this with a fine-tooth comb. It is in all our interests to always be ameliorating this kind of very specific and very critical service, so for goodness sake, let us allow the review to unfold, let the outcomes of the review be revealed and let the government actually attend to and actually examine the outcome of the review and in so doing be able to critically evaluate exactly where we are at with ESTA now and into the future on top of all the other actions that are already underway, because we are not only waiting for that review. I think it has already been stated in the chamber that there are many, many other actions that are well underway right now.

I think we should also take care—and I think it was very sensitively communicated—that when you are in this specific kind of emergency role, having to take life and death situations and make appropriate decisions with very little time, you do need a particular disposition. And even then with that disposition, we are all human and over time these things can take their toll on human beings, so it does require an enormous amount of resilience. So I extend, as I think many have here, my utmost respect for those who are willing and able to take on that kind of role. I am not sure I could necessarily take it on myself. I do understand, having known some people who work in those circumstances, you have to remain literally cool in a crisis, and I am not trying to play with words there. It is a particular kind of human being that is able to undertake that role, and I would hope that whilst on the one hand it is very important to have this kind of debate, on the other hand we are not then having a sledge at our very precious, I should say, staff in ESTA and Ambulance Victoria in particular. That is a concern

that I have—that when this debate is politicised, as I think we can very well see it is, there is a risk that for those who are at the front line and are doing these very difficult tasks on behalf of all of us, we somehow diminish or depreciate the calibre of or the respect for their role, and I would hate for that to be the case.

Particularly that is added to when you start saying, ‘Oh, Graham Ashton, no, he doesn’t cut the mustard’. So what are you saying? He has worked in emergency services—‘Oh, but that’s not good enough for us, because we want someone really, really, really, really, really, really independent’. So what is that? Where is that defined? Nobody has defined that here—and nothing against the Auditor-General in any respect either. Of course, he or she has their role in any case. But at the same time, no-one here has absolutely clarified why. ‘We just don’t want this person’. Well, that is actually not good enough. You have not given good reasons as to why we should not take on board the review that is being conducted by an esteemed former police commissioner. You have not given good reasons, and frankly I find it quite insulting to the very difficult and critical task that he is undertaking at present to think that it is okay and that you can dismiss it as, ‘Oh, no, we’re not being negative, we just want this. We don’t want that, we want this, because it suits our political narrative’, because I think that is what this is about.

Now, on top of that, they are always ready to run away from the fact that we have been through a pandemic. We are not resting on our laurels with that, but you cannot ignore the fact that across the board, staff, whether they are in ESTA or in other areas of the community, have had to be furloughed as well. It just adds extra pressure, and to discount these kinds of factors is also irresponsible. But it is kind of consistent, if we go back to that political narrative, with casting aspersions around masks, associating with anti-vaccination protestors et cetera: ‘On the one hand we’re all about health, we’re all about the community, but on the other hand we’re happy to send these mixed signals when it comes to taking specific action to protect the health of the community’. So on the one hand sledging at Graham Ashton, sending mixed signals about health but trying to be the noble ones in this debate—really unacceptable. Having said that, I am glad we are having this debate today, but I hope it lands in the right place and you will understand very clearly why we are opposing this motion, because you have not even allowed the review to complete as a starting point, let alone all the other unfair criticisms that have been thrown across the chamber today.

Mr ONDARCHIE (Northern Metropolitan) (11:09): I rise today to speak on Ms Crozier’s motion 699 around the operation of ESTA, and I have to say I am a little bit gobsmacked by Ms Taylor’s contribution to the chamber right now, because this government just will not admit that the system is broken. They will talk about everything else apart from the fact that the system is broken. Lives have been lost. People have been in trouble. It is a systematic failure. But in saying that, I want to pay tribute to the operators, the staff at ESTA. Working under the pump, they are doing a pretty good job, and our ambos are working to full capacity as well. It is not their fault. It is not the operators’ fault. It is not our healthcare workers’ fault in the hospitals. It is a problem with the system, and the standard operating procedure of this government is they will not admit it is wrong and it is broken. They will talk about everything else apart from the fact that it is broken.

Mr Finn: They just won’t take responsibility for anything.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Let us not forget, picking up Mr Finn’s interjection, they refuse to take responsibility for anything.

Let me say, let me remind us, that Daniel Andrews has been either the Minister for Health or the Premier of this state for 12 of the last 16 years. You cannot get away from the fact that if there is a failure of this system, it is his failure. So let us start where we should start: admit, government, that the system is broken. Admit that there are systemic failures in the system. Daniel Andrews is more interested in closing playgrounds without evidence, putting in curfews from 9.00 pm to 5.00 am without evidence, talking about mandating a third jab in Victoria without any evidence, making a whole lot of decisions around our health system without evidence—and then, when asked, the chief

health officer said, 'Well, I wasn't asked. Nobody asked me'. So either he gets evidence or he does not. But the only evidence that exists today is that the system is broken, and we need to admit that.

But what do the government do when they will not acknowledge the system is broken? They blame Victorians. They say, 'It's not our fault, it's Victorians' fault. They're ringing the wrong phone number'. Now, these people might be distressed. They might have some mental health challenges. It might be a genuine emergency. These could be older Victorians. There could be vulnerable Victorians who are ringing this number looking for some solution. And the answer from the government is, 'Well, stop ringing us. Ring someone else'. It is a systemic failure, and the government is failing to admit it. This is another failure of this government. There is a list of them, but I am not going to spend the chamber's time listing the failures of this government because it is so obvious.

Every day there is a problem in this state, and Daniel Andrews says, 'It's not my fault; it's somebody else's fault'. During the pandemic, which Ms Taylor talked about, he blamed someone with a ventilator. He blamed someone in Argentina, I think it was. He blamed everybody else but himself. And when it came to private security guards and hotels, he said, 'I don't know. I don't recall'. This is a man who has a reputation for total control of his government. Ask the backbenchers, ask the parliamentary secretaries, ask the ministers: they do not get a say—he decides it all. And that came from the mouth of a minister—he decides it all. So how is it possible that we put private security guards into quarantine hotels and rejected the ADF and Daniel Andrews said, 'I don't recall'?

This is a failure of this government, and one thing is very, very clear: Victorians have lost trust in this government—and rightly so. They trust the government to look after them or get out of the way; this government does neither. I support this motion.

Mr ERDOGAN (Southern Metropolitan) (11:13): I rise to speak on the motion before the house, and I will be opposing the motion for a number of reasons, some of which Ms Taylor has already reflected on, especially the concerns about the direction of the debate here and the politicisation of our emergency services. I think that is the most concerning part. Nonetheless, I have been heartened by a number of the speeches given here today, which have given me an opportunity to reflect on the amazing work that ESTA workers and Ambulance Victoria do and on emergency services overall. Mr Bourman touched on earlier his lived experience in the police force of how they interact with other emergency services and what they experience and what challenging environments they work in. That was heartening to hear, because I think sometimes we can lose sight when we are in this place, especially when there is a political overlay to the discussion. Nonetheless, I think there is no doubt that our health system not only in this state but across the country and globally has been affected by the pandemic, and it has had far-reaching consequences, which have been discussed here at length.

But it is also important to understand that as a government we have responded. The minister, Minister Symes, who is doing an amazing job as Attorney-General and also as Minister for Emergency Services, has explained that we have hired an extra 43 staff in response to what is happening—43 staff on the floor at ESTA by the end of the month, and we are not stopping there. Training courses are full. With an extra \$27.5 million of funding last October for ESTA, they can continue to recruit with confidence, knowing that there will be permanent roles at the end of that training. The funding also allowed ESTA to put in place a number of immediate initiatives late last year in response to the surge in demand.

This is what has already been done by this government: offering overtime shifts to all workers and recalling operational employees seconded into projects across the organisation to help meet demand; re-skilling police and fire call takers to take ambulance calls during peak demand; rolling out the Save 000 for Emergencies campaign; working with Telstra to introduce a recorded voice announcement when calls are received to encourage non-emergency callers to seek alternative assistance, which has contributed to a drop in demand of as much as 5 per cent; and working closely with Ambulance Victoria on new shorter scripts for peak times and sharing call data with Ambulance Victoria so that paramedics are aware of the increased demand.

Victoria is unique in Australia—in fact, rare in the world—in that we have a single, centralised authority responsible for police, fire, ambulance and State Emergency Service call taking and dispatch. So it is a world-first and a world-leading service, and that is why it is disappointing when some people try to talk down our services. They do amazing work, located at three locations—one of which is in my electorate, Southern Metropolitan, in East Burwood, one of the call and dispatch centres. People are sitting at desks coordinating and making sure the service is delivered. It is amazing work they do. They answer millions of calls. In 2020 they answered 2.7 million calls. But I mean, what is critical here is what we are hearing, that there has been an increase in code 1 dispatches to these kinds of extra-critical events and that is why it has put extra strain on the services at hand. What is important is that is what has occurred, but we have responded—that is what you need to understand here. The people that undertake this work, we know they do it with the utmost care and commitment. It is a difficult job and it is a challenging role, but probably unless you have worked in emergency services it would be difficult, unless you have lived experience, to relate to what they are doing.

I did notice, and many Victorians will recall because it was not that long ago, the state opposition's record with Ambulance Victoria—Mr Davis and Ms Crozier's record about how they handled Ambulance Victoria and our ambos. I am not going to reflect on that.

Mr Finn interjected.

Mr ERDOGAN: Mr Finn, you are interjecting. I will focus back on the motion at hand, and the motion at hand is Ms Crozier's motion, which is, I feel, very politicised and biased. Debate about the issues about emergency services is needed because, like I said, they are critical to the safety and security of all Victorians, but there have been many opportunities for them to raise this in a more respectful manner. The minister has always stated that she welcomes conversation in a respectful manner.

I do note that the state opposition's interest in these matters is here for everyone to see: there are none of them in the chamber. Not one person from the Liberal-National parties is in the chamber, and it is only Labor MPs and a number of the crossbench that are here. Mr Meddick is here; he is very interested. Mr Gepp is here, and Minister Tierney is here. It is Labor and the crossbench that are here, but the state opposition have no interest. They have brought this before the house about an important, critical service that is needed for the safety and security of Victorians, but they are not interested in the actual debate. They just want a few talking points and a few headlines. They want to talk down the services. They want to talk down the people doing this critical work, which is disappointing. It really is disappointing, because the minister has said she is open to having a conversation in a respectful manner, but still not one person of the opposition is here to hear the debate. So I am lost for words, really, because I thought that they were interested.

Ms Tierney interjected.

Mr ERDOGAN: That is right, Ms Tierney. That is right. They came here and cast aspersions on a number of people working in critical services and made reflections on their performance and then they just abandoned it. They are not even in the chamber. They have come, had their bit, and they have walked away. They have walked away from people in emergency services, from people in Ambulance Victoria, but it is not the first time. As I said, they have got a record of this. When they were in government last we remember how they treated our paramedics and ambulance services, so I am not surprised. Like I said, it is disappointing that they would do it this way at such a critical time when we are dealing with a global pandemic and when people on the front line of health services in our state, in our country, are working tirelessly. They are working overtime, cancelling holidays, cancelling secondments and coming back to work in the critical field on the front line. In the end the opposition is not interested in that. They are not interested; they have just walked away from the critical services and the critical employees in our emergency services and at ESTA.

What does ESTA do? I guess it is important to understand that they provide a 24-hour emergency call-taking dispatch service for police, fire, ambulance and VICSES. That is critical. Those are the most

critical services that our state provides; it is usually when people are in situations where it really is an emergency that they contact these services. You need to understand that they are carrying over 31 million radio calls over the metropolitan mobile radio service also. They provide 3 million data transactions on the data network and deliver 1.4 million messages to CFA, VICSES and Ambulance Victoria volunteers and staff via the statewide emergency alerting system. So that is how critical they are to our state's emergency infrastructure, but the state opposition is not interested in that. They are interested in casting aspersions on people that work in the sector unfairly.

I am glad that we have been able to support their efforts by securing supplies of rapid antigen tests, something that the federal government forgot about, and working closely with these agencies to implement appropriate operating procedures throughout the pandemic. It has been challenging at times and the health directions and guidelines have changed as this global pandemic has evolved, but in Victoria I am proud to say that we have done an amazing job in trying to decrease their workload through our high vaccination rate. And the high vaccination rate did not just occur; it happened because of the health rulings that were made, the directions. So I want to take this opportunity to thank all the workers that helped in the rollout of vaccines across our state. You know, almost 95 per cent are double dosed. It is fantastic, and that has assisted our emergency service employees in terms of trying to manage the workload.

Some on the crossbench would know all about those people who have been campaigning against vaccines, against this medical treatment, and putting all sorts of conspiracy theories out there which are reducing the trust in our institutions at this critical time. It is disappointing, because Mr Ondarchie touched on people losing trust in institutions. I wonder why, when people are spamming and trolling online, spreading misinformation. No wonder people are losing trust in our institutions. On that note I will conclude my speech.

Mr QUILTY (Northern Victoria) (11:24): I will be brief. In October 2021 Nick suffered a heart attack. Calls to 000 took 15 minutes to reach an operator; it is meant to take 5 seconds. Paramedics arrived more than 25 minutes after the call for an ambulance was made, and it was too late.

The state of our 000 service is abysmal. Many calls are not answered in time. ESTA staff report that wait times of over 5 minutes occur daily, with delays of up to 30 minutes in some circumstances. The government wants to blame this on COVID, but we have had COVID for two years now. We have known this was coming. This is the result of long-term structural failings.

I raised issues about ambulance delays as far back as March 2019, well before COVID even hit. Many regional Victorians, even after they get through to ESTA, face a long, long wait for an ambulance. What might be a shocking story in Melbourne is life as usual in too many parts of regional Victoria. ESTA workers are understaffed and overburdened, and it is costing lives. And in the middle of the staffing crisis the government sacked a bunch of ESTA workers because they were not vaccinated, clearly showing that ideology matters more to this government than saving lives.

Victorians are paying more tax than any other Australians, but it is clear that money is being wasted. The Victorian service is even trying to cover its staffing shortfall by seconding staff from New South Wales ambulance services. If COVID was the issue, the New South Wales service would not have the operators to spare. We heard yesterday and again today the government blaming people calling 000 for non-urgent matters for the delays. Maybe if the government had not spent the last two years whipping so many Victorians into a panic over COVID, there would be less trivial calls being made.

This problem should not be so hard to sort out. Surge capacity needs to be created. If, as we have just heard, this is the only service in the world that is run like this, perhaps there is a reason for that. If we actually want to sort out these issues, we should not be afraid of the Victorian Auditor-General's Office investigating, we should welcome it. Only a government focused on spin over substance would oppose a proper review of these problems. The Liberal Democrats will support this motion.

Mr GEPP (Northern Victoria) (11:26): I rise to speak on Ms Crozier's motion before the house today on ESTA. I have got to say that you listen to many things in this place on many different debates and you just scratch your head. You scratch your head a bit, don't you? I have heard the opposition through the course of this debate talk about how wonderful ESTA is, the fantastic work that ESTA staff do: 'It's not their fault, it's somebody else's fault'. And what they do, over the last few years in particular, certainly under Mr Davis's leadership in this house, is they walk in here time after time and target public officials, slander them, attack their character and attack their work and then in the next instant walk in here on a different day on a different motion and start to applaud people.

In my mind he is 'the thong'. That is his new title in this place: the thong. You know, there are a couple of different variations of what the thong is. I will leave you to conjure up the one that best suits Mr Davis in your mind, but he flip-flops, in my view. He just flip-flops from one to the other—but either picture would suit, I have got to say. That is how interested in this motion this mob actually were—that when Mr Erdogan was on his feet making his contribution there was not one member of the coalition present in this chamber, on non-government business day, to participate in the debate.

Mr Ondarchie: I was here.

Mr GEPP: No, Mr Ondarchie, no-one was here. Those benches were empty, and the video does not lie. Those benches were empty. There was not one, not one. That is how much the coalition are actually interested in this debate. They are not interested in this debate. What they are interested in is cheap political pointscore. That is all they are interested in.

Mr Ondarchie talked about how 'Firstly, you've got to admit that there are mistakes'. This government has a record of constantly reviewing all of the important and essential services that we have in this state. We are not afraid to have people look into the services that we provide Victorians and give recommendations to the government for consideration. Last October we announced that Mr Graham Ashton, one of the great Victorians in this state, who had an esteemed career with Victoria Police, would conduct a review into ESTA to look at the services that it offers, to look at the capabilities that it offers.

Ms Taylor in her contribution talked about the tabling of that review. The handing down of that report is not too far away. But that is not good enough for those opposite, because now Mr Ashton has just joined the long list of people from our public services—our public officials, who serve Victoria so well over their careers—that Mr Davis has just added to. Clearly in his mind Mr Ashton is not good enough to conduct this review. Mr Ashton is not qualified. Well, bunkum to that, because he is.

I want to refer back very quickly in the last few seconds that I have got to Mr Bourman's contribution, a very short but passionate and concise contribution, where he said that until you have walked a mile in the shoes of an ESTA worker, the call takers, you need to be very, very careful to understand the sort of work that these people are undertaking—the great work, the great service that they provide to the people of Victoria. I want to lend my voice, as so many others have here today, and thank those people for the wonderful work they do. They do a marvellous job. It is a difficult job. It is a tough job. I cannot imagine the circumstances they deal with on a daily basis, and unlike Mr Davis I will not stand up in this place and trash their work. I reject the proposition.

Motion agreed to.

Business of the house

NOTICES OF MOTION

Mr DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan—Leader of the Opposition) (11:32): I move:

That the consideration of notice of motion, general business, 689, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Committees**LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE***Reference*

Dr CUMMING (Western Metropolitan) (11:32): I move:

That this house requires the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by no later than 1 July 2022, on the effects of COVID-19 on the physical and mental health of Victorians, including but not limited to:

- (1) the provision of mental health services;
- (2) the number of suicides;
- (3) the number and type of presentations at:
 - (a) hospitals;
 - (b) general and allied health practitioners;
 - (c) pathology services;
 - (d) diagnostic services;
- (4) the effects of delays in surgery and diagnostic services, if any, to the Victorian health system and to the health of Victorians;
- (5) the health and learning impacts of school closures on children; and
- (6) any other matter the committee considers relevant.

I rise today to speak to my motion, which is motion 692. We all know that COVID has affected the physical and mental health of Victorians, but what we do not know is exactly how much it has affected them and what the effects on our health system will be as we continue to recover. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has reported a rise in the use of mental health services and an increase in psychological distress. Lifeline had their busiest three days in their 57-year history in August last year. They had seen an increase of 32 per cent in the calls that they had received in Victoria compared to two years ago. A survey commissioned by Suicide Prevention Australia showed that 15 per cent of people directly knew someone who had attempted or died by suicide in the last year. One in four knew or knew of someone who had tried to or had taken their own life in the past year.

But it is not just adults; our children are suffering as well. We have GPs telling us that four out of five young patients between the ages of 10 and 18 are coming in with mental health problems. The majority are depressed and are talking about suicide and self-harm. Many psychologists have closed their books and are not taking any new patients. Waiting lists are for months and months. And according to the latest Coroners Court data, eight girls under the age of 18 died by suicide between January and July last year, compared to only one in the same period the previous year and three the year before that.

Two parents contacted my office, both of them having lost their teenagers to suicide in the previous week. Tragically these are not the only suicides that I know. My children have lost friends in the past year, and friends of mine have lost their children. According to a report in the *Australian*, hospitalisations of young people for mental health emergencies are up by 57 per cent in the last year in Victoria. Kids Helpline recorded 30 per cent more calls in the first six months of 2021 compared to the same period of 2020. Professor McGorry is warning of a shadow pandemic stemming from the mental health issues of younger Australians.

Then there are the effects on our physical health. We have yet to know the effects that the delays in dental services, the delays in diagnostic services and the delays in surgery are going to have on all Victorians. Patients are getting sicker while they are put off seeing doctors or accessing diagnostic services. Modellers in the UK estimate the excess of cancer deaths is going to be way higher than COVID deaths. With a lower COVID death rate in Australia, our levels of cancer deaths could be even more marked. Researchers at the University of Melbourne, the Royal Melbourne Hospital, Peter

MacCallum Cancer Centre and the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute have predicted the most significant impact to be from melanoma, followed by lung cancer, breast cancer and bowel cancer. They said:

A six-month delay in cancer diagnosis and treatment is estimated to result in nearly 350 deaths and cost the Australian healthcare system \$46 million.

A reduction in the number of breast cancer diagnoses has been reported nationally and internationally during COVID, especially in the lockdowns. People are not coming forward with signs and symptoms that could indicate cancer. Some are reluctant to attend clinics for the fear that the government has created. Patients were frightened, especially older patients and those with existing health conditions. Screening programs had reduced accessibility and activity. One Melbourne breast cancer surgeon reported her referrals down 70 per cent during the second lockdown. For patients with cancer, delaying surgery has the real potential for some patients' tumours progressing from being curable to not curable. We have had delays to surgery across the board. It has been stopped, starting at 50 per cent capacity, stopping again, then only in private hospitals—you can watch the media consistently for updates.

We currently have nearly 81 000 patients waiting for elective surgery. Nearly 2000 of those are urgent, requiring surgery within 30 days. Waiting time figures are not available, but we do know that you have to wait for an average of 25 days for a coronary artery bypass graft. That has been steadily increasing since COVID, and we know emergency departments have been pushed to their limits, as have ambulances. The president of the AMA has said that he is reasonably confident that every COVID patient that needs an ICU bed or ventilator will get one, but he said also he was not seeing any preparation to continue normal health care at the same time. He is more than worried about all the other health care that has been stopped or pushed aside in order to look after COVID patients. Only last week a Productivity Commission report showed that we spend less money per person running public hospitals than any other state in the country, with fewer beds, fewer staff and longer waiting times in emergency departments, and only 62 per cent of Victorian patients in the second most serious emergency category were seen on time, compared to 79 per cent in New South Wales or 71 per cent for the national average as a whole.

We need to have access, and we need to know the toll that COVID has had on the health of all Victorians. By conducting this inquiry we can have access to that toll as well as the demand on our health system going forward. It will allow us to listen to practitioners across the health sector, to hear their views and to see the effect the last 18 months has had on them and their patients. This gives them parliamentary privilege when at times they are feeling that, if they come forward, they may lose their registration under the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. For them to be able to come to this inquiry and to be able to have that parliamentary privilege is very important.

The government will tell us that the new Pandemic Declaration Accountability and Oversight Committee will be able to do everything that I want this inquiry to do. Let me be blunt: it cannot. That committee cannot investigate or even question anything that happened in 2020 or 2021 under the state of emergency. It has no retrospective powers. A lot of this information is probably out there, but it needs to be pulled together. We need this inquiry to provide us with critical information that will allow us to plan a way forward and to ensure that the financial resources are properly allocated, and we need it before we head into the next winter.

I want to make this clear to others on the crossbench: obviously what I have heard from the government is that they are not going to support this inquiry. They are putting out misinformation that the current pandemic oversight committee can do everything that I am requesting.

Members interjecting.

Dr CUMMING: No, it cannot, and the reason why the committee cannot is that it has been established under legislation and it can only be changed by legislation and a legislative amendment, so they are unable to change the scope of the committee. So if anyone comes in here today and actually says that the current pandemic oversight committee can do what I am requesting in this inquiry, they

are wrong and they will be lying to the broader community and to themselves. We all know that the broader community has been wanting a royal commission. We cannot do that, but we can do this inquiry.

The other excuse that I have heard around why we cannot do this inquiry at this time is that that committee is full. Well, it would seem that the chair of this committee was able to put a self-referral for a far-right inquiry. Is the rise of the far right more important to the Victorian community than what has been going on in the pandemic in the last two years? Is it? Is this the government's priority—not actually to have an inquiry into what has gone on which we can learn from?

And I will say this to the chair of that committee. She has said this before: 'I can't have a particular inquiry because the committee is busy'. But, guess what, a couple of months later, or even, I would not be surprised, next week or the next sitting week, someone will request an inquiry and it will be put onto the committee. So it is about priorities. When we had the contact-tracing and tracking inquiry it was most beneficial. It is probably one of the only real inquiries that we have had around the pandemic and health that has been referred to a committee to actually have outcomes that we could benefit from during this pandemic.

A member interjected.

Dr CUMMING: Well, that is the distinct problem here. The community has been crying out for the public health advice. They want to see it. We all believe that the public health advice has been verbal. There is not any. There is nothing there, and the government has been making it up as it goes along. The Premier believes that every presser is the public health advice. Now, is the community happy with that? Or do they actually want an inquiry where they as the community can come out and actually put forward their lived experience and put in a submission to the inquiry? Or doctors and nurses could actually come forward and put in a submission, or members of Parliament could be called upon, such as the previous health minister. She could come here to this inquiry and actually put forward evidence under parliamentary privilege. Is that what the government is scared of?

Now, we also know that there are many things that this government has not spoken about that the community would like to bring up in this inquiry—things around stopping surgeries and elective surgeries but also having the information for why they could not visit their elderly family members, why they could not go to a funeral, why they could not cross a border, why we are being mandated to have vaccines or why children are wearing masks in schools. Why haven't we had COVID-ready kits? Other places around the world have actually given people COVID-ready kits so they can actually take something while they are suffering from COVID at home. Why haven't we had any preventative services? Why haven't people had those services at home? It would be great to hear from the community's lived experience through COVID and sitting at home with COVID and what we could learn from that to make it better. I know that many in the community who have had COVID have been not happy with the services that have been provided or have had no contact from the department. We could actually then allow for the vaccine injured to come forward and to actually show the Parliament the adverse reactions. Our dental services—people could actually come forward to show what the delays are and what has actually happened. So I am not sure why the government feel that they cannot allow the community and other practitioners to come forward and why they would not support this inquiry. You would believe that they would want to have this inquiry prior to the possible next variant, possibly before next winter.

This is timely. I have had it on the agenda in different forms for the last 12 months. For 12 months I have wanted an inquiry into COVID. This is what the community demands. They want to see the public health advice, they want to see written public health advice. They want to see what makes up the daily Dans, and they want to know why it is contradicting other health advice. Why are we going down a path of requiring three vaccinations before you can work? Why can you come into Australia with two vaccinations but not get into Victoria? Those little things—micromanaging this pandemic the way that the government has rather than allowing the community to make their own health choices,

recommending rather than mandating. These are the problems that are going to continue to cripple our health system. Why is it that from 15 October all of the health workers that were working through the pandemic without vaccinations could not work?

