



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

60th Parliament

Wednesday 7 February 2024

Office-holders of the Legislative Assembly

60th Parliament

Speaker

Maree Edwards

Deputy Speaker

Matt Fregon

Acting Speakers

Juliana Addison, Jordan Crugnale, Daniela De Martino, Paul Edbrooke,
Wayne Farnham, Paul Hamer, Lauren Kathage, Nathan Lambert, Alison Marchant,
Paul Mercurio, John Mullahy, Kim O’Keeffe, Meng Heang Tak, Jackson Taylor and Iwan Walters

Leader of the Parliamentary Labor Party and Premier

Jacinta Allan

Deputy Leader of the Parliamentary Labor Party and Deputy Premier

Ben Carroll

Leader of the Parliamentary Liberal Party and Leader of the Opposition

John Pesutto

Deputy Leader of the Parliamentary Liberal Party and Deputy Leader of the Opposition

David Southwick

Leader of the Nationals

Peter Walsh

Deputy Leader of the Nationals

Emma Kealy

Leader of the House

Mary-Anne Thomas

Manager of Opposition Business

James Newbury

Members of the Legislative Assembly
60th Parliament

Member	District	Party	Member	District	Party
Addison, Juliana	Wendouree	ALP	Lambert, Nathan	Preston	ALP
Allan, Jacinta	Bendigo East	ALP	Maas, Gary	Narre Warren South	ALP
Andrews, Daniel ¹	Mulgrave	ALP	McCurdy, Tim	Ovens Valley	Nat
Battin, Brad	Berwick	Lib	McGhie, Steve	Melton	ALP
Benham, Jade	Mildura	Nat	McLeish, Cindy	Eildon	Lib
Britnell, Roma	South-West Coast	Lib	Marchant, Alison	Bellarine	ALP
Brooks, Colin	Bundoora	ALP	Matthews-Ward, Kathleen	Broadmeadows	ALP
Bull, Josh	Sunbury	ALP	Mercurio, Paul	Hastings	ALP
Bull, Tim	Gippsland East	Nat	Mullahy, John	Glen Waverley	ALP
Cameron, Martin	Morwell	Nat	Newbury, James	Brighton	Lib
Carbines, Anthony	Ivanhoe	ALP	O'Brien, Danny	Gippsland South	Nat
Carroll, Ben	Niddrie	ALP	O'Brien, Michael	Malvern	Lib
Cheeseman, Darren ²	South Barwon	Ind	O'Keefe, Kim	Shepparton	Nat
Cianflone, Anthony	Pascoe Vale	ALP	Pallas, Tim	Werribee	ALP
Cleeland, Annabelle	Euroa	Nat	Pearson, Danny	Essendon	ALP
Connolly, Sarah	Laverton	ALP	Pesutto, John	Hawthorn	Lib
Couzens, Christine	Geelong	ALP	Read, Tim	Brunswick	Greens
Crewther, Chris	Mornington	Lib	Richards, Pauline	Cranbourne	ALP
Crugnale, Jordan	Bass	ALP	Richardson, Tim	Mordialloc	ALP
D'Ambrosio, Liliana	Mill Park	ALP	Riordan, Richard	Polwarth	Lib
De Martino, Daniela	Monbulk	ALP	Rowswell, Brad	Sandringham	Lib
de Vietri, Gabrielle	Richmond	Greens	Sandell, Ellen	Melbourne	Greens
Dimopoulos, Steve	Oakleigh	ALP	Settle, Michaela	Eureka	ALP
Edbrooke, Paul	Frankston	ALP	Smith, Ryan ⁵	Warrandyte	Lib
Edwards, Maree	Bendigo West	ALP	Southwick, David	Caulfield	Lib
Farnham, Wayne	Narracan	Lib	Spence, Ros	Kalkallo	ALP
Foster, Eden ³	Mulgrave	ALP	Staikos, Nick	Bentleigh	ALP
Fowles, Will ⁴	Ringwood	Ind	Suleyman, Natalie	St Albans	ALP
Fregon, Matt	Ashwood	ALP	Tak, Meng Heang	Clarinda	ALP
George, Ella	Lara	ALP	Taylor, Jackson	Bayswater	ALP
Grigorovitch, Luba	Kororoit	ALP	Taylor, Nina	Albert Park	ALP
Groth, Sam	Nepean	Lib	Theophanous, Kat	Northcote	ALP
Guy, Matthew	Bulleen	Lib	Thomas, Mary-Anne	Macedon	ALP
Halfpenny, Bronwyn	Thomastown	ALP	Tilley, Bill	Benambra	Lib
Hall, Katie	Footscray	ALP	Vallence, Bridget	Evelyn	Lib
Hamer, Paul	Box Hill	ALP	Vulin, Emma	Pakenham	ALP
Haylett, Martha	Ripon	ALP	Walsh, Peter	Murray Plains	Nat
Hibbins, Sam	Prahran	Greens	Walters, Iwan	Greenvale	ALP
Hilakari, Mathew	Point Cook	ALP	Ward, Vicki	Eltham	ALP
Hodgett, David	Croydon	Lib	Wells, Kim	Rowville	Lib
Horne, Melissa	Williamstown	ALP	Werner, Nicole ⁶	Warrandyte	Lib
Hutchins, Natalie	Sydenham	ALP	Wight, Dylan	Tarneit	ALP
Kathage, Lauren	Yan Yean	ALP	Williams, Gabrielle	Dandenong	ALP
Kealy, Emma	Lowan	Nat	Wilson, Belinda	Narre Warren North	ALP
Kilkenny, Sonya	Carrum	ALP	Wilson, Jess	Kew	Lib

¹ Resigned 27 September 2023

² ALP until 29 April 2024

³ Sworn in 6 February 2024

⁴ ALP until 5 August 2023

⁵ Resigned 7 July 2023

⁶ Sworn in 3 October 2023

Party abbreviations

ALP – Australian Labor Party, Greens – Australian Greens,
Ind – Independent, Lib – Liberal Party of Australia, Nat – National Party of Australia

CONTENTS

BILLS	
Firearms and Control of Weapons (Machetes) Amendment Bill 2024	97
Introduction and first reading	97
DOCUMENTS	
Documents	97
BILLS	
Biosecurity Legislation Amendment (Incident Response) Bill 2023	97
Council's agreement	97
MOTIONS	
Middle East conflict	98
Member conduct	98
Antisemitism	98
MEMBERS STATEMENTS	
Black Saturday	98
Opera at the Eildon Pondage	98
Emergency services volunteers	99
Sri Lanka Independence Day	99
Lauren Jackson	99
Buchan Caves Reserve	99
Gippsland East electorate roadside vegetation	99
Flood recovery	99
Narre Warren North electorate student leaders	100
South-West Coast electorate roads	100
Black Saturday	100
Great Bayside Swim	101
Brighton Central Combined Probus Club	101
Lions Club of Brighton	101
Bayley House	101
Melton electorate	101
Dr Ronald James Herbert Wells	102
Mordialloc College	102
Wellington Road, Rowville	102
Eureka electorate community awards	103
Oil and gas exploration	103
Midsumma Festival	103
The Briars, Mount Martha	104
Mary Drost	104
Schools	104
Pakenham electorate community organisations	104
Pakenham electorate schools	104
Pongal festival	105
Elizabeth Roberts	105
Tarneit electorate schools	105
Container deposit scheme	105
Templeton Primary School	105
McMahons Road–Burwood Highway, Ferntree Gully	105
Bayswater electorate sporting facilities	106
Pongal festival	106
Jells Park Primary School	106
Glen Waverley electorate multicultural events	106
Schools	107
Government performance	107
STATEMENTS ON PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE REPORTS	
Public Accounts and Estimates Committee	107
Report on the 2023–24 Budget Estimates	107
Environment and Planning Committee	108
Employers and Contractors Who Refuse to Pay Their Subcontractors for Completed Works	108
Public Accounts and Estimates Committee	109
Report on the 2023–24 Budget Estimates	109
Public Accounts and Estimates Committee	110
Gambling and Liquor Regulation in Victoria: A Follow up of Three Auditor-General Reports	110
Public Accounts and Estimates Committee	111
Report on the 2023–24 Budget Estimates	111

CONTENTS

Environment and Planning Committee	112
Employers and Contractors Who Refuse to Pay Their Subcontractors for Completed Works	112
BILLS	
Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024	113
Statement of compatibility	113
Second reading	117
Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023	119
Second reading	119
MEMBERS	
Minister for Planning	145
Absence	145
QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE AND MINISTERS STATEMENTS	
Home building industry	145
Ministers statements: education system	146
Ambulance services	147
Ministers statements: health system	148
Ambulance services	148
Ministers statements: energy policy	150
Middle East conflict	151
Ministers statements: Get Active Kids voucher program	153
Payroll tax	154
Ministers statements: cost of living	155
CONSTITUENCY QUESTIONS	
Kew electorate	156
Ripon electorate	156
Euroa electorate	157
Point Cook electorate	157
Warrandyte electorate	157
Bellarine electorate	157
Melbourne electorate	158
Pascoe Vale electorate	158
Shepparton electorate	158
Cranbourne electorate	159
BILLS	
Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023	159
Second reading	159
GRIEVANCE DEBATE	
Government performance	169
Transport infrastructure	172
Rural and regional roads	175
Health system	178
Government performance	182
Treaty	185
Government performance	187
Education system	190
BILLS	
Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023	193
Second reading	193
MEMBERS	
Member for Mulgrave	197
Inaugural speech	197
BILLS	
Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023	201
Second reading	201
ADJOURNMENT	
Flood mitigation	202
JC Donath Reserve, Reservoir	203
Flood recovery	204
School breakfast clubs	204
Extractive industries	205
TAFE funding	205
Housing	206

CONTENTS

Monbulk electorate small business	206
Evelyn electorate drainage.....	206
Endeavour Hills ambulance station	207
Responses	207
JOINT SITTING OF PARLIAMENT	
Legislative Council vacancy.....	209

Wednesday 7 February 2024

The SPEAKER (Maree Edwards) took the chair at 9:32 am, read the prayer and made an acknowledgement of country.

*Bills***Firearms and Control of Weapons (Machetes) Amendment Bill 2024***Introduction and first reading*

Anthony CARBINES (Ivanhoe – Minister for Police, Minister for Crime Prevention, Minister for Racing) (09:33): I move:

That I introduce a bill for an act to amend the Firearms Act 1996 to further provide for the service of firearm prohibition orders and for related and minor matters, to amend the Control of Weapons Act 1990 to clarify that a machete is a type of knife and for other purposes.

Motion agreed to.

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (09:34): I seek a brief explanation of the bill.

Anthony CARBINES (Ivanhoe – Minister for Police, Minister for Crime Prevention, Minister for Racing) (09:34): The brief explanation is the bill will amend the Firearms Act 1996 to further provide for the service of firearm prohibition orders, FPOs, and related and minor matters; provide additional powers for Victoria Police to serve an FPO on an individual who is avoiding service, including powers to direct and detain an individual to serve an FPO and to apply to a magistrate for a warrant to search a premises for an individual to serve an FPO. Because an FPO can be issued against a child aged 14 years or more, the additional service powers may only be exercised against a child in exceptional circumstances. Further, the bill will amend the Control of Weapons Act 1990 to clarify that a machete is a knife and therefore a controlled weapon for the purposes of that act.

Read first time.**Ordered to be read second time tomorrow.***Documents***Documents****Incorporated list as follows:**

DOCUMENTS TABLED UNDER ACTS OF PARLIAMENT – The Clerk tabled:

Municipal Association of Victoria – Report 2022–23

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – Documents under s 15 in relation to Statutory Rule 6.

*Bills***Biosecurity Legislation Amendment (Incident Response) Bill 2023***Council's agreement*

The SPEAKER (09:35): I have received a message from the Legislative Council agreeing to the Biosecurity Legislation Amendment (Incident Response) Bill 2023 without amendment.

*Motions***Middle East conflict**

Ellen SANDELL (Melbourne) (09:35): I move, by leave:

That this house:

- (1) notes the Israeli military has killed over 27,000 Palestinian people, including over 10,000 innocent, defenceless children in the current war and that the International Court of Justice has ruled that there is likely a case to be made that the horrendous crime of genocide is happening in Gaza right now at the hands of the Israeli military;
- (2) expresses deep concern that the Victorian Labor government has signed a secretive MOU with the Israeli Ministry of Defense and provided funding to Elbit Industries, an arms company whose weapons are being used in the atrocities in Palestine;
- (3) notes the thousands upon thousands of Victorians who have raised their voices in Melbourne's streets asking that Victoria stop being complicit in these atrocities and calling for a ceasefire; and
- (4) calls on the Labor government to end the secret MOU with the Israeli Ministry of Defense and end any funding arrangements with arms manufacturers.

Leave refused.

Member conduct

David SOUTHWICK (Caulfield) (09:36): I move, by leave:

That this house condemns the Victorian Leader of the Greens for fanning the flames of hatred against the Jewish community by falsely suggesting that the Burgertory fire was an anti-Palestinian hate crime contrary to all police evidence and calls on her and others who blamed the Jewish community to apologise.

Leave refused.

Antisemitism

David SOUTHWICK (Caulfield) (09:37): I move, by leave:

That this house condemns the New South Wales member for Newtown Jenny Leong for her antisemitic remarks referring to Jews having tentacles and calls on the Victorian leader to immediately denounce the language of her New South Wales colleague.

Leave refused.

*Members statements***Black Saturday**

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (09:38): Fifteen years ago today the devastating Black Saturday fires took a large toll on Victoria, with 173 lives lost, along with huge property losses. While lives go on, the pain and trauma of the losses remain just below the surface. Today we remember those lost and those left.

Opera at the Eildon Pondage

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (09:38): On a perfect night in January I took great delight in attending the opera, not your ordinary opera but one outdoors and set within a spectacular natural landscape and sung under a clear night sky full of stars both on the stage and overhead. Opera at the Eildon Pondage featured internationally renowned and almost local opera singer Breanna Stillman. While the singing was amazing and there were great crowds, the real stars of the event were the organisers and volunteers who made it possible. Congratulations to Karine Haslam, Marisa Hodge, Sandi McLear, Sue Aitken, Annette Van Der Hoek, Chloe Lewis, Katie Lansell and Sophie Cohen, the Eildon Lions Club and a host of community volunteers.

Emergency services volunteers

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (09:39): The flood events that hit Yea and surrounding areas in January this year once again highlighted the incredible value of our emergency response volunteers. The men and women who fill the ranks of our SES teams and CFA brigades are to be commended for their prompt response and actions. At all hours of the night and in conditions that continually test their resolve they front up in these emergencies and give valuable support. The January rain event was a flash flood. The response was led by Peter Weeks of the Alexandra SES, supported by the Kinglake SES, the Yea group CFA brigades and the Murrindindi shire, and they are to be commended.

Sri Lanka Independence Day

Gabrielle WILLIAMS (Dandenong – Minister for Government Services, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Public and Active Transport) (09:39): I rise today to recognise the 76th anniversary of Sri Lankan independence, which was celebrated last Sunday, and to wish my Sri Lankan constituents a very happy Sri Lanka Independence Day. On that Sunday I had the great privilege of celebrating independence day with the Consul General of Sri Lanka Sandith Samarasinghe, his lovely wife Alison and a great number of others who were there to celebrate such a special occasion for not only our Sri Lankan community here in Australia but the Sri Lankan diaspora around the world. It was a wonderful event. It was beautiful to witness traditional cultural and religious observances and watch some incredible dance performances, which were representative of different regions across Sri Lanka.

The Dandenong electorate is one of the most diverse electorates in the country, if not the most multicultural in the country, and our Sri Lankan community is an important part of our rich local tapestry. I would like to thank the Consul General of Sri Lanka for a beautiful ceremony and for welcoming me with open arms – and the broader community too for all their support, kindness and warmth over the years.

Lauren Jackson

Gabrielle WILLIAMS (Dandenong – Minister for Government Services, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Public and Active Transport) (09:40): I also wanted to say that last Wednesday night I had the great privilege of presenting the wonderful Lauren Jackson with some flowers to celebrate her 200th WNBL game. She is a great champion for women in sport. It was also great to see the Flyers get a win, 91–70, against the Perth Lynx. Go Flyers!

Buchan Caves Reserve

Tim BULL (Gippsland East) (09:41): Buchan was hit by flash flooding on Boxing Day, an event which sadly claimed two lives. It also closed the town's major tourist attraction, the Buchan Caves Reserve. Given we are presently more than four years on from the 2019–20 fires and still much of the parks infrastructure after those fires has not been rebuilt due to bureaucratic dithering, I ask the minister to commit to having the caves reserve open for this summer. It is important for our entire region. Small businesses in that town also suffered enormous impacts, and I request that financial supports be put in place to get them through the upcoming period.

Gippsland East electorate roadside vegetation

Tim BULL (Gippsland East) (09:41): Dangerous bushfire-damaged trees remain on the Gelantipy Road reserve. They were identified for removal more than two years ago. Two have fallen across the road since last June, blocking the road and risking the lives of motorists. I ask the minister: why have these hazardous trees not been removed yet, and when will they be removed?

Flood recovery

Tim BULL (Gippsland East) (09:42): East Gippsland has suffered two relatively recent flood events. In the past a Treasurer's advance has been provided to the East Gippsland Catchment

Management Authority to undertake the necessary erosion works and catchment works that need to be done post flood. For these two events, though, that Treasurer's advance has not been forthcoming, so there is a lot of work that remains to be done. I ask the minister to ensure the CMA is provided with these essential funds and also provide a time line of when they will be provided.

Narre Warren North electorate student leaders

Belinda WILSON (Narre Warren North) (09:42): A big part of the reason why I wanted to run for Parliament was my background in the school system and seeing the difference a Labor government makes to all our local schools. Working alongside parents, teachers, principals, student leaders and the local community to build a better future for our kids in Narre Warren North is really a great experience.

I wanted to do an award for my first year as an MP and to acknowledge a year 6 student to highlight some incredible leadership qualities for the future generations that they possess. The Respect and Integrity Award was awarded to a student that demonstrated outstanding responsibility in their leadership and their behaviour, was organised in all elements of their school life and displayed kindness, respect, courage and resilience in challenging situations.

After attending over 10 graduations – and I must admit to having a little bit of a cry at each one, remembering my own kids going through grade 6 – I want to acknowledge the award recipients, to congratulate them on such an incredible, outstanding effort and also to wish them luck in high school. So to Dominic, Amelia, Muay, Charlotte, Kenzie, Leda, Yehen, Victor, Bella, Sabina, Ellora and Keiran, congratulations and good luck for the most amazing year ahead for you.

South-West Coast electorate roads

Roma BRITNELL (South-West Coast) (09:44): I rise in the first sitting week to raise the dreadful state of Victorian roads. Yes, just like last year and many before that, I am speaking about the downright dangerous conditions of regional roads. Lives are lost in South-West Coast and lives are lost in Victoria because of Labor's refusal to act. It is not too much to expect that regional roads are as good as those in the city. South-West Coast has a thriving agricultural sector, ensuring that right across the state Victorians have high-quality beef, lamb, milk and much more, yet this does not come without its challenges. Milk tankers are 2½ times more likely to crash than regular trucks. Despite the higher risk and growing regional road toll, South-West Coast has some of the worst roads in the state, which simply would not be acceptable in Melbourne.

At the last state election, the Labor candidate for South-West Coast liked to claim that we suffered from 'the tyranny of distance and high rainfall'. Warrnambool's yearly rainfall is roughly one-third of that in Cairns, yet when I was there last year I did not see crumbling roads. Labor's quality control is lacking, and it is regional Victorians who are paying the price with substandard and quite frankly unacceptable road conditions. It is not the tyranny of distance or rainfall as Labor claims, it is the mismanagement by Victorian Labor that has left our roads crumbling. South-West Coast's agricultural sector puts food on the table and provides products and everyday items like aluminium cans, and our ports act as the gateway to the world. It is time Labor came down here and had a look at the roads firsthand. I have asked this in Parliament previously, and I will not rest until the minister and the Premier come and see for themselves and finally act.

Black Saturday

Lauren KATHAGE (Yan Yean) (09:45): Fifteen years ago today on Black Saturday 78 communities were changed forever. Nearly 2000 homes were lost and tragically so were 173 lives. It is a difficult day for many Victorians, including in my electorate, where the northernmost townships still bear the scars to this day. The scars left by an event like this endure, and that pain is shared by the whole community. To the families and communities dearly missing someone today I want to offer my sincere condolences. The common thread of these tragedies is the strength of our communities banding together to face a momentous challenge. That unbelievable resilience was evident in the volunteers who dropped everything to help rebuild. It was evident in the healthcare workers tirelessly treating the

injured, in local police and SES maintaining safety and security, in the career fire teams who hoped they would never see a day like that and of course in the countless volunteer fire brigades across the state whose courage and commitment was and still is outstanding. To all those who stood up to help in 2009, we thank you. Thank you also to today's first responders; may you never have to face a challenge quite like that.

Great Bayside Swim

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (09:47): Crowds of thousands descended onto Brighton foreshore on Australia Day to see 1000 registered swimmers participate in this year's Great Bayside Swim. Organised by the Rotary Club of Brighton, the event is a cornerstone sporting occasion that also raises funds for those in need. I gave out hundreds of Australian flags to local children. Congratulations to Rotarian Stuart McIntyre for your leadership.