The pandemic has hurt nearly every industry. We have crippled every business due to the mandating, and we will continue to cripple business when other parts of the world are getting on with life. The UK and Denmark have dropped all mandates, and they have allowed the community to live with COVID. We were told that once we got to 90 per cent vaccination we would be allowed to live with COVID, but the government continues to move the goalposts—and the community wants to know why. They want to know why, when the government says one thing and they have done the right thing—they have got themselves fully vaccinated—we cannot just live with COVID. Do not let me start about rapid tests and throwing members of Parliament out of this place and COVID passports. Let us hope that the government has a change of heart and let us hope that the crossbench here do not come up with the government's excuses for why we cannot have an inquiry.

Dr KIEU (South Eastern Metropolitan) (11:52): I rise to speak to the motion put by Dr Cumming. At the outset as a government we do not support the motion. But may I begin by acknowledging that we are still in the midst of a pandemic, and I want to take this opportunity to thank all the medical staff, the public health officers, the ambulance officers and particularly the Victorian public for their sacrifice and resilience for the last two years with the challenging situation that we are all in, the global pandemic.

As a government we make no apologies for keeping the Victorian community safe. The government continues to follow the science and the expertise of our public health team, including those of the chief health officer, to keep our community safe and to get out of this pandemic. As we all remember, last year, 2021, we the government introduced new pandemic-specific legislation that provides a framework to ensure that Victoria can effectively manage the global pandemic and also manage any future pandemics which may—who knows?—be coming in the future. Under this new legislation the state of emergency in Victoria is no longer required for managing the global pandemic. On 15 December 2021 a pandemic declaration made by the Premier took effect when the state of emergency ended, and this current pandemic declaration will expire at 1 minute to midnight on 12 April—in about two months time.

Now, the responsibility is on the minister, who has considered and will consider not only the health factors impacting on the lives and the health of Victorians but also the non-health factors, including social, economic and mental wellbeing, in order to issue any pandemic orders. Since the new arrangements the minister has issued 42 pandemic orders. This includes the new ones, the changes and the renewal of orders in order to keep our public health and wellbeing safe and sound and keep our public health system functioning. These orders are published online within seven days of the order being signed by the minister—not only the orders but also the chief health officer's advice. Also accompanying those are the minister's reasons for making changes to orders and a summary of the human rights assessment in issuing these orders.

These arrangements are the most transparent and accountable in Australia and provide Victoria with certainty that we can continue to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. The measures of transparency and accountability include the joint parliamentary investigative committee which will have parliamentary oversight of any pandemic orders and also the Independent Pandemic Management Advisory Committee, which is able to review pandemic orders and provide advice to the Minister for Health. The parliamentary committee may also report to either house or both houses of the Parliament if it is considering a pandemic order or an instrument that expands or varies or revokes an order that does not appear to be within the power of the minister as conferred by the act, is without clear and express authority conferred by the act or is incompatible with the human rights set out by the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities. The parliamentary committee may make recommendations it considers appropriate, including that an order be disallowed, after it has considered advice from the Independent Pandemic Management Advisory Committee.

During the pandemic, for the last two years and ongoing, there have been many concerns about the impact on the mental health of the public. It is noted that the pandemic is a global one and also an unprecedented and very difficult and challenging event which has impacted across our state. Victorians have increased their use of crisis and support lines substantially during the pandemic. Victorians have also used more Medicare benefits—scheduled mental health items—than other states or territories. We were pleased to see the commonwealth government expand the allowance for mental health plans and subsidised psychological support for Victorians during the pandemic, and we will advocate for the continuation of this expanded program. Indeed we will continue to press for its permanence in light of the ongoing mental health impact of the pandemic. Mental health presentations at emergency departments as a proportion of all emergency presentations were also up during the pandemic.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

EMERGENCY SERVICES TELECOMMUNICATIONS AUTHORITY

Mr LIMBRICK (South Eastern Metropolitan) (12:00): My question is for the Minister for Emergency Services. In early October last year I was contacted by workers from the Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority. There were a group of workers concerned about vaccine mandates. As with other people I have spoken to, they expressed a range of concerns, including being vaccinated but feeling like they were having their privacy compromised. They were also concerned about the ability of the organisation to cope if they were sacked, claiming there were over 30 employees affected. They were passionate workers who were proud of the work they did serving the Victorian community and supporting their colleagues through a particularly stressful role. Earlier today the minister recognised this, reflecting on how wonderful these workers are and how they should be celebrated. I had the pleasure of meeting several former workers from ESTA when attending a protest last year. They were very upset about losing their jobs just as we experienced unprecedented demand. I was informed that the deadline for the mandate was 15 October last year. My question for the minister is: how many of these staff had their employment terminated due to the vaccine mandate?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:01): I thank Mr Limbrick for his question and again the opportunity to talk about ESTA and the fantastic service they provide the community and the amazing types of people that work in those organisations. Like in many workplaces and communities impacted by the pandemic, it was important for the health, safety and wellbeing of all of those people in all of those settings that particular decisions were made, including requirements for vaccinations to be able to be on site in certain settings. This applied to, of course, many health and emergency services settings, and included this chamber passing a similar motion to give similar effect.

Unlike you, I have only heard from one former employee of ESTA who raised concerns about not wanting to comply with the requirements that his colleagues were prepared to comply with, so I would say that these are operational matters in relation to how many people are out, but it is very small numbers. I have asked the question about the impact on service delivery, and this has not been an issue that is considered to be impacting on ESTA's other performance issues. The staff that are out I think are very, very small, and I would encourage them if they want to come back to consider getting some health advice in relation to their vaccination options. But it is not a factor that has been attributed to any of the issues that we are focused on improving in relation to ESTA's performance.

Mr LIMBRICK (South Eastern Metropolitan) (12:03): I thank the Attorney for her answer. I met at least half a dozen on the street, so there are at least that many. I was also informed when talking to these workers and talking to other workers who have lost their jobs due to mandates that rather than face termination and have that sort of black mark on their resume they instead chose to resign before the mandate deadline date. The minister may not be able to answer this on the spot, so she might have

to take it on notice, but how many ESTA workers resigned in the two weeks prior to the 15 October deadline?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:03): Mr Limbrick, I will have a look at what information I can get to you, but I would be a bit concerned about the fact that people do not have to provide a reason for resignation, so the data might actually not be particularly helpful or useful in responding to your specific queries. I will have a look at it and see if there is anything else I can get to you. But, again, these are operational matters. It is not appropriate for me to intervene too much, but I can seek some information and see if there is anything that I think may be of interest to you.

VICTORIAN REGISTRY OF BIRTHS, DEATHS AND MARRIAGES

Mr DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan—Leader of the Opposition) (12:04): My question is to the Attorney-General. Minister, will you confirm that Labor's 40th new or increased tax, gazetted on Monday, is a whopping 50 per cent increase in the cost of birth, death and marriage certificates, in effect a tax on celebrations and grieving?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:04): Mr Davis, there is so much wrong with that question, but to even imply that a fee is a tax is quite extraordinary. I can confirm that as per the gazette there are increases to the provision of certificates from births, deaths and marriages. This will align more closely with a cost recovery model, which is a custom-and-practice way of dealing with fees in relation to government expenditure and government services across the board.

For members' information, BDM will change the certificate fees from \$34.30 to \$51.40 for legal certificates. This fee change only applies to legal certificate purchases, with births, deaths and marriages registrations continuing to be processed at no cost. The change will be applicable from 1 March. Registrations are free; it is the certificates that require a fee, and it will still be one of the lowest in Australia. We have been tracking extremely low compared to other jurisdictions. For example, comparative certificates in New South Wales are currently \$60. The increase will ensure that we can sustain and maintain improved delivery for these services that Victorians rely on.

Most recently I visited the Craigieburn note-printing facility, which is producing and providing new state-of-the-art secure paper to BDM and to other jurisdictions in Australia to combat identity theft. This is innovation that is amazing and is employing Victorians to produce this tamper-proof and identity theft proof material, which will be of interest to other jurisdictions, including international customers, for that new innovation. So, yes, Mr Davis, there are increases. These are appropriate in the circumstances which I have just outlined.

Mr DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan—Leader of the Opposition) (12:07): 'A fee is not a tax' is what I think you said, so we will just record that. Minister, will you confirm that this money—\$3.5 million per year—will go directly into consolidated revenue and be used to pay for Labor's waste and mismanagement?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:07): Mr Davis, it is important for births, deaths and marriages, as I have said, to operate a model that is as close to cost recovery as possible. This is important and a responsible measure that the government should take. Many of the ways that government brings in money direct it into consolidated revenue so that it can be appropriated to where it needs to go, including the operation of births, deaths and marriages so people can continue to register births, deaths and marriages and receive those important certificates to prove their identity or indeed hang on the wall as a mark of celebration.

MINISTERS STATEMENTS: TAFE LGBTIQA+ EQUALITY

Ms TIERNEY (Western Victoria—Minister for Training and Skills, Minister for Higher Education) (12:08): Last Sunday the Victorian TAFE network marched for the first time at the Midsumma Pride March. Staff and students from across Victoria came together to celebrate diversity and send a strong message that TAFEs are inclusive of every Victorian. You could not miss the contingent, with the fantastic TAFE Victoria rainbow banner, rainbow flags and the TAFE-branded pride T-shirts, and you definitely could not miss our TAFE ambassador, Ms Terpstra, who was in rainbow gear from head to toe. I am proud of the TAFE network for stepping up and organising their own contingent. I want to pay particular tribute to GOTAFE, which led the organisation of the network for the day. This is what TAFE is about. Every Victorian, regardless of their background, is welcome at a TAFE. We still have more work to do to make our TAFEs even more inclusive and welcoming, but having the TAFE network marching at Pride is such an important signal of their commitment to diversity and inclusion.

We have also seen TAFEs step up in other ways to ensure they are LGBTIQ+ friendly environments. Chisholm TAFE proudly celebrates and hosts events for the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Interphobia and Transphobia. GOTAFE were the first TAFE in Victoria to fly the rainbow flag at their campus throughout the year. These are just two examples. Building more inclusive TAFEs and Learn Locals is a critical priority of the new Victorian LGBTIQ+ strategy. We are not wasting any time to deliver that. Equality is not negotiable in Victoria, and it is not negotiable at our TAFEs.

COUNTRY FIRE AUTHORITY WANGARATTA BRIGADES

Ms MAXWELL (Northern Victoria) (12:10): My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, there is currently no dedicated CFA incident control centre within the city boundary of Wangaratta. The CFA district 23 headquarters building, which also hosts the Emergency Management Victoria Wangaratta incident control centre, had to be evacuated late last year due to damp and mould, and the district 23 leadership team needs a new premises to meet their needs. You have correspondence from them and me in this regard. Senior CFA volunteers have raised with me their significant concerns that the Wangaratta incident control centre has been offline for the 2021–22 fire danger period. The 16 CFA brigades of the Wangaratta group have no permanent facility in Wangaratta at all to date. What assurances can you provide, Minister, to the Wangaratta district 23 area that these issues will be urgently addressed?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:11): I thank Ms Maxwell for her question, something that I am very much across. I know a lot of the volunteers in Wangaratta, obviously, having worked with them for more than seven years. I recently had the pleasure of opening the brand new SES facility in Wangaratta, which was a fantastic investment from the Andrews Labor government following some floods and the identification of inadequate services there for those volunteers to operate, so I am very aware of the issues in relation to Wangaratta. We have some meetings just this week to further discuss these matters. As you have indicated, you have written to me, and so have many of the brigades. I have met with them in person. Most of them, as I said, I have a longstanding relationship with, so this is ongoing work. But I am not in a position to give you any further information in relation to funding or the like. It is an ongoing matter that I am very well across.

Ms Maxwell: I have no supplementary at this time. My question was going to be about meeting with those members themselves.

BUSHFIRE PREPAREDNESS

Ms LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:12): My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. Victoria has no active night-time aerial firefighting capability as the state enters its highest risk bushfire period. In a move that has left frustrated firefighters fuming, Australia's aviation regulator has

confirmed that the state's application for night water-bombing operations is still being assessed, having only recently been lodged. An Emergency Management Victoria spokesperson told the *Herald Sun*:

Night firebombing remains on track to be trialled in February pending CASA approval ...

Minister, why is this only a trial when your press release prior to the summer trumpeted Victoria's night fire aviation capabilities?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:13): I thank Ms Lovell for her question. At the outset you commenced your question with 'Victoria has no active night firefighting capabilities'. It is true. Australia does not have any active night-time fire aerial capabilities, and it is here in Victoria that we are leading the charge.

We have an amazing aerial fleet here in Victoria, with up to 30 pieces of aircraft. I went and visited some large air tankers in Avalon during January to listen to the pilots. I was there with Andrew Crisp, emergency management commissioner, to learn about the capabilities that they have, including water capabilities and how much they can carry, and it is pretty amazing what they have done with the aircraft there. It is true that for the first time we have the Chinook here in Victoria. It is Victoria's largest and highest capacity helicopter, and it is operating in Victoria for the first summertime season. This is a pretty phenomenal piece of equipment for those that are interested in big things that fly in the air. I am pretty sure Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips would probably be quite interested in this and know a little bit more about Chinooks than I do. But this is a fantastic piece of equipment that will continue to supplement our aerial fleet.

It is true that the night fire aviation program trial continues. We lodged the paperwork with the Civil Aviation Safety Authority in October, and we hope that that will be available soon. In the meantime we will continue to trial throughout February as usual, pending this approval. I am very proud of the firefighters on the ground. What this fleet enables us to do is provide particular additional support for them through being able to reach hard-to-reach circumstances or indeed provide massive amounts of water on fire, which is the most effective way of reducing fire. I hope that that CASA approval will come soon, because the Chinook will be able to fly at night—that is what one of its assets will be—but in the meantime it can still continue to assist firefighters in the event of an emergency, pending that approval.

Ms LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:15): Minister, in your answer you just told us that Victoria does not have any night firefighting capability—in fact you said Australia does not—so then why did your press release prior to summer trumpet Victoria's night fire aviation capability?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:16): The capability is there. We just have to wait for the paperwork. For me to communicate what a Chinook can do is really, really important. I think that this is going to be an amazing asset, and to date we have not had the need for night-time aerial bombing, thankfully. When we have got the equipment there, I hope it does not have to go in the air at all. That is actually the best outcome. But I know that with the hardworking efforts of the people that control our aircraft—as I have said, there are 50 that are available—we are well prepared for this continuing fire season in 2022.

MINISTERS STATEMENTS: LEARN LOCAL AWARDS

Ms TIERNEY (Western Victoria—Minister for Training and Skills, Minister for Higher Education) (12:17): Recently I was joined by parliamentary secretary Cesar Melhem to celebrate the achievements, resilience and commitment of students, teachers, trainers and industry partners in the Learn Local sector. It was a wonderful gathering of exceptional people. All have worked together in these extraordinary times to empower students to gain the skills that they need to pursue further education or great skills that are aligned to our workforce needs and creating jobs in local communities.

I was proud to also be joined by Ro Allen, a former chair of the Adult, Community and Further Education Board and current Victorian equal opportunity and human rights commissioner, to present

Omer Ntunzwenimana with the Ro Allen Award for skills for life and study. Omer epitomises what can be achieved by studying at a Learn Local. He arrived in Australia as a refugee just over three years ago, and in March 2020, when we were all facing the impact of COVID-19, he commenced conversation and reading cafe classes at Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council. In less than two years his confidence and skills grew. He now has been accepted into La Trobe University's bachelor of arts and is majoring in sociology. Omer's great learning journey started with his local Learn Local.

I would like to congratulate each and every finalist of the Learn Local Awards for their outstanding achievements in 2021. In 2022 Learn Locals will continue to empower students to create opportunities for people to contribute to Victoria socially, culturally and of course economically.

COVID-19 TESTING

Dr CUMMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:18): My question is to the Minister for Education in the other place. The use of free rapid antigen tests in schools has been expanded into kindergartens and child care. Children over the age of 12 are encouraged to conduct their own tests, while parents will have to test younger children. A number of the RATs contain a chemical called sodium azide, which may be toxic to animals if ingested. The safety data on this chemical recommends wearing of gloves and avoiding any contact with your skin. The coronavirus website includes an instruction sheet and a video, and there are no gloves worn. Minister, why has no warning been provided to parents in the video and the instruction sheet regarding the safe storage, handling and disposal of the rapid testing kits?

Ms TIERNEY (Western Victoria—Minister for Training and Skills, Minister for Higher Education) (12:19): Firstly, President, I seek your guidance as to whether it is the Minister for Education or it is another minister.

The PRESIDENT: It is in question because it goes to schools, and we are talking about rapid tests and education, unless you take it on notice.

Ms TIERNEY: I would have thought that it would be the Minister for Health. But leaving that to one side, I am prepared to refer it to the Minister for Education for his consideration and for him to get back to you, Dr Cumming.

Dr CUMMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:20): I look forward to a minister responding to my question, and I do hope that the Minister for Education does not say it is the Minister for Health. I would love a fulsome response on behalf of our children and animals. I should also mention that the RSPCA has warned about the possible harm to animals that could be caused by these tests. A government video has been provided to assist parents, saying nothing about the safety, disposal or storage. The fact sheet provided says to dispose of the kit into household garbage, but not the recycling bin or the drainage system. Surely used kits should be safely disposed of in hazmat bins. Maybe members of Parliament should have these bins in their electorate offices and allow the public to actually dispose of them appropriately. Minister, are schools provided with these hazmat bins to allow for the safe disposal of the rapid antigen tests?

The PRESIDENT: I am really having a problem with that supplementary. I do not think it is related to the Minister for Education at all.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Dr Cumming, I told you I am struggling with the supplementary, and I am trying to work it out to give you another chance so you can direct your question to the minister.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Dr Cumming, as I said to you, the first question I have allowed to the Minister for Education, and the minister took that on board and will come back with an answer. The

supplementary I am struggling with unless you want to direct it to the Minister for Education, because you cannot have two ministers on the same issue. So it is your choice, or I will rule it out.

Dr CUMMING: President, I will take your advice around the ruling to make sure it goes to the appropriate minister. I believe that it would be the Minister for Education, seeing that the rapid antigen test is for children. This is what we are talking about: the safety of small children and animals at home that the government is handing out these kits to, that we are making sure they are provided with appropriate information about wearing gloves because it is a chemical, plus provided with appropriate information on where they are meant to be disposed of. My question is: are the schools providing those hazmat bins so parents can bring them back? And I have also said, if the government—

The PRESIDENT: Thank you. That is okay.

Ms Pulford: On a point of order, President, this question goes to the welfare of animals and manufacturers' instructions on a product approved by the Therapeutic Goods Association, which falls under the administrative remit of the federal Minister for Health. Minister Merlino is a wonderful Deputy Premier and a fabulous education minister, but he has no responsibility for the welfare of little animals in homes, and I would encourage you to draw some reasonable boundaries about questions in question time.

The PRESIDENT: I gave Dr Cumming a chance to come back with a different minister, and she came back, and I agreed the supplementary is in order.

Ms TIERNEY (Western Victoria—Minister for Training and Skills, Minister for Higher Education) (12:25): In respect of the supplementary, my answer is the same as I gave to the substantive. I will refer the matter to the Minister for Education, whilst I recognise that the Department of Education and Training takes its advice on these matters from the Department of Health.

BOAT RAMPS

Ms BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:25): My question is to the Minister for Local Government. Minister, two metropolitan councils on Port Phillip Bay receive over \$100 000 per annum to subsidise maintenance on two boat ramps as part of the state government's policy to remove launching and parking fees, which were, as the councils have stated, charged for maintenance. In effect the state government is now paying maintenance costs. If we compare this, however, to East Gippsland Shire Council, which has 24 boat ramps, and Wellington Shire Council, which has 18 boat ramps, both receive nothing for maintenance from the state government because they have never charged launch or car-parking fees. Minister, do you think it is fair that the wealthier metropolitan councils are getting subsidised for boat ramps and car park maintenance when small rural councils with lesser rate bases do not?

Ms Pulford: I raise two points of order, President. One is that the member is asking Minister Leane for an opinion. The other point is that the minister responsible for the free boat ramp commitment is Minister Horne.

The PRESIDENT: Thank you for that information, Minister. Ms Bath, I ask you to direct your question to Minister Horne. Minister Pulford is representing Minister Horne.

Mr Davis: On a point of order, President, the minister does work with each of the local councils that are administering this grant. Each of those councils is administering this money as it goes out to those particular ramps, so it is appropriate to ask about this process.

The PRESIDENT: The minister has already indicated to the house who the responsible minister is, and I have given an instruction to Ms Bath to redirect her question to the minister.

Ms BATH: I would like to actually direct the question to the local government minister in relation to: the local government minister has to define—

The PRESIDENT: Ms Bath, are you changing your question? The question has already been put, and I have asked you to redirect it to Minister Horne, please.

Ms BATH: As you wish, President: to Minister Horne.

Ms Pulford: On my second point of order from earlier, President, the member is asking for an opinion, so perhaps I would seek your guidance about how asking Minister Horne for her opinion on this question is within our standing orders before I take the question for her to provide an answer, because it would seem that we are not allowed to do that.

The PRESIDENT: Ms Bath, can you reword your question, but leave it to Minister Horne, please.

Ms BATH: My question goes to Minister Horne, and my question specifically is: is it a fact that Minister Horne is directing funds to wealthier metropolitan councils rather than small regional councils?

Ms PULFORD (Western Victoria—Minister for Employment, Minister for Innovation, Medical Research and the Digital Economy, Minister for Small Business, Minister for Resources) (12:29): I thank Ms Bath for her question to Minister Horne, to which I will seek a written response in accordance with our standing orders. I am sure Minister Horne looks forward to providing Ms Bath with an update on the successful delivery of that very important election commitment.

Ms BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:30): In relation to boat ramps and looking specifically at boat ramp funding, there are a number of boat ramps in Eastern Victoria Region. Specifically at Nowa Nowa the boat ramp still needs upgrading, as do a number of them. It seems to be quite unfair that local metropolitan councils are getting significant funding but these specific councils are always scratching for additional funding. Going specifically to the Nowa Nowa boat ramp, what will the minister do to provide support and ongoing funding to councils and East Gippsland council to upgrade these really important tourist facilities?

Ms Pulford: On a point of order, President, apart from the fact that the words ‘boat ramps’ appear in the substantive and supplementary question, they do not relate to one another at all.

Mr Davis: They do.

Ms Pulford: They do not. I am telling you they do not. The first question was about the removal of fees and the other question is entirely separate to that, so I would encourage you, President, to rule this out. I think they need to go back to question time school.

Mr Davis: On the point of order, President, this is clearly about the fairness of funding across the different municipalities. The minister has a whole bureaucracy that deals with fairness in funding to councils, and in the case of these councils it is entirely appropriate to ask about whether it is fair and what steps will be taken to address that fairness, including building a boat ramp at one specific location.

The PRESIDENT: I will come back to this. We will move on.

MINISTERS STATEMENTS: LIVING LIBRARIES INFRASTRUCTURE PROGRAM

Mr LEANE (Eastern Metropolitan—Minister for Local Government, Minister for Suburban Development, Minister for Veterans) (12:32): I would like to update the house on the libraries that have successfully received funding through the latest round of the Living Libraries infrastructure fund. One great thing about the Living Libraries infrastructure fund is that small rural councils are not required to provide matching funding, so small towns do not miss out on library upgrades and new services. That means we will see that Skipton, Numurkah, Euroa and Ararat libraries will be able to offer 24-hour access for locals to drop off and pick up library books.

I was really lucky to get up to some of these announcements where there is funding going to these projects. It was great in recent weeks to visit the Sir John Gorton Library at Kerang. I have got to say, the CEO and the mayor of Gannawarra gave Mr Gepp a huge wrap-up in their speeches for his

advocacy for this project. At Rosanna Library with Anthony Carbines, the librarians he knows very well there were so happy. I was at Hampton Library with Mr Erdogan, a great local MP as well. I think the thing that we appreciate the most is speaking to librarians and hearing what they have done for the community in the last 20 months. It is amazing what they have done supporting the community during tough times, and that is why we are so happy when we can support this sort of funding for libraries that obviously is about so much more than supplying books. They are actually really critical social hubs, and we are so fortunate to have the staff that work in them and to have 277 libraries across the state and a number of mobiles as well.

BOAT RAMPS

The PRESIDENT: Minister Pulford, I have looked at the supplementary and I am allowing the supplementary. Do you want to answer that, please?

Ms PULFORD (Western Victoria—Minister for Employment, Minister for Innovation, Medical Research and the Digital Economy, Minister for Small Business, Minister for Resources) (12:34): With respect, President, that is a stretch, but I will seek a written response from Minister Horne.

BUSHFIRE PREPAREDNESS

Ms LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:34): My question is for the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, aircraft previously approved for night firefighting operations are currently available but were overlooked after operators of these aircraft spoke out in a suppressed report into the culture and safety of Victoria's aircraft management. Minister, why has a damning report into the culture and safety practices of Victoria's aerial firefighting program been suppressed? What is there to hide?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:35): This is a good opportunity to continue conversations on the aerial firefighting capability here in Victoria. As I said, there is a fleet of 50. We also have the capacity to draw on other aircraft that might be provided to private operators and the like to supplement the fleet, so amazing are the aircraft capabilities that support our hardworking firefighters that are on the ground.

In relation to night fire bombing, as I indicated, the Civil Aviation Safety Authority are looking at the capabilities for Chinook. There are important requirements for them to go through. All staff and crew undertake additional safety training and appropriate certification before undertaking night operations. All of this is ongoing work because, as I indicated, we really want to see night firefighting capacity here in Victoria, and that will lead the way for other states to follow.

Choices around aircraft are not matters for the minister; they are operational matters and they are made in conjunction with our emergency services personnel, including Emergency Management Victoria and indeed the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. So on the matters you referred to, I do not go and choose the planes; there are other people that do that.

Ms LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:36): The fact that the minister did not mention the report and why it has been hidden tells us a story in itself. Minister, do you have full faith in the culture and safety practices of Victoria's aerial firefighting program?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:36): Ms Lovell, the firefighting area of our emergency services in Victoria play an important role, and I have got to say the feedback from the community on the service when a plane is dispatched to provide assistance to firefighters on the ground is nothing but positive. Most recently the LAT aircraft was deployed to fires around New Year's Day out in the west of our state. They did five return trips from their base to deploy retardant on that fire. It is an important asset. The 50-strong fleet is a really important asset, and I thank those important staff for their continuing work. We actually have quite a few people that come from overseas, sort of on loan, as our summers change with the Northern Hemisphere. They give up a lot to come here and work to support our Victorian communities and protect them, and I thank them for that work.

Ms LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:37): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

BIRTH CERTIFICATES

Ms PATTEN (Northern Metropolitan) (12:38): My question is for the Attorney-General, and it relates to birth certificates. Currently in Victoria we do not allow a person who does not fit a very narrow and conventional relationship description to be listed on a child's birth certificate. They have to be a spouse or they have to be living together on a domestic basis. For example, a constituent of mine wants to donate sperm and actively co-parent but they are not in a traditional relationship. We discussed this in this chamber last year and I understand the department was doing some work on it, but we still seem to be hitting a brick wall with the Attorney-General's department on this. I am just wondering if you can offer me any information about the progress of any amendments to the Status of Children Act 1974 in this regard.

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:38): I thank Ms Patten for her question. Something I am really interested in is exploring more reforms for certificates. Dr Cumming has raised similar issues as well. At the moment I have got a range of views, a range of different changes that people want, and I need the opportunity to bring them together. The work is ongoing, and I do not have any specific announcements in relation to that, except to confirm that I have a personal commitment to this.

I know that the justice working group—the one that Harriet co-chairs—have been lobbying me on similar types of reforms as well. I have got to say there are a range of advocacy groups that are talking to me about births, deaths and marriages, the provision of certificates and the information that is on them. As you would have heard from Mr Davis's questions, my priority is on making sure that the services that BDM provides now are up to scratch. We have had COVID impacts, so there are some operational issues that I want to bed down, but I am interested in some changes that bring about greater inclusion and equality for all Victorians and recognise the diversity of our families.

Ms PATTEN (Northern Metropolitan) (12:40): Thank you, Minister. When it is about parenting and it is about birth certificates, there is an essence of time in that and people really are hoping to sort it out. I note that the only way my constituent can get remedy on this is via court order, and that is generally done through the Children's Court. It is a fairly protracted process, so by way of supplementary: is there a way that your department might be able to look at ways to expedite or streamline even that court process for people seeking this type of remedy or seeking to be added to a birth certificate in the lead-up to amendments to the act?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:41): I cannot give a firm commitment on the order of priorities. As I said, there is a lot in that space and I want to make sure that we give due consideration to all of the ideas that are going around, because I have got to say most of them are really good. The department is looking at all of them, and I will seek an update following today's questioning and see if I can give you any more information, but I do not have anything to hand apart from a keen interest and the fact that the department is certainly looking at these issues.

MINISTERS STATEMENTS: COMMERCIAL TENANCY RELIEF SCHEME

Ms PULFORD (Western Victoria—Minister for Employment, Minister for Innovation, Medical Research and the Digital Economy, Minister for Small Business, Minister for Resources) (12:41): I rise to update the house on support that our government is providing to small and family businesses that are continuing to do it tough as a consequence of the omicron spread throughout the community in recent months. Last week we finalised new regulations under the commercial tenancy relief scheme that will extend its operation until 15 March. Under the updated regulations, eligible commercial

tenants with an annual turnover of \$10 million or less who have suffered a decline in turnover of at least 30 per cent due to COVID-19 will be able to access the scheme. Commercial tenants need to demonstrate their decline in turnover by comparing January 2022 with January 2020.

As with previous versions of the scheme, landlords will be required to provide proportional rent relief to their commercial tenants in line with the reduction in turnover. Of the balance, at least half the rent must be waived, with the remainder to be deferred. The freeze on rent increases will continue, as will the moratorium on evictions. The vast majority of landlords and tenants will continue to negotiate in good faith, as has been a hallmark of this scheme in its two previous iterations, and in doing so will most of the time reach agreement. The Victorian Small Business Commission provides information and free mediation to tenants and landlords if help is needed for the parties to reach an agreement. Eligible commercial landlords will continue to receive support from the Victorian government, with more details on a new round of the Commercial Landlord Hardship Fund to be announced shortly.

WRITTEN RESPONSES

The PRESIDENT (12:43): Regarding questions and answers today: Mr Limbrick, one day, supplementary to Ms Symes; Dr Cumming to Mr Tierney, two days, question and supplementary; and Ms Bath, two days, question and supplementary.

Mr Davis: On a point of order, President, on the Deputy President's second question's first part asked about the report and the release of the report, the minister did not actually answer that at all.

The PRESIDENT: I will have a look.

Constituency questions

SOUTHERN METROPOLITAN REGION

Ms CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:44): (1597) My constituency question is to the Minister for Public Transport, and it is in relation to the lack of shelters at tram and bus stops in the Hawthorn electorate. I have been contacted by several constituents who have raised the issue of the lack of shelter at tram stop 48 on Riversdale Road in Camberwell, tram stop 36 on Riversdale Road in Hawthorn East and the bus stop at the intersection of Daphne Street and Canterbury Road in Canterbury. The lack of shelter means constituents are often in the elements for extended periods of time, leaving them exposed to both rain and heat. This not only discourages commuters from using public transport but also diminishes the travelling experience for those who are dependent on public transport. Minister, the question I ask of you is: will you commit to the construction of safe and purpose-built shelters at the locations that I have outlined above and respond to the needs of Hawthorn commuters?

WESTERN METROPOLITAN REGION

Ms VAGHELA (Western Metropolitan) (12:45): (1598) My constituency question is directed to the Minister for Employment, Minister for Innovation, Medical Research and the Digital Economy, Minister for Small Business and Minister for Resources, the Honourable Jaala Pulford. My question relates to the portfolio responsibilities of employment. The Victorian government is making sure that supermarket shelves are stocked by linking thousands of jobseekers with food suppliers to reduce critical workforce shortages. Major supermarkets including Coles, Woolworths and Aldi, along with wholesaler Metcash, are working with Jobs Victoria to fill staff shortages with people looking to find work. The roles available include pick packers to assemble online orders, night fillers to restock shelves, cashiers, delivery drivers and forklift operators. The program has already seen an overwhelming response, with thousands expressing interest in the jobs. My question for the minister is: can the minister please provide me with an update on how residents of Western Metropolitan Region who are looking for employment can express their interest in filling vital roles?

SOUTHERN METROPOLITAN REGION

Mr HAYES (Southern Metropolitan) (12:46): (1599) My constituency question is to the Minister for Planning. Minister, I have been contacted by many Stonnington residents who are outraged by your Christmas Eve present: a dubious 26-metre-high development at 196 High Street, Windsor, rejected both by Stonnington council and by VCAT. Locals have said it is another unnecessary, unwanted, undesirable and unsuitable development. Also, the minister's statement suggests an important consideration in favour of the development is that its construction would provide jobs. If this is an overriding consideration, I am appalled. The group of over 100 locals have asked why the planning minister has given the green light for this controversial development, ignoring the decisions of two regulatory bodies, and they ask: what is the point of residents, council and VCAT following the planning scheme only to be completely ignored and overridden by undemocratic processes such as this one?

NORTHERN VICTORIA REGION

Ms LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:47): (1600) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. My continued advocacy for the construction of the Shepparton bypass is in stark contrast to the Andrews Labor government's lack of commitment to the project. State funding of \$10.2 million was committed in the 2017–18 state budget to finalise planning for stage 1 of the Shepparton bypass and to upgrade the intersection of the Goulburn Valley Highway, Wanganui Road and Ford Road by installing a roundabout. The Andrews government took four years to complete the business case for the bypass project, and to date not one sod of turf has been turned to commence the intersection upgrade. While the government has shown no interest in the bypass project, the minister needs to inform the Greater Shepparton community when he will deliver on the promise to upgrade the intersection, a project that was funded nearly five years ago. Will the minister provide a time line on when the upgrade of the intersection of the GV highway, Wanganui Road and Ford Road will be delivered?

NORTHERN VICTORIA REGION

Mr QUILTY (Northern Victoria) (12:48): (1601) My constituency question is for the Minister for Water. Goulburn-Murray Water services a large portion of northern Victoria, providing bulk water storage and supply services. I have been contacted by a constituent from Browns Plains complaining about the unjustifiable charges from Goulburn-Murray Water for his licence to take and use water from an unregulated local aquifer under his property which he maintains and for which he pays all running costs. His complaint to Goulburn-Murray Water landed on deaf ears, leading him to my office. With a copy of his latest water bill, it is clear to see that the bulk of the charges are made up by a string of service fees that clearly do not apply to a groundwater user. My constituent is aware of the need to pay the cost of maintaining his licence, which is minimal, but argues that almost the entirety of this bill is made up of unfair charges. Minister, how can Goulburn-Murray Water issue an invoice to a groundwater licence holder full of charges for things they do not provide or pay for?

NORTHERN METROPOLITAN REGION

Mr ONDARCHIE (Northern Metropolitan) (12:49): (1602) My constituency question today is for the Minister for Police. People in Fitzroy are concerned about protecting our parks, the illegal dumping of rubbish, graffiti and antisocial behaviour, and I want to thank the many residents who responded to my recent Fitzroy community survey. Peter wrote to me and said that graffiti in North Fitzroy, Nicholson Street, is an eyesore and that no-one in government is interested in addressing the issue. Fitzroy North is a wonderful community. The parks are beautiful, and they have been a vital asset to the community during these periods of lockdown. They need to be protected. The question I have for the minister is: will the minister commit to extra police patrols to better deter illegal dumping in local parks like the Merri Creek trail, McKean Street and Rae Street and graffiti in St Georges Road, Nicholson Street, Queens Parade around the shops and between Barkly Street and Holden Street?

Fitzroy residents care for their community, and they want a safer and cleaner suburb in which they can raise their families.

EASTERN VICTORIA REGION

Mr BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (12:50): (1603) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. On Princes Highway around about Gumbuya World there are a multitude of speed zones now. It goes from 100 to 80 to 100 to 80 to possibly 70 to 100. I believe this was instituted after a serious accident, but there has also been a serious accident since then. It is also quite annoying, and I have found that the traffic is ending up doing quite a lot of different speeds in the same zone, because some people see the signs and some people disobey the signs. Anyway, it has become quite a large mess. So my request is that the minister initiate an inquiry urgently to try and sort out at least a consistent speed that is not just always the lowest possible denominator and fix the problem.

WESTERN METROPOLITAN REGION

Mr FINN (Western Metropolitan) (12:51): (1604) My constituency question is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. Motorists in Melbourne's west are at boiling point. They are sick to death of the gridlock created by the ongoing and incredibly slow construction of the ill-fated West Gate Tunnel Project. A project that is billions of dollars over budget and years behind schedule does nothing to ease the fury of thousands of motorists trying to traverse the west every day. My constituents have had a gutful, and I do not blame them one little bit. The West Gate Tunnel Project has been one stuff-up after another. What a debacle! The havoc it has created for local people is totally and completely intolerable. My question is the same one on the lips of many tens of thousands of my constituents: when will this West Gate Tunnel farce end?

NORTHERN VICTORIA REGION

Ms MAXWELL (Northern Victoria) (12:52): (1605) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. Incompatible radio networks between emergency services in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia make communication between border brigades near impossible. Back in 2004 the national inquiry on bushfire mitigation and management supported the alignment of emergency services communications between the states. The 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements report notes that little progress has been made in the 17 years since. The former Walwa CFA captain noted recently that after 45 years in the CFA the communication systems remain incompatible and requests for basic upgrades to equipment and facilities have been ignored. Lack of action on this issue is frankly dangerous for residents in border communities and hampers the tactical capacity of local emergency services. So my question is: will the government commit to a time line and finally sort this out?

WESTERN VICTORIA REGION

Mrs McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:53): (1606) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety and relates to the concerns of residents about the state of the C161, the Carlisle-Colac Road, specifically around Black Bridge. The terrible accident on that bridge involving truck driver Michelle Pillar has tragically been followed less than three weeks later by a fatality only 1 kilometre south. The biggest problem with this road is inadequate width, and that compounds other problems. On a narrow road, crumbling edges and overgrown vegetation are even more dangerous. This is not a local road, it is a VicRoads arterial route used for farm machinery; heavy vehicles, like milk, timber and livestock transport; commuters; tourists; and even brave cyclists. What it needs is reconstruction and proper maintenance, not speed limits. Minister, when will you commit to a proper review of this road to widen it in sections and to proper maintenance, including vegetation clearance and resurfacing?

WESTERN METROPOLITAN REGION

Dr CUMMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:54): (1607) My question is to the Minister for Health in the other place from a resident in Cairnlea. Her daughter has suffered mental health issues for a

number of years. She has an eating disorder, self-harms and has tried to commit suicide on numerous occasions. She was placed in a ward at Sunshine Hospital as there were no beds available in a psych ward. During her stay she tried to commit suicide again. She now has a security officer outside her ward. My constituent is desperate and is trying to have her daughter placed in a facility in Queensland. She asks: why are there not enough mental health beds in the west?

EASTERN VICTORIA REGION

Ms BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:55): (1608) My question is to the Minister for Health. This is on behalf of a constituent who has lived with debilitating pain with respect to a hip replacement since 2020. He has lived on painkillers from the start of 2021—morphine patches; 24-hour painkillers. His health deteriorated to the extent with that 24-hour pain that he lost 18 kilograms. His surgery had been cancelled four times in 12 months, to a point where his fantastic local doctors and the surgeon deemed that it was not elective surgery; it was actually life-threatening and he needed to have that surgery completed. So he did—the surgeon pushed him through and he was able to get that right at the end of last year. He is sick and he is recovering. Minister, why is Victoria still in a code brown situation?

EASTERN METROPOLITAN REGION

Dr BACH (Eastern Metropolitan) (12:56): (1609) Over recent days I have been engaging with an outstanding community advocate in Ringwood, Ms Cynthia Watson. Ms Watson is a long-time local councillor, former mayor and now the Liberal candidate for Ringwood. She has been engaging intensively there with small business owners like Mr Bill Halvaxis, who owns Bean in the Woods in Ringwood Square. Like so many small business owners he has not only done it very tough through this period but has also given back to the community. Ms Watson was regaling me with tales about the wonderful program run by Mr Halvaxis to provide free meals to people experiencing homelessness. Ms Watson is of the view, and I am also of the view, given that my broader electorate takes in Ringwood and Ringwood North, an area I know well, that there are specific issues affecting small businesses in Melbourne's east that require a more nuanced approach. We have spoken recently in this place about greater support for small businesses in New South Wales, and my question is to the Minister for Small Business: what specific and nuanced support will she provide to small businesses in my electorate?

Committees

LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Reference

Debate resumed.

Dr KIEU (South Eastern Metropolitan) (12:57): I continue my contribution now from the latest Victorian Agency for Health Information report of 25 October last year. Even though the number of emergency department presentations is still high compared to 2019–20 for those aged 0 to 17, overall the number is now below the levels in 2019 and 2020. The government is committed to the reform of mental health, and the record-breaking investment in the recent state budget provided \$3.8 billion to kickstart the next decade of reform of mental health services.

I could go on and talk a lot more about the government's commitment and record on supporting health, mental health and all the social and economic issues during the pandemic, but I would just like to touch very briefly on suicide rates. Each death by suicide is one too many and has a very strong impact on family, friends and communities. They can be very devastating. We must continue to work together to reduce suicide with our efforts involving communities and health services too. The latest monthly report from the Coroners Court on suicides, of 15 November last year, shows that so far we have had 34 fewer deaths than at the same time in 2021, and also the year-to-date figure is the lowest since 2017.

My colleagues may go on and talk more about that. In the interests of time I want to say that we do not need a parliamentary inquiry to tell us the number and the types of presentations in hospitals

because the information sought is already publicly available on the Victorian Agency for Health Information website. I would invite anyone interested to visit the website to see the many different reports on ambulance services, hospital admissions and discharges, emergency care, elective surgeries and other information. *(Time expired)*

Sitting suspended 1.00 pm until 2.04 pm.

Dr BACH (Eastern Metropolitan) (14:04): I am very pleased to rise to join the debate on this incredibly important motion that Dr Cumming has put on the notice paper. I want to thank her for doing so. It has been good to have discussions with Dr Cumming over recent days about the content of this motion, and I want to indicate for the benefit of the house at the very outset that the opposition parties will be wholeheartedly supporting Dr Cumming's motion.

In her motion she calls for, of course, a new reference to the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into a range of really important matters. She is after more data when it comes to the provision of mental health services, the number of suicides and the number and type of presentations at hospitals and at allied health pathology and diagnostic services. In particular today I want to focus my remarks upon point (5). Point (4) is also very important, and I dare say we will hear more anon from Ms Crozier on this point:

the effects of delays in surgery and diagnostic services, if any, to the Victorian health system and to the health of Victorians;

So I will leave point (4) to my honourable friend. I will focus more on point 5:

the health and learning impacts of school closures on children ...

which have been so significant. The chief argument from those opposite in their opposition to this motion seems to be that we do not need any more data, we do not need any more information. Dr Kieu was clear on that. Now, that struck me as an odd position to take given that it is directly at odds with the position that Mr Merlino, the Deputy Premier, the Minister for Mental Health and also the Minister for Education, has taken recently. I read in the *Herald Sun* the other day that:

Mr Merlino said the state government was interested in gathering more data on children's mental wellbeing, but wasn't sure whether this should be collected through NAPLAN testing as has been proposed ...

by some. So Mr Merlino is in fact in lock step with the medical experts here, including the experts at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute. During my contribution I will speak about some of the views put forward by the Murdoch Children's Research Institute in a seminal report that that body issued some months ago, last year, and also in a new report issued just earlier this month. In that report the experts at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute specifically call for more data, greater information, about the matters that Dr Cumming's motion goes directly to the heart of, especially when it comes to point (5). At the conclusion of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute's new COVID-19 research brief they say that there are research gaps, and the institute calls for more:

... data to identify children requiring intervention and ongoing care, as we move through the pandemic

Dr Kieu said we need no more data. That is not what Mr Merlino says, and it is not what the Murdoch Children's Research Institute says. The list of research gaps goes on:

Surveillance data on children's mental health to align policy efforts in this area with need including level of severity, population risk and geographic concentration

Intervention studies with robust evaluation designs to address the gap in disparities because of the pandemic

Clarification of factors building resilience in children and families—

so important given the content of this report that I will come to momentarily—

Targeted studies on the indirect effects on first Nations children—

which have been severe—

Building evidence base for online resources and intervention

Screening program for mental health and wellbeing on return to school to identify kids in need of support.

So if the chief argument against this motion from the government is that, ‘Well, we don’t need any of this information; it’s all available publicly’, well, that is the opposite of what Mr Merlino says. That is the opposite of what the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute says. And in this new report from the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute we hear about the very significant health and learning impacts on children of, in particular, school closures—to come very directly to point 5 in the motion before us today.

I will work my way through in chronological order just two or three of the key points in this new report. What the new report says is that the impacts on health and learning of school closures are to be ‘long lasting’. In an earlier report the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute said that COVID is of course a risk to children. What the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute says is that when children get COVID they are either asymptomatic—so they have no symptoms at all—or they have symptoms ‘similar to a cold’. Now, before any members jump down my throat, those are not my words. It is a direct quote of the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute: children are asymptomatic or they have symptoms ‘similar to a cold’.

Previous reports from this institute have found that by far and away the greatest risk to Victorian children right now is not COVID-19, but it is ongoing lockdowns and ongoing school closures. These policy levers pulled time and time again by the Andrews Labor government have caused massive harm to children, and the experts say that we do not yet understand the depth of that harm. We must carry out further work in order to understand that to then put policy responses in place. That is all the motion before the house today is calling for, and that is why every single member of this house is duty bound to support it.

It is interesting that over the period of this pandemic the Murdoch institute and various other eminent health bodies have pointed to rising inequality, something of course that those opposite say they care deeply about, and I do not doubt that many of my friends opposite do care deeply about it, as we do on this side of the house. Interestingly, when it comes to education, the institute says that when we close our schools, as we did in metropolitan Melbourne for over 170 days last year, what we see is a significant increase in educational inequality when it comes to the wellbeing of students. I will find the exact point in a moment.

It has been estimated—

so says this new report—

that the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students grows at triple the rate during remote learning ...

There is already a massive achievement gap in Victoria. We have heard Ms Bath talk about the shocking problems in regional and rural areas, where we see, for a whole range of nuanced and complex reasons, such educational disadvantage. We must remember that schools across country Victoria were shut down last year and the year before for months on end, not because there was any COVID in many of our regional communities but rather—so said Mr Merlino—to ‘level the playing field’. Well, there is no level playing field between kids in metro Melbourne and kids in regional areas. These gaps have been exacerbated. That is my view as a former schoolteacher and a former head of a large secondary school. It is also the view of the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute. It is why it is so vital for the Legal and Social Issues Committee to carry out this inquiry, just like the health experts say we must do, to gather far more information about the impacts of the government’s policies.

I agree with the comments of others that more variants are coming. Indeed more pandemics are coming—it is a fact that the eventuality that has sat atop the risk matrix of every single Western

government at least for the last 15 years has been a pandemic. So we have known that pandemics will come. We must be prepared with far better policy responses than the policy responses that have trashed our kids' learning and trashed our kids' mental health. We must get the facts, and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute says, despite what Dr Kieu may put forward in this place, that we simply do not have those facts.

There are a range of other important points to be made when it comes to the impact on young people. The Murdoch Children's Research Institute points to the impact on our most vulnerable children, those children for whom home is not a safe haven. Of course the vast majority of Victorian families are loving families and the vast majority of Victorian homes are safe homes, but sadly not all are. Again it is a damning indictment on this government's policies, enacted in many parts of the state to 'level the playing field', not to deal with any risk of a pandemic, that we increased the amount of time children spent with violent caregivers or chaotic households without access to the usual means of escape. Access to child protection services was reduced—that is what Melbourne's Murdoch Children's Research Institute says. It is another reason why it is so important, to come back to point (5) of the motion, that we learn far more about the health and learning impacts of school closures on children, that we figure out how to do things so very differently, when inevitably the next variant hits us and yes, I am afraid to say, inevitably the next pandemic hits us.

The other points in Dr Cumming's motion have great merit. I dare say other speakers on this side of the house will address them. From my perspective I can say again that the coalition parties wholeheartedly support this motion. It is an important motion, and my sincere hope is that all of us around the chamber will find it within ourselves to also support it.

Ms SHING (Eastern Victoria) (14:15): In rising to speak in relation to Dr Cumming's motion today I want to put a number of matters on the record as they relate to this government's commitment not only to recognising the impact of mental illness and compromised wellbeing on the lives of Victorians but also to again underscore the impact that the pandemic and the response to the pandemic have had on the mental health and wellbeing of a number of cohorts and communities in particular. I also want to make it abundantly clear, just in case there is a temptation to propose it outside this chamber or indeed in response to anything that government members might say, that the impact upon children of isolation, of home-based and remote learning and of detachment from the very opportunities to learn, whether through play, through social interaction or through a range of exposures to different circumstances, has been profound. Nobody is disagreeing with that.

What we need to do, in understanding what that impact is, is to my mind and to the government's mind continue to work as assiduously as we can across a range of different portfolios including, as Dr Bach has pointed out, that of the Deputy Premier, who is also the Minister for Education and the Minister for Mental Health, and other portfolios as they relate to disability, to community services, indeed to local government, to regional development and to the way in which our education and training pathways related work is managed. We need to understand that we have not just in Victoria and not just in Australia but indeed around the world populations that are grieving and reeling and yet to understand the full weight of impact that this pandemic has had on them. This is part of an intergenerational challenge not just in the context of the loss of family members, friends, workmates and members of communities and of long-term damage and compromise through long COVID but also of the depression, anxiety and indeed other serious and chronic forms of mental illness that have been exacerbated because of the changed circumstances that were necessary to respond to the pandemic and to other challenges to public health.

It has been sought to be made as an argument, and I think a cheap one at that, that the public health orders which have been issued by the chief health officer and the orders and restrictions which have been made in the course of pandemic orders since the passage of the pandemic-specific legislation last year have not considered mental health or wellbeing or have considered them to an insufficient degree in the way in which such orders have been made. As Professor Sutton indicated in the public hearing of the Pandemic Declaration Accountability and Oversight Committee, mental health and wellbeing

is central to his work in public health. As the Premier has also indicated, alongside the Minister for Mental Health and indeed the former Minister for Mental Health, who is now the Minister for Health, Minister Martin Foley in the other place, the pandemic has had an extraordinary and devastating impact on mental health and wellbeing across the state.

That is why the terms of reference for the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System were amended to incorporate the impact of the pandemic upon people living with mental illness and upon communities at large as a consequence of changes that were reasonable, necessary and proportionate in response to the other public health challenges of the pandemic. That is why, in response to the royal commission's recommendations, all of which we have said we accept, all of which we have promised to implement, there are a range of measures which go very, very specifically to the matters raised in Dr Cumming's motion and which I am going to put on the record now.

There is, by way of background and information for this chamber and anyone else who is interested in the mental health response more broadly, an existing envelope of \$225 million as part of supporting Victorians' mental health throughout the pandemic. There is a further investment of \$22 million to support fast-tracked tailored care to people who need it and therefore to alleviate the burden on our emergency departments as the number of COVID patients and the number of presentations grows—or indeed grew. It has plateaued and now, as we see with a measure of enormous relief and gratitude, begun to fall. There is no denying, however, that the pressure on the health system has been immense. We have seen that changes to the availability of elective surgery have had a knock-on impact on the way in which Victorians have been able to live their lives, notwithstanding the changes to restrictions.

What we have seen is that community has never been more important than now, and this is why, on balance, the decision has been taken in fact to encourage a return to school and to school-based learning, to provide the supports and the certainty of RATs being made available through the school system, to introduce a range of measures that allay concerns and fear around transmission given the airborne nature of, in particular, the omicron variant, and to introduce air purifiers and HEPA filters into our schools.