Brighton Central Combined Probus Club

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (09:47): Probus is a powerhouse in Brighton. There are 10 local clubs, six of which meet in my electorate. I recently caught up with 100 local members of Brighton Central Combined Probus Club for their first meeting of the year. We spoke about protecting our suburbs from inappropriate development and the increase in crime. A special thankyou to president Helen Wartman and Gaynor Johnson.

Lions Club of Brighton

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (09:47): The Lions Club of Brighton work tirelessly to raise funds for those in need. Over the weekend I joined club members as we ran a sausage sizzle in Church Street. Hundreds of sausages were sold to raise funds for important causes. Thank you to club president Kim Low and vice-president Tony O'Herlihy for their master chef skills and their leadership.

Bayley House

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (09:48): The best event in Brighton each year is the annual Bayley House Christmas concert. Brighton is abuzz in the lead-up and following. Many local traders take all of their staff to what is always an incredible night of laughs, tears, dancing and singing. This year was particularly special after we acknowledged Bayley Birds, who have supported the organisation for an incredible 50 years. Thank you so much, Bayley Birds, for your commitment to our community and your commitment to our organisation. We love you, we miss you and we hope you enjoy your retirement.

Melton electorate

Steve McGHIE (Melton) (09:48): Melton has started 2024 hitting the ground running. Throughout January Melton welcomed over 1200 new Australian citizens across three massive ceremonies. These individuals have joined a vibrant and diverse community with endless opportunities, and I welcome all of them to Melton as our newest Australian citizens. On 20 and 21 January I headed to the Melton Recreation Reserve where the Melton CFA hosted the Greater Midlands Fire Brigades Competition for both junior and senior ages. On 26 January I joined the Kirrip organisation's Survival Day breakfast with members of Melton's indigenous community. I also visited the Sri Lankan Study Centre for the Advancement of Technology and Social Welfare Sri Lankan multicultural Australia Day celebration with over 100 attendees. Bacchus Marsh had their community open day for their new basketball stadium, and the Plumpton Sikh temple opened up its new sporting facility, and it was a fantastic event. Last Saturday I attended the AG Hunter Cup and the Great Southern Star harness races at the Melton Entertainment Park. This facility is the pinnacle of Melton's entertainment industry, and it is estimated that this year's harness racing carnival will generate \$4.4 million in economic activity.

Additionally, Melton families now have greater access to special education, with the opening of Dharra specialist school and the brand new high school Yarrabing Secondary College, where our Thornhill Park families are now zoned. It was a pleasure to visit both schools with the member for

Kororoit Luba Grigorovitch. Last Thursday Binap Primary School opened their gates to welcome the grade 1 through to year 6 students, and then on Friday the brand new prep cohort attended. It is fantastic to see this school open, and I have had a great working relationship with the principal Jean Bentley. I welcome the Minister for Education's visit there next week.

Dr Ronald James Herbert Wells

Sam GROTH (Nepean) (09:50): Today I rise to recognise the contribution of my late predecessor Dr Ron Wells, who passed away on 2 January this year. Dr Wells served as the member for Dromana in this place from 1985 to 1992 before transferring to the upper house as the member for Eumemmerring until 1999. An accomplished veterinarian, Dr Wells made the move to politics in 1982 when he attempted to succeed the Honourable Roberts Dunstan at the hotly contested state election. Unfortunately, Dr Wells was narrowly defeated by Labor in the fall of the Thompson government. However, unflappable as ever, Dr Wells returned in 1985 to recontest his local seat, this time winning with an almost 10 per cent primary swing.

Dr Wells was thought well of by his parliamentary colleagues, and he was known for his attention to examining the details of legislation in the interests of his constituents. They described him as calm, intelligent and a dedicated local member. I would like to remember Dr Wells by sharing a quote from his maiden speech, and I think it is a sentiment as pertinent today as it was nearly 40 years ago in 1985:

Time is short. The next decade will show whether we Victorians have the common sense, the wit and the wisdom to really grasp these two great truths and commit ourselves to them: Sell more product; educate every Victorian. The alternative is unthinkable.

Dr Wells is survived by his wife Janette and his children Katherine, Clare, Michael and Paul, and my thoughts are with them at this tragic time. Rest in peace.

Mordialloc College

Tim RICHARDSON (Mordialloc) (09:51): Excitement is building in the Mordialloc electorate as we go closer to the celebration of Mordialloc College's centenary anniversary. It will be such a wonderful moment with our school community as we come together with thousands of locals who have benefited from an outstanding public education at Mordialloc College. It was the borough of Carrum and the borough of Mentone that came together and realised that they needed a secondary college some 100 years ago. 18 February 1924 was the moment that the Mordialloc College got underway in the mechanics institute. It was a few years later in 1927 that the main building was built, and at that time it was £30,000 – a bit more for stages of school works now.

It will be a great celebration, because Mordialloc College has the prestige of having back-to-back Lindsay Thompson awards. That is the equivalent of the Brownlow Medal in education, which demonstrates the leading role that it plays in education across our community and the generations that have benefited from the teachers, the learning and the great outcomes. We are really excited to celebrate that with principal Michelle Roberts, her principal leadership team, the educators, the students and the Mordialloc College Alumni Association, which has done so much work to make this such a wonderful occasion. So on 18 February 2024 I am sure there will be millions heading towards our local area to celebrate one of the best schools not only in Victoria but in Australia!

Wellington Road, Rowville

Kim WELLS (Rowville) (09:53): The recent fatality on Wellington Road in Rowville tells us that this is a dangerous road in desperate need of upgrades. In my regular surveys that I send to Rowville and Lysterfield residents, the condition of roads comes in at number one over and over again. Funding for Wellington Road since 2014 – so that is for the last 10 years – has been just \$3.21 million for the Rowville section, and sadly, only \$1.78 million of that funding has actually been spent. The previous federal Liberal MP Alan Tudge had secured \$110 million for a Wellington Road upgrade, but in the first Albanese government budget this funding was axed.

To fix Wellington Road we need at least five issues to be addressed immediately: we need the speed to be cut from 80 to 60 kilometres an hour outside Wellington Village, we need a speed red-light camera installed at the intersection outside Wellington Village with proper signage warning motorists of the camera, we need better police patrols along Wellington Road, we need a long-awaited upgrade to Wellington Road and we need the trucks from the local quarry to stay in the left lane. We need action on this road as the highest priority possible. I pass on my condolence to the Naidu family.

Eureka electorate community awards

Michaela SETTLE (Eureka) (09:54): Community is at the heart of every country town, and it is wonderful to celebrate the people who make that community happen. Golden Plains Shire Council puts on a great event every year in a different corner of that wonderful shire, and this year it was in lovely Haddon. A big congratulations to the Young Citizen of the Year Caitlin Cadby. She was a vital member of the young women's leadership program and is a really extraordinary woman. The Community Impact Award was won by Maddy McColl of Meredith Tennis Club. It had been out of operation for 10 years. Maddy got behind it, and it is now a huge and thriving community event down at Meredith.

In Bacchus Marsh the EasterFest won the Community Event of the Year; this is a fantastic family event which raises money for the Bacchus Marsh Hospital. David Hookey won the Mayor Award; David has been strongly associated with Ballan Rotary. Ophelia Fernando won the Young Citizen of the Year and Emma Muir won Citizen of the Year.

I was really delighted that at the Ballarat Community Awards the Mega Ganesh Festival 2023 won the Community Event of the Year. I know my colleagues in Wendouree and Ripon were as delighted as I was to see this wonderful festival recognised. Also, a shout-out to Kevin Moneghetti.

Oil and gas exploration

Ellen SANDELL (Melbourne) (09:55): Last night we got some good news when it comes to climate change: the New South Wales government has announced that they will ban any new oil and gas drilling in New South Wales waters off their coast. It is a fantastic announcement, and we in the Greens applaud the New South Wales government for making that bold decision. It follows overwhelming community opposition and scientific evidence that earth simply cannot afford any new fossil fuel projects. Yet here Labor in Victoria is still supporting new gas drilling.

Others have noted that today marks 15 years since the horrific Black Saturday fires which killed 173 Victorians, one of the worst climate disasters our country has ever seen, and yet Labor here in Victoria continues to fan the flames of climate change, which causes these types of disasters, by supporting new gas drilling. In fact in Victoria we have over a dozen new drilling projects in the pipeline, including new gas drilling right next to the marine national park of the Twelve Apostles, one of the most iconic sites along our coastline, and another huge project that goes all the way from Portland down to the west coast of Tasmania. These gas projects threaten our future. They threaten climate change and also the wildlife that is in our marine ecosystems. Communities do not want gas drilling; we cannot afford any more gas drilling. It is time Victorian Labor followed the lead of the New South Wales government and banned offshore oil and gas drilling in Victoria.

Midsumma Festival

Nina TAYLOR (Albert Park) (09:57): The Midsumma Festival runs over three weeks in January and February each year and showcases a program of events, parties, workshops and activities that celebrate LGBTIQ+ culture and creativity with a line-up of local, interstate and international artists. The organisation works year-round to provide artists with support and tools to create, present and promote their work. Midsumma's programming aims to strengthen the creative voices of LGBTIQ+ communities whilst developing the festival's leadership position at the forefront of LGBTIQ+ artistic development.

Midsumma's annual program attracts an average of about 250,000 people to Victoria. It is absolutely fantastic. As part of that I have attended, to start with, the *Queer Latinx: Migrating Down Under* photographic exhibition at the Victorian Pride Centre, noting our government helped build this \$25 million Pride Centre – just pointing that out. Anyway, this exhibition – layers of identity and intersectionality experienced by LGBTIQ+ Latinx people living in Australia.

Then of course the Midsumma carnival, which was really the opening of the Midsumma Festival: free events in Alexandra Gardens, over 120,000 people on average, live performances, fun activities, food trucks and stalls and the dog show – not to be missed. Next, Temperance Hall, where there was a triple bill. Temperance Hall researches and develops artwork fostering young choreographers and dancers. It is something to see – really, really fabulous. And of course the Pride March on Sunday. It was sweltering. The Premier, the Minister for Equality, over 400 groups – absolutely fantastic. Thank you to the Rainbow Labor Network.

The Briars, Mount Martha

Chris CREWITHER (Mornington) (09:58): A Harry Potter sound and light show will be held in the Briars wildlife sanctuary in Mount Martha. It is a great event, but it is in the wrong location. It will see 3000 people per night through this sanctuary and around 200,000 over a few months. This will impact flora and fauna, including nocturnal and diurnal animals, including koalas, emus, kangaroos, birds, echidnas and many others, plus a set of nesting powerful owls, which are vulnerable and where even the shire-ordered fauna assessment report indicates great concern.

Our petition now has over 21,000 signatures. It has been in media across the nation, and hundreds of locals turned up last week for a community forum organised by Louise Page, Anne Shaw, Peter Rawlings and others. I call upon the Mornington Peninsula shire to consider moving this event to an appropriate location such as the Mornington Rotary forest, which is within the Briars itself, or another location and for the state government to see what they can do to intervene.

Mary Drost

Chris CREWITHER (Mornington) (09:59): I also want to acknowledge and honour the memory of the late Mary Drost OAM, who passed away on 3 January. The Greek community in Australia and beyond are mourning the loss of a heroic activist. She was a benevolent yet fierce political advocate known for fighting tirelessly for environmental issues and more. She was never a bystander in the face of injustice, leading citizen marches against overdevelopment in Jakarta, where she lived for 21 years. In the Greek community she was unstoppable, and I send my condolences to all of her family and friends.

Schools

Emma VULIN (Pakenham) (10:00): The last few months seem to have flown by, and it is hard to believe that our kids are back at school already. In saying that, I want to give a big shout-out to all the new preppies and their parents for this important milestone in their learning path.

Pakenham electorate community organisations

Emma VULIN (Pakenham) (10:00): In the lead-up to Christmas I was honoured to work alongside Follow Bless Collective volunteers packing food hampers ready for distribution to hundreds of families. I also want to acknowledge the Salvos, Have A Little Hope and so many other agencies in my electorate who go over and above helping families in need. Not least of these was the Pakenham motorcycle riders group, with their first Pakenham toy run. Around 80 motorbikes participated, and it was very cool for me to don the leathers, hitch a ride on a Harley and present awards on the day.

Pakenham electorate schools

Emma VULIN (Pakenham) (10:01): Just before school finished for the year I was proud to introduce the Achieving Your Best award, which recognises young people that inspire us and who

always try to do their best. Nominated by their school principals, I want to again congratulate grade 6 recipients: Areng, Indiana, Beth, Hassan, Kaylee, Mary, Nate, Chevyleigh, Olivia, Phoebe, Rachel, Rihaab, Ruby Lee, Samarveer, Tauranga and Zoe.

Pongal festival

Emma VULIN (Pakenham) (10:01): I also attended our local Tamil Pongal festival and was grateful to celebrate this day with our Tamil community. With over 17,500 Tamil Australians living here in Victoria, I want to thank them for the richness and kindness that they bring to our state, particularly our little corner of it.

Elizabeth Roberts

Emma VULIN (Pakenham) (10:01): A quick shout-out to Elizabeth Roberts, who is Cardinia's Citizen of the Year.

Tarneit electorate schools

Dylan WIGHT (Tarneit) (10:02): Last week I had the privilege of joining the Minister for Education Ben Carroll in opening two exceptional new schools in my electorate of Tarneit. The opening of Wimba Primary School and the much-anticipated Brinbeal Secondary College marked a significant milestone for our growing community. Witnessing the students' enthusiasm for the schools' innovative designs and learning environments was truly inspiring. I extend my heartfelt congratulations to everyone involved in the creation and launch of these new schools, and I wish the best for all the new students and staff. Education is a top priority for our government. The Education State is what we call Victoria now, and that shows through the amazing new schools we have seen being developed. These schools are world class, because kids in the west deserve nothing less.

In addition, the Minister for Education, Premier Allan and I visited Wyndham Park Primary School to serve a free breakfast as we celebrated 40 million meals being served as part of the Victorian government's breakfast club program. Wyndham Park Primary School is one of many participating schools, and it supports around three-quarters of the school's 400 students every single day. Since 2016 Wyndham Park has served more than 10,000 meals.

Container deposit scheme

Jackson TAYLOR (Bayswater) (10:03): It is great to see people using the container deposit scheme, which launched last year right across the state. In my electorate of Bayswater what I believe is one of the most used reverse vending machines in the entire state is at the Mitre 10 on Mountain Highway in Bayswater. Lots of people are lining up and getting their 10 cents for every single eligible container, and there are lots more coming on line.

Templeton Primary School

Jackson TAYLOR (Bayswater) (10:03): Construction is speeding ahead on the new classrooms and state-of-the-art buildings at Templeton Primary, a fantastic local school in the heart of my electorate. I am very proud that the Allan Labor government is getting this done and making sure that kids get the very best facilities and teachers have the best places to teach in at Templeton Primary.

McMahons Road–Burwood Highway, Ferntree Gully

Jackson TAYLOR (Bayswater) (10:04): Building a better Burwood Highway is nearly finished: the McMahons Road intersection with the Burwood Highway and Clyde Street – long talked about by some but only being delivered by an Allan Labor government. The lights are soon to be switched on, in February – not too far away now, a couple of weeks, maybe three if we are lucky. The new intersection will make it a lot safer. Thank you so much to everyone for your patience and of course to all the workers who have worked diligently on this project.

Bayswater electorate sporting facilities

Jackson TAYLOR (Bayswater) (10:04): Of course the Allan Labor government is continuing to deliver for sports in our local community, whether it is new nets at Guy Turner Reserve, the redevelopment of the State Basketball Centre – I could talk about that one for a very long time – the Marie Wallace pavilion upgrade, the new football nets at The Basin or the new Knox Regional Netball Centre facility. The Allan Labor government is getting on with making sure that we have got the very best sporting facilities in Knox city.

Pongal festival

Gary MAAS (Narre Warren South) (10:05): I recently had the pleasure of representing the Minister for Multicultural Affairs at the Tamil festival, Australia's Thai Pongal event, on 27 January. I was there with many of my parliamentary colleagues in fact over at Tunstall Park in Nunawading. Thai Pongal is traditionally a harvest festival during Tamil Heritage Month, and it celebrates the cultural richness within our vibrant community. The Tamil Festival Australia event really was a joyous occasion, with over 5000 attendees experiencing the variety of stalls, food, entertainment and cultural performances that showcased Tamil traditions and heritage. Tamil heritage of course is drawn from Sri Lanka, India, Singapore, Mauritius and Malaysia, and seeing all those communities come together to display their cultural pride and promote understanding and appreciation amongst the wider community really was something to behold.

Cultural festivals like Thai Pongal play a crucial role in preserving and passing down traditions, and they create a real sense of belonging and identity which contributes to our multicultural Victoria. I am really wrapped to be a part of an Allan Labor government that supports this festival, with \$400,000 over four years as a part of our 2022 election commitment. I commend Tamil Festival Australia, Mr Sivasuthan and all the volunteers for putting on such a special event, which means so much to so many.

Jells Park Primary School

John MULLAHY (Glen Waverley) (10:06): Jells Park Primary is a terrific local school in the Glen Waverley electorate, centred around the values of respect, honesty, excellence and resilience. I recently had the pleasure of attending Jells Park Primary to present this year's school leaders with their badges. I would like to congratulate 2024 school captains Athan and Amaya and school vice-captains Timothy and Jasmine. I would also give a shout-out to this year's house captains, environment captains, performing arts captains and media captains. I wish all these outstanding students all the very best in their leadership roles in the Jells Park Primary School community.

Glen Waverley electorate multicultural events

John MULLAHY (Glen Waverley) (10:07): On another matter, I would like to acknowledge a couple of multicultural events I attended over recent weeks. Earlier in January I had the pleasure of attending Makara Sankranti celebrations run by Vishva Hindu Parishad of Australia. It was a delightful event, celebrating and strengthening connection with the Hindu community, marked with cultural and culinary displays. I thank the entire Vishva Hindu Parishad community, especially Victorian president Geeta Devi, for their hospitality and congratulate them on a successful event.

I would also like to note 26 January was Indian Republic Day, and it was an honour to join Hindi Niketan and their president Dr Reena Dubey at their celebrations. The Glen Waverley electorate, from Vermont to Forest Hill all the way to Wheelers Hill and everywhere in between, is home to a vibrant Indian diaspora. It was terrific to join Hindi Niketan, the Consul General of India to Melbourne Dr Sushil Kumar and you, Deputy Speaker, to celebrate all things India, including our shared values of community, democracy, fairness and justice. I also came third in the over-25s running race, which was great.

Schools

John MULLAHY (Glen Waverley) (10:07): I would also like to wish my daughter all the very best on her first day of school today.

Government performance

Brad ROWSWELL (Sandringham) (10:08): Although the opposition does welcome the RBA's decision yesterday to put interest rates on hold, it is interesting to note that yesterday Victoria paid \$15 million in interest payments on this government's debt.

Statements on parliamentary committee reports

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Report on the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Jess WILSON (Kew) (10:08): I am pleased to make a further contribution on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (PAEC) *Report on the 2023–24 Budget Estimates* tabled on 3 October last year. Previously in this chamber I have made some observations around that report and its recommendations relating to my portfolio of education and early childhood, but today I would like to take the opportunity to highlight some of the findings in relation to my portfolio of finance.

The committee noted in the report the \$2.9 billion in saving initiatives contained in the budget over the forward estimates. These savings measures include a forecast reduction in spending on consultancy and labour hire, a reduction in back-office and corporate functions and a range of savings and efficiencies across government. The report states the committee asked departments to identify these savings and efficiencies and how they would meet their savings targets. A number of departments advised they would be providing further details to government on the implementation of these savings at a later stage, and as the committee report rightly notes, the savings measures contained in the budget amounting to \$2.9 billion are there without any detailed explanation.

Let us start with the promised reduction in consultants and contractors. Unsurprisingly the Labor government does not have a good track record in this space. In fact the Victorian Auditor-General found last year that the Allan government spent nearly \$12 billion on contractors and consultants over four years, breaking its election promise to cut waste. And despite promising to reduce spending, Labor has spent over \$11.6 billion between 2018–19 and 2021–22 on consultants and contractors. Since coming to government in 2014 Labor has spent a total of \$24.4 billion on consultants, contractors and labour hire. That is an increase of a staggering 47 per cent between 2018 and 2022, according to the Auditor-General's report. Concerningly, only two departments actually reduced spending and one met the 50 per cent reduction target, while several departments, the Auditor-General found, did not even meet their reporting requirements around transparency. This is Labor's financial mismanagement on another scale, and once again they are trying to hide it.

On top of this dramatic increase in consultants, we also look to the growth of the public sector. Looking at the PAEC report, the lack of detailed explanation in the budget on exactly how these savings measures are going to be achieved is a cause for very significant concern. Even if the government meet their savings targets, which they appear to have come up with on the back of an envelope, Victoria is still on track to hit net debt of \$171 billion by 2026–27. As the Shadow Treasurer has just said, that is \$15 million of interest payments a day we are making at the moment, climbing to \$24 million a day within just three years.

ABS statistics show the public sector in Victoria has grown by over 60 per cent over the past 15 years, which is double the rate of population growth across the same period, and it is significantly higher than other states. According to the S&P Global Ratings, Victoria's wages bill has risen steadily since Labor came to power in 2014, jumping by 65 per cent between 2015 and 2023. But the scale and the speed at which the government has bulked up the bureaucracy is truly remarkable. You can understand there would be some growth, but when you look at the detail you understand it is not the frontline

workers that are increasing under this government. If you look at some of the numbers, the growth of bureaucrats earning more than \$250,000 has increased by 56 per cent since 2019, and there has been a 142 per cent increase in bureaucrats earning over \$350,000 since 2019, a doubling of bureaucrats earning over \$450,000 since 2019 and a tripling of bureaucrats earning more than \$500,000 since 2019. The growth of the public service is coming at the expense of services because it is not being delivered through frontline workers.