But in addition to that there is \$13.3 million to deliver 20 pop-up community mental health services with around 90 dedicated clinicians providing 93 000 additional hours of wellbeing checks and counselling—it is these sorts of pop-up centres that sit alongside the work that we are doing across the entire health system. It is measures like this that include an additional support of \$4 million for Aboriginal community controlled organisations, \$1 million to expand the Triple P parenting program, \$1.2 million to boost the capacity of peak LGBTIQ+ community organisations, a further \$1 million to support the mental health workforce to respond to patients presenting with trauma and \$1.5 million to allow the Royal Children's Hospital, VicHealth and key partners to better support the most vulnerable groups of children and young people both now and into the future. This sits alongside the investment that was announced at last year's budget of \$300 million to roll out critical new infant, child and youth area mental health services. That delivers on one of the recommendations of the mental health royal commission, and it also ensures that we are able to expand our youth services capacity and therefore access to services by 14 per cent.

We need to make sure not only that we are aware of the important work of implementing the recommendations of the royal commission and the mental health commissioner but that we know and understand and are not tempted by the desire to engage in narratives that might constitute a sugar hit for certain newspapers, which I will not refer to here and which incidentally I do not read, to in fact seek to argue that mental health is not at the core of what we are doing by way of pandemic and COVID response. The nature of proportionality in the way in which pandemic orders are made and the way in which directives are developed includes a reference to the incursion upon personal rights and liberties of broader health measures and the requirement that it on balance does not outweigh the benefit which is conferred through that public health measure.

What I would suggest to Dr Cumming is that there is ample material already provided, including by reference to the pandemic-specific legislation and the oversight that operates within that context, which we debated extensively here in this place and which is now the subject of a joint investigative committee including members of this place but chaired by the member for Shepparton with a deputy chair in Mr Bourman for Eastern Victoria Region. We want to make sure that we proceed diligently, carefully and with compassion and the appropriate level of resourcing to address the mental health concerns and the issues of mental illness, distress and compromised wellbeing as we recover from this pandemic. As Dr Bach has said, this is not our last pandemic. We need to get better at doing this, and with the benefit of modelling data, information reporting and public disclosure of information we are continuing along that path of improvement. On that basis and for reasons that have been outlined by other speakers, the work proposed by this motion is already being done and a reference is considered not able to be supported by the government as it currently stands.

Ms MAXWELL (Northern Victoria) (14:25): I am pleased to speak on Dr Cumming's motion today and indicate that we will in fact be supporting this referral to the Legal and Social Issues Committee. We have been very conscious of the need throughout this pandemic to balance the public health response to the coronavirus against the impacts on the mental health and general health of our population. Of course this is no easy task but something that needs to be a high priority. There have been a number of studies that show just how seriously and widely mental health has been impacted by the pandemic, and constituents in my electorate contact me regularly on these matters.

The Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, conducted monthly by the ABS from March 2020 to June 2021, reported that the groups with the highest levels of psychological distress were Australians aged between 18 and 34, people living in Victoria and women. The University of Melbourne conducted a weekly Taking the Pulse of the Nation survey through the Melbourne Institute, where 20 per cent of respondents reported feeling depressed or anxious most or all of the time. Employed parents whose youngest child was aged five to 11 years reported higher levels of mental distress than parents of other age cohorts. This tells a real story of how tough the stay-at-home and remote-learning requirements were on members of the workforce with young children.

The Headspace National Youth Mental Health Survey 2020 showed the proportion of young people feeling the impact of a lack of companionship rose to 54 per cent in 2020. Other studies reported that where initial increases in levels of distress reduced again over time there are ongoing challenges for the levels of distress and wellbeing of our society as people struggle with financial uncertainty, being constantly confronted with pandemic-related media, fear and uncertainty about accessing other health care, uncertainty around more homeschooling et cetera.

Mental health is only one component of all of this but something I am personally very passionate about. We know our health system has faced some real challenges in other areas, including hospital ramping, ambulance response times, elective surgery, GP shortages, workforce furlough, vaccination rollouts and much more. That is all very gloomy, but we have an obligation to consider this information and how we can learn from this for future pandemics—as Dr Bach referred to, this certainly will not be our last—and not just from the negatives. We need to see the positives as well, and I hope that this motion will highlight some of the positive responses that we can build and work on that we have faced and learned from within this pandemic. We support Dr Cumming's motion, and I look forward to participating in this inquiry if her referral is successful today.

Ms CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:29): I am pleased to rise to speak to Dr Cumming's motion, because it is an important one, and Dr Bach has outlined very eloquently to the chamber just how important it is around those very aspects. He knows only too well, being a former teacher, the impacts of the loss of face-to-face learning and the impacts of that dislocation, not being able to have that socialisation, which are such important elements of any child's education, whether that is in the early years or whether that is in the senior years—incredibly important for anyone.

And what we know from the lockdowns is that they have been enormously detrimental to the Victorian community. Victoria of course had the harshest restrictions of anywhere in Australia and the longest lockdowns—Melbourne had that unenviable title: the longest lockdown period for any city anywhere in the world—yet we have had the worst outcomes of anywhere in Australia. Now, the government can argue all sorts of things, which they continuously do, but those impacts are there to see. This is a government that put curfews on people—and where was the health advice? It did not come from the chief health officer. He admitted that. They banned playgrounds for children, for heaven's sake. They banned playgrounds. This is a government that has continuously told Victorians what to do and has not taken Victorians with it.

I am very concerned about not just what this government has done throughout the pandemic but what is emerging as we move forward. I am concerned about the argument put by the government in relation to this where they have said that the rebuttal for their non-support of Dr Cumming's motion is that there has been sufficient focus on the mental health impacts and that this is just a cheap shot—this argument is just a cheap one, I think were the words Ms Shing said. Well, I find that really offensive. The number of suicides—we know even from the coroner: back in December there was an FOI application, and what was released to the Liberals and The Nationals demonstrated that a ministerial briefing did say that the lockdown measures were having an adverse impact on mental health and noted two suicides following the recent lockdown in the context of loss of employment. Now, that was the fourth lockdown, but there were so many more, and there are anecdotal stories that we are all hearing. There is a backlog of cases in the Coroners Court that are looking at this issue.

Dr Bach referenced that very important study by the Murdoch Children's Research Institute which showed that children were struggling with just the basic skills of coping, empathy, making friends, change or disappointment and identifying emotions. These are the real impacts. They are the mental health impacts, the real impacts, and so this is an incredibly important element of Dr Cumming's motion. As she said, she has got many constituents—we all have. So to call it a cheap argument I think just highlights how the government is cheapening the severity of what we on this side of the house and Dr Cumming through her motion actually want to address. I find it absolutely stunning.

Now, Dr Bach said that I would probably go to point (4) in Dr Cumming's motion, and I do want to speak to that. There is much in this motion, and there are some very good elements, but I did want on the record the work of my colleague Emma Kealy: the private members bill which she introduced in the lower house and which I introduced here to get those mental health practitioners into schools and unlock those people that could then actually assist Victorians. It was rejected, voted down by the Labor government—and some independents, I might add. It just does go to show how much they are really putting into this. They can write all the cheques they like, but the actions—

Ms Bath: It is on the ground.

Ms CROZIER: It is on the ground, Ms Bath, what really counts, and as a result we have got, I think, a real concern amongst large parts of the emerging generation of young people in Victoria. But to go back to this important point, point (4):

the effects of delays in surgery and diagnostic services, if any, to the Victorian health system and to the health of Victorians

Well, let me look at the health of Victorians, this aspect in this part of this motion. I have been speaking for many, many, many months about the impacts of cancellation of elective surgery. Elective surgery is vital surgery. It is essential surgery. No-one wants surgery, but it is surgery that people need that will improve their quality of life, improve their health outcomes and quite possibly save their life. But what we have got are very, very critical delays that are causing people's health to deteriorate. Their health conditions are worsening, so they are getting sicker and they are going to be needing more urgent surgery. Some of those category 2s, I want to know how many of them have moved into category 1. How many category 1s have not got their surgery and have actually died?

I think Victorians need to know those figures—and I am hoping the government will not spend 19 months like they have and finally get to my questions that I have put in questions on notice on this and have that in a far more reasonable time than 19 months, as I have just received more in the last few days—because these are the impacts for Victorians. And elective surgery waitlists: as I say, it is essential surgery, ballooning out to over 80 000—80 000 Victorians—waiting on essential surgery waitlists. Well, that is not even counting the people who are waiting to get onto the waitlist—there are probably double that and more. And then we have got a ballooning waitlist in the private system because of the government's code brown and bans on surgery. This ideological push from this government is extraordinary. They are not only strangling the state, just slowly, with their economic decisions, which are killing this state, but they are also squeezing the very elements that support Victorians into getting their healthcare needs delivered.

The private system is incredibly important as well as the public system, to support the public system, and for the life of me I do not understand why this Minister for Health and this ideologically driven Premier do not understand the code brown and the aspect of just putting these blanket bans in place with no understanding of how a hospital system works or how hospital administrators actually manage their own hospitals. They say to me, 'There is capacity in the system. We can do more. We should be doing more. We want to be doing more for our patients'.

This government is failing Victorians every single day—they have every single day over the past two years. I despair of where our state is heading with this administration because of the secrecy, the cover-up, the refusal to accept expert health advice—because I know there are many true health experts who work in the system who have been advising the minister, and he is ignoring that. He is ignoring that advice that says this elective surgery should not be banned, it should resume. This minister has a lot to answer for. This Premier has even more to answer for. I do not blame the health minister all that much because he is only taking the lead from his leader, the Premier, who is an appalling leader.

Dr Bach: He's a shocker.

Ms CROZIER: He is a shocker. I do not think he has led this state at all well. In fact I think he is taking this state backwards. This motion is so important in terms of looking at the issues around the physical and mental health of Victorians, whether it is children or whether it is adults who are waiting for surgery, and we need to hear from those Victorians. This motion to get that inquiry to do that will enable that to occur.

On the pandemic committee, I heard Ms Shing talk about that. Well, you know, there are four Labor members on that and two independents, and there are three of us over here, two Libs and a Nat. Well, the whole state can see where that is going. So I was very pleased I was able to do what I did last week with Professor Sutton, who said he did not provide advice on some mandates, on the reversal of surgery bans and on a whole lot of other issues.

Sadly I have run out of time. I have got so much more I could say on this important motion. I urge the government to support it.

Mr MELHEM (Western Metropolitan) (14:39): I also rise to speak on the motion by Dr Cumming. I think we can look at the motion itself and the issues Dr Cumming wants to explore in the committee and the various points in her motion in relation to mental health, suicide numbers, hospital admissions and waiting lists. I think all these issues are good issues that we should all be mindful of in making sure that they have been addressed, but there are a couple of points here. One is that we are in a pandemic, a pandemic I do not think anyone created—not in this chamber anyway, not in this country. It is a worldwide pandemic which is putting huge strain and huge pressure on our hospital system. Last time I heard the health minister, I think a few days ago, over a few thousand medical professionals are actually at home and cannot work because of COVID restrictions.

It is like trying to paint a picture that we are living in a perfect environment: there is no pandemic, there is no COVID-19. We do not have thousands and thousands of cases every day, and basically the

government is sitting idle, not investing in hospitals, not doing anything—that is why we are creating these problems. I think Ms Crozier talked about the amount of people who have suicided because of mental health et cetera and because of the pandemic. It is a real issue, and it is something that we are concerned about. One suicide is one too many. But the coroner in fact, from memory, has said that suicides in 2021 actually were less than in the previous year even though it was during a pandemic. I think the numbers were 35—and as I said, 35 too many. So there are less suicides according to the coroner, but Ms Crozier is saying that there are not. If people want to come in here and debate issues, let us stick to the facts instead of just making up things as we go.

There is definitely an issue. There is definitely a strain on the system. Yes, waiting periods for elective surgery are going up—80 000. It was 50 000 last year. We had to make the hard decision on elective surgery. We did that last year when we had the lockdowns. It is not uncommon. Every state in Australia is facing the exact situation. It is not unique to Victoria. It is not even unique to Australia. There is a major problem. We will need to play a lot of catch-up hopefully when the pandemic is brought under control. The minister and the Premier announced a few days ago that elective surgery now will go to 50 per cent capacity, and hopefully as we have better control of the outbreak we may be able to open up more and more and invest a lot of money into the health system to make sure we are able to get elective surgery underway. We do not want to see anyone waiting for surgery, especially when we talk about category 1 and urgent surgeries. In fact my understanding is that over 30 000 elective surgeries were performed in private hospitals in recent times on behalf of the public hospital system, so we are actually doing whatever we can to make sure that we address these issues. There is pressure in a pandemic on Ambulance Victoria. They are doing a terrific job.

The problem I have with this motion is that it is not about saying that these problems do not exist. They do. The question is: what we are doing about them? I believe our health professionals are doing a fantastic job trying to cope in the current circumstances. The Department of Health is working in overdrive with the public and private hospitals. The government is putting a lot of money into the system as well and trying to do what it can to take the pressure off. It is not like we are not doing anything. We are doing a lot of stuff.

Now, a parliamentary committee wants to look at how we are going, how we are performing and whether we are doing our job as a government, and that is fair enough. I have got no issue with that. I think that is what Parliament is there for—to make sure it holds the executive to account. There has been a lot of debate in this chamber for the past two years about an oversight committee, about the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee holding hearings, about various other committees, about references to various committees. Last year after a lengthy debate there was an agreement that the Parliament would have a joint investigatory committee to basically specifically look at the pandemic issue. If Dr Cumming and the opposition want to look at how the government is performing and how those various departments are performing, that committee is the perfect body to do that. It was specifically established on the resolution of both houses of Parliament, and there is wide representation on that investigatory committee from both houses—from the government, from the opposition, from crossbenchers. It is very well resourced, in my understanding, with people specifically resourced to look at specific issues in relation to pandemics.

What I do not like is that we come here sometimes and just grandstand: ‘Okay, you can do one thing, I can do one better’ type of thing. ‘I’ll put motion after motion and reference after reference just for the record to show I’ve done something’. So if you are fair dinkum about this, this should be going to that joint committee, which is charged with looking at pandemic-related matters, not the Legal and Social Issues Committee, which is already inundated with references and resources and is not going to be able to deal with this anyway. So we will vote on this one, and then it goes to that committee. Then it will go down the list, and by the time they get to it probably the election will have happened and nothing happens. The point I am making here is this: if we are fair dinkum about this, that reference should be made to the joint investigatory committee—that is the correct committee—and let it actually

deal with that. That is where it should be. It is just a piece of advice. It is what we should have done in the first place. But anyway, I will leave that to Dr Cumming and the opposition.

I just want to finish off in the last 2 minutes that I have got by actually praising our health workers, first responders and teachers and all the public servants and all the organisations that are actually out there helping day in, day out the people of Victoria to be able to manage through this horrible, horrible disease, helping not just the people who are directly affected by COVID—and now we have got hundreds of thousands of Victorians who have contracted COVID; I am one of them, and I am still suffering from it—but also helping the people on the waiting list, helping the people who basically need medical treatment. There is a lot of strain on the system, and as I said, a few thousand—I think it was over 2000—health workers basically are not able to go to work. We have got a major problem. In order to fix the problem you need three things: you need the hospitals, you need the beds and you need the people to run them, and we have got a major crisis trying to attract and get people in to be able to balance all these issues.

The issue about mental health—I do not think the government should be lectured about this. The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System handed down its report back in 2018. We have accepted that, and we have implemented every single recommendation or are in the process of doing so. It is the biggest investment in the country's history in trying to address mental health in this state and in this country. We are playing catch-up—we are all playing catch-up—in that we can do more, but at least we are doing it. I do not see any contribution or any real effort from the Liberal Party or the National Party. In particular I am referring to the federal government. They basically talk the talk. We are actually not talking the talk, we are walking the walk. The Premier stood up in the exhibition building and basically said, 'We're going to implement every single recommendation of the royal commission into mental health', because it is a real issue. Kids are suffering and adults are suffering during the pandemic.

We have got a big job to do, and we are doing it, so come on board and support that. Let us be a bit more positive instead of negative and basically putting motions: 'I've got a motion on the notice paper for it to go to a committee which is not going to go anywhere'. So if you are fair dinkum, write to the joint investigatory committee and let them deal with that issue. That is why I will not be voting for the motion, not because of what the motion stands for but because to me it is just a political stunt—no more.

Ms BATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:49): I am pleased as the member of The Nationals in this place to throw my support behind Dr Cumming's motion 692 for a reference to the Legal and Social Issues Committee to investigate the list—and it is a very extensive list and it is a very serious list—of issues that have faced Victorians in their homes, in their schools, in our hospital sector, in our mental health sector, in a raft of places. One of the things that I often hear, and I think it is justified, is that MPs when they come into this place somehow become aloof, devoid of reality, and sometimes people coming in here have not even had a grounding in the real world in the first place. What we do not want in this place is to only receive information from certain sectors—from government departments, who really quite often can provide information that is not the true, clear facts of what is going on. What I have seen in my time working in committees is the value of having real people with real-life experiences, real scientists—not lobbyists, but scientists—health experts, educational experts, principals and parents from regional Victoria, and regional Victorians often feel overlooked. Having those voices of people who have experienced mental health issues or had their family member have significant mental health issues—I am sure that they could teach each and every one of us as members of Parliament in this place some eye-opening facts about what is going on. For that reason and because of the great depth of need for this to be investigated and for some clarity around these issues I will certainly be supporting this motion.

We have just heard Mr Melhem talking about the upper house committees and perhaps devaluing the level at which they can investigate. We have seen in the lower house just yesterday the result of a motion that came from me and was accepted in this house by all sides, except for a few minor

independents. We held an inquiry that had extensive commentary from all sides of the discussion. There was a huge delay in it—over two years—but the minister has brought in a recommendation in a bill that has been passed in the lower house and then will be in this house. So there can be powerful outcomes from recommendations of upper house committees.

Among the things that I would like to touch on—and there are some huge issues here—are surgery and diagnostic services. I will read out something that has just come in to me from a constituent only a week ago. She comes from my electorate, naturally, from the town of Morwell. I will not read her name, but I will read what she has written:

I would like to ask you to bring up the fact that people who need Elective surgery are not getting it and are becoming extremely worried. Someone I love has a tumor and they won't do the surgery for a biopsy because it is labelled as a number 3. It is getting worse and I am worried. Please, other people are dying because they can't have Elective surgery. We need you to stand up for us and ensure people get the care they need.

These are the very real things that we get, the voices of people that we get in our offices communicating with us.

Another one is a slightly good story because after a terrible, anguishing time the patient got that bad that his very good surgeon pushed uphill and got him the hip replacement that he needed. But back in 2020 my constituent was in intense pain and had to have a hip replacement. His surgeon said, 'We'll book it in', and it was over the period of the next 12 months cancelled four times. This is because of the government's ban on elective surgery. This is not some lightweight piece of surgery. This, as Ms Crozier has just said, is essential surgery. We have seen many other doctors come out on social media having that same conversation. He was placed on weekly morphine patches and 4-hourly painkillers. He was in crippling pain. Over a 12-month period he lost about a quarter of his body weight—20 kilograms—because he just could not cope with the pain and could not eat. The medication was stifling him and his digestive system. So his great surgeon, as I said, and his doctor have pushed and pushed and pushed, and finally he tipped over from being elective to an emergency situation.

I bring this to you because he has come to me saying, 'I don't want other people to be in this position'. Well, we do not want—The Nationals and the Liberals certainly do not—other people to be in this position.

Mrs McArthur interjected.

Ms BATH: Rightly Mrs McArthur has just said they are in their thousands. There are many other examples. I want to go now and give some statistics for the house about the comparison between Victoria and New South Wales, because if you believe the government, the government is just saying it is happening across the nation: 'We're doing our best. We're doing a wonderful job'. Well, let us look at some statistics that have come out by virtue of the *Report on Government Services*. Now, this is a very comprehensive analysis of the tale, in this case, of two states. If we look at the year 2020–21, 38 per cent of designated emergency patients arriving at an emergency department were not seen within the national benchmark period. Now, this has increased in its status from the previous year. So there are a lot of people not getting that emergency care when they need it. Our hospitals are under pressure. Our emergency departments are under pressure. Staff work at their absolute maximum capacity, and in fact I know that they do double shifts sometimes because shifts cannot be filled. This government needs to have prioritised health over many, many years. In fact the Premier has been in charge of the state or its health system 11 out of the last 15 years.

The next lot of statistics: in 2020–21 almost 45 per cent of category 2 patients on the elective surgery waitlist had their wait periods extended, like my constituent, beyond the recommended 90 days. That is 45 per cent for Victoria. Let us compare New South Wales: only 4.3 per cent of category 2 patients face a wait time over 90 days. That is the tale of two states. We could also look to other interesting

and quite challenging aspects, because at the bottom line of this it is challenging for the patients—Victorians—but it is also challenging for those people providing those services.

Ambulance response times: alarmingly, when every second counts, in 2020–21 one in 10 Victorians who called for an ambulance response had their emergency calls processed within the recommended 10 seconds. That is one in 10. If we go to New South Wales, it is much better. By contrast, New South Wales had 200 000 more calls yet were able to deal with 94 per cent of calls within that time. So we see a really important differentiation. Why is that? Because, again from these factual documents, the statistics tell us less is being spent in Victoria on the public hospitals, as I have just said. Victoria is spending \$2687 per person, well below the national average of \$2971. There is a disparity here between government funding and the importance government places on our wellbeing—on our physical health but, significantly, on our mental health.

I just want to congratulate our Shadow Minister for Mental Health, Emma Kealy. She has forensically investigated the depths of the situation in Victoria of our mental health services. She is fighting hard, as we should fight hard, to seek better outcomes particularly in my patch for country Victorians but for Victorians across the board. This needs to be properly investigated. Let real people provide the voice so that we can make real recommendations. I support the motion.

Mr QUILTY (Northern Victoria) (14:59): I will be brief. New evidence is mounting against lockdowns. Research from Johns Hopkins shows the harms caused by lockdowns are more severe and the benefits less clear than the government wants us to believe. This committee referral is to get the government to relook at and acknowledge the harms of COVID-19, including its response. I am hopeful that lockdowns are behind us—but we have all been there before, and there has always been another lockdown. We can expect the government to trot something out when we get the upcoming winter's COVID spike and a new variant.

As part of the COVID response our government shut down elective surgeries and reallocated health resources away from other areas and towards COVID. We have yet to account for the damage this has done. Current estimates show that it is likely to have cost thousands of lives and a great deal of additional suffering that could have otherwise been prevented. Reduction in cancer screenings alone is expected to continue to cost lives in late presentations of cancer over the coming years. The cost in education is mounting too. A few weeks of remote learning is disruptive. Years of constant disruptions will leave an entire generation of students behind where they should be.

I am doubtful that the time lost to lockdowns can ever be made up, but Victorians deserve to know that their government is at least aware of the costs of their actions. Transparency is something that Victorians desperately need and something that this government appears to be allergic to. The Liberal Democrats will support this motion.

Dr CUMMING (Western Metropolitan) (15:01): In summing up it is pretty clear that the government has no will to be transparent or accountable for what they have done in the last two years during this pandemic, to show the health advice that the community so wants to have brought forward or to actually allow the community to come forward with their concerns of the past two years. It really shows the government up today—to actually come in here and try to make out that this motion is a political stunt. Shame on you. Shame on you for not listening to the community, who want this inquiry, who want a royal commission, who want to be heard.

And shame on any of the others on this crossbench who would not support this motion today, for their own wants and needs—and they are minor ones, mind you. I hear that there are some on the crossbench that might not support this today due to their own self-referring to this committee, which is just about scheduling—not the merits of this motion, not the desires of this community. Maybe those same crossbenchers who supported the government with the state of emergency and the pandemic bill do not want what they supported to come to light to show their errors. For me, you learn from your mistakes. That is what I was hoping for, that the community would actually know: were the lockdowns

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needed? I could say categorically time will show you: no. Was mandating necessary? No, government. You had 80 per cent before 15 October, and now you are trying to mandate a third jab, micromanaging the community to a point where you are going to have less and less employees and Victoria is going to be less attractive to come to. And let us talk about the police response during the pandemic. Wouldn't it be great to actually have some knowledge around that so that you would not make the same mistakes in the future? The police did not want to be used in that way in the last two years, for a health response.

Shame on this government for not wanting this inquiry, but shame on any of my fellow members on this crossbench that would not support this on its merits, knowing that what they are wanting to achieve in this committee can be achieved in a small time frame; it is just a matter of scheduling. But do not worry, the community will not forget that this government does not want to answer questions, does not want to be accountable and does not want to be transparent. Where is the health advice? Why can't you come forward with that? Why wouldn't you want to improve things for the next nine months plus, for the next wave? Where are our COVID-safe kits? Where are our hospital beds? Good luck.

House divided on motion:

Ayes, 18

Atkinson, Mr
Bach, Dr
Barton, Mr
Bath, Ms
Bourman, Mr
Burnett-Wake, Ms

Crozier, Ms
Cumming, Dr
Davis, Mr
Finn, Mr
Grimley, Mr
Hayes, Mr

Limbrick, Mr
Lovell, Ms
Maxwell, Ms
McArthur, Mrs
Quilty, Mr
Somyurek, Mr

Noes, 18

Elasmar, Mr
Erdogan, Mr
Gepp, Mr
Kieu, Dr
Leane, Mr
Meddick, Mr

Melhem, Mr
Patten, Ms
Pulford, Ms
Ratnam, Dr
Shing, Ms
Symes, Ms

Tarlamis, Mr
Taylor, Ms
Terpstra, Ms
Tierney, Ms
Vaghela, Ms
Watt, Ms

Motion negatived.

Motions

OMBUDSMAN REFERRAL

Mr SOMYUREK (South Eastern Metropolitan) (15:11): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes the resolution of the Council on Wednesday, 17 June 2020, referring a matter to the Ombudsman has led to Operation Watts, a coordinated investigation that the Ombudsman is undertaking with the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) into a range of matters including allegations of 'branch stacking' aired in media reports in 2020;
- (2) further to that resolution, refers the following matters, pursuant to section 16 of the Ombudsman Act 1973, as part of an expanded investigation:
 - (a) the red shirts scheme, including the role of the then opposition leader, the Honourable Daniel Andrews MP, in designing, propagating and facilitating the scheme;
 - (b) all electorate officers and ministerial advisers performing factional tasks during work hours from all factions of the Australian Labor Party (ALP);
 - (c) the extent of branch-stacking activities and funding of branch-stacking activities, in particular whether government funds have been misdirected to pay for memberships from electorate office budgets, including, but not limited to, through arrangements for the provision of printing, office supplies or other services;

- (d) the allegations in the 14 August 2021 article published in the *Age* titled 'The chosen few: how Victoria is really governed' that ALP activists are 'stacked' into the public service thus compromising objectivity and professionalism and increasing the risk of corruption;
 - (e) the Premier's taxpayer-funded social media unit staff;
 - (f) the monetising of factional politics through the new trend of occupying the dual role of lobbyists/faction powerbroker to ensure that factional power over members is not misused for personal financial gain;
- (3) requires the Ombudsman to consider her powers and obligations under the Ombudsman Act 1973 to refer matters to and share information with IBAC and other integrity bodies with a view to expanding the scope of Operation Watts to include the matters referred to in paragraph (2);

and requires the Clerk to write to the Victorian Ombudsman and the IBAC Commissioner to convey the terms of this resolution.

There are a number of parts to this motion. I will briefly speak to each one of them in turn. Part (2)(a) relates to the red shirts issue, so let me just briefly go through the issues relevant to the red shirts—I can speak to that all day. After a pretty sensationalised TV program this house moved a motion referring the contents of the TV program to the Ombudsman, as it should have, and the Attorney-General, as she should have, wrote to IBAC asking for IBAC to investigate—I think that was in the interests of everyone, including me, for that to have happened. However, notwithstanding the colour and movement of that particular program, I was very comfortable with where I expected things to land. All the narrative and the false assertions—because a serious integrity body was investigating, I was comfortable. I was happy for it to come back. I wanted it to come back as quickly as possible, and then I wanted to leave this place.

I was surprised when IBAC came back and said that they were holding a public inquiry—in about October last year they came back to me with a letter and said that—because, they said, they had distilled the entire program to electorate officers, which was marginal to the program actually. There were a whole lot of other bad things in that program, but that was marginal to it. They said that that in their view potentially met a serious corruption charge, and that was based on electorate officers perhaps doing some party-political work. So I was a bit surprised at that.

Unlike the red shirts issue, which was systematic and centralised, my electorate officers had very serious instructions: you rock up to work. If anyone does not rock up to work, they get their payment docked. IBAC had about six or seven years of my text messages, and they found several instances of electorate officers doing some factional tasks. Now, on some of those occasions those EOs themselves—they are all activists in their own right—were self-motivated. In other cases my erstwhile friend Anthony Byrne had directed them to do it.

Notwithstanding all of that, the government's defence in the red shirts affair was as follows: section 30(4) gives MPs the ability to direct the responsibilities and duties of their electorate officers. This was the government's defence, and nothing has changed from when the government put out its defence. Even though the legislation has changed, it did not get to this particular issue. Section 30(2) states:

The employment of a person under subsection (1) must be under an agreement in writing and is subject to any terms and conditions that are determined for the time being by the presiding officers, acting jointly.

On the face of it, it looks like, 'Well, that's pretty bad', because it cuts across 30(4), but the wording in 30(4) says 'Despite subsection (2)'. I am running through not my position, I am running through the government's position when it was defending the red shirts. In other words, that would make any members guide ultra vires. So you as the President do not have the power to put up a members guide because of section 30(4), according to this. That was the government's defence.

I have told you what I allegedly did: serious corruption based on random casual interaction. I do not know whether I need to go into red shirts. I will not go into it, because everyone sort of knows what it is, but let me tell you what the factional equivalent of red shirts would have been. I think I have never

done that publicly before, and that is probably a more powerful way of explaining it. The factional equivalent to red shirts would have been me calling 25 factionally aligned MPs and directing them to sign off on time sheets for six months in advance—essentially a false document saying that they actually worked certain times, the times that were dictated by me—and then having those people sit in a factional office somewhere ringing the 17 700 ALP members in order to recruit them into my particular faction. That could be any faction. That would have been the factional equivalent. And not only that, having my staff member oversee the whole thing. That would have been the factional equivalent, the party-political equivalent of red shirts. No-one watching IBAC would have thought that was the case.

The problem we have got is this. Let us now go to the Ombudsman's report. Again, this house made a referral to the Ombudsman with the red shirts issue, and I think it was done by Mr Barber, who was very good at governance-related issues—very, very good. He had the government ministers scared of him. Literally when he walked into the chamber people were scared, because he was very good on governance. The red shirts referral to the Ombudsman—if you read the Ombudsman's report, she says what she did when she got the referral. She says she went to the Supreme Court. She wanted to test her powers in the Supreme Court, her jurisdiction in the Supreme Court.

Mr Davis: They said yes.

Mr SOMYUREK: They said yes. The government challenged. It ended up in the High Court. Now, make no mistake about this. I am not standing here pretending that I was not on the government's side. I was barracking like mad for the government. I did not want that hanging over my head. I was concerned, very concerned. I was barracking for the government, let us be clear about this. I was hoping it would go away. I was hoping the Supreme Court, I was hoping the High Court would knock it off. They did not. Then she says in the report the government claimed exclusive cognisance. She said she was not going to pursue it any further because she was worried about the cost that had already been clocked up. Then we did not cooperate because she did not have the coercive powers. She could not subpoena documents. She could not compel witnesses to turn up.

So despite all of these things—I am not criticising the Ombudsman, by the way; I will get to my point in a second—her state of mind at that moment was obviously that this was not corrupt. All of these things lead me to believe that her state of mind was that red shirts was not corrupt, it was a mere breach of the electoral entitlements. Let us not forget that contemporaneously we had the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker also rorting their entitlements. That is important because it gives you the atmosphere, the milieu of the times too. So she thought, obviously—I am just trying to assume her state of mind—that this was not a corruption matter, it was a breach-of-entitlements matter.

Now, what the legislation says that she ought to have done—not 'ought to have', compels her to do—is that if there are any reasonable grounds to suspect corruption, 16E(1) of the Ombudsman Act 1973 states clearly that she ought to have gone to IBAC and notified IBAC. Why? Because it is corruption. Why? She does not have coercive powers. The Ombudsman does not have coercive powers. Even when she got knocked back—the government was not cooperating, it was going to the High Court, all of those steps—the Ombudsman still did not go to the IBAC, because she did not think there were reasonable grounds for corruption. Again, I am not critical of the Ombudsman, I am just saying there is an anomaly here. It is highly likely now that she, when the IBAC Commissioner has asked, and counsel assisting are saying that random acts based on seven years of text messages are matters of serious corruption. That means the Ombudsman has reassessed what has happened, so I think it is only fair that we go back to the Ombudsman and put it to her. She might say that she has not changed her mind—that that is IBAC going off on a frolic. I doubt it. Then we would have a real problem. But if she has changed her mind—and that is perfectly acceptable; it is actually a sign of strength and intelligence when people can change their minds and not just dig in obstinately on a particular issue—I think that is a good sign, if someone is able to change their mind, but I think we should give her the chance and send it off there.

Let us not forget it is not just, 'Oh well, that happened, this happened; it doesn't matter'. No, there is a fundamental principle on the line here. When we make legislation, we make legislation based on principle, not based on people or factions or politics or political parties. That is a very important principle, and the follow-on from that principle is that everyone is equal before the law. That is a cornerstone of every liberal democracy, it is a fundamental human right and it is indeed entrenched in legislation in this place, in the 2006 Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities. So I would seek support for this to go back to the Ombudsman so that we can get some—I mean, I have got a lot on the line here. I have got a lot on the line here. I have got no doubt nothing is going to happen from the IBAC. That is dangerous territory, saying that, because they have got the power to determine whatever they want. But I am very scared about the red shirts issue. I am very scared, so if this gets through today, you are not going to see me, but I will be going home and not being able to sleep at night. But there is a principle on the line. There is a principle on the line. This is not a game. IBAC coming at you for signing six months of timesheets is not a game—when staff have not been in your office; they have campaigned. That is not a game. This is a matter of principle.

Moving on—that is enough about red shirts—based on the same principle of equality before the law, we have also got (2)(b) of the motion about other factions. It should not be just one group. Again, if there is serious corruption in the political party, we are just a product of how the Labor Party has operated for about 50 years. We are not any different. I was not any different. In fact I knew nothing about the factional matters. So I think it is only fair, because I think it is the right thing to do, that if there is serious corruption, the integrity bodies are able to chase down that corruption, find it and weed it out. IBAC have got very, very narrow terms of reference at the moment about that program. We need to give them wider terms of reference so they can chase down corruption in the Labor Party and weed that corruption out. It is just logical; it is a no-brainer.

Now, I could talk about people—who has been doing what—but I have decided I am not going to do that. I could talk about faction secretaries who work in ministers' offices; I could talk about all the rest of it. I do not want to go down that path. I am sure those opposite know that I can talk about all those things. What I talked about was political work. IBAC has got a view on political work. It talks about meritocracy. I would respectfully point out the subtle—or not so subtle—difference. The counsel assisting kept talking about patronage, but what he was really talking about, taking the loaded terminology out, was political appointments. Advisers and electorate officers are political appointments. In every democracy you have political appointments. You have the bureaucracy, which is totally at arm's length from the political appointments and politics. You have political appointments. We have got section 27 in the Equal Opportunity Act 2010, which expressly states that MPs can actively discriminate based on political activism, ideology, values, trust and all the rest of it. That is just a reflection of the fact that electorate officers and all that are political appointments.

However, when political appointments do not do the right thing—they are substandard, they are no good, they bludge, they do not do their work—do you know who suffers? The politician. If a ministerial adviser is not on top of their brief, which goes back to a Socialist Left faction secretary sitting in a minister's office—if the SL faction secretary did not do his job—with two bad question times he will lose his job. But in the bureaucracy, in the public service, if public service officials are incompetent, do you know who suffers? We all suffer. The community suffers if the bureaucracy are not up to the task. It is not just individuals.

What is happening right at the moment is the destruction of the public service and government agencies by stacking ALP activists and mates. We are heading towards—not back towards, because we have never had one—a spoils system. Now, that was trialled in another place at another time. It was trialled in America in the 1800s. That did not work well. Corruption was rife. We had Tammany Hall at the end of that, and that is where we are going. We are heading towards Tammany Hall unless we put a stop to this right now. Going to a government department is like going to a state conference of the ALP. Looking at a list of departmental heads—well, not heads, but people high up—is like

looking at a Labor Party branch list. It is amazing. This needs to stop. This is where you have corruption creeping into your system. This is where corruption takes hold.

Trust in government institutions is very important. If people think that the Premier or the government have got people embedded in the police force, people embedded in IBAC and the integrity bodies, well, they are not going to trust those august bodies, are they? Those bodies need to be trusted. Our police need to be trusted. We need to be able to say that Mr Andrews does not have his tentacles within the police force or the integrity bodies.

Members interjecting.

Mr SOMYUREK: I am not going to make a statement. Odd things have happened, but I am not a conspiracy theorist—at the lower end.

Can I just quickly go through something. This is an organisation—the *Age*—I am not terribly fond of these days. I think in their former days they were better, but this particular article is spot on, is really good research. It is dated 14 August 2021 and titled ‘The chosen few: how Victoria is really governed’. This has basically uncovered evidence that the Labor Party activists have been stacked into the Labor Party public service, thus compromising the objectivity of the service. If I can just read, I will read fast from this document:

In June 2014 it employed 393 people. In June 2020 its headcount was 1070. The result is a concentration of administrative power at the expense of specialist departments such as health, transport and education.

...

... current and former senior Victorian public servants who raised their concerns with *The Age* in confidence say that since 2018 and Andrews’ thumping re-election, there has been a marked shift in the number of political operatives installed in senior bureaucratic jobs.

An example cited by multiple sources is the replacement two weeks after the 2018 election of Simon Hollingsworth, an experienced and well-regarded career public servant who has worked for Labor ... governments in Victoria and Canberra, with ALP political operative Jamie Driscoll.

Mr Driscoll I just associate with being a National Union of Workers operative—

In his new job as Deputy Secretary of the Budget and Finance Division of the Treasury Department—

Look, this goes on. At the end of the day what we had was that we were desperate to win. We were desperate to win long term. We knew and Mr Andrews knew he had one shot in the locker. He was having a hard time from caucus from both the left and the right. They wanted to bring him down. He was desperate. He did something well beyond what he should have. He crossed the line. He designed this system. He told me personally, ‘You’ve got to take part in this process whether you want to win or not’, and that reflected his mentality at the time.

I am running short of time, but other parts of this motion are also very worthwhile. Unless we want to go down the path of Tammany Hall and a spoils system—that has been tried before, and it has been a spectacular failure—we need to take this opportunity to have IBAC look at all these things.

Ms TAYLOR (Southern Metropolitan) (15:32): This government has a clear record of investing in and strengthening Victoria’s oversight and integrity systems that function to investigate and expose improper conduct, corruption and police misconduct and uphold the integrity of our public institutions. This includes providing our integrity agencies with consistent funding since 2014 to ensure they can acquit their legislative requirements. In particular this includes providing IBAC with an additional \$50 million in funding over the last two budgets alone and almost \$20 million in additional funding to support the Victorian Ombudsman to uncover improper conduct and improve administration to better protect the community.

Since 2019 we have made a range of reforms to strengthen the oversight and integrity of our public institutions, including: making COVID response measures permanent to allow IBAC and other integrity agencies to continue conducting inquiries and investigations over audiovisual links and

embed modified service requirements; improving Victoria's public disclosure system and streamlining oversight of integrity agencies under the new Integrity and Oversight Committee; providing our integrity agencies with greater budgetary independence, with budgets now determined in consultation with the IOC and annual appropriations specified in the Parliament appropriation bill; and other reforms strengthening IBAC's powers, including the power to arrest a potential witness suspected of corrupt activity if IBAC believes that person is at risk of leaving Victoria. We have also delivered significant reforms to improve transparency and access to information for Victorians through legislative, policy and administrative changes. The Victorian Ombudsman and IBAC therefore absolutely have the resources and the legislation they need to investigate any genuine allegation or evidence of improper conduct, maladministration, corruption and police misconduct.

In relation to the specific matters referenced in this motion, these matters have already been reviewed extensively by the Victorian Ombudsman and Victoria Police. Further, other relevant matters have previously been referred to both IBAC and the Ombudsman by the previous Attorney-General, and those agencies are currently conducting a joint investigation into those matters. IBAC and the Victorian Ombudsman have the resources and the legislation they need to investigate these matters, and it is absolutely appropriate that they determine the scope of these investigations free from attempted political interference.

Members interjecting.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Mr Bourman): Order! Thank you, Ms Taylor. I know this is a contentious thing, but let us try and keep it down to a dull roar.

Mr DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan—Leader of the Opposition) (15:36): I rise to support Mr Somyurek's motion. It is a very thoughtful motion, it is a carefully considered motion, it is a motion that goes to the heart of what has gone wrong with our integrity agencies in Victoria and with the proper investigation that should have occurred of the corruption that is at the core of the Andrews Labor government. The truth of the matter is that the report by the Ombudsman—the previous report, and we all know the red shirts report—was referred under section 16. There is a specific section of the act, Ms Taylor, that enables either house or indeed a parliamentary committee to make a referral to the Ombudsman. That is why that section is in operation, and that is why that referral was made.

The truth of the matter is that the government obstructed. The government obstructed the police. The government obstructed the investigation of the Ombudsman. They fought in the court. They blocked it in the court, and they fought and fought and fought. Mr Atkinson, as the then President, acted on behalf of the chamber and made sure that we fought all the way to the High Court, where there was a ruling that the Ombudsman did have powers to undertake these investigations, but she was blocked in effect from getting to many of the architects of the scheme. Yes, she could talk to John Lenders, but she could not talk to Daniel Andrews because the lower house asserted exclusive cognisance. They claimed that they were above the law. They claimed that they ought to not be investigated. They claimed that there was no reason for them to be investigated and that they would block the investigation.

This red shirts matter goes very deep. It goes right to the centre of the Andrews Labor government, and the truth of the matter is that Daniel Andrews and many in this government should be in jail. They stole money, they took money. It is theft. When do you get a bank robber coming out of the bank saying, 'Oh, I'm caught. I'll pay back the money. Let me loose'? That is what happened here. They took the money, they stole the money, the theft happened, the crooked stuff happened—and they should be in jail. I say this investigation is appropriate, and I say that Mr Somyurek's point here that this should be broadened to a number of other matters is correct too.

The hindering of the police investigation was also scandalous. That should not have occurred. The police should have had a clear range, a clear opportunity to talk to whomever they wanted. Of course in a tit-for-tat manoeuvre the lower house put a motion to refer people in this party—the Liberal and

National parties—to the Ombudsman. We cooperated in full. We opened all the books and we cooperated impeccably, and the Ombudsman came back and said, ‘There is no case to answer’. Every single member was cleared, because we were honest. We actually laid out the facts. We cooperated fully, and nothing could be further in contrast to what Labor did—the Labor members, the Labor ministers and the Premier in particular, who sought to frustrate the Ombudsman and who used taxpayers money to block the Ombudsman’s opportunities. So I think the claim of exclusive cognisance was simply an attempt to block the investigation of corrupt and crooked activities that Labor had undertaken.

I pay tribute to Mr Barber for moving the original motion, and I hope that Dr Ratnam has the courage to stand by Mr Barber’s honesty and integrity. I hope that she feels that she should do the right thing by the community. This is very important. It is very important that there is no shielding of Labor by members of this house—that for whatever deal may have been done, for whatever side deal may have occurred, there is no shielding of Labor from the proper investigation of the law and the mechanisms that are laid out.

Mr Somyurek in his motion lays out the section 16 referral, and he adds a number of matters. I agree with those matters. He knows more about the internals of the Labor Party than I do, but it is clearly rotten to the core—crooked and rotten the core. At the same time in point (3) he:

requires the Ombudsman to consider her powers and obligations under the Ombudsman Act 1973 to refer matters to and share information with IBAC and other integrity bodies with a view to expanding the scope of Operation Watts to include the matters referred to in paragraph (2)

Well, that invites the Ombudsman to exercise powers that she has under the act. She has those powers. They can be exercised by no-one other than her. The most this motion can do is suggest that she look at these matters. Mr Somyurek is firmly of the view that she should have done that earlier. I am not here to judge the Ombudsman. I just say to her, ‘I have faith in your honesty, I have faith in your integrity and I have faith that, if the evidence is in front of you, you will take the appropriate steps within the frame of that evidence’. That is all this motion, in part (3), asks to happen. It also says that the Clerk should write formally, and obviously that is a sensible mechanical step.

Mr Somyurek talked about 16E, and I understand that is the Ombudsman’s decision, but I do make the point here that Labor has tried to nobble these integrity agencies at every turn. Every Labor member of this chamber voted against an increase in the budget for the Ombudsman and the IBAC last year. Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips and I worked on that, and we put forward that motion to increase the funding to those agencies. When you look back over the funding flows to the agencies it is very clear that their funding has been cut. The early money was used year after year, nibbled away at without the government providing the additional funding that they needed, and even where there was increased activity at an IBAC level and increased activity at an Ombudsman level there was not commensurate funding provided.

So this government, corruptly in my view, has turned the tap right down to a trickle to slow the investigations of IBAC and to slow the investigations of the Ombudsman. I think that is a measure of the corruption in this government. It is a measure of the lack of integrity in this government. I say those bodies need to be funded properly, and that is why we moved that motion.

I do think that the government’s approach on this has from the beginning been a cover-up. It has sought to close down and block investigations at every turn, and it is going to do so again today. If the government had an ounce of integrity, what it would do is just say, ‘That’s fine, we’re happy to be investigated’, just like when the Legislative Assembly passed a motion about the opposition we said, ‘We will cooperate in full. We are not claiming exclusive cognisance in this chamber because the motion came from the Assembly. We are actually going to volunteer the material, volunteer whatever you want’. That is the way this should be conducted. The government should step forward with integrity and honesty and clear up all of the internal corruption inside Labor.

It is clear that there is a factional system in Labor. It is clear that it is a factional system that is driven by money and the sprinkling around of money, and that needs to be dealt with. Our democracy is too important. Our democracy should not be sacrificed by these internal corruptions inside the Labor Party. I see this as a matter for the future of our democracy as a state. We actually need to have this motion passed today to give our state the best chance of clearing up the corruption inside one of our major political parties.

Mr Somyurek has made the point, correctly, that it appears the referrals and the material that have been shunted towards the IBAC are one-sided. It appears that the Premier's faction has been let off the hook, and this motion seeks to clear that up. It puts the Premier on the hook. His faction and the dirty, grubby dealings that his faction has done should be looked at. They should have the strongest light shone on them by independent agencies that have the power to require witnesses, to obtain documents, to demand attendance and to demand answers to questions. The idea that through the bogus, spurious claims of exclusive cognisance, through the nobbling of the police investigation—

Ms Crozier interjected.

Mr DAVIS: That is exactly right, Ms Crozier. If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear, and in this case you can see that Labor has a lot to fear because it is corrupt to the core.

Mr HAYES (Southern Metropolitan) (15:46): I welcome this motion today and thank Mr Somyurek for bringing it in, because it is giving this house an opportunity to talk about how we are being governed here in Victoria. The motion we are discussing today has at its heart a concern about the misuse of public funds, a concern that taxpayers money is or was being used for party-political purposes. The perception that this is a widespread problem—that is the perception—is undermining faith in our democratic system, and the public are increasingly aware that corruption is destroying the traditions of the Westminster government system, a system that has served us well in this state for over a hundred years. I am inclined to support Mr Somyurek's motion not because I wish to attack the Labor Party or continue to harp on about the red shirts issue; I think the principles that can be discussed in this motion could and should apply to both major parties or whoever governs this wonderful state. However, the opposition has only been in government for four of the last 20 years.

The point I particularly like in this motion is the following: to ensure that public sector employees, including government agencies, are employed on a merit-based system to protect the independence of the public service, thereby reducing the risk of corruption.

The motion here moved today by a former cabinet minister of this government raises serious issues about how government is operating in this state. It makes reference to a story in the *Age* from August last year, which reveals details of political infiltration of the public service by ALP-aligned bureaucrats. Mr Somyurek has already referred to that story by Paul Sakkal and Chip Le Grand:

In nearly every department and within key government agencies, political operatives who have dedicated much of their professional lives to advancing the interests of Labor politicians are employed in executive public service positions ...

just as Mr Somyurek described. It goes on:

At the centre of this power structure is the Premier's Private Office ... Sitting outside the public service, unaccountable to parliament and not required to respond to freedom of information requests, this group of 87 people—who outnumber Labor's MPs—is the most influential and least transparent organ of government in the state.

'Unaccountable to Parliament and not required to respond to freedom-of-information requests'. What we have in this state is a growing autocracy, a secret inner government underpinned by the government's large majority in the other place. The public service is becoming increasingly politicised and is losing talented people. When the government changes hands one lot sacks the other lot and we are getting rid of expertise in the high levels of the public service. We lose people experienced in

identifying and promoting public policy issues. An unbiased public service is essential for a democratic society.

Unfortunately this motion only scrapes the surface of the toxic cloud of corruption lingering over this state. Whether it is for turning a blind eye to Crown Casino or taking whopping donations from property developers, the major parties must be held to account. They both resisted my call for the banning of donations from property developers, and of course the increasing autocracy of this government is on display for all to see. We have seen it in the changes to planning laws, for instance—Big Build projects running roughshod over local communities.

A member: Bills Street.

Mr HAYES: Yes. And we saw it in the Suburban Rail Loop legislation last year, a prime example of the political public service advice resulting in legislation without a proper business case, which is really a planning power takeover for the property industry at the expense of local democracy. Another example is the pandemic emergency legislation late last year, which was rushed through the lower house and presented to this place without proper consultation. We saw more autocracy. A significant community outcry over that legislation occurred and the autocrats had to reluctantly roll back parts of the power grab. What we need is a fully functioning democracy based on cabinet government put into practice, not just in theory, and we need a public service based on merit giving frank, fearless and independent advice working in practice, not impartiality just put forward as a nice-sounding theory. So while I support this motion, it only scratches the surface of the cloud of corruption that is lingering over this state. I will be voting in support of the motion today.

Mr ATKINSON (Eastern Metropolitan) (15:52): Mr Somyurek's presentation today was a rather nervous one to this Parliament, and I think there is good reason for that, because he has put himself in some peril with the information that he has brought to the public in the public interest. He has certainly been before IBAC for other matters which have been well publicised and for which this house has expressed some dismay. However, on this occasion he is being quite courageous in coming forward to highlight some extraordinary transgressions by the Labor Party in the past. And I guess that is really the refuge of the government at the moment—that this is in the past, that this was two elections ago and therefore why should we revisit it now? Well, the fact is if you have somebody who confesses to a serious crime or misdemeanour, then indeed you go back and you investigate it, and you investigate it properly. In my view there is no doubt that this matter was never satisfactorily resolved, again, to the public interest, because apart from anything else the government obfuscated on every occasion every attempt to get to the truth of the misappropriation of funds from this Parliament for political purposes, and that included defying the police in their investigations of this matter, which was probably, in the context of Mr Somyurek's remarks today, what the Ombudsman had relied on as the next step in the investigation of the red shirts matter.

I have said in this place before that we are the people who make the laws. We sit here in judgement on our community effectively in making laws that we believe they should abide by. We have gone through a particularly severe period with this COVID-19 health challenge in the last two years and made extraordinary demands of our community, backed by our laws, by our judgements. Is it not absolutely right then that we should be the first to follow and abide by those very laws? Is it not right that we should, if there is a police investigation, cooperate fully, if there is an Ombudsman's investigation, cooperate fully? It is not even a matter of whether it is actually written down in law. The fact is we have a moral responsibility as leaders of the community, as the people who make those laws that we expect them to abide by. We are representatives of a community, and we are there as the gatekeepers of public interest. It is only right that we should be cooperating on every occasion where there are concerns. And integrity is the very lifeblood of democracy. Unless we have integrity in our democratic system, unless we have integrity in our public servants and in our parliaments and in our courts and in our regulatory bodies or scrutiny bodies, then democracy starts to fail. We see a situation where public trust is diminished, and there are serious repercussions for that.