And finally, just looking at the savings purported in the budget and looking across where there have been blowouts across this state, looking at major projects, I turn to my own electorate of Kew, which is going to be affected by the North East Link. This was a project promised by the government for \$5 billion, revised up to \$10 billion, revised again to \$18 billion, and then at the end of last year the Premier went out and announced it will now be \$26 billion of taxpayer money. That is a project that has blown out by \$21 billion and is costing Victorians every single day.

Environment and Planning Committee

Employers and Contractors Who Refuse to Pay Their Subcontractors for Completed Works

Juliana ADDISON (Wendouree) (10:13): I rise today to provide further comments on the report from the Environment and Planning Committee's inquiry into employers and contractors who refuse to pay their subcontractors for completed works. This really is at the heart of fairness and what our country is about – that a fair day's work deserves a fair day's pay. What we have found is that that does not happen in Victoria, that for far too many people, for far too many families, a fair day's work does not equal a fair day's pay.

This report was tabled in the last sitting week of 2023, and it is only the second opportunity for me to discuss the significance of the report's findings and the importance of the recommendations. But first and foremost, as so many of us who work on committees know, we must acknowledge the incredible committee secretariat for their hard work that they do to support the committee as well as gather the evidence and produce this report. To Igor Dosen, Kieran Crowe, Samantha Leahy and Helen Ross-Soden, your work is so appreciated. For the quality of your work and the support that you give your committee we are all indebted to you. Thank you so much.

The terms of reference for our committee for this inquiry were to really examine the reasons and the nature of the refusal to pay subcontractors for completed work. The report that has been produced is a quality report. It does a really deep dive into the poor payment practices for subcontractors in the Victorian construction industry, producing four important findings as well as 28 very significant recommendations on how to address the scourge of non-payment, incomplete payment and late payment. The reason this report is so good is because of the committee members who did the work. I am looking over to my deputy chair right now, the member for Morwell. Working collegially with him as well as the members for Bass, Croydon, Monbulk, Nepean and Ripon and our newest member, the member for Warrandyte, who has replaced the member for Nepean, has been really, really great, because this topic is really important. It is important to people who live in every electorate across our state.

It was not a niche report. It was a really, really significant report, and I want to thank all the committee members for their genuine interest and the collegial approach that we had. We all were looking for the very best outcomes for our subcontractors, because we all shared the view that this was about fairness, so I really, really thank them. I am really looking forward to getting out and rolling up our sleeves for our next inquiry, which is about securing Victoria's food supply. We have got really great terms of reference, and we are going to have a red-hot go and do that.

The construction industry in Victoria is one of our largest industries in terms of its contribution to the economy and the number of people it employs. One of the features of the Victorian construction industry is its hierarchy – it is very hierarchical in nature, particularly for commercial and civil projects. Contracting for these projects resembles a pyramid, with a project tenderer at the top – sort of the

principal – followed by head contractors and then subcontractors, who undertake much of the building work. It is these subcontractors who typically suffer from poor payment practices, which affects not only their employees, their apprentices and the people who work in these very often small and sometimes medium enterprises but also the families and local economies. If you have got tradies and subcontractors working in a small community or in regional Victoria and they are not getting paid, that has got flow-on effects. It has got flow-on effects for local businesses and it has got flow-on effects for suppliers, and we want this practice to stop.

We know that this is not unique to the Victorian construction sector and that other Australian jurisdictions have also introduced security-of-payment legislation to address these issues. The poor payment practices occur in the sector for several reasons, but a really important reason is the imbalance of power between head contractors and subcontractors and the prevalence of undercapitalised businesses and thin profit margins. We heard that head contractors use money that should be earmarked for subcontractors as operating capital for other projects and business expenses. I am going to take the opportunity to talk on this report more, because I have run out of time and I am just skimming the surface.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Report on the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Tim McCURDY (Ovens Valley) (10:18): I am delighted to rise and make a contribution on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's *Report on the 2023–24 Budget Estimates* as well, like a previous member. I particularly want to focus on chapter 6.6.1, road maintenance and repairs, and chapter 6.6.2, road safety. Just to put it in context, since we met in the last sitting last year I have been called to two different public meetings. There were about 40 to 50 people at each of these. Their concerns were around roads in general, but they were mainly about overhanging trees and dangers that we experience. Some of these are on VicRoads roads and some of them are on council roads. To give you the example of Snow Road, which people exit when they are coming to the beautiful electorate of Ovens Valley and they are heading up to Bright or Hotham or Falls, they have been doing 110 kilometres an hour on the Hume, they exit onto Snow Road, they slow down to about 105 – that should be a bit less, but anyway – they are absolutely oblivious to the country conditions and they have absolutely no awareness about these trees.

After this December meeting where people had raised these concerns, sure enough a massive limb fell onto Snow Road. I was there on the afternoon when it fell, and somebody dragged it off to the side of the road. This limb would kill an entire family, and that is not being outrageous at all. It was a massive limb, and the damage it could cause was quite unsafe. In the last six months I have seen similar limbs fallen on the Wangaratta-Whitfield Road, the Greta-Moyhu-Hansonville road, the Benalla-Tocumwal Road and the Wangaratta-Yarrowonga Road. Most of those are VicRoads roads, and I have seen massive limbs falling from the canopies that are overhanging the roads. There have been plenty of near misses and close calls. Heaven forbid we see a fatality in the near future, which we certainly do not want to see.

At the January meeting we had the mayor and the deputy mayor of the Rural City of Wangaratta come and join us – Dean Rees and Harvey Benton, great guys – and they were trying to talk about how they can support us for these canopies on the council roads. But in their defence, their hands are tied because they need permission from the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action to remove some of these limbs that are overhanging the sides of these roads. Sometimes DEECA will not let you remove these limbs even though it is a council road and sometimes DEECA will say you can remove the tree but it is going to cost you \$20,000 and the council says it does not really have \$20,000, so it will have to play Russian roulette with that one.

Surely Victoria must be the only state in the world that refuses to remove trees and canopies that are safety hazards, and then they wonder why the road toll is where it sits. Victoria really has to change its attitude on trees and roadsides. Safety must come first – human lives versus trees. We can plant

plenty more trees, a hundred trees for every tree that we move off roadsides. The government needs to change their policy on the duty of care for people's lives rather than the trees.

I also want to touch on the environment and discuss access to the environment. I recently visited the El Dorado community where the dredge is. Many of you might know the old gold dredge at El Dorado. There is a swimming hole there that Parks Victoria have said they are going to reduce access to for the locals, and it is quite concerning. They are saying they want nature-based tourism, but at the end of the day they are telling the locals that they cannot swim at this hole. These budget estimates are really failing the Ovens Valley, failing the people who use these services, whether it is roads or whether it is, as I say, the dredge and the swimming hole. Parks have told them they are going to reduce access and people will not be able to swim there anymore, and that is quite outrageous if you ask me. I have written to the minister about this, and I hope that he comes back and supports the locals rather than just Parks wanting to reduce access.

Further, just on the roads, can I just remind people that the roads are made up of a pavement that we drive on. They are made up of the shoulders, and they are ruined and crumbling. They are also made up of the dangerous trees and the roadside vegetation. The Allan Labor government needs to look seriously at the state of our roads, not just the pavement itself but the shoulders and overhanging trees. When you try to get contractors in the country – they might be carting silage, for example – they have been told they have to have a tarp on their silage wagon, and it goes through and gets ripped by the trees that are in the canopy as they have to get off the side of the road. It is high time that this government looked into the whole roads maintenance package and gave us some support in the country like we deserve.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Gambling and Liquor Regulation in Victoria: A Follow up of Three Auditor-General Reports

Mathew HILAKARI (Point Cook) (10:23): I rise to talk on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee report *Gambling and Liquor Regulation in Victoria: A Follow up of Three Auditor-General Reports*. This report was delivered in November 2023. I am surrounded by members of PAEC at the moment, so I had better get this right. Being a member of the committee myself, it is an important thing to do.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the chair Sarah Connolly and Dr Caroline Williams, the executive officer, both of whom spent a really significant amount of time making sure that this is the quality report that we expect from a committee like PAEC. There are almost 200 pages of reporting here about things that are really important to the lives of Victorians. I will come back to the rest of the committee and also the secretariat and their work a little bit later, but I imagine I am going to be speaking on this report several times.

The report looked into the Victorian Auditor-General's Office's audits on the follow-up of the regulating gambling and liquor audit – that was a follow-up report; the second time that VAGO had had a go at that one – and reducing the harm caused by gambling. The inquiry also considered online gambling but excluded Crown Casino. Of course we excluded Crown Casino because they had just been inquired into by the Royal Commission into the Casino Operator and Licence, and they did an important body of work which the government has started to regulate and legislate around.

The committee inquired into the 2019 recommendations of VAGO on regulating gambling and liquor, including licensing, industry participants, assurance, compliance, measuring performance and collaborative enforcement. I was particularly pleased to see the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission's active enforcement in the gambling sector, and I will come back to that a little bit later. The 2020–21 recommendations of the Auditor-General were on reducing the harm caused by gambling, understanding gambling harm, preventing gambling harm and treating gambling harm.

One of the things that I thought were quite innovative for this committee was to hear from young people at a roundtable event here in this Parliament House. One of the things that really struck me was the participants talking about the loss of time through gambling addiction. They said to us, 'We can always get the money back.' You can get the money back, a lifetime of earnings. You can always do that. But they could never get the time back with their friends and their families and for building relationships. That is one of the things that addiction steals from people. It steals from them time, and you cannot get time back. I just want to thank all those young people, who made a real impression on this report and made a real contribution, and I hope PAEC continues that tradition of inviting young people to participate in the regulation of our state and the legislation of our state.

We know that of course gambling and alcohol consumption increased over the course of COVID-19, and it has actually continued to increase since that time. That is why the committee considered these reports so important. The Victorian government over the course of the committee hearings actually introduced the Gambling Legislation Amendment Bill 2023 in October, so just before we reported, and this was a really significant step on gambling reform. It was to set out load limits on gaming machines, and what that means is how often it spins and how much you can put in, and particularly the compulsory closure of all gaming venues between 4 am and 10 am. What we heard in the inquiry was in certain suburbs, and suburbs represented by many people on this side of the house, you could gamble for 24 hours a day, because people would stagger their closing times. People who were addicted to gambling would know about this, and they went from one venue to the other, just reinforcing the behaviours that had led to their addiction and led to poor outcomes for them and their families. That was a really important piece of legislation that was put forward, and I thank the Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation for bringing that forward now, because it is important for our communities, the communities we represent.

The committee made 61 recommendations, and we believe that if they are implemented we will have a safer community in Victoria. In the follow-up areas of the report – and I can see I am going to run out of time by a substantial margin here, so I will come back to this – 13 recommendations were made in 2017 and 2019 audits, with work on four of those still to be completed around liquor licensing checks. I am going to sit down now, but anticipate that I will be back on this one, have no doubt at all.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Report on the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (10:28): I rise today to speak on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee 2023–24 budget estimates report, which was tabled in October last year, and what a source of information that is. I thank PAEC for the work that they have done. I am going to limit my comments today to chapter 6 on the Department of Transport and Planning and in particular 6.6, 'Roads and road safety: key issues', which goes then into road maintenance and repairs. This is something where I feel like a broken record, and it is almost embarrassing when I get introduced in my electorate as the woman who does not give up on potholes, because that is what I seem to do all the time. Whilst I am not giving up on it, I think the government has given up on it. The government's approach to rural and regional roads is one that is really appalling, and I think that they can do so much better in this regard.

One of the things that have come up recently and do get highlighted through the reports is the extra damage that is caused by floods, and there has been no doubt in my electorate – in October 2022 we had pretty devastating floods. Again just recently the flood event in January cut off a lot of roads, and there was a lot of water over the roads. Yes, it does damage the road surfaces. But what the government forgets, and what is highlighted in the PAEC reports, is the fact that the funding has been cut, because over years – absolute years – there has been a lack of investment into regional roads. These potholes, these shoulders that were not graded and these surfaces that are crumbling and failing on so many roads and highways were there well before the floods. Now they are made a little bit worse. What

needs to be done, the extent of the repairs, is going to be even greater. I really condemn the government for their lack of support for regional Victoria in this area particularly.

I can drive throughout my electorate and on nearly every VicRoads-managed road there are issues. The cash-strapped councils, in particular the Murrindindi and Mansfield councils, do not have a strong revenue base. They do not have the ability to raise lots of money like in the city, and they have enormous networks of roads and bridges – enormous – when you see the number of kilometres that they are responsible for. With their limited budget, they actually know how important roads are and they do the work in the main that is required.

I am constantly having to write to the government about their failures in roads. If you go from Yering to Yarra Glen – starting in the member for Evelyn’s patch – where we have got some dangerous corners, there are accidents all the time at one particular corner. If you look at that piece of road, it is dreadful. The surface is so uneven because potholes are continually having to be repaired. Then you drive from Yarra Glen to Yea on the Melba Highway, and particularly from Castella to Yea the patch works are dreadful. There is work that has been done. I understand that the minister visited Yea the other day, but I did hear on the grapevine that she did not go up the Melba Highway. I have been calling for her for a very long time to drive the Melba Highway. I understand that she did not take that route, but I would love to be corrected, because I really hope that she did see it.

As you head towards Molesworth and Cathkin you see the surface failures there, and at Maindample on the way to Mansfield as you go from the Melba Highway to the Goulburn Valley Highway to the Maroondah Highway through to Mansfield. All of these areas are very heavily patronised. We have trucks. It is a major freight route, that route between Melbourne and the Hume Freeway via Benalla. That has not had the investment. The Black Spur is looking a little bit better because it is well known as a windy, dangerous road, but then we have down in the Yarra Ranges Don Road, the area between the Warburton Highway at the pub at Launching Place through to the township of Don Valley. It is a small section. It is only a couple kilometres long, but it is riddled with potholes and uneven surfaces and roadsides. There is so much that the government needs to do. I think the PAEC report that has been put forward indicates their failures in road repairs and road maintenance, and I do hope that the next budget turns that around and we do get better investment in country roads, because that is what we need.

Environment and Planning Committee

Employers and Contractors Who Refuse to Pay Their Subcontractors for Completed Works

Nina TAYLOR (Albert Park) (10:33): I rise to reflect on the Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee’s report *Employers and Contractors Who Refuse to Pay Their Subcontractors for Completed Works*. This inquiry was very, very, very important work, and it was tabled in November 2023. I will commence by firstly thanking the committee membership. We had the chair, the member for Wendouree, and deputy chair, the member for Morwell. We also had the member for Bass, the member for Monbulk, the member for Nepean, the member for Ripon, the member for Croydon and the member for Warrandyte. I would also like to thank the secretariat. I know the incredible amount of work that goes into preparing these reports to a calibre that is expected by the Parliament, as has been delivered here. I express my gratitude to the committee, because this is certainly a really, really important issue.

I note that it was clear from the outset that the focus of the inquiry would be on the payment of subcontractors in Victoria’s construction sector. I would make the qualification of course that cash flow matters for every business, but when you think of the fact that the construction industry is one of Victoria’s largest industries in terms of its contribution to the economy and the number of people it employs, when things go wrong, as has been critically evaluated by this report, the ricochet effect can be truly devastating.

I note and echo some of the comments of the chair just earlier in the chamber, because to some extent as a result of what is apparently the hierarchical nature of this industry it is the subcontractors who typically suffer the poor payment practices. And just going a little bit further on that issue, which is really the crux of the focus here when we are looking at that issue of fairness, poor payment practices such as long payment terms, late payment, incomplete payment and non-payment – and I just want to make this further clarification – are of course experienced by businesses in many sectors of the Victorian economy, particularly small businesses. Small to medium-size businesses are twice as likely to experience problems with late payments than larger corporations, and unfortunately when you are in a smaller business particularly, you are extremely vulnerable. You do not have the backup. Who is going to back you up? It is you and the employers that you may or may not have who are relying on you as well and of course your family, mortgage, rent and all the other elements, and whatever you may owe the bank as well. We know that the consequences for the Victorian economy can be profound. They are profound and can include reduced cash circulation, employment and business growth. So the magnitude of the impact of poor payment practices, particularly those experienced by subcontractors, is certainly worthy of the focus that has been extended through this particular committee inquiry and report and of course more broadly.

I should say, this is not obviously a problem exclusive to Victoria. We know that other Australian jurisdictions have also introduced security-of-payment legislation to address these issues, because of course we know that building and construction is not exclusive to Victoria. Other states partake in these activities because they should and because it is a very important part of our economy and of building a community as well. I will put the little caveat that of course difficult economic conditions are exacerbating payment issues and contributing to a high rate of insolvencies. I think that further element is relevant when we are discussing more broadly the recommendations and also the particularly difficult circumstances and contingencies that have been explored as part of this report.

I will come back to the original point that was beautifully articulated by the chair that what fundamentally underpins the element here is a concept that I think we all should value, and that is one of fairness. You have put in a good hard day's work, you are putting yourself on the line, you have exhibited the skills that have been expected, you have had the contract there properly undertaken and yet you are not being remunerated for the work done.

Bills

Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024

Statement of compatibility

Ben CARROLL (Niddrie – Minister for Education, Minister for Medical Research) (10:40): In accordance with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 I table a statement of compatibility in relation to the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024:

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (the **Charter**), I make this Statement of Compatibility with respect to the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024 (the **Bill**).

In my opinion, the Bill, as introduced to the Legislative Assembly, is compatible with the human rights protected by the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

Overview of the Bill

The Bill amends the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* (**ETRA**) to, among other things, enable the Secretary to the Department of Education to employ staff at, or for the purposes of operating, government early learning centres (ELCs) (the government ELC workforce). The Bill also enables the Minister to, by Ministerial Order, declare the employment arrangements for the government ELC workforce and to fix fees to be charged for the provision of early childhood education and care at government ELCs.

The Bill supports the implementation of the Victorian Government's commitment to establish 50 new government-owned and operated ELCS as part of the 'Best Start, Best Life' program.

Human rights issues

The human rights protected by the Charter that are engaged by the Bill are:

- Protection of children (section 17(2));
- The right to privacy (section 13);
- The right to participate in public life (section 18);
- The right not to be punished more than once for the same offence (section 26);
- The right to a fair hearing (section 24(1)); and
- The right to freedom from forced medical treatment (section 10(c)).

I will discuss these human rights in turn.

Protection of children (s 17(2))

Section 17(2) of the Charter provides that every child has the right, without discrimination, to such protection as is in the child's best interests and as is needed by the child. This right recognises the special vulnerability of children, and requires the State to adopt social, cultural and economic measures to protect children and to promote their development and education. The scope of the right is informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which requires that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be the primary consideration.

I consider that the amendments to the ETRA promote the right in section 17(2) by improving access to early childhood education and care for children by supporting the creation, and regulating the operation, of 50 new government-owned and operated ELCs. The Bill further promotes the right in section 17(2) by enabling the Minister to set eligibility and suitability criteria as well as qualification and experience requirements for employment in the government ELC workforce so as to ensure that prospective ELC employees are suitable persons to employ in the delivery of early childhood education services.

I therefore consider that the Bill promotes the protection of children under section 17(2) of the Charter.

Right to privacy (s 13)

Section 13(a) of the Charter provides that a person has the right not to have their privacy unlawfully or arbitrarily interfered with. An interference will be lawful if it is permitted by a law which is precise and appropriately circumscribed, and will be arbitrary only if it is capricious, unpredictable, unjust or unreasonable, in the sense of being disproportionate to the legitimate aim sought. The right to privacy is broad in scope and encompasses rights to physical and psychological integrity, individual identity, and the right to establish and develop meaningful social relations.

Clause 11 of the Bill inserts new Chapter 2A into the ETRA which, among other things, deals with the eligibility and suitability criteria for employment in the government ELC workforce. The eligibility and suitability criteria require applicants to disclose to the Secretary personal information which will allow the Secretary to assess a range of factors necessary to make an informed decision about an applicant's suitability to perform their duties in a government ELC, including:

- Eligibility criteria declared in a Ministerial Order: new section 2A.1.5 deals with employment arrangements and gives (by new section 2A.1.5(d)) the Minister the power to, by Ministerial Order, declare the eligibility and suitability criteria for employment in the government ELC workforce. New section 2A.1.6(1) provides that a person is not eligible for employment in any position of the government ELC workforce unless the person satisfies the eligibility criteria set out in a Ministerial Order.
- Criminal record information and working with children (WWC) clearance: new section 2A.1.6(2) provides that a person is not eligible for employment in any position in the government ELC workforce if the person has at any time been convicted or found guilty of a category A offence in Victoria or an equivalent offence in another jurisdiction, or been given a WWC exclusion. Also, new section 2A.1.6(3) provides that a person must be registered under Part 2.6 of the ETRA in order to be eligible for employment as an early childhood teacher in the government ELC workforce. Registration under part 2.6 of the ETRA requires the person to, among other things, provide to the Victorian Institute of Teaching a national criminal history check, criminal record check and WWC clearance.
- In addition, clause 13 of the Bill amends section 5.3.4(1) of the ETRA to provide that the Secretary may, at any time, request the Chief Commissioner of Police to provide the Secretary information

concerning the criminal record, if any, of a person employed by the Secretary in the government ELC workforce.