Mr Hayes made some very good points, and they are points that I have made on a couple of occasions in other ways. That is that I am really concerned about the public service here in Victoria. Things like the Crown Casino, toxic waste dumps that explode—these are not unlucky events. These are not mere accidents. These are because of the competence or rather the incompetence of the regulators. And why are they incompetent? Because of political patronage, because of political appointments. And the fact is that, no, it does not go right through the public service, where in fact we have many wonderful Victorians working, but for so many of them their morale is crushed by that very leadership put in place by political patronage. We have lost capacity. We have lost competence. Is it any wonder that major projects go miles over budget? It is because the people who are actually supposed to be providing advice either are pulling back on that advice, not providing fearless advice, or indeed just do not have the competence to actually do the work to scale those projects and to give the government the correct advice. Maybe in some cases it is simply the tin ears of ministers who do not want to hear that advice.

The fact is this motion today is an important motion. When it comes to integrity, when it comes to how this Parliament operates, it is always an important motion. And yes, as President of this place I did go through a whole process that took me all the way to the High Court on behalf of this house. Why? Because again the government obfuscated; the government tried to prevent any investigation of the red shirts deal. We had ministers who refused to answer questions in this place, let alone in the Legislative Assembly, where they claimed exclusive cognisance to try and avoid any further attention on ministers and particularly the leadership in that house.

We had a long journey, and indeed it was a journey that was very much developed by Mr Barber, who did understand the importance of integrity. Indeed one of the things that I have valued about the Greens contribution to this place over an extended period has been the fact that they have been prepared to support any issues that provide scrutiny of government activities. They have been prepared to support reviews. There is only one time that from my point of view they let this house down. But essentially that is part of their core belief. I guess it works for them politically as well. But certainly for Mr Barber it was a genuine process to make sure that there was integrity in government, and the Greens—not just Mr Barber but his Greens colleagues at that time in this house—all supported that proposition. So again I would hope that the Greens party today stays the course and recognises the importance of that scrutiny. We are not dealing with something that is done and dusted. We are not dealing with something that is historic, something that, ‘Oh well, it’s so long ago’. The fact is that these issues are critical today, here and now. The fact is that these issues will be critical here and now and tomorrow and beyond, because they go to the very core of what our Parliament ought to be about, what the behaviour of our members of Parliament ought to be about, what the behaviour of our public service and the performance of our public service ought to be about.

This is a crucial motion, and I urge all of the members of the crossbench to support Mr Somyurek on this occasion. We know the government will not, because again they will continue this obfuscation on this whole issue. Mr Somyurek was courageous today to come to this place, make his statement and put his own position on the line. But in recognition, perhaps after a road to Damascus perhaps because he was concerned even at the very outset of this project, as he suggested, that this should not have happened, he deserves support today.

Sitting suspended 4.02 pm until 4.18 pm.

Mr LIMBRICK (South Eastern Metropolitan) (16:18): The Liberal Democrats believe in government transparency and the prudent use of taxpayers money, so we will support the motion referring matters to the Ombudsman regarding the red shirts affair, the independence of the public service and the role of the social media unit.

Some of you might think the red shirts issue is an internal factional matter for the Labor Party. For those of you that think this, I guess the best way to stay out of it is by simply abstaining. But if you take away the noise that comes from various political agendas, I believe there are some outstanding

matters that should be addressed. The original whistleblower, who should be applauded for their courage in raising this matter and suffered a great personal toll as a result, has told my staff that there are some serious outstanding issues that must be looked at. I am not going to repeat them all in detail here, because I cannot personally corroborate them, because they were before my time. But suffice to say that they are numerous. This is in no way meant to criticise the Ombudsman's original investigation, but clearly the best way to get to the bottom of it all is by using the special powers invested in IBAC.

Whilst this is a serious matter, I feel the investigation into the independence of the public service is even more important. The politicisation of the public service is potentially a serious, long-term and corrosive problem. I think all Victorians would prefer that our health departments are managed by health experts and our electricity grid is managed by energy experts, rather than experts in politics. I suspect that some of the failures we experienced during the pandemic might be attributed to political considerations overriding expertise. It should be looked into.

We are also intrigued by the prospect of getting to the bottom of the role of the social media unit. I personally saw how political social media works when I witnessed a protest by construction workers outside the CFMEU back in October last year. I went there because I thought the situation was odd and I did not trust the government or the media to tell the truth about it.

A member: You happened to stumble on it, didn't you?

Mr LIMBRICK: I did. I spoke to numerous people there and witnessed what was going on. There was no evidence there that people were fake tradies or man-baby Nazis or anything other than construction workers that I could see, and if you doubt this I urge you to watch the live streams of the event. However, immediately after there was a coordinated campaign to discredit these people on social media. The thought bubble was quickly picked up by the mainstream media, and I would like to discover the origins of this campaign and determine if it emanated from a government-funded social media unit. Maybe you do not agree with the aims of these protesters, but perhaps you might agree that producing disinformation is not a public service. It is not too hard to imagine that if this kind of infrastructure is allowed to stay in place, disinformation campaigns could be aimed at people who you agree with at some future date.

I do not know if there has been corrupt conduct, but I do know that there are many questions that deserve to be answered. This is an important motion, and the Liberal Democrats commend it to the house.

Mr FINN (Western Metropolitan) (16:21): This is a motion that Mr Somyurek has brought to the house largely to his own cost, and for that I think we owe him a debt of gratitude. It obviously was not something that he would have taken on lightly. Nobody wants to do themselves in, as it were, for such things, but Mr Somyurek has on this occasion decided that in the public interest he will do that. That is a gutsy effort, and that is something that I commend him on.

There is something that I have been deeply concerned about for a long time in this state and in this country, and that is the lack of faith that the general community has in institutions, particularly the Parliament and the government. I have to say in the almost 23 years that I have been in this Parliament I have never seen the esteem so low, the opinion of the electorate so low, of elected members and of their government. Their trust is gone. If you do not believe me, go and have a talk to people in the street, in the milk bar, in the pub, in the fish-and-chip shop—wherever you might want to speak to them. They will tell you, 'We do not trust our government. We do not trust our politicians'. The number of times I have been told I am a crook because I happen to share the same profession as Daniel Andrews is extraordinary. I have had to point out to them, 'I am not Daniel Andrews. Say that once more and I'll sue you'. But people think we are all the same. How about now, today, within the next half-hour, we decide to do something about that. How about today we decide that we are going to

allow the accusations that have been made and the allegations that have been made against the government to be properly investigated.

I was appalled, I have to say, at the initial investigation by police, when members of the government, members of Parliament, were told by their leadership not to cooperate with the police. ‘Don’t speak to the police’, they said. I look around the chamber, and there are members here today who were told that and followed those instructions. Little wonder they came up with the ‘nothing to see’ verdict at the end of the day. If the suspects will not cooperate, it is very, very difficult to gain any evidence at all, and of course they were let off, even though the ALP stole hundreds of thousands of dollars, even though the Victorian government took over a million dollars of taxpayers funds to go to the High Court of Australia in an attempt to cover up its misdeeds. All of that, and the police investigation said, ‘Nothing to see here’, because nobody from within the government would cooperate.

Is it any wonder that people are disgusted with their political leadership? Is it any wonder that people think we are all crooks? Is it any wonder that they have no faith in their political leaders? Is it any wonder they have no trust in government? Is it any wonder that that is what they teach their kids: ‘Don’t trust your politicians, don’t believe your politicians’? As I say, I have never seen the public opinion of political leadership in this country, in this state in particular, as low as it is now.

I urge members to do something about that now. Here is an opportunity. It is not an opportunity that we will get very often, but it is an opportunity that we have now. And we must grasp it. We must run with it. Here is a chance to show the people of Victoria that we are not all crooks. Here is an opportunity for us to show the people of Victoria that they can trust us, that they can have faith in at least some of us, that we are not all the same. This is so important in my view—so important. I do not know when we will get another chance like this, I really do not. If this motion is defeated today, we may never get another chance like this. Here is a chance to show the people of this state that we are fair dinkum about our image and about—

Ms Crozier interjected.

Mr FINN: I know. Ms Crozier is pointing the motion at me; I am well aware of that.

Ms Crozier interjected.

Mr FINN: I know the Labor Party are crooks—we know that. What we are trying to find out here is just how crooked they are. Some things are already established. We know that the Victorian government is corrupt—we know that. What we need to know is how corrupt. We need to know how crooked it is and who the main crooks are. Who are the ones who were behind this artifice, this crooked scheme that they came up with, and how many other crooked schemes have they been involved in?

A member: A rort.

Mr FINN: Well, it is more than a rort; I reckon it is corruption. How many other crooked schemes? How many other corrupt schemes have they been involved in over the past eight years—or earlier indeed? This is what we need to know as parliamentarians, as legislators, and this is what the people of Victoria need to know.

Now is the time for us to clean up the act of government in this state, to send a message loud and clear to the four corners of Victoria that the corruption must come to an end. And if we do not take a stand against corruption, against government corruption—if we as members of this Parliament do not take a stand—who will? It is our duty. It is our obligation to take a stand against this corruption. It is something that we must do. This is something that the people of Victoria have been crying out for for years and years and years. Today is our chance. Today is our opportunity to send a message that this is not business as usual and we are not just going to roll over and say, ‘Oh, well, Dan just does that. That’s just what Dan does; we don’t worry about that sort of thing’.

It is about time we did worry about it. It is long overdue that we worried about it. People cannot be allowed to get away with acts that are openly corrupt. They cannot get away with stealing from the public. They cannot get away with that—surely! If we as members of Parliament vote to allow that to happen, then we are not fit to be in this Parliament, we are not fit to have the faith or the confidence of the people of this state. If we as members of Parliament fail in our duty, we should get the hell out of this place. Those who vote for the cover-up, those who vote against this motion, should tender their resignation today. They should tender their resignation today because they will have failed a basic test—a basic test of trust, a basic test of faith of the community.

Mr Ondarchie: They're not fit to be here.

Mr FINN: They are not fit, as Mr Ondarchie says. They are not fit to be here. So let us grasp this nettle, as painful as it may be. Let us grasp this nettle and let us support this motion so bravely put forth by Mr Somyurek. Let us support this motion. Let us, please, on both sides of the house unite as one and do the right thing. We must do the right thing, and let us do it now.

Ms PATTEN (Northern Metropolitan) (16:31): I am not sure I am pleased to speak on this motion, but I must say I have listened to this debate with interest. I am sure Mr Somyurek has too. This has certainly been quite a change from the chorus that he normally would have got from that side of the house. This road to Damascus that Mr Somyurek has found has obviously profoundly affected many of the members in here—Mr Finn in particular, it would seem.

This motion has been described to the media numerous times—in fact even as late as this afternoon—as this being the Parliament referring issues to IBAC. It is not. Let us remember that: it is not. We cannot, we do not have that power and it is not what this motion does. This motion refers a wide range of issues, many that have already been investigated by the Ombudsman, back to the Ombudsman. I have heard as I listened closely to this debate how much faith we hold in the Ombudsman—except not now, except when we do not think that she did her job properly and we are asking her to go back and look at her homework and do it again. That is effectively what we are saying here. We are saying that she did not do enough, that she let people off the hook, that she investigated this and said, 'No, I can't see this'. We are also asking in this motion to direct her. We are directing her to share information with IBAC. That is what this motion says. That is ultra vires; we cannot do that, yet everyone seems to have looked over that.

I would say that both IBAC and the Ombudsman are independently fierce, and prior to this debate I thought there was unanimous support for that notion and for that position—that we thought our Ombudsman was fierce, she was formidable. She certainly has not appeared to be a friend of this government, and I speak to her regularly. I speak to her regularly, as I am sure many of you do as well. We know that she could be investigating this. We know that Mr Somyurek could be providing this information to IBAC and to the Ombudsman. I hope, with this road to Damascus moment that he has had during the 18 months that he has not been in this chamber and that time that he has had to reflect on what he has done, he has come back to this chamber having reflected and seen the errors of his ways and he is going to provide this saviour for us all to bring back faith and trust in this Parliament—to bring back faith and trust in the politicians like Mr Finn, who says that people at his milk bar say they do not trust him.

I believe in IBAC and I believe in the Ombudsman, and I think this is a jaded exercise. This is why we have an Ombudsman. She is independent. The office of the Ombudsman and the office of IBAC are absolutely independent. If we believe that there is more corruption for the Ombudsman to investigate, then write to the Ombudsman. Send her that information. She is open to hearing it.

Mr Davis interjected.

Ms PATTEN: I have sat in silence throughout this. I have been respectful. I have listened, and I have been actually quite surprised by the lack of faith that we have in our fiercely independent organisations. I am not supporting this motion. I am also troubled that we would say that our

independent organisations are not good enough, that we have to direct them, that it is up to us as politicians to direct those independent organisations. The Ombudsman can self-refer. IBAC is still investigating this; this is a live investigation with IBAC. So I am not going to support this motion. I do not believe that Mr Somyurek is the saviour; he may have been described as a naughty little boy, if I am going to badly misquote the *Life of Brian*. But I do not think that this motion goes anywhere near this. This motion to me seems to be absolutely self-serving. This has given the opportunity to a chamber that I cannot say had much nice to say about Mr Somyurek in previous months or previous years. I think it is good that Mr Somyurek is finding friends in here and that this motion is supported by some people here, but I do not support this motion.

Dr CUMMING (Western Metropolitan) (16:37): I rise to speak to support Mr Somyurek's motion today. For me, I believe there is more to be gained from us requesting that the IBAC look into this further and have this inquiry. Obviously I have been in this chamber and have put forward to this government amendments to the Members of Parliament (Standards) Act 1978 only in September. At that time the government gave a commitment that they would look at my amendments to the Members of Parliament (Standards) Act 1978, but I have not heard back. I have requested updates, and I believe that the government should actually look at my amendments to the Members of Parliament (Standards) Act 1978.

Obviously during the IBAC Operation Watts hearings there was much that was brought up that this government could do off their own back without necessarily even requesting recommendations. They could see from the public hearings that there was much this government could do. I gave them some opportunities; I gave them some suggestions as to what they could improve under the Members of Parliament (Standards) Act. They gave assurances that they would go back and have a look, but they have failed me on my request to keep us updated on what they are going to do to improve the Members of Parliament (Standards) Act as well as on some of the issues that have been raised by IBAC under Operation Watts.

I remember Gavin Jennings, when he was here, explaining to me that the red shirts inquiry at the time was very onerous. It was something that he had said to me, as a new member of Parliament, I would never want to go through—as in, 'Dr Cumming, beware. Make sure that everything that you do has integrity and is transparent, accountable and honest', which I have done. Even in my mistakes, which have not been illegal, I have made sure that I have listened to my community, come here and requested improvements to actually get us up to the standard of what the community would expect in 2022. It is not necessarily what they expected in 1978.

The Members of Parliament (Standards) Act is very thin. This is all it is. It could be improved. The Local Government Act 2020 actually has more onerous standards for local councillors than we have here in Parliament. I hope that IBAC comes back obviously with recommendations that this Parliament could take on board, and I support Mr Somyurek's push for further information. It would seem that even the I Cook Foods inquiry needed two goes at it to have more information come forward that community standards could be improved to make sure that they were what the community expects. I commend this motion to the house.

Mr QUILTY (Northern Victoria) (16:41): I will be brief. This motion comes from a former member of the Labor Party and refers that party to the Ombudsman for an anti-corruption investigation. Mr Somyurek takes the next step on his unlikely redemption arc.

Transparency and anti-corruption measures should be applied consistently and in an unbiased way. They should not be used as a weapon to attack political opponents. Mr Somyurek is not an uninterested party. I have no doubt that this motion is intended as a way of getting back at former colleagues for their role in his expulsion. They fought dirty to oust him, and he is fighting dirty to get back at them—all the more reason for this investigation. The use of corruption exposition as part of factional infighting is yet another form of misconduct evident within the Labor Party. We need to clean this mess up.

We know about some of the use of taxpayer resources for party-political campaigning, we know about some of the Labor branch stacking, we know about some of the public sector stacking and we know about some of the Labor Party's internal factional power struggles that have destroyed local councils. With new information, some of it from Mr Somyurek himself, it is clear that these behaviours run deep. While the red shirt allegations may be old news, some of the other areas outlined in this motion are very current. The use of taxpayer-funded workers to run Labor's social media and to manufacture and coordinate online campaigns and Twitter swarms is a very live issue.

Victorian governments of all shades have a long history of misusing taxpayer resources for party-political purposes, but there has never before been a government doing it on such an industrial scale as this one. The accumulated muck within these Augean stables is so high, perhaps the Yarra will need to be diverted through this Parliament and through the government offices and through the politicised public service and the police force in order to cleanse them.

I do not want to dwell any longer on the allegations. They need to be investigated, and that should be obvious to everyone. Instead I will finish with some reflections on MPs in this place that will not support this motion. The Greens—the hypocritical Greens—claim to be a check on government corruption and overreach. But when the rubber hits the road, or perhaps when the coal hits the power station to run all those new air conditioners for renters, it turns out they have no interest in good government. Just like everything else they claim to stand for, the Greens' only purpose is to posture, not to create change. At the end of the day the Greens are part of the swamp. They have no interest in draining it. They wallow in it while pretending to be offended by the smell.

Voters should be clear: any crossbencher who will not support this motion has no interest in good government; they are in the pocket of the government, hypocrites threading their arguments through the eye of a needle. Some of them may appear to have already tattooed their allegiance to the government all over their bodies. But if anyone is still in any doubt, let today's vote dispel that, and the voters of Victoria will remember it come the election. I support this referral for an expanded investigation into corruption within this government.

Dr RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (16:45): What I find quite incredible about the debate that we have had in this chamber so far has been what has been missing in this debate, something at the very core of why this motion has been brought before us that people who want to support this motion refuse to acknowledge or voice, and I think it is really important that it be said. What we have here is a person who is subject to a very serious investigation by IBAC and the Ombudsman bringing a motion before this house seemingly to change the terms of reference for that investigation that he is currently the core subject of, to seemingly diffuse his responsibility in the matter that he is being investigated on. It is so important that we name the context this motion is being debated in here today: to draw the Parliament into an active investigation and seemingly interfere in a process that our integrity bodies are currently undertaking I believe is a misuse of this chamber.

I acknowledge that there are some serious matters raised by some parts of this motion, but this motion, I repeat, must be considered in the context in which it has been raised before this chamber today. And for members of this chamber not to take that context into consideration and not to take an active investigation by IBAC and the Ombudsman that is current into consideration in this debate today I think is improper. It is improper for members to not take that context into consideration.

I have confidence in our integrity agencies. I have confidence that should they see fit, on the evidence presented before them in their investigation, to expand or contract their investigation as need be, they will do so.

Members interjecting.

Dr RATNAM: Can I remind everyone who wants to talk over me and speak at me while I am making my contribution that the investigation has not concluded. We are making judgements on an investigation that has not concluded, and I ask every member who is asking for interference in a current

investigation to take into serious regard how they are potentially interfering in a very serious active investigation.

All you have to look at are the few extraneous points that have been added late into this motion about the public service and social media units, which may be warranted. We might consider—not in this context—it warranting investigation, but seemingly it is added to this motion to distract from the reality that, and I repeat with all due respect, someone who is the subject of a very serious investigation is asking this chamber, this Parliament, to help him change the terms of reference under which he is currently being investigated by IBAC and the Ombudsman. Have a good hard think about that, because that is the context that we are debating this motion in here today. And I will not support it, because that process does not have integrity. I have heard members in this chamber wanting to lecture the Greens about integrity, and I reiterate: integrity is at the heart of what we do. It is the reason we raised this matter, the red shirts matter, with the Ombudsman originally. But having integrity means that you apply—

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Ms Crozier, Mr Finn, you have been warned.

Dr RATNAM: So to those who want to lecture me and the Greens about integrity, I will say this: if you want to have integrity, you have got to have integrity consistently, which means thinking about things deeply, looking at the context in which you are being asked to act and thinking seriously about the process that you are potentially interfering in. And I take that very seriously.

For those who are concerned about matters raised in this motion, who believe they warrant further investigation—and I have heard people crow on about ‘this matter I’ve been concerned about for a long time’—well, bring your own motion then. If someone who is the subject of an active investigation wants to bring a matter before this chamber to say, ‘Change the terms in which I am currently being investigated’, and you are saying, ‘Yes, we’ll do that, but I don’t have the courage to bring my own motion, because I’m so worried about this issue’, then I do not put a lot of stock in your argument. I do not believe that you care about integrity or care about the matters that you seemingly purport to really care about today. For three years I have not seen you bring a motion to investigate those matters more deeply.

Mr Finn: On a point of order, President, you have quite rightly warned me and Ms Crozier for interjecting. I would suggest to you that Dr Ratnam is in fact inviting interjection at the moment by her very personal attacks on members in this house. I think it is appalling. I think it is disgraceful, what she is doing.

The PRESIDENT: There is no point of order.

Ms Pulford: On a further point of order, President, though it is not unrelated, I have been sitting here for an hour in this debate and Dr Ratnam is the only person who has been shouted over the entire time. I was quite interested in hearing what she had to say, and I think a bit of order and a little less interjecting from the other side would be courteous as a minimum.

The PRESIDENT: I have already ruled there is no point of order. Dr Ratnam to continue and, please, in silence.

Dr RATNAM: In conclusion, I maintain that the Greens have been consistent in our concern about integrity, about transparency, about accountability and about holding the government to account at every possible opportunity. It is the reason we raised the red shirts matters years ago when no-one else was raising those issues. We had the courage to act, and so an investigation took place.

We have a current investigation, and the person who is the subject of that investigation is asking us to change the terms of reference of that investigation that he is currently being investigated under. I do not think that is a proper process. That process does not have integrity for me, and therefore I am not

able to support the motion. I reiterate what I have said publicly: that this motion is about continuing factional warfare in the Labor Party, which does need to be resolved for the health of our democracy in this state, but the self-interest, the impact on the subject of a current investigation, cannot be denied in the context of this debate. I think it is a really serious matter that every member in this chamber should consider before they cast their vote on this motion.

Mr SOMYUREK (South Eastern Metropolitan) (16:53): Had I not known that Dr Ratnam had a PhD, I would have extreme doubts about her ability to understand simple facts. Now, there was a highly sensationalised TV program—a TV program that pays people to kidnap people and then to film it, okay? We had a program, then we had a quick reaction. We needed to have a quick reaction. We had a quick reaction from the Attorney-General. We had a quick reaction from this chamber. You have to be seen to be acting. You had to act, and you did. The chamber did the right thing. You moved a motion, a reference to the Ombudsman. The Attorney-General did the right thing, right? Everyone did their job, and I am glad you did your job because there was no way I was ever going to come out of that. Now, at the end of the process, do you know what we have got? We have got the use of electorate officers seen to be corrupt. The red shirts is highly germane to that—nothing else. There are no developer contributions. They have seven years of WhatsApp, seven years of text messages, 20 years of emails, telephone intercepts and my best friend of 25 years taping me, trying to entrap me. What have they got? They have a couple of text messages that staff have gone to pick up envelopes.

Do you know what we did in red shirts? We signed false documents saying that our staff worked in our offices. They worked for the ALP campaigning, right? That flipped an election. False equivalence, right? Everything else was investigated, so I stand before you here as confirmed. I am the only politician in Australia that people can confirm has not been on the take, because they have had seven years of text messages and WhatsApp messages and 20 years of emails.

So it has come down to electorate officers, okay? That is germane to red shirts, don't you think? It is nothing else. You listened for four days. What else was there? Were there developer contributions? What else was there? There was nothing else—literally nothing else. It is entirely about electorate officers.

Let us be clear about this. You can try to besmirch and throw mud at me as much as you want, but the fact of the matter is I sat there for four days and they had every part of my life. They had every bank account, they had everything about me, they knew everything about me, and all it was at the end of the day was envelopes—electorate officers picking up envelopes. I am not going to go through what red shirts is again.

So look, I feel bad for the people on the other side. You people are critical of the Labor Party; I am not. I am not, because there are 24 other people—we were all comrades in arms, we did this and we were all forced to do this by the leadership. We were forced to do this by the leadership. So I do feel sorry for those people opposite. It is hard, and I feel I am being a little bit selfish because I have decided on principle that I am going to fight this. I am not going to stand for it. But I realise by doing this I am actually compromising them too, and I really do feel sorry for those people. And these people are friends and comrades of those people, so I am not going to judge them. They have to do what they have to do.

But I have got absolutely no respect for these people. What do you think your job is? Is it an ideological game you are having? Is it for the ideological lines they come out and tell you, the dirty Tories? They control nothing. Look at them. They do not have the white cars. They control nothing. Your job as an opposition party is to hold the government to account.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Mr Somyurek, through the Chair, please.

Mr SOMYUREK: It is to hold the government to account. Now, I have been in this chamber with Ms Pennicuik and Mr Barber—and he was ferocious. He would strike terror into the hearts of ministers and government officials, because he was forensic. He would not care about ideology. He

knew you have got to hold the government to account, not the Tories that do not control anything. Look at them. They do not control anything. They do not have the white cars; it is the people in power. It does not matter if they are ideological allies. You have got to hold power to account. That is your job. On the pandemic bill you were an absolute disgrace, the three of you.

The PRESIDENT: Through the Chair, please.

Ms Patten interjected.

Mr SOMYUREK: So, President, I have got to say I am not even going to respond to Ms Patten, because that was all about telling me how bad I am. The worse they run me down, the worse they say I acted, the more corrupt they say I am, the more compelling this inquiry is, because IBAC is all about electorate officers. So the worse words they say about me, the more extravagant they are in their language, the more compelling the case for this to go back to IBAC is, to go through the Ombudsman is. And as for misleading, I sent out emails from last Friday clearly saying ‘referral to the Ombudsman’, and parliamentary counsel put this; they are experts on, you know, technicalities. So it was not me just sitting down and writing things up. It was clear what the path of this was going to be. It is 16E(1). Read about it. Do basic research. Do not just get the talking points off the Premier’s office and come here and speak nonsense, Ms Patten. Earn your money; earn your keep. You are a disgrace. You are not acting like an opposition. I am going to be the only opposition in this place I think on the crossbench apart from— *(Time expired)*

Mr Davis: On a point of order, President, I just want to draw the chamber’s attention to the fact that there may well be a conflict of interest for certain people in voting on this, and I draw attention, by way of example, to Mr Tarlamis, notice of motion 650. He is actually very much subject, and he is to vote—

The PRESIDENT: Mr Davis, I am sorry to interrupt, but there is no conflict of interest and no point of order.