By requiring persons that are seeking employment in the government ELC workforce to disclose to the Secretary personal information – including sensitive information such as their criminal record and any WWC exclusions – new section 2A.1.6 engages the person’s right to privacy. The power bestowed on the Secretary to, at any time, seek to obtain from the Chief Commissioner of Police, the criminal record of a person employed in the government ELC workforce, may also engage a person’s right to privacy where such information is requested and obtained.

However, any impacts on the right to privacy are not unlawful or arbitrary. The interference with privacy is authorised under the legislation and is for the purpose of enabling the Secretary to make informed decisions about the appropriateness of a person to work, or continue to work, with young children, and ensuring the safety of young children in the care of government ELCs. Accessing all relevant information about a person seeking employment in the government ELC workforce is a fundamental aspect of the integrity of the ELC roll-out as part of the ‘Best Start, Best Life’ program and provides a protective mechanism for identifying persons whose history indicates that they pose a risk of causing harm to children if allowed to work in ELCs. The eligibility criteria for employment at a government ELC is tied to the severity of the risk associated with the particular aspect of a person’s history, with only very serious matters giving rise to ineligibility.

In addition, as public authorities for the purposes of the Charter, the Minister and the Secretary are subject to the requirement in section 38 of the Charter to give proper consideration to, and to act compatibly with, human rights when exercising their respective powers to declare the eligibility and suitability criteria for employment in the government ELC workforce and to request and make decisions in relation to criminal record information. This obligation under section 38(1) operates as a further constraint upon any interference with privacy.

In my view, any impacts on the right to privacy are appropriate and proportionate to the legitimate aim of protecting children attending government ELCs from harm.

I therefore consider that the Bill is compatible with the right to privacy in section 13 of the Charter.

Right to participate in public life (s 18)

Section 18(1) of the Charter provides that every person in Victoria has the right, and is to have the opportunity, without discrimination, to participate in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives. Section 18(2)(b) further provides that every eligible person has the right, and is to have the opportunity, without discrimination, to have access, on general terms of equality, to the Victorian public service and public office.

It is not clear whether section 18(2)(b) will be engaged by new section 2A.1.6 of the ETRA. In order for section 18(2)(b) to apply, a person must be an ‘eligible person’. The term ‘eligible person’ is not defined in the Charter. The commentary suggests two possible interpretations: either that persons are ‘eligible’ under section 18(2)(b) if they are eligible under the current law of Victoria, or alternatively that ‘eligibility’ takes on an independent meaning in the context of the Charter that is not confined to the conditions of eligibility under existing law. Under the former construction, section 18(2)(b) would not be engaged where a person does not meet the eligibility criteria for employment in the government ELC workforce under new section 2A.1.6 of the ETRA.

If ‘eligible person’ were to take on an independent meaning in the context of section 18(2) of the Charter, the commentary suggests that it would mean an adult person with the relevant connection to Victoria, such as residency. If this interpretation is adopted, the right to have access to the Victorian public service without discrimination would apply to a person irrespective of whether that person meets the eligibility criteria for employment in new section 2A.1.6 of the ETRA and section 18(2)(b) may be engaged.

If section 18(2)(b) is engaged by new section 2A.1.6, that right will only be limited where the eligibility criteria gives rise to ‘discrimination’, meaning discrimination on the basis of an attribute within the meaning of the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* (which includes a spent conviction).

- In formulating a Ministerial Order establishing eligibility criteria under the new section 2A.1.5(d), the Minister will be required to consider relevant rights, including this right.
- In so far as new section 2A.1.6(2) provides that a person is not eligible on the basis of being convicted or found guilty of a Category A offence and, in very limited circumstances, a Category A offence may become a spent conviction, as a spent conviction is not required to be disclosed, then the right will not be limited.

In these circumstances, in my view, either the right will not be limited or any limits on a person’s right to have access to the Victorian public service are reasonably justified by the important objective of the new

provisions – imposing eligibility criteria on persons seeking employment in ELCs – to ensure a protective mechanism for identifying persons whose history indicates that they pose a risk of harm to children and are not safe to work in ELCs.

I therefore consider that the Bill is compatible with the right to participate in public life in section 18 of the Charter.

Right not to be punished more than once for the same offence (s 26)

Section 26 of the Charter provides that a person must not be tried or punished more than once for an offence in respect of which they have already been finally convicted or acquitted in accordance with law. This right is engaged by new section 2A.1.6(2)(a) which provides that a person who at any time has been convicted or found guilty of a category A offence in Victoria or an equivalent offence in another jurisdiction is ineligible for employment in any position in the government ELC workforce. This right is also engaged by new section 2A.1.15 which provides that the Secretary must dismiss an employee from the government ELC workforce if the employee has at any time been convicted or found guilty of a category A offence in Victoria or an equivalent offence in another jurisdiction.

However, in my view, the right against double punishment is not limited by the Bill because where eligibility is refused or removed on the basis of a person's criminal history, that refusal or removal will have a protective purpose, rather than a punitive one. That is, the aim of the provisions is clearly to protect children from harm, rather than to impose a punishment for an offence. As the refusal to grant, or the act of removing, eligibility for employment in the government ELC workforce is not a punishment, it does not amount to double punishment for the purpose of section 26, and the right is therefore not limited.

Right to a fair hearing (s 24(1))

Section 24(1) of the Charter provides that a person charged with a criminal offence or a party to a civil proceeding has the right to have the charge or proceeding decided by a competent, independent and impartial court or tribunal after a fair and public hearing. The concept of a 'civil proceeding' in section 24 is not limited to judicial decision makers, but possibly encompasses the decision-making procedures of many types of tribunals, boards and other administrative decision-makers. The right to a fair hearing is concerned with the procedural fairness of a decision and the right may be limited if a person faces a procedural barrier to bringing their case before a court, or where procedural fairness is not provided.

Termination of employment

The new Division 4 of Chapter 2A of the ETRA deals with termination and suspension of employment in the government ELC workforce. New section 2A.1.13 empowers the Secretary to terminate the employment of a non-executive employee on the grounds specified in the provision, and an executive employee for any reason consistent with their employment terms and conditions.

If a broad reading of section 24(1) was adopted and it was understood that the fair hearing right was engaged by new Division 4 of Chapter 2A of the ETRA, this right would, in my view, nevertheless not be limited because, where the Secretary exercises her power to terminate the employment of an ELC workforce employee, the Secretary is by new section 2A.1.13(4) required to exercise her termination power in accordance with the matters specified in section 20(3) of the *Public Administration Act 2004*. Section 20(3) requires the Secretary, in her capacity as the employer of the government ELC workforce, to exercise her powers in respect of ELC employees in conformity with the public sector values, any binding code of conduct, the public sector employment principles, and the standards issued by the Victorian Public Sector Commission. The public sector employment principles are set out in section 8 of the *Public Administration Act 2004* and require, among other things, that employment processes are established that ensure that employees are treated fairly and reasonably, human rights are upheld, and that employees have a reasonable avenue of redress against unfair or unreasonable treatment. The employment processes established by the Secretary, and applicable to the government ELC workforce, include termination processes applicable to the Secretary's termination powers under new section 2A.1.13.

Further, where a non-executive government ELC employee's employment is terminated, the employee will have access to the unfair dismissal process under the *Fair Work Act 2009*, should they choose to access it. A dismissal may be found to be unfair where the employer – in this case, the Secretary – has not afforded the employee procedural fairness. This gives a remedy where a termination process lacks procedural fairness.

Mandatory dismissal and cessation of employment

New section 2A.1.14 provides that if an on-going employee is absent from work for a period of 3 months, and that absence is not authorised, the employment will cease at the end of that 3 month period. If an employee's employment ceases in accordance with this section, the employee may apply in writing to the Secretary to be reinstated. If the Secretary directs in writing that the employee be reinstated, the person's employment is taken not to have ceased.

New section 2A.1.15 requires the Secretary to dismiss an employee from the government ELC workforce if the employee is at any time convicted or found guilty of a category A offence in Victoria (or equivalent offence in another jurisdiction), or if the employee has been given WWC exclusion.

Cessation of employment and dismissal from employment in these circumstances do not, in my view, engage the fair hearing right in section 24(1) of the Charter. Where a legislative provision mandates that a decision-maker must dismiss an employee from the workforce where certain events have occurred, the decision-maker does not engage in a decision-making exercise when doing so and the fair hearing right is therefore not ordinarily engaged. Further, cessation pursuant to new section 2A.1.14 is reviewable by the Secretary. Specifically, the terms of new section 2A.1.4 expressly contemplate that an employee captured by this provision may apply in writing to the Secretary to be reinstated and that the Secretary may direct that they be reinstated.

I therefore consider that the Bill is compatible with the right to a fair hearing in s 24(1) of the Charter.

The right to freedom from forced medical treatment (s 10(c))

Section 10(c) of the Charter provides, relevantly, that a person has the right not to be subjected to medical experimentation or treatment without their full, free and informed consent. In addition, as mentioned, section 13(a) of the Charter protects a person's right not to have their privacy unlawfully or arbitrarily interfered with. This right extends to privacy in the sense of bodily integrity, which involves the right of a person not to have their body interfered with by others without their consent.

The purpose of these rights is to protect the individual's personal autonomy and integrity. They recognise the freedom of individuals to choose whether or not they receive medical treatment or participate in medical experiments.

The Bill inserts new section 2A.1.8 in the ETRA which provides that for the purpose of ascertaining the fitness of an employee to perform their duties or to participate in procedures under the ETRA relating to the employee, the Secretary may direct the employee to submit to a medical examination by a qualified medical practitioner nominated by the Secretary. While employees must comply with a direction made by the Secretary to submit to a medical examination or risk their eligibility to remain on the government ELC workforce, the requirement in section 2A.1.8 to undergo a medical examination does not obviate a person's right not to be subjected to medical treatment without their full, free and informed consent.

I therefore consider that the Bill is compatible with the right to freedom from forced medical treatment in section 10(c) of the Charter.

Conclusion

For the reasons set out above, I consider that to the extent the Bill engages human rights, the Bill does not limit those rights and is thereby compatible with the Charter.

The Hon. Ben Carroll MP
Minister for Education

Second reading

Ben CARROLL (Niddrie – Minister for Education, Minister for Medical Research) (10:40):
I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I ask that my second-reading speech be incorporated into *Hansard*.

Incorporated speech as follows:

Introduction

Today, I introduce a Bill to amend the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* ('the Act') to provide the state with the necessary legislative powers to operate government-owned early learning centres in Victoria.

The Bill will empower the Secretary to the Department of Education to employ staff at early learning centres and enable the Minister for Children to make orders in relation to staff employment and the payment of fees by parents of children enrolled in the centres.

As part of the \$14 billion Best Start Best Life reforms, the Victorian Government has committed to building 50 new government owned and operated early learning centres across Victoria to deliver affordable childcare, kindergarten and Pre-Prep.

These centres will open between 2025 and 2028. All 50 centres will be located where they are needed most – in areas with significant childcare shortage and higher rates of disadvantage. Where possible, centres will be

co-located or integrated with schools, hospitals, TAFEs, or other community services. This will increase parents and carers' access to early learning and childcare, and subsequently increase workforce participation.

The first centres will open next year at Eaglehawk North Primary School, Moomba Park Primary School, Murtoa College, and Sunshine Primary School. The centres opening in 2026 will be located at Clunes Primary School, Hallam Primary School, Harrisfield Primary School, Kings Park Primary School, McClelland Secondary College, Numurkah Primary School, Portland South Primary School, Wedderburn College, Wilmot Road Primary School and Wyndham Park Primary School.

The early childhood professionals who will teach, care and manage operations in these centres will be critical to their success.

We know that the biggest influence on the quality of early learning is our workforce: our valued early childhood teachers, educators and education leaders. These professionals hold some of the most important jobs for Victoria's future.

That is why the model for their employment in government early learning centres is so important. This Bill will enable the creation of a new Victorian government-employed early childhood workforce.

Specifically, this Bill will amend the Act to:

- (a) empower the Secretary to the Department of Education to employ staff at government early learning centres to deliver early childhood education and care;
- (b) enable fees to be fixed and charged to parents of children enrolled at government early learning centres; and
- (c) enable the Minister to make orders setting out:
 - (i) the fees to be paid for attendance at government early learning centres; and
 - (ii) the employment conditions for the government early learning centres workforce.

Summary of the Bill

While the Secretary to the Department of Education has existing employment powers under the ETR Act and the *Public Administration Act 2004* (the PA Act), these powers are not suitable for employing the early childhood teachers, educators and other employees that will comprise the government early learning centre workforce.

Accordingly, the Bill establishes a modern, broad employment power for the Secretary to employ persons in the government early learning centre workforce, and provides for a range of other matters pertaining to the employment of the government early learning centre workforce which are necessary to promote child safety and efficiency in the administration of the government early learning centre workforce. These matters include employment eligibility requirements, powers to direct employees to submit to a medical examination, automatic cessation of employment under certain circumstances and preservation of certain rights of employees transferring from the government teaching service or the public service into the government early learning centre workforce.

The Bill also makes provision for long service leave entitlements in the ETR Act for the government early learning centre workforce. This will ensure that the arrangements for the government early learning centre workforce will mirror those of their teaching service colleagues who are directly employed by the Secretary. As a result of these provisions, the Bill makes a consequential amendment to the *Long Service Leave Act 2018* to ensure it does not apply to the persons employed in the government early learning centre workforce. This is on the basis that the Long Service Leave Act 2018 does not apply to employees who are entitled to long service leave under another Victorian Act, to the extent of any inconsistency.

The Bill empowers the Minister to make orders to declare key aspects of the employment arrangements for the government early learning centre workforce, including the categories of staff who may be employed by the Secretary and the terms and conditions of employment in the government early learning centre workforce. The Bill also empowers the Minister to make orders in relation to fees charged at government early learning centres.

This Bill is a major milestone for the 50 government early learning centres program.

I commend the Bill to the house.

Jess WILSON (Kew) (10:40): I move:

That the debate be adjourned.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned.

Ordered that debate be adjourned for two weeks. Debate adjourned until Wednesday 21 February.

Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023*Second reading***Debate resumed on motion of Danny Pearson:**

That this bill be now read a second time.

Jess WILSON (Kew) (10:41): I rise today on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023, a piece of omnibus legislation that seeks to amend 14 acts across 10 portfolios. I am pleased to see the minister at the table today. I thank him and his office, particularly Jon in his office, for facilitating briefings for me and my colleagues. Obviously across 10 portfolios there were many different departments that needed to come into the briefings, and I appreciate the government's willingness to organise that. I also note my thanks to the many shadow ministers who consulted on this piece of legislation. With the 14 acts and 10 portfolios involved, many of my colleagues made sure they were across the detail and asked many questions about the impact of these reforms.

As to the purpose of this bill, the government has stated that the reforms contained in the bill are mostly minor, technical or for clarification and do not represent substantive changes to the acts in question. For that reason the coalition will not be opposing this bill. The majority of the amendments are aimed at streamlining requirements or rectifying specific instances where current acts' provisions are not working as intended or have become impractical. I think it was very clear from the briefings we had from the department that in many cases the reforms within this piece of legislation seek to amend legislative drafting issues or where there have been loopholes discovered after the fact.

I note that in 2022 the Parliament passed a similar bill, the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2021. It is very similar in composition to the one we are looking at in the chamber today. Like the 2022 bill, the 2023 bill brings together a number of minor and technical amendments across a range of portfolios that are not significant enough to warrant their own standalone reform bills. I understand that this piece of legislation has been put together through the government inviting departments to submit minor amendments that they have discovered, throughout the course of operations, as being necessary to improve regulatory compliance or to produce administrative efficiencies. This bill is the ultimate result of that process. We on this side of the house are always looking to see a reduction in red tape and an improvement in efficiencies to remove that burden, particularly on small businesses across the state.

The government outlines the four objectives within this piece of legislation as (1) to modernise and streamline requirements for businesses and social service providers without compromising the effective management of harms, (2) to improve emergency preparedness, (3) to support technology-neutral legislation and (4) to make simple and uncontroversial amendments to support an effective and efficient regulatory system through amendments to a variety of acts.

I note the minister's second-reading speech given in this place last year, wherein it stated that the regulatory reforms contained in this bill will provide over \$2.6 million in annual savings to businesses in Victoria. These savings, as identified through questioning the department, will be achieved largely by removing licensing and permit fees and making regulatory compliance easier. When we probed deeper into the \$2.6 million savings outlined for this bill, the department identified the following amendments as largely equating to the \$2.6 million in annual savings, noting that given the variety and the number of amendments to acts in this bill there may be further savings. The \$2.6 million in annual savings is largely contributed to by the amending of the Essential Services Commission Act 2001 to remove the requirement to provide notice of price determinations to all regulated entities, amending the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 to create a mechanism for the secretary to authorise a specified class of entity to undertake an activity that would otherwise require a licence or permit, and amending the Gambling Regulation Act 2003 to provide licensees with remote access to keno systems and to allow for a single approval for linked jackpots.

I will return to the \$2.6 million in annual savings a little later to speak more broadly about red tape reduction for businesses across Victoria, particularly small businesses, and where we see there could be further improvements. But before I do, let me take the house in thrilling detail through the various parts of the act and how the bill seeks to amend each of the 14 different acts.

Part 2 of the bill amends the Monetary Units Act 2004, and can I thank the Shadow Treasurer, who is sitting at the table, for his contribution to this part of the act. The Monetary Units Act 2004 amendment will provide greater flexibility in fee setting by allowing regulations in Victoria to prescribe small fees in the form of fee units. This is achieved by removing an unnecessary prohibition that means a fee less than the equivalent of one fee unit, which is currently \$15.03, cannot be fixed in fractions of that fee unit. But with this change, fee units can be set for small fees and indexed annually to keep up with inflation. Part 2 also makes a minor amendment to clarify the fee units that can be used not only for regulations but for other types of legislative instruments that may set fees.

Part 3 of the bill amends the Casino Control Act 1991 to remove a requirement for licence applicants who are seeking to become casino special employees to provide evidence of certain former employment that is not relevant to the licensing criteria.

Part 4 of the bill amends the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 to improve information-sharing arrangements within child information sharing schemes. The bill does this by updating references to restricted information-sharing entities and clarifying the power to delegate under the scheme. This will create an administrative efficiency by enabling regulations to be made that allow restricted information-sharing entities to delegate their powers and functions by instrument in the same way as information-sharing entities. We understand from the bill briefing that this was largely an error in drafting. It seeks to remedy that through this reform within the bill today.

Part 5 of the bill amends the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 to create a mechanism wherein the Secretary of the Department of Health can authorise a class of entity to obtain, possess and store medicines. Under this amendment the secretary will be required to conduct a risk assessment and authorised entities will be required to comply with existing provisions relating to storage, record keeping, access and administration.

I note that in his second-reading speech the minister stated that this amendment will allow the secretary to authorise Victorian residential aged-care facilities to be supplied with and store antiviral medicines without a permit, improving timely access to medications, and of course this is very important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. I thank my colleague in the other place Ms Crozier, who was very much interested in diving into the detail of this amendment within the bill, and the department for answering a range of questions, including about the changes that have been made particularly by the Commonwealth in administering vaccines in residential settings.

Part 6 of the bill amends the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 to fix drafting ambiguities and also creates efficiencies in the operations of the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority and the Victorian Institute of Teaching. These efficiencies include simplifying the process of reinstating expired teacher and early childhood teacher registrations. This is a very important change, particularly in the context of what is a teacher shortage crisis in Victoria. It will allow for teachers who have had their teachers licences expire to go through a faster process to restore those and is a welcome change.

The bill is ensuring that requirements for commencing prosecution for offences relating to apprentices are consistent with the provisions in that legislation, ensuring the provisions in the legislation that relate to ministerial orders function properly, ensuring that authorised officers are able to appropriately seize documents or other things as required by their roles and ensuring that investigations that are undertaken by the Victorian Institute of Teaching and other regulatory authorities have the required powers to ensure those investigations can take place in a timely and appropriate manner.

The bill also clarifies that the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority must notify an affected person of its intention to publish noncompliance information on its website, provide that person with an opportunity to make a submission in response to that submission to be considered by the VRQA before the decision is published and made, and ensure that the publication date is included on any published material.

Part 7 of the bill amends the Environment Protection Act 2017 to grant authority to the Environment Protection Authority to authorise transportation of waste in an emergency.

Danny Pearson interjected.

Jess WILSON: We are only up to part 7. I think there are 14 parts.

Members interjecting.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Through the Chair, without assistance from members on my right.

Jess WILSON: They can help out. This amendment updates the possible EPA responses in emergency contexts by allowing the EPA to set proportionate regulatory requirements about waste transportation in these circumstances. It will provide for the temporary relief of community hardship and enable the commissioning, repair, decommissioning or dismantling of any item of plant or equipment. I note that part 7 of the bill – the amendments here – seeks to align with the second objective, to improve emergency preparedness.

Part 8 of the bill amends the Essential Services Commission Act 2001 and the Water Industry Act 1994 to achieve several administrative efficiencies. These include removing a requirement for the ESC to serve price determination notices to commercial passenger services while still requiring the ESC to provide determinations to any regulated entity that requests them. I note here that without this amendment the Essential Services Commission is currently needing to send over 8000 notices to individuals, which was not the original policy intent. The bill removes the requirement that the entire codes of practice be published in the *Government Gazette*, instead requiring the Essential Services Commission to publish notice of changes in the *Government Gazette*, with the full changes published on the ESC's website.