House divided on motion:

Ayes, 19

Atkinson, Mr
Bach, Dr
Barton, Mr
Bath, Ms
Bourman, Mr
Crozier, Ms
Cumming, Dr

Davis, Mr
Grimley, Mr
Hayes, Mr
Limbrick, Mr
Lovell, Ms
Maxwell, Ms

McArthur, Mrs
Ondarchie, Mr
Quilty, Mr
Rich-Phillips, Mr
Somyurek, Mr
Vaghela, Ms

Noes, 17

Elasmar, Mr
Erdogan, Mr
Gepp, Mr
Kieu, Dr
Leane, Mr
Meddick, Mr

Melhem, Mr
Patten, Ms
Pulford, Ms
Ratnam, Dr
Shing, Ms
Symes, Ms

Tarlamis, Mr
Taylor, Ms
Terpstra, Ms
Tierney, Ms
Watt, Ms

Motion agreed to.

Business of the house

NOTICES OF MOTION AND ORDERS OF THE DAY

Mr DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan—Leader of the Opposition) (17:07): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

STANDING AND SESSIONAL ORDERS

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (17:07): As previously discussed, I move, by leave:

That standing and sessional orders be suspended to the extent necessary to allow the order of business for the remainder of today to be:

Ms Burnett-Wake's inaugural speech

Statements on reports, papers and petitions (maximum 30 minutes)

Government business (maximum 30 minutes)

Adjournment (up to 20 members).

Motion agreed to.

Members**MS BURNETT-WAKE***Inaugural speech*

Ms BURNETT-WAKE (Eastern Victoria) (17:08): It is an honour and privilege to be standing before you today as the new Liberal member of the Legislative Council for the Eastern Victoria Region. I am humbled by my selection, and the gravity of the responsibilities that come with this position are certainly foremost in my mind. I wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the Eastern Victoria Region, which is home to the Boon Wurrung, the Gunnai/Kurnai and the Wurundjeri people, and I pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I am the first Liberal Party woman to represent the Eastern Victoria Region. Seeing more women in politics and holding senior positions across the board is something I am passionate about. I take over from the Honourable Edward O'Donohue. Edward has done so much for the Liberal Party, its members and the communities of Eastern Victoria Region. Taking into account his generous and significant contribution, there is no doubt he will be deeply missed. I will strive to serve the Liberal Party, its members and the community by maintaining the same high standards set by Edward. Thank you for your service, Edward, and the support and friendship you have extended to me.

In his inaugural speech in 2006 Edward spoke on several topics that are as relevant today as they were then. One topic that struck particularly close to home was his mention of the Latrobe Valley's brown coal industry, the baseload power generation. Growing up in Yallourn North, every day for the first 21 years of my life I woke to the droning hum of the Yallourn power station. The hum was part of our everyday lives, and we considered ourselves lucky that the wind rarely carried the stench of the paper mill in our direction. It may sound like the backdrop to an awful childhood, but it was anything but. My father and my grandfather worked at the power station and had a journey to work free from traffic jams or overcrowded trains, and I had the privilege of growing up in the countryside with all the joys and difficulties that it brings. I could safely walk to the local school, ride bikes or horseride with my friends and cousins, build cubbyhouses in the bush and spend summer days swimming in the local creeks, rivers and lakes. We did not have a care in the world. It was a truly idyllic childhood.

Today the power station is in wind-down, along with the employment that it once provided. We see adverse economic and social consequences, particularly in Morwell. A once-thriving country town is now in decline, with businesses leaving and increasing social problems. As I learned growing up, it is possible for a country lifestyle and heavy industry to coexist. That said, over the last 20 years wind turbines have sprung up on our hills and solar panels cover our roofs. Where is the local manufacturing industry to support these innovations? Furthermore, where in the Eastern Victoria Region is the long-term, secure employment that ordinary people can build a life around? There is still the traditional economy of the region—agriculture, forestry, fishing, other natural resources and of course tourism. As in 2006, the region was faced with numerous challenges and yet offered many opportunities. There

is no escaping the fact that the region's future must also include technology and innovation-based businesses that can contribute to economic stability and expand youth employment opportunities.

I was forced to leave the Latrobe Valley to find employment in a job that aligned with my interest in the law and my determination to leave the world a better place than I found it. I started out at ASIC followed by time working in the then migration and refugee tribunal as a case officer, where I got my first taste of reading and understanding complex legislation and policy guidelines. It was there that I grew to understand the true role and importance of migration in Australia's future and how important it is for legislators to make clear and unambiguous laws founded in sound policy objectives. Well-founded policy and the precise wording of legislation can make an enormous difference. Having frequently been in the position of interpreting law and making decisions in accordance with the law I have gained an appreciation of how hard legislators and experts work to create it.

It is sometimes forgotten that it was a Liberal government that championed postwar migration from Europe and later a war-torn South-East Asia in the 1970s. It was also a Liberal government that acceded to the refugee convention in 1954. Migration has been of tremendous value to Victoria, perhaps more than any other state. Targeted skilled migration programs are a means to bring the best people from around the world to our region, where they can help our businesses succeed and share their knowledge and skills whilst enriching our culture.

Both my grandmothers migrated to Australia from Scotland with their families. They came here for a better life. They were the matriarchs of the families and have left a long legacy behind them. My paternal grandmother had 11 children. My maternal grandmother had eight. I have 41 first cousins; all of my cousins have children. Our family reunions are very large. I was fortunate enough to have my maternal grandparents, whom we called Nanna and Poppa, live with us while growing up. My nanna was a woman who worked hard all her life. She worked tirelessly for her family, the most important thing to her. It was her work ethic and dedication that provided the foundation of my belief that strong families provide the best hope for our children. Strong families, whatever their size and shape, enable individuals to thrive and contribute. It is certainly true of my family, and to this day any member of my family, be they aunt, uncle or cousin, I know I could pick up the phone and they would be there to help.

In addition to receiving support from my family I have received much support from many, many members of the Liberal Party. The Honourable Jason Wood, who I first met back in 2003, has been a good friend and will always go out of his way to help not just me but anyone in need. Steve McArthur has also been a wonderful support, and I thank him for that and his mentorship. Donalea Patman, Ranj Perera, Jenny Fernandes, Sarah and Ray Krumins, John Schurink, Margaret Fitzpatrick and Matt Reid, thank you for your support too. Another person is Holly Byrne, who I met some 13 years ago. Holly is the Victorian Liberal Party's female vice-president. Her commitment, her integrity and her willingness to mentor and support women in politics is commendable. Thank you for your support and friendship, Holly. I would also like to thank the many other Liberal Party members in the Monbulk and Evelyn state electorate conferences and those beyond who gave me support along the way. You know who you are. Thank you for the support and advice.

My nanna was always forthright when sharing her opinions. You always knew where you stood with Nanna. She lived to the age of 102, and she told me the secret of her long life on her 100th birthday—but as for what that was, that is a story for another time. What I will say is that I am proud to have inherited her passion and tenacity, and this extends to belief in liberal values—the true liberal values that the party was founded on: fundamental freedoms, democracy, equality before the law, the importance of family, opportunity in a tolerant and diverse society, free enterprise and small, decentralised government.

Now as then, small businesses offer a hope of prosperity for anyone prepared to work hard. When businesses succeed, communities grow and prosper. The prevalence of job opportunities offers hope for young people to remain in the eastern region if they wish to do so. That is important to me. Like

all parents, I want my children to be able to live prosperous lives and have a safe and secure future. But the world today would have seemed inconceivable in 2006. We can only guess what they will experience in the future and do our best to prepare for it. We can look to the past for lessons, but we cannot go back there. The only certainty in life is change. When Edward spoke of democracy in his inaugural speech, he could hardly have imagined the threat that it would face from out-of-control social media, fake news and illusory truths and from those who seek to use the media as a weapon to destroy democracy itself.

As a councillor I learned to cut through the noise of the internet by going out and listening to people and hearing their concerns personally. After the devastating storm the Dandenong Ranges experienced in June of last year—the worst in a century—large parts of my local community were left without power and telecommunications for weeks and in some cases months. I want to thank the councillors of Yarra Ranges council, the CEO and staff, who all worked tirelessly from day one to relieve the disaster and who are still working even now to clear and repair the damage. Many hazardous trees still must be removed before tourism can properly reopen.

When it comes to matters of the environment and conservation, each area is unique. Applying a single uniform policy to every region is not the way to create prosperity. We must encourage industries that will be essential for our communities to prosper but must also strive to secure our national heritage and national environment now and for future generations. We should aim to do better than allowing highly polluting industries on people's doorsteps, near schools or in other areas of outstanding natural beauty or environmental significance. If we manage development in a sustainable way, it can create a net benefit for the environment and community.

Ensuring that development is beneficial to the local people requires them to be heard. My experiences on Yarra Ranges Council showed me that LGAs are a precious resource. They are our partners in government. If we listen carefully to them, we can hear exactly what is troubling the residents in each area.

The eastern region has been financially devastated by the pandemic as well as storms, floods and bushfires. Areas that depend on tourism have seen two years of little to no revenue, and many businesses have failed as a result. In the last two years across the region we have seen some of the worst storms, floods and fires in history. In the face of the relentless disasters we must be prepared. Our infrastructure must be resilient. Power and telecommunication providers need stronger incentives to build robust systems.

I want to take this opportunity to thank and pay tribute to the many valiant emergency workers, firefighters and volunteers who give so much of themselves in the face of these adversities. I also want to give special thanks to the CFA. Most country areas have limited access to full-time firefighting professionals, and the dedication and standards of the CFA volunteers are well known to those in country Victoria.

It was partly because of my success in winning the council election that I was able to participate in the Pathways to Politics for Women program through the University of Melbourne in partnership with the Trawalla Foundation and the Women's Leadership Institute Australia. I would like to thank the program, its organisers, educators and guest speakers. Without their wonderful help I might not be here speaking to you today. I want to give back to that program and other similar initiatives so that we can hear from more women in positions of leadership, whether it is in business or in government. Women make up just over half of Victoria's population, and balanced representation can only lead to better outcomes for everyone in this great state.

Another concern often brought to my attention as a local councillor was issues relating to law and order. We need to detect, deter and disrupt unlawful activities that threaten community safety. I will always be ready to listen to residents and the police and hear their concerns. The police have direct experience of the dangers posed by illegal activity, and it is the job of the government to properly

enable them to enforce the laws that keep us all safe. We should also be mindful that crime is increasingly shifting online, and when that impacts Victorian residents it can become a state-level problem. The internet is now an essential tool for business and government, and the state must recognise the local consequences of cybercrime.

We need to focus on community safety, but we need to deliver good education and we need to promote investment in business and especially promote those businesses that will secure our future and sovereignty. Nationhood begins in the classroom. Other countries around the world understand this implicitly, and we choose to ignore it at our peril. It is our duty as legislators and as parents to pass on the best of Australia, its values and histories and work together to continue to build our great nation, led by a dream that each generation can make it greater than the last.

In a post-pandemic world many are moving away from the inner suburbs and looking for a better quality of life in outer suburbs or country regions. Those people want to work remotely, and they need high-speed internet services to do it. Those services are now essential, and they must be reliable.

Business has learned that home workers can be highly productive. Commuting into the CBD is no longer necessary. Some will choose to live in Drouin or Wonthaggi or Lakes Entrance and work in Sydney, Chicago or London because that is no longer unusual in a world where people really can work from home and because it gives space for their children to play and an environment that they can enjoy in the free time they are no longer wasting sitting in the car or in an overcrowded train.

Over the pandemic the producers of Victoria—farmers, bakers, artisan crafters—have helped provide locally for Victorian consumers, and there is tremendous potential to invigorate rural and semirural communities if we put the right incentives in place and work together with LGAs to deliver what local people want, not just food but also manufactured goods and services. Interstate and international markets will always be essential, but in times of disruption local providers can provide a reliable backstop.

The residents of Victoria and the eastern region simply want access to good infrastructure, amenities, good education for their children and good health care. Infrastructure projects are vital, but we need them to be agile and responsive. Private enterprise leads the way in these areas, and government can learn from them how to deliver faster, cheaper and more responsively, to measure satisfaction with services and to reduce waste. It should not come as a surprise that as a Liberal I would like to see more areas where private enterprise is given the right environment to prosper and provide choices and solutions—with appropriate oversight, naturally.

However, there are areas where people expect a government service—for example, health care, and very rightly mental health specifically is a focus right now. However, the eastern region creates additional challenges for health care, especially for those without easy access to the large hospitals of inner Melbourne. I will be advocating for improved access to health care specifically for those in rural areas. We can build a state where those living in a rural region have equitable access to essential health care without travelling hours into the city. Prevention is better than cure. For young and old, the earlier and more quickly health problems can be addressed, the better the outcomes for those involved. Diagnosing issues earlier not only gives people better lives, it can also avoid costly treatments or the secondary impacts that illness involves.

Whatever the specific issue, we need to move forward with transparency, strategic thinking, positivity and tolerance to preserve a society where people are free to choose and be themselves whenever it does no harm. Innovation is impossible without choice, and without innovation we have stagnation. Yet for change to bring better quality of life, we need to prepare for it. The lesson of the last two years is that dramatic surprises that arrive unprepared for are hard indeed to bear. We cannot plan for every eventuality, but most of the challenges we face are no surprise. Health, education, law and order and prosperity are not new expectations, they are simply the yardstick by which any modern government should be judged. We have plentiful examples in other states and other countries to learn from.

Leadership is not a position or title; it is action and example. It is the duty of leadership to offer hope when a problem can be solved by working together. I will strive every day to work for the people of Eastern Victoria, bringing them strong representation. I look forward to doing this, led by Matthew Guy, holding the government to account and presenting the people of Victoria an alternative government in 2022.

Finally, I want to thank my family and friends for their love and support—my parents, my sisters, my husband, Peter, and my children, Dylan and Adrian, who are here watching today. You are my foundation. You keep me going every day. Thank you for believing in me and coming on this journey with me to make a difference.

Members applauded.

Statements on reports, papers and petitions

DEPARTMENT OF TREASURY AND FINANCE

2021–22 Budget Update

Mr DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan—Leader of the Opposition) (17:29): My matter for the reports section today relates to the parliamentary output and the spending on the Parliament. Parliament is a very important part of our democracy. It is the foundation stone of our democracy in this state. What we have witnessed in the chamber in the recent few minutes is a Labor Party member—Kaushaliya, I pay great tribute to you—who is prepared to cross the floor and actually stand up for dignity, stand up for honesty and stand up for integrity. I want to put on record the protections that are there for members of Parliament who take that stance. The Liberal Party and other parties on our side of the chamber do not have bound members of Parliament, do not have members of Parliament who are limited in what they can say. Labor Party members are forced to sign a pledge, and that pledge if breached sees them thrown out of the party forever. I say that that is quite wrong. The Labor Party should not have that pledge. It is a direct breach of article 9 of the Bill of Rights of 1689, and if you read the sections of the constitution—

Mr Leane: On a point of order, Acting President, what report is Mr Davis talking on when he is talking about the internals of a political party? Maybe get back to the report, I would say.

Mr DAVIS: Yes, I am. I am talking about the parliamentary output section of the 2021–22 budget update. Indeed the money is allocated and the money is tracked—

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Ms Patten): Mr Davis! Please.

Mr Leane: I have got to say, Acting President, if we are going to talk about internals of political parties, it is no surprise, Mr Davis, that Liberal Party members sent you to far, far Kew, where you belong.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Ms Patten): Mr Leane, this is not a point of order.

Mr DAVIS: Thank you, Acting President. My point is that our democracy rests on our Parliament. It rests on our constitution. Section 2 of the constitution makes clear that all of the laws of England in those days, from 1689 onwards, including the Bill of Rights, are part of our system of government, including the protection of members of Parliament.

Mr Gepp: On a point of order, Acting President, you might not have accepted Mr Leane's point of order, but, my goodness, I have not seen any report come before this Parliament that remotely resembles the contribution the thong is making over there. Not one skerrick of his contribution is even close to any report, and if he is not going to be relevant to the particular report that he is claiming to make a statement on, then he should be sat down.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Ms Patten): Thank you, Mr Gepp. Mr Davis, I have to say I do not recall any of what you are talking about being in that report either. Please, could you stick to the report for the remaining minutes.

Mr DAVIS: I will. The budget update tabled in this Parliament just recently for 2021–22 does deal with the appropriation of money for the Parliament. Amongst many other things, it deals with the appropriation of money across the whole Parliament and the tracking of that spending of money, and that is what I wanted to draw attention to: the funding of our democracy. But the underpinnings of our democracy are equally important, both through the constitution and through the protections of members of Parliament. Those who would threaten the decisions of members of Parliament, those who would apply pressure to members of Parliament and those who would make decisions that would pressure members of Parliament ought to be resisted, and I wanted to get that on the record. The Labor Party, as I have said, has a pledge which directly impinges on the Bill of Rights—the 1689 Bill of Rights—at article 9. I would say that our independent officers ought to be aware—

Mr Gepp: On a point of order, Acting President, at the risk of sounding like a cocky and repeating myself, I am not sure where this bloke is taking this. We are only halfway through the week, and he is going off on some tangent that is completely irrelevant to any report that has been tabled. He is just now flouting your ruling, and I would invite you to require him to come back to the subject matter at hand or sit him down.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Ms Patten): Thank you, Mr Gepp. Mr Davis, this is the budget update report that I believe you are speaking to in this time. There may be a mention of Parliament appropriation a little bit in that budget. I think you are going widely outside the report, and I would ask that you come back to the budget report.

Mr DAVIS: Acting President, I accept your guidance as always, and I make the point that that budget update provides a great and concerning insight into the financial position of the state. It provides information that shows that the state's deficit has reached \$19.5 billion this financial year. That is a frightening number, and it is directly the result of this state government's mismanagement. Of course COVID spending is part of it. Of course COVID spending has increased the size of the deficit. But it is important to put on record that we were in deficit at the end of December 2019, before the COVID pandemic began to impact. Victoria, uniquely, is in a very difficult position across the forward estimates, and that forward estimates period adds more than \$30 billion to our budget debt, to the overall debt, and over the forward estimates period it is clear that the net debt of the state increases to over \$160 billion.

This is of course subject to discussion today with the Moody's investor group report, which looks at the state's financial position. In common with other ratings agencies, Moody's has also singled out Victoria as having a uniquely weak budget position. That report, released this afternoon, makes it clear that the financial position of Victoria is much weaker than any other jurisdiction in the country. This is again a direct result of the mismanagement of this government. It looks at the property receipts in the budget, but it also recognises that the major projects that are in action in this state are a major contributor to the financial position of the state. I would make a point about those major projects: many major projects have value, but they must be kept within budget and the waste must be prevented.

VICTORIAN CIVIL AND ADMINISTRATIVE TRIBUNAL

Report 2020–21

Dr BACH (Eastern Metropolitan) (17:37): I am keen to speak this afternoon on the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal's most recent annual report, which was recently tabled in this place. In particular what we learned from that report was the scale of the backlog that we are facing. I am not going to go back quite as far as my friend, but I will go back just a few years to the election manifesto of the Labor Party in 2014, which argued very forcefully that the incredibly small backlog at that time was an appalling thing and that Victorians were being denied access to justice. We hear in this place

repeatedly that the mother of all ills is COVID. Of course what has happened over the last two years has exacerbated the scale of our backlogs, not only in VCAT but also across all our courts. But the backlog was growing and unacceptable even before the pandemic hit our shores. Like I have said previously, I have been gratified at least by the verbal responses that I have received in this place from the Attorney-General, noting the fact of the matter, which is that this scale of backlog is utterly unacceptable.

VCAT is such an important body in our broader judicial system. It was the Kennett government of course, under the outstanding Attorney-General Jan Wade, which established VCAT. In my mind the world's greatest scholar on lower courts and tribunals is the British scholar Dr Jennifer Davis. She calls lower courts and tribunals like VCAT 'a poor man's system of justice', and she talks about these as a working-class resource. The whole idea of VCAT is to have quick, accessible justice for people from all walks of life, and yet at the moment people cannot have all manner of really serious matters heard. In the report in particular I was so saddened to read about what we are seeing on the residential tenancies list, which has struggled most at this time. Some of the changes through the COVID-19 Omnibus (Emergency Measures) Act 2020 only exacerbated those problems.

There are issues of technology at VCAT. Many matters today are being dealt with at VCAT over the phone, on a conference call. So there is the tribunal member, there are legal representatives on the line and the member of the public who is bringing a particular matter is on the line as well. Now, people from all walks of life go to VCAT, as I say. Of course some of our fellow Victorian citizens—many at the moment—are experiencing challenges with mental health: drugs and alcohol, perhaps experiencing homelessness. These are things the tribunal members must take into consideration. You cannot properly take these matters into consideration when you are on a conference call, for goodness sake, and yet the Andrews Labor government seems determined to take ongoing steps to exacerbate the problem rather than to remedy it. I refer to the recent decision just last weekend of the Andrews Labor government to renew work-from-home orders. We must get our friends the legal profession back to work on site.

The manual processes at VCAT are very much concerning when we are thinking about the scale of the backlog, which means so many of our fellow Victorians simply cannot access justice right now. VCAT uses manual processes and paper files. Some members of this place are aware that the Supreme Court of Victoria has a perfectly good e-filing system called RedCrest. There has been a trial at VCAT called Project Felix, trying to move from paper to digital systems. These problems have been spoken about by those in our legal profession for years and years. Of course the pandemic and the heavy-handed restrictions of the Labor government have made these problems worse, but now, finally, surely the government must act to give VCAT the resources that it needs.

Finally, and again this is a matter that was directly touched upon in the report, our backlogs in VCAT are only being made worse by the fact that we have so few tribunal members. I am looking for the exact number. Last year there were 20 fewer members than in the year before. So again, if you are not going to update the VCAT's systems, if you are not going to allow VCAT and our other courts to get back to work carrying out important matters in person, at a minimum appoint more members. This is not a matter that will find its way onto the front pages of the newspapers, but it is critical to so many Victorians—especially those experiencing disadvantage.

VICTORIAN LAW REFORM COMMISSION

Improving the Justice System Response to Sexual Offences

Mr GRIMLEY (Western Victoria) (17:42): I rise today to speak about the recent Victorian Law Reform Commission's report, *Improving the Justice System Response to Sexual Offences*. Before commenting on some specific elements of the report I would like to first commend the VLRC on their work on issues related to victims of crime. The VLRC has published a series of papers on these matters. This report is another well-considered, well-researched and comprehensive document.

Prior to the report being tabled the Attorney-General announced that the government was committed to legislation to require affirmative consent and to make the act of stealthing a criminal offence. We very much welcome this. If it were not for this announcement, we would have moved our own legislative amendment to the Sex Work Decriminalisation Bill 2021. No-one should have their consent for safe sex refused against their will.

The 91 recommendations arising from this report are testament not only to its thoroughness but also to the scale of the work required to improve how we treat victims of sexual assault throughout the judicial process. Let us not lose sight of this too. Too many times the victims of these terrible crimes are further traumatised by the system that is meant to bring justice for them. We need to do better. It is disappointing that I have to note here that in 2016 the VLRC produced another fantastic report on the role of victims in the criminal trial process, from which a number of recommendations have not been implemented—minus two, I might add, that were voted in last night in this place through our amendments.

The report presents a comprehensive reform program. A few initiatives cover issues previously raised by Derryn Hinch's Justice Party, and they include better education on sexual violence, giving teeth to the Victims' Charter Act 2006 by delivering enforceable rights to victims, expanding multidisciplinary centres, improved governance and accountability between Victoria Police and child protection, stronger advocacy for children and reforms to the Victims of Crime Assistance Act 1996, just to name a few.

The report also recommends the implementation of an online sexual assault reporting option for both sexual assault centres and the police. I have been a huge supporter of this in the past and have spoken to many stakeholders about how Victoria could implement such program. It calls for community organisations to receive funding to support sexual assault survivors. We have advocated for specific projects that come under this banner, such as the funding for improvements to crisis accommodation in Horsham, for which we successfully advocated in 2019.

Of significance, a few of the reforms point to the establishment of a victims legal service. Derryn Hinch's Justice Party achieved the first VLS in Victoria in the last budget, but it was grossly underfunded, with only \$7.6 million set aside. Given several recommendations in the report indicate better resourcing for the VLS, as do our conversations with individual victims of crime, we will continue to lobby for this.

A number of recommendations in this report relate to improved data gathering. Recommendation 17 mirrors my motion in the Legislative Council on 11 November 2020, which sought for the government to report on attrition rates for sexual assault cases. The government voted against my motion, ensuring it failed, with the help of some crossbenchers. I bet they probably regret that decision now, with not only this report telling us we need to collect more data but many other reports and experts echoing the same. I will be very interested to hear now what the response will be from the government on these recommendations.

While we are happy with the commitments on affirmative consent and stealthing, I remind the Attorney-General that these are just a few out of the 91 recommendations. We will hold the government to account to deliver a more comprehensive response as to how they will implement the remaining 89. And if they decide not to implement any of the recommendations, then why? I probably could have written half of those recommendations myself with the work that our party is doing with the victim-survivors of crime. I really hope that this shows that the government is listening to the agenda that we are pushing, because it is an important one and one that needs to be heard, not put in the too-hard basket like the 2016 VLRC report. As members of Parliament and lawmakers in this state we need to do more to protect and support victims of sexual assault. Stop playing politics with victims of crime and start being part of the solution.

PARKDALE ELEVATED RAIL*Petition*

Mr HAYES (Southern Metropolitan) (17:46): E-petition 395 draws the attention of the Legislative Council to the risks and issues associated with the proposed sky rail at Parkdale. Numerous residents and businesses have contacted me about this proposal, and while they accept that modification is inevitable, they believe the planned sky rail is not the best solution for this situation. Parkdale has a unique seaside village atmosphere, with a cafe culture that thrives on abundant sunlight and natural flora, enhancing the community interaction. There is a heritage overlay on the Parkdale shops at Como Parade West, and residents believe that sky rail will have a negative impact on the character of the neighbourhood. The proposed sky rail's visual bulk will cast a shadow that affects the whole village, especially small business, and increasing noise will be heard throughout the surrounding community. Within 50 metres of this project is a kindergarten, several primary and high schools, and cafes and restaurants that rely on the visual amenity and light in the area for their everyday wellbeing.