The bill changes the definition of 'civil penalty requirements' under the act to allow the ESC to use its enforcement provisions to improve outcomes for consumers with embedded networks, consistent with the recommendations from the embedded networks review. And following that, the ESC will use the information-gathering powers in the ESC act rather than relying on the Water Industry Act, granting the ESC a consistent set of information-gathering powers across all regulated sectors.

Part 9 of the bill amends the Food Act 1984 in line with recommendations of the parliamentary inquiry into the closure of I Cook Foods Pty Ltd. It modernises notice requirements and publication orders and allows for notice and closure orders to be served by email. It also makes an amendment to enable orders to be made on additional grounds prescribed by regulations to address food safety risks. It prescribes infringements for breaches of the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code, specifically the horticultural primary production and processing standards approved by the food ministers meeting in 2022. And finally, it grants regulation-making powers to the Minister for Agriculture to enable a registration framework for horticulture businesses. I note that these amendments fully implement recommendation 10 from the inquiry into the closure of I Cook Foods and also address recommendation 13.

Can I put on the record my colleague in the other place Ms Crozier, the Shadow Minister for Health, for her incredible work around the inquiry into I Cook Foods and her consistent due diligence in making sure the recommendations from that inquiry were followed up and implemented. I know she was pleased to see this change included in the bill today.

Part 10 amends the Gambling Regulation Act 2003 to reflect advancements in technology in which keno systems can be remotely accessed. Part 10 also makes a minor amendment so that only a single approval is required for linked arrangements installed at the same venue, streamlining the present requirement in which a monitoring licensee and a venue operator are required to obtain two approvals for the one shared arrangement. This effectively keeps current regulatory requirements but reduces the number of applications.

Part 11 makes a number of amendments to the Meat Industry Act 1993. First, the bill will clarify that the act does not apply to the sale of dried meat online, which is covered by the Food Act 1984, thus reducing the regulatory burden for businesses selling dried meat online. It also makes an amendment to close a loophole currently found in both the Meat Industry Act 1993 and the Seafood Safety Act 2003 wherein licence applicants under both acts who are refused for a licence renewal can obtain a licence by instead applying for a new licence. So essentially, if you are refused a licence under one act, you cannot just go to the next act and apply for a similar licence, because the amendment will close the loophole by allowing the regulator to refuse licence applications where a person has failed to comply with one licence condition.

Part 11 also makes an amendment to update the Commonwealth and Victorian licensing and inspection requirements to avoid duplication to make it easier for PrimeSafe to rescind outdated codes of practice. It makes an amendment to streamline licensing requirements in the Meat Industry Act 1993 and Seafood Safety Act 2003 in recognition of the fact that refrigerated vehicles are often used to transport multiple commodities. This amendment will ensure that only one type of licence to transport meat and seafood is required, thereby reducing the regulatory burden on businesses transporting both meat and seafood products.

It makes an amendment to remove a requirement that poultry and game processing facilities provide information to PrimeSafe that PrimeSafe does not actually need or use to assess licences and licence conditions. It also makes an amendment to remove an impractical requirement for PrimeSafe to refuse a licence for vehicle-based meat-processing facilities where an application is inconsistent with applicable planning schemes. Part 11 makes a further amendment to clarify that parts 2 and 5 of the Meat Industry Act apply to poultry and game processing, ensuring consistency in regulatory requirements.

Finally, part 11 makes an amendment to allow for delegation to the chief executive officer of PrimeSafe to occur through electronic means rather than under common seal and makes several minor amendments to remove redundant provisions, reflect machinery-of-government changes and correct typographical errors.

Part 12 of the bill amends the Regional Development Victoria Act 2002 to increase the membership of the Regional Development Advisory Committee from nine to 10 and reduce the number of required RDAC meetings from six to four per year in line with meeting arrangements for other similar advisory groups. Previously when the Regional Development Advisory Committee met, the requirements were that there were too few memberships under the current legislation, and by increasing that it means that one person no longer has to rotate off those committee meetings. Part 12 also makes minor amendments to update references to Melton City Council and reflect machinery-of-government changes.

Part 13 of the bill amends the Seafood and Safety Act 2003 to ensure that only one type of licence to transport both meat and seafood is required, as we saw similarly before in part 11 of the bill, in recognition of the fact that refrigerated vehicles are often used to transport both seafood and meat and multiple other commodities. It also makes an amendment to close the loophole currently found in both the Meat Industry Act 1993 and the Seafood Safety Act 2003, which I referred to previously.

Finally, part 14 of the bill makes amendments to the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, the Social Services Regulation Act 2021 and the Children and Health Legislation Amendment (Statement of

Recognition, Aboriginal Self-determination and Other Matters) Act 2023. These amendments arise from the changes to the Social Services Regulation Act and relate to definitions in the Children, Youth and Families Act, such as the definition of ‘community-based child and family service’. These amendments reflect that from 1 July 2024 these providers need to be registered under the Social Services Regulation Act 2021 rather than the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005. Without these amendments there may be a lack of clarity around the ability to place children at existing services. Part 14 also makes minor amendments to the Sale of Land Act 1962 and the Land (Goonawarra Golf Course) Act 1988 to update references stemming from the establishment of Homes Victoria – very much minor and technical amendments. The amendments in the bill contained before us today are mostly technical in nature and do not significantly alter the intent or operation of the acts that they amend.

I will just turn briefly to the consultation that was undertaken throughout the drafting of this legislation. As I said earlier, thank you to all the shadow ministers who took the time to look through the detail within the amendments in their own portfolios. The department also advised that the following non-departmental regulators had been consulted throughout the drafting process: the Environment Protection Authority, the Essential Services Commission, PrimeSafe, the Victorian Institute of Teaching and the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority. Additionally, the coalition has sought advice from the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Australian Industry Group and the Council of Professional Teaching Associations of Victoria, none of which expressed concerns about this legislation.

If I turn back to the \$2.6 million in estimated savings to businesses that this legislation will bring, as noted earlier we asked the department to provide further information about where those savings will be and how they will affect businesses. Largely the advice was that it will have more of an impact on government non-departmental regulators and the \$2.6 million would largely be through removing licensing and permit fees and making regulatory compliance easier. But when we think about how Victorian businesses are struggling at the moment, particularly under cost-of-living pressures that are not only affecting all Victorians but small businesses in particular across the state, the modest savings in this bill are really put under a spotlight. \$2.6 million in annual savings for Victorian businesses are claimed to result from this bill. Given there are over 710,000 small businesses in Victoria, that means each of these businesses can expect an average saving of \$3.66 a year. Surely we can do better when it comes to easing the pressure on small businesses in this state. Just as households in Victoria grapple with cost-of-living pressures – whether that is in electricity, whether that is in education or whether that is every time they go to the petrol bowser or to the supermarket – we also need to understand the struggle that our small businesses are under with the economic headwinds that are in place.

If we look to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Victoria was the only state that went backwards in terms of the number of businesses in 2023. Victoria lost 7600 businesses in 2023, many of which were no doubt forced to shut up shop due to the unfavourable economic conditions and the years of financial mismanagement by the Labor government in this state.

It should come as no surprise to anyone here, but according to the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry’s *Cost and Ease of Doing Business in Victoria* report Victoria is perceived as the most expensive place to do business. It is simply harder to do business in Victoria than in any other state. I am sure the Shadow Treasurer would agree that as he goes around his own electorate and of course around Victoria, particularly as we have been discussing our tax reform paper, a number of businesses identify that the cost of doing business in Victoria and whether it simply stacks up anymore to open their doors, to try to hire more employees or – what would seem sometimes a crime under the Labor government – to make a profit is simply becoming too hard.

If we look at some of the cost pressures on small businesses, we can turn to electricity in particular, with a 17 per cent increase over the past 12 months. Coupled with that is a 31 per cent increase in the cost of gas for businesses in Victoria. That 31 per cent increase is double the rate of any other state. From 2027, as the government’s own *Gas Substitution Roadmap* has identified, Victoria will be using

more gas than it produces, so that 31 per cent increase over the past 12 months is only set to get worse for businesses. Of course many businesses are concerned with the push by this government to force businesses and households out of using gas, many of which rely on it heavily for their operations and for their production. If I turn to the comments by the Victorian chamber of industry here and by their CEO Paul Guerra, he notes that the increase in the cost of electricity and gas for businesses in this state is alarming. It is their biggest concern, and he says:

We're at this nexus now. We're either going to see more price increases to the consumer, or we're going to see more businesses fail, or probably both.

That is the consequence of the pressure that this Allan government is putting on our small businesses, the increase in electricity and the increase in gas. It is simply getting harder to do business, and at the end of the day the business has to either reduce its number of employees and reduce its operations or pass those costs through to the consumer at a time when Victorians are doing it tough.

There are a variety of other costs that are sitting on small businesses in this state. If I turn briefly to WorkCover, over the past 12 months we have seen a 42 per cent average increase in WorkCover premiums for businesses in Victoria. I have not met a business owner who has actually got a 42 per cent increase. I have met many who have received a 60, 70, 80 per cent increase in their WorkCover premiums, which is just putting further and further pressure on these businesses right across the state.

Coupled with the increase in taxes, fees and charges, one of the major inputs into the cost of running a business is of course paying rent. The increase in rent has been a major problem for many businesses across Victoria, and one of the problems that are often raised with me is when the government, particularly in my own electorate, has shut down roads and closed off roads for level crossing removals or looking at the Suburban Rail Loop and implementation of those works. They have shut down roads, they have closed off roads and there has been no regard for the small businesses in the area that have to try to keep open their doors during this time with a limited amount of foot traffic. One of the biggest issues they raise is that their rent bill continues to go up, and they have to pay that every single day. Their rent bill is going up because this government, in the context of a housing supply and housing affordability crisis, has decided to increase land tax. That increase in land tax is flowing directly through to renters at a time they can least afford it, whether they are households or whether they are small businesses.

Of course we have also seen a number of increases when it comes to payroll tax by this government. Hitting business hard seems to be the focus of this government in trying to turn its budget around. Heading towards \$171 billion of debt in just a few years, we are now seeing the government look for revenue and trying to tap revenue from any possible source, and business is often the first one that they go after, whether it is land tax, whether it is payroll tax or whether it is increasing WorkCover premiums. We had the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC out this morning saying that WorkCover premiums are likely to increase again later this year.

If I turn back to the bill, a bill that seeks to amend 14 acts across 10 portfolios, it is a piece of legislation that seeks to put in place a number of technical changes to clarify a number of pieces of legislation and to make changes that do not warrant acts in and of themselves. But the \$2.6 million of savings that the government wants to cry about within this piece of legislation do not go far enough. As I said before, that equates to about \$3 per business in Victoria. It is simply not good enough that this is what the Allan Labor government is delivering when it comes to regulatory relief for businesses in Victoria, when it comes to cost-of-living relief for businesses in Victoria. We have 710,000 small businesses in Victoria, and what we have from this government is a piece of regulatory reform that delivers very, very little and will make very little change in their lives.

Dylan WIGHT (Tarnait) (11:10): It gives me great pleasure to stand in this place this morning and speak on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. I obviously rise today in support of this piece of legislation, the second of its kind introduced by our government – an omnibus bill designed as part of the regulatory reform agenda of the government to make it easier to do business

here in Victoria. Where in this country, if you are a business, be it small, medium or large, would you rather do business? Consistently over the term of this government Victoria has had the best-performing economy and also the fastest growing economy in this country. That is just a fact, and that has been consistent all the way through this term of government. That is in no small part, and we certainly play a role, due to my electorate of Tarneit, where we have an absolutely thriving and developing business community.

It was only a few months ago, before the holiday period, that I had the absolutely amazing opportunity, with the Minister for Small Business, who is at the table, Natalie Suleyman, amongst many others, to attend the opening of the Wyndham women's microbusiness hub. This is an absolutely fantastic initiative supported by business, supported by government, supported by council and supported by some NGOs out there in Wyndham in response to how fast that microbusiness community is growing in Tarneit and Hoppers Crossing. During COVID we saw many microbusinesses develop and operate from home. They range from massage therapy to microbusinesses making things like candles or other things that they sell at local markets and directly from home.

The Wyndham women's microbusiness hub gives those microbusinesses an opportunity to go into a facility to collaborate, to access things like free wi-fi and to access training programs which may help them learn to do their tax, which may help them learn to do a BAS or which may help them learn to use a program like MYOB. As I said, it was an absolute pleasure to attend that event. I think that is one of the better initiatives that I have seen for small business at a local level over the short period that I have had the pleasure to represent the communities of Tarneit and Hoppers Crossing.

In addition to that, over the last about four years, as part of the Victorian government's suburban revitalisation program, we have seen the development and the flourishing of the Tarneit Business Association. This is an association with over 100 members. Over 100 small businesses in Tarneit are members. It is supported, as I said, through the Tarneit suburban revitalisation board. Just before Christmas we as board members voted on \$50,000 to assist the Tarneit Business Association to do their annual business expo, an expo that I was proud to visit just last year – it opened last year – where small local businesses can once again come and collaborate, come and share ideas and come and network. I would really like to acknowledge the fantastic work of the president of the Tarneit Business Association Rashi Dhagat, who is a small local business owner who runs two cafes, the Little Growling Cafe. I will be very honest – I do not want to be biased – they are probably my favourite places to eat and grab a coffee in my electorate of Tarneit. We also have as the secretary Shivani Arora, another local business owner, and treasurer Nihar Shah, amongst many others, who have been doing an absolutely fantastic job as part of the Tarneit Business Association for our local business community.

We have had a pretty broad reform agenda when it comes to supporting business right here in Victoria. This agenda includes, in addition to what we are talking about right now, the Business Acceleration Fund, rapid reviews of regulatory settings, better approval processes for regulators and businesses and the establishment of an economic growth commissioner to undertake inquiries into impediments to economic growth. As I said earlier in my contribution, it is no secret that Victoria has been the fastest growing economy consistently over the term of this government.

This bill in particular is an integral component of our broader regulatory reform agenda. It seeks to simplify the process for businesses and regulators in obtaining and managing licences and registrations. Additionally, it encompasses small, non-controversial regulatory changes across multiple portfolios, embodying our commitment to making Victoria a better place to do business. Our objective is clear: to foster an environment where businesses can flourish, regulations are sensible and the Victorian economy is robust and inclusive. Our vision is of a high-performing state and a regulatory system that supports increased productivity, makes business easier to do in Victoria and also protects consumers, community and the environment – and that is exactly what this piece of legislation does. This piece of legislation saves Victorian businesses 300,000 hours in administration – 300,000 hours. That is how you increase productivity and that is how you grow your economy.

I will just touch on the opposition and their track record over the four years that the Victorian people gave them an opportunity to govern. We assumed office in 2014, and after those four small, short, do-nothing years of the Baillieu and Napthine governments we identified the need for a systematic overhaul of the regulatory framework that we inherited, a framework that in many respects hindered rather than helped business and consumers. Our approach starkly contrasts with the previous government, where really all they did in this space was parrot the catchphrase ‘cutting red tape’. I am proud to stand here in this place this morning and say that we were able to do what those opposite could only say – cut red tape, make it easier to invest in Victoria and make it easier to have a productive small, medium or large business. As I said at the start of my contribution, this is by far the best state to do business in this country, and because of reforms like this it will continue to be.

Our government has undertaken numerous reforms right across various sectors, such as liquor licensing, environmental protection and consumer affairs, which have achieved tangible improvements over our terms in government. As I said, this reform is a fundamental imperative to continue to have a business sector in this state that is flourishing and that is increasing productivity. I commend it to the house.

Brad ROWSWELL (Sandringham) (11:21): I also rise to speak on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023, following my colleague the Shadow Minister for Finance, the member for Kew, who in my view did an outstanding job in going through the bill before the house in such detail, taking up her full allocation of 30 minutes to convey the views of the coalition to members gathered and to the broader Victorian community.

As we know, the regulatory legislation amendment bill is a piece of omnibus legislation that amends 14 acts across 10 portfolios. The reforms contained in the bill are mostly minor, technical or clarificatory in nature and do not represent substantive changes to the acts in question – and what a relief that is. The majority of the amendments are aimed at streamlining requirements or rectifying specific instances where current provisions are not working as intended or have become impracticable.

The coalition does not seek to oppose this legislation. I will say that at the outset. We do not seek to oppose this legislation, but we note the government’s record of regulatory reform and red tape reduction is woefully thin, resulting in Victoria being perceived as the most expensive state to do business in. I listened to the member for Tarneit and his contribution just before mine, and there he was, talking about how Victoria is such a good place to do business in. That is not what I am hearing.

The Minister for Small Business is at the table, and the Minister for Small Business should be taking a greater interest in what small businesses and medium businesses and larger businesses are saying in this state. They are saying that because of the taxes imposed by this Labor government they are making their next major business investment decision not in this state but in other states – in Queensland, in South Australia. Premier Malinauskas in South Australia – do you know what he is doing? He is knocking. He wants Victorian-based businesses to come to South Australia. He is rolling out the red carpet. He has opened the door for Victorian businesses to make the jump, and do you know who they are being pushed by? This Allan Labor government, because of the 53 new or increased taxes imposed in the last decade – the tax on jobs, the tax on rents, the tax on employment, the tax on health, the tax on schools, all the taxes imposed – and because of the WorkCover charges going through the roof, the cost of electricity and the cost of gas going through the roof. The conditions for business to operate in this state are just not conducive to business growth, and that is what I am hearing fair and square from the business community in this state. My goodness, I got very excited very early.

I will draw the house’s attention to specific amendments to the Monetary Units Act 2004. As we are told by the government, this is to provide greater flexibility in fee setting by allowing regulations in Victoria to prescribe small fees in the form of fee units by removing an unnecessary prohibition that means a fee of less than the equivalent of one fee unit – currently \$15.03 – cannot be fixed in fraction of a fee unit. This means that fee units can be set for small fees and indexed annually to keep up with

inflation. It goes on. It makes a minor amendment to clarify that fee units can be used for not only regulations but other types of legislative instruments that may accept fees.

I just want to come back to two words in the first dot point which I refer to, and that is the phrase 'indexed annually'. As I was informed by the member for Kew the Shadow Minister for Finance during the course of the bill briefing, the opposition sought specific clarification on this point in relation to the amendments to the Monetary Units Act 2004. Will the implementation of this bill be a revenue raiser for the government? We were assured that it would not be, but I want to put on record so members of the government can hear this quite clearly: we will be taking a very clear and careful watch of the amendments to the Monetary Units Act 2004 within this bill. Because they say that it will not raise revenue, but bowl me over with a feather, the phrase 'indexed annually' seems to me –

Emma Kealy: Isn't it 'blow me over'?

Brad ROWSWELL: Actually, correct, member for Lowan – although you are not in your correct place, so you probably should not be interjecting – blow me over with a feather, that is the correct expression. 'Indexed annually' seems to me to say that there will be additional revenue raised as a result of the implementation of this bill. What does that mean? That means that someone has got to pay. That means Victorians have got to pay at a time when they are being taxed to the hilt by this Labor government, who have got a debt problem and who have major interest payments to pay each and every day – 15 million bucks today, 15 million bucks yesterday, 15 million bucks tomorrow, climbing to \$24 million a day in interest payments alone in the next three years. Victorians pay the price for the mismanagement of the economy by the Labor government, who this year have been ruling the state by decree for a decade.

I believe that we do need to beef up red tape reform in this state. We should be considering what a repeal day looks like in this chamber, instead of just creating more laws to impose upon Victorians to make their lives harder and to raise more revenue for the Allan Labor government to then waste it. You are probably aware of this: there has been more than \$38 billion in cost overruns on major projects in the last decade at the hands of this Labor government. Instead of imposing more restrictions and instead of imposing more regulations upon Victorians what we should be doing is freeing up the economy. What we should be doing is allowing small businesses, medium businesses and larger businesses to do what they do.

Let us not forget our reason here. Let us not forget our purpose. Small businesses, medium businesses, larger businesses in this state – they employ people. We talk about numbers all the time and we talk about statistics, but sometimes I think we forget about what that really means. When we are talking about someone being employed in this state, we are not just talking about one person being employed, we are talking about a family being taken care of. We are talking about a family being able to stand on their own feet, pay for a roof over their head, pay for their increasing school fees, pay for their increasing energy bills and pay for their increasing grocery bills at the hands of a Labor government that does not really care.

It has been said time and time again, and I completely agree because I am experiencing it and my community is experiencing it as well: we are in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis in the state. There are many things that the Allan Labor government could be doing to ease the cost pressures on families and on businesses, but no, they do not. Through the lens of pure ideology, they are imposing an energy regime which is increasing the cost of energy in the state – more than a 25 per cent increase to the cost of energy just in the last 12 months and a 26 per cent increase for energy for local businesses. That has an impact on local economies, not just in my community and not just in the member for Kew's community, the member for Lowan's community, the member for Murray Plains's community and the member for Nepean's community but in communities right across the state. If it costs more to turn on the gas or turn on the electricity to cook the steak or deep fry the fish or cook the chickens on the rotisserie, then that is going to be paid for by Victorians.

We should be, for once in our lives, trying to at the very least have reliable and affordable energy, but no, no, no. The Allan Labor government is purely driven by ideology on this, not by the needs and the economic safety and security of Victorians. I was not expecting to be so broad in my contribution today, but I hope the house has enjoyed the treat. As I said, we will not be opposing this bill.