It is no surprise that we are told by residents and businesses that they have felt left out of the process and that government has not listened to their concerns. The issue is like a recurring bad dream for them. It seems to many that the government purposely removes the community when designing projects. I urge the government to stop this autocratic and unidirectional decision-making in our state. True community consultation, which is a democratic process, improves public projects by allowing competing interests and preferences to be heard and taken into account. Active community involvement gives rise to community ownership of perceived problems and their solutions, thereby enhancing the prospects of a sustainable outcome. The community should be stakeholders. People are an integral part of the solution and not independent from it. Residents want involvement, and this should be a basic community right.

This e-petition asks the government to discuss alternatives to the Parkdale sky rail, such as providing a costing for an underground option. It also asks the government to listen to the residents of Parkdale and engage in authentic and consultative communication to deliver an outcome which works in favour of the community. I support this e-petition and urge the government to act and listen. Real communication goes in both directions.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH*20th Report to Parliament on the State of Emergency*

Dr CUMMING (Western Metropolitan) (17:49): I rise to speak on the 20th report to Parliament on the extension of the declaration of the state of emergency. I never thought that there would be 20 reports on the extension of the state of emergency, and I got to speak to most of them every sitting Wednesday. They did not have much substance, but it gave me the opportunity to at least speak about what the government's road maps were.

In the month before this report was released last year we had further versions of road maps delivered. We had vaccine mandates, which were a dog's breakfast. It was really hard for the community to keep up with the changes within the actual report. We still have these current issues. The constant changing of directions is really hard to actually keep up with. On 1 October the Premier issued a statement saying that on the advice of the public health team all workers in Melbourne and regional Victoria had to be double vaccinated by 26 November. It just feels so long ago. If you tried to keep up with the vaccination mandatory directions within that report, it was absolutely a dog's breakfast at the time. You could not keep up. Different categories kept coming in and out, and here we are. If you remember, in September the Premier actually stated that vaccine passports were going to be here to stay. In the next year—2022—expect that these vaccine passports will actually be including booster shots, and you know what? The Premier has actually stuck to his word.

Mr Ondarchie interjected.

Dr CUMMING: Yes, I have got the Premier speaking in September about three jabs and that these vaccine passports were not going away. He was predicting the future. There was no health advice—he would just predict the future, and even at that particular time he was saying words to the effect that we were going to have these vaccine passports for, obviously, the tennis, but also for Albert Park for the grand prix.

So here we are, and it would seem that we have the Premier at this particular time conflicting with what the national government wishes to do, which is two vaccines to get into Australia, but now you are going to need three to get into Victoria, which is going to clog up the economy. We have rolling people wanting to get their boosters. We do not need to micromanage them. We can recommend for them to actually go and get their boosters, but we do not have to mandate them to do things. We need to remove the mandates now completely so that we have any chance of recovering. For the government to think—and they have come into this place this year to actually say—if it was not for their mandating we would not have got to 90 per cent vaccination rates is absurd, because on 15 October when this report was being directed there were 80 per cent plus vaccination rates. It had nothing to do with mandating, and it is pretty clear the more you micromanage the community the more difficult it is for businesses to thrive, and it will be even more of a headache now that we are talking about natural immunity and trying to figure that out. Be thankful that we have 90 per cent plus vaccinated. The small percentage that are not vaccinated are nothing to worry about and should be able to go back to work. It is pretty clear.

I would hope that under the current and the new committee that is being set up we can have some proper recommendations, that we can in Victoria move forward and remove all the mandates—especially the mandates for children wearing masks in school. It is absurd. Science does not agree with it anymore. We all know that cloth masks are decorations, as the government comes in here every day with messages on their cloth masks, or a different story. So I would hope that this government actually stops being cruel to our children and removes the masks immediately.

SEX EDUCATION

Petition

Dr RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (17:54): I rise to speak on a petition that I tabled regarding sex education in schools. Earlier this year I was lucky to be able to meet with Steph and Anji, two young people behind the newly formed Youth Against Sexual Violence Australia. Steph and Anji are campaigning for better sex education in schools, and on behalf of Steph, Anji and 2047 other young Victorians I tabled e-petition 318 asking for compulsory, holistic sex education in schools.

While schools have to run mandatory sex education, the actual delivery of sex education programs leaves much to be desired. It is often inconsistent across schools, with some schools offering extensive programs and others doing the bare minimum. It tends to be delivered in one block instead of holistically across subjects and year levels, and often fails to cover consent education and LGBTQIA+ sex education or to include students with a disability.

There is also no real training or standard for teachers on how to deliver sex education in schools. Our young people know we can do better and are campaigning for more holistic sex education in schools and better training for teachers. Comprehensive and well taught sex education, including the concept of consent, is an integral part of addressing sexual violence in our community. I am pleased to support their petition and encourage the government to work with young people and youth organisations to improve sex and relationships education in our schools.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

WRITTEN RESPONSES

The PRESIDENT (17:56): Before I call the minister, in the afternoon Mr Davis raised a point of order. I have checked *Hansard* about the second question from Ms Lovell to the Minister for Emergency Services, and I order that the minister has two days to respond to the question.

Adjournment

Mr LEANE (Eastern Metropolitan—Minister for Local Government, Minister for Suburban Development, Minister for Veterans) (17:56): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

EASTERN VICTORIA REGION TOURISM

Ms BURNETT-WAKE (Eastern Victoria) (17:56): (1720) My adjournment matter is to the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change. The adjournment is in relation to the closure of several parks and tracks and the crippling effect it has had on businesses in those tourist areas. Minister, I note that the government has launched a new tourism drive campaign called Stay Close, Go Further, which is designed to help rebuild Victoria's visitor economy. I welcome this campaigning initiative. However, many of the natural attractions they should be able to visit in my region are currently closed.

At the moment more than 10 of Victoria's most popular parks are closed due to storm damage, including several since the June storm. Most notably, the 1000 Steps trail in Dandenong Ranges National Park, arguably Melbourne's most popular bushwalk, is closed, having had trees ripped out of the ground as well as concrete stairs torn up. Parks Victoria has further listed that William Ricketts Sanctuary, Morwell National Park and Dandenong Ranges National Park, which takes in Olinda and Sherbrooke Falls, are closed.

All of these important natural attractions are located in the region I represent. These closures have had a devastating impact on local small businesses that rely on tourists to visit those parks. These businesses are already doing it tough after enduring restrictive lockdowns throughout the last two years. Earlier this year the iconic Cuckoo Restaurant closed its doors after 62 years of business. Furthermore, the lack of tourists has resulted in the closure of the Piggery Cafe in Sherbrooke and the 30-year-old Sassafras Tavern. The dire situation that local businesses face is laid bare in the Yarra Ranges Council municipal plan. In June 2021 expenditure within the Yarra Ranges was down \$13 million or 8 per cent compared to a year prior. This was led by a significant drop in visitor spend of \$10 million or 17 per cent.

In order to ensure other local operators can survive, the state government needs to reopen parks so that more tourists are attracted to the regions. Therefore I call upon the minister to open these natural attractions as soon as possible so that visitors have a wide range of natural attractions to explore in the regions. The local operators rely on them being open in order to survive.

FAMILY VIOLENCE CYBERSECURITY ASSISTANCE

Mr GRIMLEY (Western Victoria) (17:58): (1721) My adjournment debate is for the Minister for Police. The Nicholson Project is a joint pilot between Wayss family violence service and Protective Group. This initiative is privately funded, aimed at minimising the technology-facilitated abuse of family violence survivors. The way it works is a referral is made via police to Wayss, and then Protective Group are able to remotely access the victim-survivor's devices, such as iPads, computers and phones, once permission is granted. Protective Group then conduct a thorough check of all hard drives, search for and remove any spyware and malicious programs, conduct an audit of the victim-survivor's social media settings and then change all of their passwords. Protective Group staff are all ex-police, corrections and ASIO, so they understand security and the complexities of family violence.

On the day my office spoke to Protective Group last week they had already accepted 20 job requests, all women seeking refuge, needing their devices swept. This has been exacerbated through COVID but also reflects society's reliance on technology. CEO Steve Wilson said they are busier than they have ever been.

In 2020 Wayss responded to over 8000 family violence reports from Victoria Police. Wayss provides services across Greater Dandenong, Casey, Kardinia, Mornington Peninsula and Frankston, but I understand that tech sweeping is available across the state through Orange Door referrals. As the minister may know through some statements I have made in this place on previous occasions, online and tech abuse is rife in family violence.

Research shows that 99.3 per cent of family violence practitioners say their clients have been victimised using technology in some form. This is incredibly scary. Further research with frontline family violence workers by peak domestic violence network Wesnet found tracking and monitoring of women by perpetrators had risen 244 per cent between 2015 and 2020 and the most common abuse experienced with physical family violence is stalking, often through technology.

The former husband of a victim-survivor whom Ms Maxwell and I met with at Parliament was tracking her movements through the location services on her child's iPad. He found her at a refuge. This was despite intervention orders being in place and his being formally charged with family violence crimes. It seems that she was not referred on to services such as Protective Group to have her devices cleaned. Of further concern in this case is that both Safe Steps and Victoria Police did not ask specific tech questions despite this woman and her kids being classed as high risk.

If Orange Door are not directly involved with a victim-survivor, this risk assessment could very well be missed. This type of risk assessment does not seem very well known, and to my knowledge police are not trained to instruct a victim-survivor on how to conduct their own safety check. Whilst it may seem as though this is a question for the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence, the action that I am actually seeking is for the Minister for Police to consider rolling out additional training to Victoria Police officers to assist victims of crime in sweeping their devices to keep them safe from perpetrators.

WOLLERT ROAD INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr ONDARCHIE (Northern Metropolitan) (18:01): (1722) The adjournment I have for this evening is a matter for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. Wollert residents are concerned about the traffic and the congestion and the time it takes them to get to work, and I want to thank the many residents who responded to my recent Wollert community survey. Every morning residents in Wollert experience choked roads and frustration as traffic is banked up. Residents have told me that Epping Road and Craigieburn Road East are just a nightmare when trying to get to work on time, and in the evening it is difficult for them to get home to see their families in time.

Previously in this place I have raised the delays in the Epping Road duplication, how the delays are affecting my residents and how this upgrade needs to be brought forward. It was promised in 2018, but now the government has said, 'Oh we'll probably finish it around 2025'. Well, that is not good enough, so the action that I seek from the minister, by directing transport to do something right now even if they cannot start the road immediately, is to investigate in the short-term the light sequencing and the safety at the intersections where Epping Road crosses Craigieburn Road East and Harvest Home Road and review the safety of the roundabout at Bridge Inn Road and Epping Road so that my residents can get home safely and spend more time with their families and less time in traffic.

ELECTIVE SURGERY

Dr CUMMING (Western Metropolitan) (18:02): (1723) My adjournment matter is to the Minister for Health in the other place, and the action that I seek is for the minister to urgently review the restrictions on elective surgeries and to allow hospitals to make decisions that are in the best interests

of their patients. The last two years have seen restrictions to elective surgery. It has been cancelled, cut back, ramped up only to be cancelled again, ramped up, cut back—it keeps going on.

Now, elective surgery is not always a choice. It is not face lifts and nose jobs; it is surgery that is essential. It is essential for somebody to be pain free, it is essential for somebody to be able to work and it is essential for somebody to participate in society. It is essential, and it saves lives. The logic in cancelling day procedures blows my mind. These are procedures that do not take up a hospital bed or that use specialised staff, and they are not freeing up a bed or staff to help with the COVID response.

I have brought this up with Professor Sutton over this time. I could not understand within the lockdowns, four lockdowns, why they have actually stopped elective surgery. It has made no sense in the last two years. Four times they have done this. We have surgeons finishing their category 1 procedures by 9.30 in the morning and then having to pack up and go home and allocated staff with nothing to do for the rest of the day.

We have seen a backflip on IVF procedures, which I am so pleased to see, but is IVF more important than someone having a cataract removed, more important than someone having their skin cancer removed—these are day surgery procedures—or more important than someone actually having their hip or knee replaced or their carotid artery bypass graft, a child having reconstructive surgery to enable them to speak, such as with a cleft palate, a child actually having their hearing restored so that they are not going to be missing language or a woman who is actually forced into a nursing home because she could not manage any longer in her home due to pain?

These people are waiting. They have been waiting for months, now years, for their surgery. We have got a list of 90 000-plus and growing 1000 a week, so why are they suffering? Why are they having these delays caused? Please show us the health advice that says they are— (*Time expired*)

COUNTRY FIRE AUTHORITY CHILTERN BRIGADE

Ms LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (18:06): (1724) My adjournment matter is directed to the Minister for Emergency Services. The action that I seek is for the minister to facilitate the acquisition of donated land on the Beechworth-Chiltern Road, Chiltern, and to commit funding for a new three-bay fire station and local command facility. The site has also been identified as a suitable location for a future ambulance station to be co-located with the CFA and is large enough to facilitate this.

The Chiltern fire brigade has a proud history of protecting the residents of Chiltern and the wider community for over 140 years. For the past five years the brigade has been seeking to identify suitable land for the construction of a new, fit-for-purpose fire station. The current station last underwent some renovations in 2005, but the facility no longer meets the needs of the brigade or the community it protects. The layout of the station makes it unsafe for volunteers, with the brigade forced to store personal protective clothing in the engine bay, close to reversing trucks. There is also only one toilet on site for the 44 operationally active volunteers, 25 per cent of whom are female, and female change facilities are badly needed.

Recognising the need for an alternate site to ensure the Chiltern fire brigade remains sustainable into the future, a search for available land options has been underway for some time, without success. That was until a local landowner recently approached the brigade to propose that he donate an adequately sized parcel of land to build the new station, providing that the government covers the cost of the subdivision of the land and the connection of power, water and sewerage to the block, which would also benefit his remaining land. The approximately 5600-square-metre parcel of land in Chiltern fronts the Beechworth-Chiltern Road between the Hume Freeway and the railway line.

A CFA analysis of fire history over a five-year period, of current member residential addresses and of road speed modelling from the proposed parcel of land to an 8- to 10-minute radius has shown that the location is a more than acceptable option for a new station. I am informed that Ambulance Victoria wish to establish an ambulance station in Chiltern and have indicated their desire to share the donated

land with the brigade. The parcel of land is large enough to house both the CFA and Ambulance Victoria facilities, and its location near the Hume Freeway would reduce emergency response times. I am also informed that CFA district 24 management are overwhelmingly supportive of this project and have since submitted a memorandum to the land and building department recommending the procurement of the land in conjunction with Ambulance Victoria as a future site for a joint service delivery location for Chiltern.

COVID-19 VACCINATION

Mr LIMBRICK (South Eastern Metropolitan) (18:09): (1725) My adjournment matter is for the attention of the Minister for Health. According to the COVID live tracking data website there have been about 850 000 cases of COVID in Victoria since the start of November. Different experts have different estimates of how many cases have not been reported, but commonly this is between two and four times what is actually recorded. So possibly around half the state have had COVID in the past couple of months, but without surveillance serology testing we simply do not know the real answer. Either way it is pretty clear that we are on the downslope of the current outbreak, with a population that has a very high rate of protection either through vaccines or through prior infection, yet we are persisting with a segregated society based on vaccine status. For what purpose? It is no secret that I have been opposed to these mandates throughout the pandemic, as I believe they are immoral and of little to no benefit, but even for those who have held a different view and felt they were justified, surely that justification has expired. What purpose are they serving? At this stage it seems like just vindictive cruelty.

Places that people who remain unvaccinated are prohibited from attending include gyms, pools, creative arts premises such as theatres, amusement parks, food and drink premises for dine-in service, play centres and some large sporting and entertainment events. Adult education and higher education premises are also on the list, although pandemic orders create an exemption for activities that cannot be conducted from home. However, I am aware that some institutions are preventing any unvaccinated people from attending campus at all. I have also heard stories of GP clinics refusing to see unvaccinated patients even in the car park—needless cruelty to appease the sensibilities of people that the Premier describes as ‘not wanting to sit next to someone who made the wrong choice’.

What do independent experts think about all of this? Just last week the *Conversation* published an article titled ‘Is it time to rethink vaccine mandates for dining, fitness and events?’. They sought the views of five experts: Professor Catherine Bennett, epidemiologist; Associate Professor Holly Seale, social scientist; Professor Julian Savulescu, bioethicist; Dr Katie Attwell, political scientist and vaccine researcher—of the five experts the only one that did not think the vaccine mandate should be reviewed was Dr Attwell, and she was specifically talking about the Western Australian context. My request to the Minister for Health is to immediately revoke the Pandemic (Open Premises) Order 2022 (No 4).

VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY

Mr FINN (Western Metropolitan) (18:11): (1726) I wish to raise a matter this evening for the attention of the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. On 27 January of this year at AAMI stadium there was a world cup qualifier soccer match between Australia—the Socceroos—and Vietnam. There were a number of Vietnamese Australians who attended that match in support of the Socceroos, and they were wearing apparel—scarves, hats and so forth—that featured the yellow flag of freedom, the flag of the Republic of Vietnam. They were told that they were not going to be permitted to enter the arena until such time as they removed that apparel. A couple who managed to get in were confronted by police, if you do not mind, who demanded that they take their apparel off. This has caused grave anger—I was going to say grave concern, but it is more than grave concern; it is anger—within the Australian Vietnamese community.

The Australian Vietnamese community is one of the best going around. They really are great people. They are proud Australians, they are loyal Australians and one of the many things that I love about the

Vietnamese community is that they always show gratitude for what Australia did during the Vietnam War. They never forget and have never forgotten the number of Australians who sacrificed their lives for their freedom, and it is something that often brings a tear to my eye when I am with the Australian Vietnamese community. It is just a remarkable thing. So for them to be treated in this way at a soccer match when they were actually supporting the Socceroos—they were not even supporting Vietnam, they were supporting the Socceroos. The Australian Vietnamese were confronted by security and then by police and told that they were not allowed to display the yellow flag of freedom, which is something that is so close and so dear to the heart of every Australian Vietnamese person, particularly refugees, because to them it symbolises so much. It symbolises freedom, it symbolises love of their homeland and for this to happen I find absolutely disgraceful. What I am asking the minister to do is to conduct an investigation into exactly what happened at AAMI stadium on 27 January and make sure that it never happens again.

SHEPPARTON BYPASS

Mr QUILTY (Northern Victoria) (18:14): (1727) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. The Shepparton bypass is long awaited—very long awaited. This government initially produced a \$300-\$400 million estimate for stage 1 of the Shepparton bypass. The federal government agreed to contribute most of the cost for the \$208 million commitment, but the project was still underfunded. In new estimates the project cost has tripled. The bypass is now expected to cost \$1.2 billion. The government is refusing to reveal where the initial numbers came from and what explains the increase in costs. This has led to squabbling between governments. The Victorian transport infrastructure minister wants to shift blame onto the federal government, and the feds do not want to pay an additional \$692 million because of the state government's stuff-up. Barnaby Joyce suspects regulation is responsible for the blowout, but Jacinta Allan says he has no idea what he is talking about.

So, Minister, how about you enlighten us? I call on the minister to tell us why this project has tripled in cost and to specifically account for the additional costs incurred from compliance with environmental and cultural heritage red tape. While you squabble, the bypass is not getting built. Nobody is releasing the business case. A case developed for taxpayers using taxpayer funds is being withheld from taxpayers by politicians that are supposed to represent them. It is not your business case and it is not your information to keep secret. The information belongs to the public, and it is time you released it. In fact, Minister, I call on you to turn the Shepparton bypass into a case study in transparency. Put up the budgets and the costings with all their granularity online. Open it up to the crowd for scrutiny. Reveal every delay and cost overrun in real time. Let us monitor the project, warts and all. Turn what has been so far a typical case of government secrecy and stuff-up into a shining example of transparency.

ON-DEMAND WORKFORCE

Mrs McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:16): (1728) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Industrial Relations and concerns his government's consultation paper *Fair Conduct and Accountability Standards for the Victorian On-Demand Workforce*, released in December last year. The minister provides a gushing foreword, noting the consultation's origin, the inquiry led by former Fair Work ombudsman Natalie James. He describes it as a 'national first' which closed a 'critical knowledge gap' and 'forensically and extensively' examined work facilitated by apps matching workers and clients. It is indeed an important contribution, and he is right to note that the increasing use of digital platforms by workers and businesses is a significant development. Yet the Treasurer inexplicably ignores the central thesis of the report. In a paragraph titled 'The commonwealth should lead' the James report's very first recommendation is that:

... the Commonwealth Government, in collaboration with state governments and other key stakeholders, lead the delivery of the recommendations in this report regarding the national workplace system.

His own consultation paper is subtitled ‘Implementing recommendations 13 and 14 of the report of the inquiry into the Victorian on-demand workforce’. Yet when we look at those exact prescriptions we find that the commonwealth should collaborate with stakeholders, including state governments, to lead the development of fair conduct and accountability standards. What is going on here?

My concern is that these proposed standards are simply the latest bottom-up federalist Victorian usurpation of commonwealth responsibility for industrial relations. Just like innovations in wage theft laws, industrial manslaughter, labour hire licensing and long service leave, they subvert commonwealth responsibility. They will create a patchwork system that will not only make Victoria even less competitive, something we have heard a lot about with the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry report released today, but will make life impossible for digital platforms operating across state jurisdictions. Victorian workers and Victorian consumers will be the losers yet again. At a time when business is on its knees the Andrews government is introducing more regulation of the Victorian workforce that will stifle our economic recovery. In the same breath the government is cementing its creation of a shadow industrial relations system, pretending it is following the recommendations of an independent inquiry when it is in fact directly defying them. It is extraordinary. So I ask the Treasurer to explain this discrepancy. Is his defiance of the recommendation that reform be led at the federal level a pre-emptive action, a vote of no confidence in Mr Albanese’s electoral hopes?

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL APPOINTMENTS

Ms BATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:19): (1729) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Education, the Honourable James Merlino in the other place, and it relates to the appointment and reappointment of school principal contracts in the state education system. I am speaking specifically in relation to constituents who have raised this with me, but it could well be seen across the state and utilised across the state. The action I am seeking is for there to be a greater weight of parent voice, school council voice and transparency around these appointments—either renewal of current principals or the awarding of new principal roles and also assistant roles.

In our state our children deserve the very best of educational outcomes. They deserve for leaders in our schools—our principals and assistant principals—to be focused solely on student wellbeing and student outcomes; excellent communication within the staff and within the parent and school community; good governance; good managerial skills; and potentially and hopefully budgeting skills. What we need and want and what students deserve is the very best that the system can offer. That may well be people coming in from overseas, if their situation and qualifications are appropriate, or lateral movement from different states. The Department of Education and Training should be picking those people who are the best and brightest.

Now, sometimes in our system there are principals who have been in the system a long time and, let us be honest, are cruising. I have had that situation explained to me by one of my constituents and am very concerned that that is not really benefiting the students or the town. So it is really important that for this education system the minister refreshes this to actually give more weight to parents. Parents understand. They live in the community and they can really seek out and give weight to the best principal.

Now, let me be very straight. In my time teaching in the state education system for nine years I met some outstanding teachers and outstanding principals, and they are the type of people who we want to see flourish and work throughout our system. Also in my role I am often contacted by principals who do an amazing job. I think our students deserve the very best, and so I am calling on the minister to change the process to enable greater parent voice and oversight for the best outcomes.

COURT SERVICES

Dr BACH (Eastern Metropolitan) (18:22): (1730) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Attorney-General, and the action that I seek is for her to take all necessary steps to ensure that all contested matters of substance in our courts are once again dealt with in person. I spoke a little bit

earlier today about the most recent annual report of the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, and in that contribution I spoke in part about the fact that so many important matters are being dealt with on the phone. More broadly, we are seeing across our court system so many matters being dealt with via video link technology in a way that quite frankly is slower and less efficacious than it would be in person. This is a change that defendants certainly want. This is a change that lawyers want. This is a change that judges want. It would result of course in quicker and better outcomes.

Importantly—and this is something that is not often touched upon in these discussions—it would result in far better outcomes for members of our legal profession, in particular younger members of our legal profession and female members of our legal profession. When you look at the make-up of the Victorian Bar it is so fantastic to see that so many of the younger lawyers are emerging female lawyers, and yet at the upper echelons of the bar we still see a very significant gender imbalance. There has been so much written about the fact that for men it is simply a fact that there are so many more informal networking opportunities and informal professional development opportunities. And so a message that I have heard loud and clear from the many female members of the bar who I have been speaking to over recent months is that they in particular are desperate to get back to work, to engage with their colleagues once more and to continue to engage in professional development, because of course they are so serious about the administration of justice in this state and—of course in a manner that is entirely appropriate—about their careers.

Now, the Victorian Labor government says that it is appropriate, and I agree, for 80 000 people to cram into the MCG and watch the cricket. That is great. The Victorian Labor government, on the eve of the final in which Ash Barty was going to play, said that there could be 80 per cent capacity at the tennis. I agree with that. Very belatedly, we have classrooms full of kids, albeit masked—and we could do away with that—but the point is, how can it possibly be safe to cram so many Victorians into confined spaces but never to even allow 10 or 12 perfectly socially distanced people in a courtroom?

Because of the ongoing work-from-home directions, small businesses in particular have been crushed. I dare say matters of the administration of justice like this are never going to end up on the front page of the newspaper, but they happen to be so important for the many, many Victorians who rely on our court system. So again I would urge the Attorney to take all practicable steps to ensure that our legal system can get back to business, working face to face in person.

RESPONSES

Mr LEANE (Eastern Metropolitan—Minister for Local Government, Minister for Suburban Development, Minister for Veterans) (18:26): Eleven MLCs have directed 11 adjournment matters to nine different ministers.

Dr Bach: A good spread tonight.

Mr LEANE: Yes, it was actually impressive. I am sure that responses from those ministers will be directed to those MLCs in due course.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 6.26 pm.