Darren CHEESEMAN (South Barwon) (11:31): It is with some pleasure that I rise this morning to make my contribution on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. I can recall, I think it must have been around about when I was in year 10, at the school I went to, which was Mount Clear Technical High on the outskirts of Ballarat, having the opportunity to wander off and have one-on-one meetings with our career teachers to kind of plot out the next few years and the things that we might want to do post schooling. In that conversation I can recall being asked what were some of the things that I would like to do, and I came up with a list of careers that I thought might be interesting. Paul Keating was the Prime Minister at the time, and I can recall thinking, ‘Gee, I wouldn’t mind being a parliamentarian.’ I was very interested in working in politics, and I was very much, at that point in time, enjoying Paul Keating’s contributions to federal question time. I can recall having a conversation with my career teacher about that, and we came up with a bit of a list of things and reasons why I might want to do the various jobs that I had nominated as things that I would be interested in.

I must say that making a contribution in this chamber on regulatory legislation reform was certainly not on that list. There was a whole bunch of other reasons as to why I wanted to be a politician. Back then one of the great things that I found motivating was having the opportunity to potentially represent families that were in a similar set of circumstances to mine. In my family’s context, that was a working mother and father; my dad was a fitter and turner and my mother was a nurse.

Having been indulged by the house for a few minutes on this, I must say that these types of relatively dry bills are important for driving productivity in a micro-economic context and in some ways can contribute to small business just as importantly as the things that actually motivate me to be a politician. Certainly from my perspective, economically enabling infrastructure is super important to the running of our state. It underpins the economic productivity of our economy. In so many ways it drives the livability of this state, and it is the reason why many, many tens of thousands of people annually are making their way here to grow up, to raise a family and to contribute to the state of Victoria.

This piece of legislation makes more than 54 amendments to more than 14 different acts of Parliament across more than 10 different ministerial responsibilities. That really is in so many ways a joined-up government where ministers can undertake reform. It is not worth bringing those amendments to a chamber like this individually, but we can bundle them up and bring them forward in this style of omnibus bill to make sure that we tidy up legislation. In the context of Victoria, we were first proclaimed as a state in around the 1850s. Over that journey many, many bills have passed through this Parliament and become law, and there are elements of those laws that are no longer needed and that have become redundant for a whole bunch of different reasons. In the context of this bill, there is a bunch of them that we are bringing to this place with the hope of having the bill pass through both chambers in the near future to free up small business, particularly those small businesses that are regulated by elements of acts being amended by this bill.

I must say the one that particularly caught my attention – and I took the opportunity to head over to the advisers box a short while ago – was the dried meat amendment that is in this bill. It did not occur to me that there is a different set of arrangements that exist with online selling of wet meat and dry meat. That had never occurred to me as being an issue. Clearly it is an issue; that is why we have brought forward this amendment. I have no doubt that at the time that original act was passed way back whenever it might have been it was never envisaged that this would be a necessary step, to remove that. The dried meat amendment is of course important.

The types of amendments that are in this bill are important. They are necessary little tidy-ups to make our existing framework work more productively and efficiently. They are certainly not significant

issues for us as legislators, but for those small businesses that are caught up, needing to comply with unnecessary and unwanted regulation is something we should avoid, and we should take the opportunity to tidy these things up.

I must say, in my concluding comments on this, I think it is always a testament to government as to what you take up when you are given the great gift of government. And I must say we, Labor, in government are reformers. We have brought a lot of innovation to this place. We are very determined to see the productivity of the state of Victoria uplifted. We are very determined to make sure that we make Victoria the best place in the country to do business. And when you look at every single measure that you possibly can to see how we are competing against other states for migration, for business and for opportunity, I think it is fair to say that Victoria is leading the charge with reform across the Commonwealth, and a small, little tidy-up with this particular bill hopefully passing both chambers will continue to add to the reasons why people choose to make Victoria home. I commend the bill to the house.

Peter WALSH (Murray Plains) (11:40): I rise to make a contribution on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023 on behalf of the coalition. As has already been talked about, this bill amends 14 different acts across 10 different government portfolios, and it contains a number of minor technical or clarifying amendments to those 14 acts that we are talking about. The genesis of this bill was that the government actually requested or invited departments to submit minor amendments to improve regulatory compliance or produce administrative efficiencies from the administration of legislation in their particular departments. They requested information about four major objectives: streamline requirements for business and social services providers, improve emergency preparedness, support technologically neutral legislation and make simple and uncontroversial amendments to support an efficient regulatory system through amendments to a variety of acts. That is the request that was made.

The government claim that these regulatory reforms will provide over \$2.6 million in annual savings to businesses here in Victoria. What is interesting is that if you do a simple arithmetic calculation, there are a bit over 700,000 small businesses here in Victoria, and if you actually divide \$2.6 million by 700,000 businesses, that means that every single Victorian small business gets to save about \$3.36. It is a barbecue stopper! Stop the presses; *Herald Sun*, do not roll the papers, the government is bringing in legislation that is going to save each business \$3.36! You think about the increase in administrative burden on businesses in Victoria that has grown under the decade of this government, and they are going to save \$3.36. The request has gone out to departments to actually find savings for businesses. We spend billions of dollars in Victoria for these departments to function and to employ tens of thousands of public servants to administer the red tape, green tape and cultural tape that everyone suffers under in this state, and the best they can do is \$3.36 per business in savings. Can I kindly put to the minister that perhaps they should not get a Christmas bonus this year, because they have not done very well in actually saving money for Victorian businesses.

If you think about the process that goes into legislation, there would have been a request to cabinet for this legislation. There would have been information going out to all the departments with the request, as I said, to streamline requirements for business and social service providers, improve emergency preparedness, support technologically neutral legislation and make simple and uncontroversial amendments to support an efficient regulatory system through amendments to a variety of acts, and this is the best they could do. I think it is a disgrace. If you think about the time in departments that would have gone into actually producing these recommendations, then preparing a bill, going back to cabinet and going through the whole process of bringing it to this Parliament, if this is the best that they can do, I actually think if there was a teacher marking this exam paper it would be a fail, because it has not actually done what I think it should have done – that is, make a significant change and significant reduction in cost of administrative burden for businesses here in Victoria.

There has been a plethora of new taxes. Since this government came into power there have been over 50 new taxes or increased taxes and costs on businesses, and we have now saved \$3.36 per business, an absolute disgrace for the effort that has gone into that.

In my portfolio area there are changes to the Regional Development Victoria Act 2002. They are absolutely earth-shattering. They change the number of members on the regional advisory committee to increase it by one person – so there are nine members, one from each region, and an independent chair. It is earth-shattering, that one more person on there. They reduce the number of meetings per year from six to four. That is probably good. Given that RDV – Regional Development Victoria – effectively has no money now, has very few staff and does very little across regional Victoria, those four meetings probably are almost too many, because they have got nothing to administer anymore. They can make recommendations about what should be funded by government in their particular region, but there is actually no money to do that.

If you go back to when Regional Development Victoria was originally set up, and you particularly go back to when the Liberals and Nationals were in government, there was a \$1 billion Regional Growth Fund that actually made a meaningful difference in regional Victoria. If you think about what RDV is now, it pales into insignificance against what it used to do. Even under the Brumby government, but particularly under the Baillieu and Ryan government, it made a real difference across country Victoria. There were programs from RDV then that made sure that sporting facilities were upgraded in regional Victoria. I can also remember in my electorate at that time a number of country halls that had not had any money spent on them for decades. They did not have air conditioners; they did not have proper hot running water. They actually had upgrades to the kitchens in their country halls, and they had upgrades to the air-conditioning systems. They became community facilities again that could be a hub for people to meet in. Those sorts of programs are gone. There is no money now effectively out of RDV to actually fund the programs that used to be funded. Local government used to look forward to the announcements that came out of RDV, where they could get money in addition to their ratepayers money to upgrade facilities in their area that helped their community. It is a long, long time since I can recall any RDV-funded projects being opened in my electorate, and I think that would be the case in most of the regional electorates around Victoria.

At one time the RDV staff would circulate widely in the community, working with the community and working with local government to actually get up projects to be funded. You never see those staff now. Most of them have gone. Those that are still there are seconded to other departments, but if they are there they do not go and drum up business, because they know they have got no money to allocate. RDV is an absolute shadow of itself. This changes the administration of the regional development advisory committee. I am not sure what advice they are giving to the minister other than saying, perhaps, ‘Please can we have some programs back that actually fund what happens in our communities and give us something to really hang our hat on into the future?’

For one of the other acts that I would take an interest in, although it is not my portfolio anymore, there are amendments around the transportation of seafood and the transportation of meat and the combining of licences there. I think that is a good thing to do. That has been a vexed issue for a number of years, once seafood came in under PrimeSafe a number of years ago. It was not originally there. That is a sensible amendment that actually can help in the future. One of the things that I would probably ask the minister about is that there is a change in the Seafood Safety Act 2003 around issuing licences where licences have been refused in the past and about people being able to ask to get a new licence. If the minister is summing up this bill, I wonder whether she might give some information as to what the issue is that this clause is actually addressing other than what it says. How many times have people been refused a licence and then been able to obtain one by applying for a new one? How often was that actually happening, and did PrimeSafe have good records of how many times that was particularly being used?

It does make changes, it does help some people, but I go back to where I started: if the best we can do out of all the work that has gone into this legislation, all the work the departments in good faith have

brought forward, is save small businesses in Victoria \$3.36 each, it does not even buy you a cup of coffee.

Natalie Suleyman interjected.

Peter WALSH: Do the simple arithmetic, Minister. Divide the money by the number of businesses, and that is how much it saves. \$3.36 is not enough for all this effort.

Lauren KATHAGE (Yan Yean) (11:50): I think I would like to buy the Deputy Leader of the Coalition a coffee so I can explain to him a little bit about how I think he is out of touch. I do not think he knows, for example, the cost of a coffee, because it is a bit more than that, but I do not think that he is in touch with what small businesses in Victoria value, prioritise and need. It is the big and the small, and it is small changes like this that can have a big impact on people's lives and businesses, giving them time – time is the valued commodity for small businesses – and giving them the opportunity to step away from the till and to step away from the paperwork and think of new and innovative ideas to grow their business and to boost their productivity. So I think the Deputy Leader of the Coalition is a little out of step there. This bill is an example of this government listening to families and businesses and following through. It is good for businesses in my electorate and good for the state overall, freeing up that time, as I said, away from paperwork and tick boxes.

Another thing I would like to explain to the Deputy Leader of the Coalition across a coffee is that actually we are doing very well for business in Victoria, thank you very much. Our economy is the powerhouse of the nation.

Emma Kealy interjected.

Lauren KATHAGE: I would love to give you an example. The recent Deloitte Access Economics *Business Outlook* report confirms that we will lead all states in economic growth over the next five years. All states – we will lead them. And this is not a report from government, this is an external independent report. I was very happy to provide you with that example. Our economic strategy is paying off not just for businesses but for jobs – record-breaking job creation and employment levels. We are in touch, and we are making our targets and exceeding them, and I am very proud of that.

This bill makes amendments to the Food Act 1984 to prescribe infringements for breaches of the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code, specifically horticultural primary production standards 4.2.7, 4.2.8 and 4.2.9. Standard 4.2.8 relates to the production and processing of leafy vegetables such as lettuce, kale and cabbage. It also covers herbs such as basil. I had the privilege with the Minister for Small Business recently to visit Walwa Park Farms in Upper Plenty. This is owned by David Markham, and he has created a farm share arrangement where he is supporting young farmers to get on their feet and establish themselves as small businesses. That includes Thanisa Adams of Wattle Gully Flower Farm, and I am sure the minister will agree with me that her cosmos cupcake flowers were beautiful, absolutely outstanding. Congratulations to her.

Also there at Walwa Park is Plenty Valley Produce, which is run by Michael Collins and Sam Shacklock. This is an organic small-scale market garden business. They take great care with each and every plant that they produce, and it is high-end produce. So if you dine out at one of the top restaurants in the city tonight, there is a good chance that you will be eating something from Plenty Valley Produce. This is a peri-urban small-scale vegetable producer, and they have grown rapidly as a business over the last two years. Their reputation in providing produce to these high-quality, topnotch restaurants in Melbourne depends on their reputation for high-quality and hygienic produce, so it is important that we have the standards and the regulations in place so that consumers can have confidence in their product and so that they have a competitive edge against others who may not.

While we were there, they showed the minister and me their practices for maintaining high food safety standards. We were there on a Friday, which is their harvest day. They harvest once a week ahead of the weekend markets and onto the wholesalers to the restaurants. It was a busy day, and I am sorry

that we got in their way a little bit there. Some of their practices for maintaining the standards that are referred to in the bill are really straightforward, like not allowing food to touch the floor. But some of it was more complicated, and that related to the refrigeration of produce. That is definitely one of the more expensive items for them as a small business. It took them some time to work up to that. These capital-intensive startup requirements can be difficult for small-scale farmers, and as land for farming, especially in peri-urban areas such as Upper Plenty, reduces it will be important for government to consider how best to support these hardworking people.

But we know that government supports food and fibre businesses in Victoria. It is evident in the regulatory reforms such as those set out in this bill and in the investment that has been made in turbocharging the sector more broadly, such as the \$1 million investment for the Morwell Innovation Centre, and it is paying off. In the 2022–23 *Victorian Food and Fibre Export Performance Summary* report we see Victoria is the largest food and fibre exporter by value in all of Australia, accounting for 24 per cent of the national total, and 2022–23 saw an increase of 7 per cent in export value, totalling \$19.6 billion. I would be very happy for the Deputy Leader of the Coalition to run his ruler and do his numbers on that, because it is a very big number indeed and one to be proud of.

A member interjected.

Lauren KATHAGE: That is right. We are exceeding our incremental targets in the 2020 agriculture strategy, and we are well placed to reach our target of \$20 billion a year in food and fibre international sales by 2030. We have a reputation for high-quality, safe products, and this bill supports that. That in turn drives our export growth. It is protected and enhanced by this bill. This industry supports 330,000 jobs, and that is what this government is about: growing the economy, growing the number of jobs. This regulatory reform lets our small farmers, our small businesses and our larger businesses get on with doing their jobs.

But this is not just a government about the economy and productivity. It is also a government about fairness, which is why this government banned compulsory embedded networks in new apartments, and that is something that I know has had a great impact for people and something that I am very proud of. An expert panel heard from people in such arrangements that they felt trapped, that they had a lack of choice. We know that consumers deserve to have fair access to fair deals, and that is why we took action on that. In the expert panel recommendations in the embedded networks review we have recommendation 7.2, which is:

To support strengthened oversight, monitoring and enforcement of the local energy network market, the ESC should be able to collect appropriate data and information.

The government response notes that we support proactive, robust and proportionate regulation, all with a customer outcome and all with fairness front and centre. The amendment that we are considering today will allow the Essential Services Commission to use the information-gathering powers in part 4 of the Essential Services Commission Act 2001 rather than rely on section 46 of the Water Industry Act 1994. This is an example of what I spoke of at the beginning of my contribution – that we are a government that follows through. We said that we were going to ban embedded networks in new apartments, and we have done it. We said that we were going to make it fairer for people in existing arrangements, and that is what we are doing through bills such as this.

Sam GROTH (Nepean) (12:00): I am absolutely thrilled to rise to speak on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. It is exciting stuff – omnibus legislation that amends 14 acts across 10 portfolios. The reforms contained in the bill are mostly minor, technical and clarificatory in nature and do not represent substantive changes in the acts in question.

Emma Kealy: That's not a word!

Sam GROTH: It is. I am not going to go into too much depth about every single amendment. I will quickly touch on part 5. As much as I know the house would like to hear it, I will just stick to a couple of pieces. Firstly, part 5 amends the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 to

create a new mechanism for the Secretary of the Department of Health to make authorisations for certain organisations to obtain, possess and store medicines. This amendment will require the secretary to conduct a risk assessment and authorise entities to comply with the existing provisions relating to storage, record keeping, access and administration. In their second-reading speech the Assistant Treasurer stated the amendment will allow the secretary to authorise aged care facilities to be supplied with and store antiviral medicines without a permit. This is particularly important down in Nepean. We have got an aging demographic, probably one of the oldest in the state. Let us be clear, anything that allows patients or these older people in aged care facilities to get access to medications more readily by making them more readily available is fantastic, but this is not a solution for the underinvestment that we have seen in health care on the southern Mornington Peninsula.

I note that recently a community rally was held by locals at Rosebud. They braved some pretty extreme temperatures down there – 30-plus degrees – but there was a huge turnout from locals to raise awareness about the need for further investment into health care on the Mornington Peninsula. It is something that I have raised in this place many times and have had discussions with the minister on. While it is fantastic to see a public-private partnership being pushed up at Frankston and investment going on in that hospital, we still need to have health care on the Mornington Peninsula close to people when they need it. We should not have to send an ambulance 45 or 50 minutes down the freeway – on a good day. Let us not even think about what it has been like over summer. I know many members in this chamber have spent time down on the Mornington Peninsula over the summer period – I think probably a huge percentage of the people in this room. You know just how bad the traffic can be. So while in the winter period it might be 45 minutes to get from Blairgowrie or Rye or Capel Sound up to Frankston, 45 minutes over summer can quickly become an hour and a half. If you are in an ambulance for an hour and a half – that is once it gets to you, if one is available – that is far too long. We definitely need to see investment in health care, including the Rosebud Hospital, down on the Mornington Peninsula.

I also note that in the legislation and through briefings the government claims there is a huge saving to small business in this state of \$2.6 million. It is a huge, huge saving for those 700,000 businesses – a grand total of \$3.66 for every business. I am sure that will go a long, long way to cover their increase in WorkCover premiums, their increase in their energy bills. It is just going to do absolute wonders for business, not just in my electorate of Nepean but all over the state, I am sure – \$3.66 is going to go a very, very long way!

A member: Hear, hear.

Sam GROTH: If you want to talk about ‘Hear, hear’ and the \$3.66, we have seen a huge number of businesses leaving this state.

We need to make sure we are making Victoria the best state to do business, not just for those businesses that are here. We do not want them looking elsewhere; we do not want them looking to other states. But we also want to be encouraging businesses that are not currently doing business here to come back. I am not convinced that a saving of \$3.66 is going to encourage other businesses to pick up and do business here. We lost last year alone more than 7500 businesses who no doubt were forced to shut up shop because of just how difficult this government, this Labor government, has made it to do business in this state. It should come as no surprise to anyone here. If you look at the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry’s *Cost and Ease of Doing Business in Victoria* report, Victoria is perceived as the most expensive place to do business in Australia.

We on this side of the chamber, the coalition, are committed to regulatory reform. We want to see reduced red tape, we want to enhance productivity, we want to improve efficiencies across the state of Victoria and we really just want to make it easier for those people that want to do business here, those small businesses that are the backbone of our economy – to make it easier for them to keep their doors open, employ more people and not be hit with higher rates of tax on payroll when they decide to increase their payroll. Just because you are employing someone it should not put further burden or

more pressure on you as a business. We are committed to making sure that happens, and if this bill is anything to go by – the huge savings that we are seeing and the minor tweaks that are being done – those on the other side have absolutely no plan to make it easier for regulatory reform, no plan for making it easier for businesses in this state. And we want to see that.

There are a lot of minor changes in here. It will tidy things up. I am sure we are going to hear a lot of riveting contributions across all sides on this bill. It is one thing to tidy up 14 acts for 10 portfolios, but we need to see more done – more to help Victorian businesses, more to help Victorians, more to help our health system. There needs to be more done than what we are seeing in this bill.

Nina TAYLOR (Albert Park) (12:07): What does this bill do? The bill proposes 54 amendments across 14 acts and 10 ministerial portfolios to modernise and streamline regulatory requirements for businesses and social services, support emergency preparedness, ensure technology neutrality and make other simple and uncontroversial changes. These amendments have been developed in consultation with relevant departments, agencies, regulators and stakeholders. They reflect the feedback and suggestions – get this – received from businesses and social service providers who are affected by the current regulatory frameworks.

I do think it is interesting that throughout this debate what the opposition have come up with – red tape, free up the market, do the things, free it up – certainly lands as a concept very broadly. We get that means something, but it is much harder to actually do the work required to protect consumers and businesses in our state for the benefit of everyone. And when we are talking about the conservative estimate, the \$2.6 million through these legislative reforms, that is a conservative estimate, because when we are looking at the reforms as a whole we are looking at things like aspects of food safety, public health, EPA emergency responses, and when you quantify those elements you are also looking at values as well. Does the opposition value those protections when it comes to food safety? And what is the cost of not regulating well in that capacity or in that domain? I would argue the ramifications of insufficient regulation or not continually reforming in this space could be extensive, to say the least.

I think that the rather manipulative argument that is being used by the opposition to try and diminish the significance and the benefit – whether it be economic or otherwise, food safety et cetera – is unhelpful to say the least, and it also detracts from the enormous amount of work that goes into delivering these kinds of necessary reforms for our state. It is obviously all they have got. That is the best they could find. They think, ‘Well, we’re actually meant to support this bill. We’ve got to come up with something, so let’s just try and diminish the significance of this,’ irrespective of the fact that there are a whole range of reforms that actually are for the benefit of consumers and businesses alike.

But the other thing I was going to say is that the way that they were presenting their argument was to suggest this is all there is for businesses in this state, which is absolutely and emphatically untrue. When you look at the enormous amount of continuing reform in our state across all departments in so many areas – and I am going to get to energy, because that was raised before – to suggest that this is just the last bastion when it comes to small businesses is a furphy at best. So nice try, but really I feel the thin rebuttal by those opposite, I guess, is the best they have. It also reflects well on our government, because we have obviously put up some pretty terrific reforms and it is hard to find something to go against them. That is the best they could come up with, so well done.

But anyway, moving on, there was an issue raised about our *Gas Substitution Roadmap* and what that means for businesses in this state and how we are really making life harder for businesses because we are actually putting forward a transition to a cleaner energy future. I thought that was really interesting, because there are a couple of aspects there, and I am going to unpack that because it does come back to the way we regulate our energy market.

One of the aspects that I wanted to go to with regard to this is that time and time again they pretend to care about the environment. They pretend to care about cutting emissions, but when push comes to

shove, they cannot do it. They just cannot bring themselves to get to that very important precipice. They just cannot. I want to quote something that was published today:

CSIRO's annual GenCost report again shows that renewables are the cheapest form of power, while nuclear is the most expensive.

Yet the Liberals are keeping the door open to nuclear –

get this –

and have opposed every renewables target in Parliament – meaning higher bills for Victorians.

That is who they are. They only think short term. They never think about the environment. They never think about the future of young people in this state or having a planet worth living in or affordability either, because there is a cost element that balances out that domain.

So let us get down to the nitty-gritty of this. We should say the impact of energy prices on business bills is not a supply crisis, it is a crisis of greed. Australia produces more than enough gas. Eighty per cent of our production is sent offshore. Gas companies are making windfall profits on the back of the illegal war in Ukraine. The ACCC found that in 2021 the big gas exporters had taken more gas out of the domestic market than they had put in. That is unacceptable.

Businesses can also access discounted energy efficiency upgrades through the Victorian energy upgrades program – funny that the opposition have not mentioned this. In 2020–21 more than 14,900 businesses – I am going to say that again: more than 14,900 businesses – received upgrades through the program. That is fantastic. On average, businesses saved \$3700 on their annual energy bills through the program – funny they did not mention that either. They have just exclusively tried to sort of pick at what might or might not benefit a small business from this one regulatory omnibus bill to the exclusion of all the other benefits that have been going on in this state.

We have also implemented the Victorian default offer for small businesses. There are currently 50,000 small businesses. What? There are currently 50,000 small businesses on the VDO. Who knew? The introduction of the VDO delivered savings on expensive standing offers of between \$1380 and \$2050 for small businesses. I do not know if that means much to the opposition or not. It certainly does to me. It is dollars and cents, isn't it? Small businesses on the VDO also pay about 25 per cent less than businesses in other states. What? I am going to say that one again too: small businesses on the VDO also pay about 25 per cent less than businesses in other states on the equivalent default market offer. I think that matters.

We know the quickest and only way to drive down gas bills is to help people take up electrical alternatives. When we look at the *Gas Substitution Roadmap* and this transition and the why, we are leading the nation with our *Gas Substitution Roadmap* – leading the nation, not just Victoria. Great news for those opposite: we are more than a month in and the sky has not fallen. The Victorian community and construction industry are getting on with it while the opposition tie themselves further and further into energy policy knots, which I alluded to earlier in my discussion today.

All-electric new homes do not need to cost any more to build than gas-connected homes – isn't that wonderful? The cheapest form of new energy is renewable. That is why the Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO) have confirmed yet again that Victoria's wholesale power prices are the lowest in the country.

Members interjecting.

Nina TAYLOR: I don't know if they heard that. I could not hear what I was saying because I was being interrupted, but I will say it again: the cheapest form of new energy is renewable. That is why AEMO have confirmed yet again that Victoria's wholesale power prices are the lowest in the country. Those opposite want nuclear and more gas, which will only drive power bills up more. I am going to go a little bit further – I have got another minute – but I hope this provides some reassurance to those

opposite that we do have small businesses and consumers, Victorians across the board, in mind when it comes to energy regulation and regulation across the board.

I should say converting an existing home with solar panels from gas to electricity can save around \$1700 a year on energy bills in addition to around a thousand dollars of savings per year from an existing solar system. For Victorians in a new all-electric home, going all electric will save them around a thousand dollars each year on their home energy bills. These savings can increase to over \$2200 when paired with rooftop solar. And new all-electric homes do not need to cost any more to build than gas-connected homes. That is just a snapshot; I have not even got into other aspects of the economy which are being regulated to the benefit of businesses – small, medium and large – and also to the benefit of consumers across the board.

I commend this bill to the house. I believe the opposition are supporting it. It is not clear from the way they have presented their arguments in the chamber, but I understand that we are unified about passing this bill.

Emma KEALY (Lowan) (12:17): It is wonderful to be back in this place in 2024 and to be able to debate legislation, including the legislation before us today, the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. If you had listened to the previous speakers from the government side of the house, you would think that this is perhaps the most exciting piece of legislation that has ever come through this chamber. It is going to slash red tape and it is going to make such a difference to small businesses that are struggling so much with additional taxes from Labor and the escalating cost of doing business in this state, whether it is through more fees and levies being put through, the ever-increasing WorkCover premiums that come through for Victorians or the skyrocketing energy bills which are coming through as well. This is the problem. We have got a complete disconnect between what this government say and what they are actually doing.

Some of the things stated by the member for Albert Park around the impacts of shutting down gas were preposterous. I was one of many members of this place who went to the Australian Hotels Association dinner last night. Dave Canny, who has played an important role in the hospitality industry for such a long period of time – he is a champion fella all round as an individual but also in the work that he does for hospitality and particularly in his role with the AHA – made so very, very clear last night in his opening remarks the importance of access to gas for our pubs. It suits a certain way of cooking, and this is particularly important for Asian communities. We know that cooking is the heart of every home. To be able to utilise a wok it is essential that you have got access to gas. It is a cheaper source of energy than so many other options. It is a lower carbon emitting energy than many other options. It is very, very important for the pub and club industry. This is what Dave Canny was saying last night. The Premier was at that same dinner. I hope that she listened very carefully to those comments, because there are a lot of publicans who are very, very concerned about Labor's single-minded approach to shutting down access to natural gas in this state. I do urge the government to ensure that they are evaluating that properly.

We are seeing an extension of transmission lines through large portions of my electorate of Lowan in particular. There is a cost to that. If there are more powerlines, we see that cost put on to every single Victorian's energy bills, so there is a cost to it. I think that certain selective elements of the truth were portrayed by the member for Albert Park. The whole picture needs to be looked at very, very carefully, and I do refer to the Mountain report around alternative opportunities to look at transmission infrastructure in the west of the state – particularly his recommendation that upgrading the existing infrastructure which goes through to Horsham and up through Mildura and leads into New South Wales is a cheaper, more reliable option and would unlock more renewables in the short and long term. I urge the government to review that paper, because it has been ignored today.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to add some other points and rebut some of the points made by earlier speakers. This is a wideranging bill. I can see the Deputy Speaker nodding his head. As you can hear from many of the contributions, people are picking up the bits that are most important. As

has been mentioned I think by every other speaker, the bill seeks to amend 14 acts across 10 different ministerial portfolios. The elements that I particularly want to speak to today are in relation to the agricultural sector – being the Shadow Minister for Agriculture, and of course that being the backbone of my local economy in the Lowan electorate, which represents 20 per cent of the state. The reason we have got such a large land mass is that we have got a lot of national parks but also vast areas of cropping land and farming land and pastoral land throughout the west of the state. We grow people's food and fleece and their fibre and we do a very good job of it, and we are given very little credit for the work that we do and also the contribution that we make to the Victorian economy.

I would urge the Labor government to take that into account when they are developing the budget this year. We deserve to have recognition for all that we put into the economy and the state. We deserve to get safe roads, we deserve to have hospitals which are modern and support our healthcare workers, we deserve to have good police stations and courts and we deserve to have amazing schools for all of our students. That is very, very important, and I urge the government to ensure that every corner of the state is covered off on that. I would also like good public transport connections, and while I did hear the Minister for Public and Active Transport state yesterday that the Suburban Rail Loop will improve travel times for all Victorians right across the state, I do not think that it will have a great impact on my electorate. I think we have got a lot of money that is heading into Melbourne at the expense of upgrading our local facilities and ensuring that local people in far western Victoria have access to public transport as well.

The areas of this legislation which relate to agriculture are around streamlining some of the duplication between licensing, particularly the transporting of meat and seafood. I have consulted with the relevant industries, and they are pleased that this will come into play. It is red tape that probably has more of an impact on the bureaucrats and how this is actually managed in the licensing system as opposed to making a big difference to the end users. I think this is the important thing to point out. As part of the proposed red tape cuts that are coming through, it really is not going to make a huge difference for so many businesses across Victoria. Even the cost savings that have been outlined by the minister in his second-reading speech are around a \$2.6 million saving. We could not hear through the bill briefing where that saving would actually occur. It is suspected that this actually just 'Well, this is a change we want put through. It was one of the submissions for legislative change that we wanted to see come through' and it would be an internal government saving.

Even if you could see that that would be not an internal government saving of \$2.6 million, let us take for a second that it is true. This would save \$2.6 million for small businesses right across the state of Victoria. There are 710,000 small businesses in Victoria. While it was contested by the minister who was then at the table that there was some fudging of the figures, simple maths says \$2.6 million divided by 710,000 businesses only comes down to the grand total of \$3.66 per business. Given the huge number of taxes that have been imposed on businesses in Victoria since this Labor government came into power – they are now in their 10th year; when we look at businesses that are struggling with the early closure and shutdown and the restriction of supply of energy supply in Victoria, which has seen the cost of energy just go through the absolute roof; and when we look at a government that has got this ham-fisted way of trying to do WorkCover reforms but does not satisfy anybody at all – everybody is divided.

When you get a position on a piece of legislation where the unions agree with the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, who agree with us, and the only people who think that these WorkCover bills are any good are the government themselves – they say these are wideranging reforms, and yet we are going to see increases in premiums continue and we are going to see the focus on mental health completely slashed; all of those mental health reforms are totally forgotten, they are not a priority anymore – that is a problem. This government have lost their way.

While I understand that the amendments which are outlined in this legislation tidy up a lot of duplication and other problems – technical issues – and perhaps clarify matters for interpretation by those who have to impose fines and penalties or who have responsibility for licensing, for example, in

the meat industry and seafood industry, they do not actually make a difference and answer the question that small businesses desperately want answered. That is, they want less government in their lives. They want less red tape. They want less green tape. This bill, while it is being sold by the government as being amazingly reformative, is not going to make a crack of difference for businesses who are really struggling at this point in time. And let us never forget that small businesses are the biggest employer group in Victoria. Particularly in smaller communities, we have fabulous small businesses. They are the ones who sponsor our footy and netball clubs. They are the ones who sponsor kids to go to Kokoda and do the trek over there. They are the ones who stand up. They employ our young kids. They create so many jobs, and they keep our money local in our country communities. So while I support the sentiment of the government in wanting to slash red tape for business, they have not hit the mark in this legislation. Please go back to the drawing board. Please try harder, because what our businesses desperately need is for a government to deliver on its commitment to cut red tape and cut the costs for business.

Anthony CIANFLONE (Pascoe Vale) (12:27): I too rise to speak on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. As we know by now, this is an omnibus bill that consists of over 50 reforms across 14 acts and 10 ministerial portfolios. While many of these reforms appear to be a collection of relatively simple and straightforward reforms, continuous fine-tuning of the legislation is essential to the Victorian government's vision of a high-performing state and a local regulatory system that supports increased productivity, makes it easier to do business in Victoria and protects consumers, community health, safety and our environment. It is this continuous fine-tuning that continues to underpin Victoria's growing economy, which continues to grow at the fastest rate in the nation – which you would not know about if you just listened to the other side all the time.

As announced on 30 January 2024 by the Treasurer and of course the member for Werribee in that capacity, the *Deloitte Access Economics Business Outlook* report released last week shows that the Allan Labor government's strategy for sustainable, job-creating growth is working. The report forecasts that Victoria's growth across all state products in 2023–24 will be 2.5 per cent, outpacing all other states and territories, and Victorian economic growth will lead all states over five years to 2027–28 at an annual average rate of 2.3 per cent. The report also shows Victoria's strong economy has enabled job creation and employment levels just shy of the all-time high achieved last year of 3.68 million Victorians in work. The report expects Victorian household consumption to also grow by 1.3 per cent in 2024, outpacing the national forecast of 1.1 per cent. Fundamentally the Deloitte Access report shows that our economic strategy is growing jobs, it is keeping local communities strong and it is encouraging businesses to invest and expand their workforces.

Indeed the reforms contained in this bill, as well as the other various economic, budgetary and policy approaches, continue to support and foster a positive economic outlook for business, workers and communities across our state. If this was not the case, we would not be able to provide the economic environment for the kickstarting of business, jobs and cultural revitalisation opportunities through my community in central Coburg. In this respect I would like to draw the house's attention to the media coverage by the *Age* newspaper on 27 January 2024 by Tom Cowie and 3 December 2023 by Royce Millar, both of which respectively featured and highlighted the incredible once-in-a-generation opportunities currently on the horizon for central Coburg revitalisation building off the record state investments into central Coburg, which include the world-class new Coburg and Moreland train stations; the removal of four level crossings along the Upfield line at Moreland Road, Reynard Street, Munro Street and Bell Street; the delivery of a new landmark active transport, cycling and walking, and open space corridor; investment into local schools, including \$22.5 million to build a brand new Coburg special development school and \$17.8 million for a new Coburg technology hub; and \$6 million to redevelop Coburg City Oval.

All of these combined are working to drive local revitalisation efforts, to enhance local ambience and amenity and to attract new investment and businesses through central Coburg, Sydney Road and the

Upfield corridor. Indeed this approach along with our broader regulatory reforms are creating dividends for local businesses and my local community.

Again as featured in the *Age*, the unlocking of the new Pentridge visitor and entertainment precinct is very much at the heart of what is becoming a new chapter for Melbourne's northern creative, cultural, events, tourism and business sectors. I am glad that the Minister for Tourism is at the table, who has visited on a couple of occasions already and seen it firsthand for himself. Indeed, Pentridge's North & Common Restaurant, in the former prison mess hall in the old B division, has been recognised by the *Age*'s Good Food Guide as Coburg's first ever hatted restaurant, a world away from when some of the state's most infamous names would have been lining the hall for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The Pentridge precinct is already drawing international, interstate and intrastate tourists on a daily basis – the tour is absolutely phenomenal – in unprecedented numbers to Coburg as they spend an unforgettable night in Pentridge and have the opportunity to experience the Sydney Road corridor.

In this respect I would also like to acknowledge and commend the Central Coburg Business Association, who continue to do a commendable job in advocating and promoting the interests of local traders and whom I have previously engaged with, including Ray Jacobs; the secretariat; Brett O'Riley, the chair, from True North cafe; Caspar Zika, the treasurer, from VICSEG New Futures; Donna Stoddart from the Brotherhood of St Laurence; Con Pavlidis from the National Australian Bank branch; Leeann Berger, formerly of Pictures and Pages, which is now owned by wonderful local mum Lien Giang; and many others.

One of the newest businesses, which I did recently have the pleasure to officially open on 25 November in central Coburg alongside the member for Essendon and the member for Broadmeadows, was Fresh On Young Food Hall in Louisa Street in central Coburg. An amazing family-run local business by Tony, David and Lee Abouzeid, Fresh On Young does provide locals with some of the freshest agricultural produce from right across the state and has also played a key role in helping reinvigorate central Coburg's food and cultural offerings.

All of these food businesses will be particularly interested in the various reforms contained in this bill as they relate to the Food Act 1984, the Meat Industry Act 1993 and the Seafood Safety Act 2003. But along with these businesses in central Coburg, my municipality of Merri-bek is also home to a really wide array of local businesses who will be interested in many other of the 50 regulatory process reforms contained in this bill, which are designed to continue underpinning and streamlining regulations for businesses across the state. My community of Merri-bek is home to over 16,700 local businesses. That has grown by 1784 businesses since 2021–22, so we are growing business-wise and jobs-wise also in Merri-bek, despite the claims of those opposite. My local businesses consist of 16 per cent construction; 14.8 per cent transport and warehousing – and I would particularly like to acknowledge the Transport Workers Union, which does such a magnificent job in representing many of those transport and warehousing workers across Melbourne's north; 13.6 per cent professional and scientific sectors; 8.8 per cent rental, hiring and real estate services; 7.2 per cent retail trade; 6.8 per cent health and social services, a huge sector in my community; 5 per cent accommodation, food services and the visitor economy; 3.2 per cent manufacturers; 3 per cent arts, creative and recreational industries; 3 per cent financial and insurance services; and of course 2 per cent education and training. These businesses collectively help contribute over \$7 billion in gross regional product and represent almost 1.5 per cent of the overall state's gross product.

Of course there are a wide number of reforms that are contained in this bill, many of which I could go to and tie directly into any of those different local business sectors. As I said, there are 50 different pieces of reform contained in this bill over 14 acts and 10 ministerial portfolios. The Department of Treasury and Finance estimates that these reforms will provide over \$2.6 million in annual savings to businesses across Victoria, including many of those that I mentioned earlier, by removing licensing and permit fees and making regulatory compliance easier. For example, the bill will modernise and streamline requirements for businesses and social service providers, including through the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981, where the Secretary of the Department of Health will

have the capacity to authorise a health service or another type of health entity to obtain, possess or otherwise deal with medicines where this is considered appropriate and does not create risk. On that note, I really would like to acknowledge Merri Health. They are one of the biggest and longest lasting community health providers and do an absolutely fantastic job. They are one of the biggest, if not the biggest, employer in the Merri-bek municipality, employing over 500 community, social and health workers, and this reform may potentially go directly to supporting their work.

The bill will reduce the regulatory burden for businesses that sell dried meat, as we have heard previously, in the food sector. The bill includes an amendment which will clarify that the Meat Industry Act 1993 does not apply to the online sale of dried meat, which the act was never intended to do, ensuring that online retailers are treated in the same way as bricks-and-mortar retailers, both being of low risk to consumers. The bill also streamlines the licensing requirements in the Meat Industry Act 1993 and the Seafood Safety Act 2003 and recognises that refrigerated vehicles are often used to transport multiple commodities. Issuing one type of licence to transport meat and seafood will reduce the regulatory burden on businesses and the transporting of both products. That will be a win also for Transport Workers' Union members and drivers.

Currently, under the Social Services Regulation Act 2021, registered social service providers must notify the social services regulator about changes to information provided on registration. While in a business sense health and social services in my community rank at about, from memory, the 3 or 4 per cent I cited earlier, from a workforce point of view, health and community and social workers are the largest employment sector in my community. Around 15 per cent of my local residents are employed in the health and social services sector, so I really appreciate that particular reform being implemented through the business community.

The bill will also improve safety compliance and improve food safety for Victorian consumers by amending the Food Act 1994. Again that will be welcomed by many of those food and hospitality workers but also food manufacturers, the growing food manufacturing base in my community particularly through the Newlands Road and North Coburg corridor, which are making the very most of that beautiful, wonderful regional Victorian agricultural produce that is transported to northern Melbourne in my community and then value-added to through the work of local workers in those food hubs and food factories. On that note, I commend the bill to the house.

Tim BULL (Gippsland East) (12:37): I rise to make a contribution on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. I have changed a few notes from what I was originally going to talk about on this bill, because I have been sitting down there in my office and hearing a lot of the commentary coming from the other side about how fantastically great it is to do business in Victoria and what a great friend of government business is here in Victoria.

About 18 months ago I read a report that some members in this chamber have touched on already, but I just want to go into it in a little bit more detail. It was a report put together by the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI), which I think everyone in the chamber would agree is an independent agency representing the business sector in this state. They put together a report called *Cost and Ease of Doing Business in Victoria*. What it found was that Victoria is perceived to be the most expensive place to do business.

A number of members on the other side of the chamber, and I think indeed the member for Tarneit when he was speaking, said that between 2010 and 2014 we said on our side that we would cut red tape and did not do it but now on that side this government is actually doing it. I just want to read a couple of findings of this recent report that do not align with that sort of commentary that we have heard from a few members over there. It says that Victoria is sixth in relation to affordability and labour productivity of all the states in the country. It is seventh for the number of permits needed to start up a business. How can we claim to have cut red tape and made it easier for business when Victoria is seventh in the number of permits needed to start up a business? The report also says that more than half of the national businesses that operate nationwide in our country said it was hardest to

do business in Victoria. More than half of the businesses that have a national presence said it was hardest to do business in Victoria, and only 7 per cent of businesses said that this government is doing a good job in reducing the cost of doing business.

This report was put out I think around 18 months ago. Things certainly have not got any better since then, from talking to the business sector. Our shadow minister who spoke earlier, the member for Sandringham, commented about what he is hearing from the business sector in his electorate, and I can certainly assure you that I am hearing very similar things from my electorate. Admittedly in my electorate we have had probably a tougher time than normal. We came off a massive drought straight into bushfires that closed down our whole region for the summer, and then we went headfirst into the COVID pandemic, which had a huge impact on businesses and regions that are predominantly reliant on the tourism industry. But the message that I am getting from my business sector – and I meet with them regularly and talk with them regularly – is that a lot more can be done by government to assist them in their endeavours to recover and stand on their feet again. Do not take it from me; let us take it from the VCCI report. Those messages that we are hearing from the other side of the chamber are terrific as speaking notes, but they are not the reality of the situation on the ground. I think VCCI's commentary was that this was the most comprehensive evaluation of the costs impacting business in Victoria that we have ever seen. I think everyone in this chamber would say VCCI is an organisation with a high level of credibility, and we can certainly take notice of the reports that they produce and the commentary that they make.

Just recapping, we have heard from speakers prior to me on both sides of the chamber that this piece of legislation amends 14 acts across 10 portfolios and that there are a lot of technical clarifications to those acts. I did note that one of the commentaries the government provided was that this bill was the result of inviting departments to submit minor amendments or improve regulatory compliance, which is sort of a bit of a doublespeak for 'fixing up errors that were made in the original bills'. I note that part 6, which amends the Education and Training Reform Act 2006, is to fix drafting ambiguities. If that is not bureaucratic speak for 'fixing up mistakes', I am not sure what is, but we are reading a little bit of that in some of these explanations in relation to these amendments.

A couple of the objectives of this bill are to streamline requirements for businesses. I have just touched on that. They do not feel that things have been streamlined for them. They rate us very, very low in relation to setting up a business, maintaining a business and just the regular bureaucratic processes that are required to operate a business. Small businesses are the major employer that we have in this country, and we need to do as much as we can to support them. As I have said, they have been through a very tough time with the pandemic and other factors in certain areas. In some parts of the state it has been flood. In my part of the state it has been fire, followed headlong by COVID. But as the member for Lowan pointed out, these small businesses are the ones that are the heart and soul of our community. They support our local sporting clubs, they support our local charities and they support people when they need a helping hand, and that must not be underestimated by anyone in this chamber. I think there is a wide appreciation of that.

The bill also says that it will improve emergency preparedness. This is an area I touched on earlier, where certainly my patch gets its fair share of emergency situations. I think we are probably impacted by more emergency situations than any other area of the state just due to our geography and our high, timbered areas of extensive national parks. We are very prone to flood. On the Great Dividing Range, if we get rainfall up there, we can have very severe floods within 24 hours. So anything that we can do to support and streamline our emergency services is something that we on this side of the chamber would wholeheartedly support.

It has been mentioned before about the handclapping and backslapping that is going on around this \$2.6 million in annual savings. The reality of it is, as the member for Lowan pointed out, we have 710,000 small businesses. This is \$3.66 a year. We are giving them half a latte a year and expecting to slap ourselves on the back and congratulate ourselves, which is an interesting way of painting a positive picture on something that is relatively insignificant.

I want to make a comment on one element of the bill around the Meat Industry Act 1993 and the Seafood Safety Act 2003 and the changes there. I probably represent one of the few electorates in the state that has both a significant meat industry and a significant seafood industry; there would be some others, but perhaps none to the scale of Gippsland East. That involves obviously an enormous amount of transport out to the various markets, not only the length of and breadth of Victoria and nationally but in many cases, in particular in relation to our seafood, international markets. The Mallacoota Abalone cooperative is probably the key factor there. But we supply a lot of seafood and fish to Sydney and New South Wales markets, and obviously our beef goes everywhere, including across the border into overseas jurisdictions. This legislation does assist in streamlining the processes for transportation of seafood and the transportation of meat in refrigerated vehicles. Only one type of licence will now be required to handle both of those areas in relation to transport. That is a genuine streamlining. It is something that we strongly support and something that will certainly be beneficial to my region.

But in summing up, I will just say that this is fluffing around the edges. If we really want to support small business, we can do better than \$3.66 per small business. We can get in there and adjust those factors that were highlighted in the VCCI report around more permits being required in Victoria to start up a business than anywhere else. There is so much more we can do to streamline for small business. We do not need to be going back to between 2010 and 2014. This government has been in power for 10 years. In a report that was published 18 months ago, there is much, much more we can do, so let us stop the back patting and the backslapping and let us make some real changes to support small business in this state.

Kathleen MATTHEWS-WARD (Broadmeadows) (12:47): I rise today to lend my support to the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. I note that this is the second such omnibus bill that we have put forward and it makes a lot of those small changes that are needed for business. It is not too exciting, that is true, but a lot of our legislation is about making small things easier, and this will make a big difference to a lot of industries.

The urgency in the bill is about the lack of access to antivirals in aged care at the moment. According to the bill summary, aged care facilities can access a store of essential medicines without the need for a public health emergency order to be in place. That is really important. In my time working in aged care policy during the pandemic we saw how vulnerable those communities were. Access to antivirals makes any illness that you get, particularly COVID or the flu, a less serious illness. It makes a big difference to the small businesses, and it will have an effect over different ones as we go.

Talking further about aged care, my mother-in-law and father-in-law were both at Dorothy Impey aged care, and they did a wonderful job looking after them. Having had a lot of experience in aged care, I have seen, when places get locked down because there is gastro or flu or COVID, how detrimental that can be to people without that social contact. Anything we can do to make aged care safer certainly has my support, and I am pleased this bill has come up right now so that we can make sure people have access to the medicines they need.

The bill contains clauses about waste during emergency services. During my time as an adviser, waste during the COVID pandemic was an incredibly big issue for a lot of communities, with all the PPE that was getting used in nursing homes and the overflow and the lack of ability for the waste industry to keep up with that and the need to get permits and the incredible burden it put on the system. To see that addressed here will make a really big difference. It will make a difference to risk in the community and it will make a difference to the community's experience of emergencies. It is not just pandemics, it is fires and floods and all of those things where waste is a really big issue. I think that has been overlooked by people speaking about it.

The other thing we talk about in the bill is the reduction in regulatory burdens on local government. In my time in local government I saw that all the time. Anything we can do to save time and money for people applying for all sorts of things and businesses – it makes a big difference when we can reduce that and make things more sensible, like having the same permit for a meat and a seafood van. That

just makes sense. Why would you have a seafood van permit and a meat van permit when essentially they are doing the same job?

I just want to reiterate that the omnibus bill does important things even though it is fairly unexciting to talk about. I also want to point out that the commitment to efficiency is not pursued at the expense of safety and responsibility. The bill in tandem places paramount importance on ensuring robust harm management protocols, acknowledging the need for a balance between regulatory ease and the protection of public interest.

In endorsing the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023 we embrace a vision of a regulatory landscape that is not only responsive to the evolving needs of businesses but is also steadfast in safeguarding the welfare of our citizens. Among its notable provisions the bill stands to strengthen its food safety measures, particularly benefiting consumers in Victoria. By prioritising the safety of our food supply chain, it underscores a commitment to public health and the quality of life for citizens. Moreover, the legislation facilitates simplified access to essential antiviral and other medications for residents within aged care facilities, as I have already spoken about.

While I am speaking about aged care, I just want to give a shout-out to the workers. Aged care workers, to me, do one of the most underappreciated jobs in society, yet it is so critical. Often for residents in aged care that is the contact they have with people every day. I was so pleased that the Fair Work Commission recommended an increase in wages for aged care workers, and I thank all the aged care workers, who do such a fabulous job every day to look after our older people in residential aged care.

The bill also introduces more balanced controls on waste transportation, and it aims at advancing outcomes for consumers utilising embedded electricity networks, acknowledging the evolving landscape of energy consumption. Notably the Department of Treasury and Finance anticipates that the bill's implementation will yield substantial economic benefits, projecting over \$2.6 million in annual direct savings for businesses. This financial foresight underscores the bill's multifaceted impact, aligning regulatory reforms with fiscal prudence and positive societal outcomes.

Anticipating a more responsive and efficient healthcare system, the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill foresees the secretary's inaugural authorisation to be directed towards aged care facilities. The strategic direction comes from a recognition that these facilities play a pivotal role in providing timely healthcare services to residents. By avoiding the need for individual permits and Department of Health assessments, the legislation aims to eliminate unnecessary delays in the procurement of essential medicines. I have said before that that important work that aged care workers do every day – we want them to sit there and do that work and be able to talk to the residents and be able to care for them properly and not spend their time doing waste-of-time paperwork that does not actually benefit anyone and is clearly not needed. I think this legislation makes a big difference to those processes, where people can actually do the job that they want to do, caring for our older people rather than filling in forms that do not add value.

Specifically, the example of vaccinations supplied under the Commonwealth influenza and COVID vaccination programs illustrates the urgency of streamlining the authorisation process. Currently secured through public health emergency powers, the bill endeavours to extend this facilitation even beyond emergency circumstances, acknowledging the ongoing need for prompt access to medications critical for the wellbeing of residents in aged care. This foresighted approach not only aligns with the principles of efficiency and responsiveness but also underscores the importance of uninterrupted healthcare delivery, especially in settings where residents depend on swift and seamless access to essential medications. The Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill introduces a pivotal shift in the authorisation processes for residential aged care facilities to procure medications, opting for a more streamlined mechanism over the grant of individual permits.

This strategic modification is not intended to disrupt the existing supply chain dynamics governing the acquisition of medications for these facilities; rather it seeks to refine the bureaucratic processes

involved in obtaining authorisation. By bypassing the need for individual permits, the bill aims to expediate the access to medications without necessitating alterations to the established procurement pathways. This change is procedural, not structural, ensuring that the critical supply chain remains unaffected while ushering in a more efficient and responsive authorisation process for the benefit of residential aged care facilities. In effect the bill reflects a nuanced understanding of the delicate balance between regulatory oversight and operational continuity. By adopting this approach it acknowledges the importance of maintaining the integrity of the existing supply chain mechanisms, emphasising that the amendments relate to the authorisation process.

This pragmatic stance ensures that while regulatory reforms are instituted, the core operations and logistics of medication procurement for residential aged care facilities remains seamless and uninterrupted. The initial authorisation to be issued by the secretary is expected to prioritise residential aged care facilities, allowing them to procure the necessary medications for providing health services to residents. Given the comprehensive considerations and procedural steps that precede the granting of authorisations, it is anticipated that this first authorisation may not be granted until an early to mid 2024 time frame. The careful examination of relevant factors and meticulous evaluation of risks are integral to this process, ensuring a judicious and well-informed approach to the implementation of the new authorised medium. Consequently, while the time frame for the first authorisation may extend into the specified period, it underscores the commitment to a thorough and thoughtful transition to the revised regulatory framework.

I wholeheartedly endorse the efforts of our Labor government in facilitating more accessible avenues for residents of aged care facilities to obtain antiviral and other essential medications. I also endorse the improvements to waste and food safety and all of the improvements in the bill for small businesses and local government. I endorse the bill.

Sam HIBBINS (Pahran) (12:57): I rise to speak on behalf of the Victorian Greens to the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. As has been canvassed by previous speakers, this is an omnibus bill that seeks to reform regulatory legislation across 14 acts and 10 ministerial portfolios. According to the second-reading speech, the purpose of the bill is to increase productivity, make it easier to do business in Victoria and also protect consumers, community health and safety and the environment. I will not go through all the 10 portfolios and the 14 acts that are due to be amended; I think other members have covered that quite well. What I do want to focus my remarks on is clause 1 of the bill, the purpose of the bill – and the bill actually does amend the Essential Services Commission Act 2001 in relation to various administrative enforcement matters.

A number of opposition members have spoken of the need to cut red tape and to reduce regulation. We have had a number of Labor government MPs wax lyrical about how good the economy is going and how things are good for business. Well, I can tell you the economy is not working for people. People are really struggling, and the government's response does not need to be to have less regulation or an approach of suddenly slashing red tape, it actually needs to be expanding regulation. The Greens certainly believe that consumers do need more protection, and the government can do this by expanding the administrative and enforcement functions of the Essential Services Commission to include the retail grocery industry – more specifically, supermarkets. The government needs to recognise that what is obvious is that supermarkets are providing Victorians with an essential service, just like other essential service industries that are covered by the Essential Services Commission – water, gas, the retail energy market. These are all regulated by government. All Victorians buy groceries to live. The vast majority of us will shop at one of the two major supermarket retailers. At this particular time in history when Victorians are experiencing significant financial strain and the cost-of-living crisis, supermarkets are charging more for food –

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I think now would be an appropriate time to break for lunch. The member will have the call when we return to the bill.

Sitting suspended 1:00 pm until 2:01 pm.

Business interrupted under sessional orders.*Members***Minister for Planning***Absence*

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:02): I rise to inform the house that for the purposes of question time today the Minister for Precincts will answer questions for the portfolios of planning and suburbs.

*Questions without notice and ministers statements***Home building industry**

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:02): My question is to the Premier. Jess from Doreen, a single mum with a young daughter, worked hard to achieve the great Australian dream of home ownership, but the dream has turned into a nightmare. When Montego Homes is liquidated she will not be able to access the support payment scheme provided to customers following the collapse of Porter Davis. This is also true for customers of collapsed home builder Chatham Homes. Why won't Labor extend the scheme to Jess and the scores of Montego Homes and Chatham Homes customers when it was offered to others?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:03): I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question. I am sure all of us understand the very difficult situation that Jess and her family find themselves in. If it is your first home and you have been working through with your builder to build that home, that is indeed a very devastating set of circumstances for Jess, and my thoughts are with her. And, as the Leader of the Opposition has identified, there are a number of other now former customers of Montego Homes who have been caught up in this situation, and they deserve our respect in how we debate this issue and discuss this issue in the Parliament.

In terms of the set of circumstances that we saw last year with Porter Davis, our government acted quickly to support those families. The Treasurer and I have already met and discussed the situation today around Montego Homes. I appreciate there is further information to be provided, because this did happen last week and obviously for people like Jess some have been identified as being affected. We want to make sure that we get a full appraisal of the former Montego customers – there is a workforce that it also impacted here as well – and that we get further information as we consider, as we have done so previously, the government's response to the situation that Jess and others find themselves in.

What we also know, whether it is Montego Homes last week or Porter Davis last year, is that this has identified that we need to take action as legislators in this place to make the legislative change that provides the future consumer protections –

John Pesutto: On a point of order, Speaker, I just ask you, on a point of relevance, to draw the Premier back to the question. The question is about why the scheme for Porter Davis was not extended to others.

The SPEAKER: The Premier was being relevant to the question that was asked.

Jacinta ALLAN: Thank you, Speaker. It is one thing – an important thing – to take action to support people who are affected by situations now, but where there is an opportunity to act to make changes so in future people like Jess and others can be protected, it is incumbent upon all of us to act. Given there is a bill that is before this house this week, I would urge the Leader of the Opposition to not delay, to not proceed with the stalling tactics that the Leader of the Opposition and his colleagues have pursued this week in this place –

John Pesutto: On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, can I ask that you draw the Premier back to the question about why the Porter Davis compensation was not extended to people like Jess who are affected by the Montego Homes collapse.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! Assistant Treasurer! The Premier was being relevant. The Premier has strayed a bit from the answer that she was giving. I ask her to come back to the question.

Jacinta ALLAN: The question gave the example of Jess in Doreen and her circumstances and referred to the situation with Porter Davis. What it highlights is we need to make change. We have the opportunity to act, and I urge the opposition leader to join us in that action.

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:07): Jess is in the gallery today.

The SPEAKER: Order! The Leader of the Opposition knows that you cannot refer to people in the gallery. I would ask you to direct your comments through the Chair.

John PESUTTO: Thank you, Speaker. The administrator for Montego Homes, Cor Cordis, was advised by the Premier’s office that there is no money to extend the liquidated builders customer support payment scheme. Is this advice the reason why the scheme has not been extended to Victorians like Jess?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:08): As I said in my answer to the Leader of the Opposition’s substantive question, the Treasurer and I have already met today. We have already discussed the situation that is occurring with Montego Homes, an event that occurred last week, and we are getting further advice and looking at how we can support the people who are impacted. I gave that answer to the Leader of the Opposition’s substantive question. We have the opportunity to act and act quickly, and I would urge the Leader of the Opposition to put the politics aside, put down his amendment to review and defer the passage of the legislation and act with us now to support other families who may be impacted in the future.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, the Premier knows that the opposition has said that not only will it pass but –

The SPEAKER: Order! That is not a point of order. The Manager of Opposition Business will resume his seat. The Manager of Opposition Business knows that that is not a point of order.

Ministers statements: education system

Ben CARROLL (Niddrie – Minister for Education, Minister for Medical Research) (14:09): The Allan Labor government know that investing in public education is the most important public investment we can make. That is why since 2015 we have invested an additional \$30 billion in building the Education State right across our state. Here is a bit of a pop quiz for everyone in the Parliament; let us start the new year with a pop quiz. Pay attention. Which state is the first in Australia to have the best government school attendance? Victoria. Which state is leading the country on school leavers fully engaged in education or work? Victoria. Which state has grown its investment per student higher than any other jurisdiction? Which state has the best NAPLAN results in Australia? On this side of the house –

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Members are being disorderly today. I would ask you not to interject. The member for Eildon I think was going to raise a point of order on that matter. The Minister for Education to continue without assistance.

John Pesutto interjected.

The SPEAKER: Leader of the Opposition, are you defying my ruling?

Ben CARROLL: I can offer tutoring to the Leader of the Opposition, but he would cut it like Free Fruit Friday. We also know on this side of the house that we are going to have an inaugural speech later today from someone who knows all about education, the new member for Mulgrave, and I guarantee everyone in this Parliament – everyone – that we will not hear from her tonight what the member for Mornington said, ‘Let’s extend HECS to school students.’ In his great inaugural speech that is what he said. In a cost-of-living crisis, with inflation: ‘Let’s extend HECS to school students.’

John Pesutto interjected.

Ben CARROLL: I see the opposition leader is not ruling it out. That is very good. Thank you, opposition leader, for putting that on the record.

Our commitment to Victorians is that the Allan Labor government will do our homework. We will get our homework in on time. We will also make sure we study and work hard on behalf of every Victorian during this inflation and cost-of-living crisis. Our government is investing around \$750 million to support students and families, whether it is the free glasses program, the 40 millionth breakfast we served with the member for Tarneit – *(Time expired)*

Ambulance services

Emma KEALY (Lowan) (14:12): My question is to the Minister for Health. Yesterday for almost 12 hours all fixed-wing air ambulances were grounded due to a lack of pilots. There are four aircraft statewide, and typically three are meant to be operational at any time. Why weren’t there any pilots available for this life-saving service?

Mary-Anne THOMAS (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Health Infrastructure, Minister for Ambulance Services) (14:12): I always welcome a question from the opposition on ambulance services, because it does give me an opportunity to just outline to those on the other side of the house our government’s investment in ambulance services in Victoria. When we came to government we had an ambulance system in crisis. We had a government that was at war with our paramedics. Since we have been in government we have invested more than \$2 billion in our ambulance services. We have more paramedics here in Victoria than ever before. In fact we have increased that workforce. We have got more than 50 per cent more AV teams on the road.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, we are almost 1 minute into the answer. The answer does have to address the question, and the question related to 12 hours yesterday when air ambulances were not available. The minister has not come anywhere near that question, and I would ask you to bring her to the question that was asked.

The SPEAKER: The minister has time to address the question that was asked. She was only 1 minute into her answer. I ask the minister to come back to the question.

Mary-Anne THOMAS: Thank you very much, Speaker. Of course it is important to understand that our ambulance service works as one, be that our paramedics on the road, in the air or indeed on motorbikes. But what I can do is confirm, having sought advice from Ambulance Victoria regarding these operational matters, that 24-hour coverage is being delivered by Ambulance Victoria’s fleet.

Emma KEALY (Lowan) (14:14): Air ambulances respond to an average of 21 critical incidents every single day. How many Victorians could not obtain an air ambulance yesterday when they needed one?

Mary-Anne THOMAS (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Health Infrastructure, Minister for Ambulance Services) (14:15): Once again, I welcome the supplementary question. I have got to say taking a lecture from those on the other side when it comes to ambulance services in this state is absolutely rich. Once again –

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! I would remind members that interjecting across the table is not parliamentary, it is disrespectful. It is also disrespectful to be yelling across the table when someone is on their feet trying to either give a point of order or answer a question.

Emma Kealy: On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, this is related to air ambulances, which provide critical, very rapid transfer of patients to central tertiary hospitals in Melbourne. Road ambulances take patients a much longer period of time. I ask you to bring the minister back to air ambulances and to respond to the question put.

The SPEAKER: I ask the minister to come back to the question that was asked.

Mary-Anne THOMAS: As I have already indicated, I have sought advice from Ambulance Victoria in relation to these operational matters, and as I have advised, there is 24-hour coverage delivered by Air Ambulance Victoria's fleet. This is the information that I have received from Ambulance Victoria.

Ministers statements: health system

Mary-Anne THOMAS (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Health Infrastructure, Minister for Ambulance Services) (14:16): I rise today to update the house on how the Allan Labor government's commitment to delivering real cost-of-living relief for real people is making health care more accessible for thousands of Victorians.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Nepean can leave the chamber for an hour.

Member for Nepean withdrew from chamber.

Mary-Anne THOMAS: When budgets are tight at home, Victorians should not have to choose between putting food on the table and getting the health care that they need. However, due to almost a decade of neglect from the former federal Liberal government, we know that accessing a bulk-billing GP can be difficult. That is why we have created 29 priority primary care clinics. Over 280,000 visits have already been made to our clinics, where real patients are receiving real treatment for common occurrences like cuts and burns and bruises, stitches, fractures, tonsillitis, RSV and other common infections. But what is more, we are also getting on –

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Leader of the Opposition, I would ask you to cease interjecting across the table.

Mary-Anne THOMAS: We are getting on with delivering our 12-month-long community pharmacists pilot, which has already saved Victorian women many trips to the GP for the relief of simple UTIs or for the refill of a prescription for the contraceptive pill.

The Allan Labor government also knows that the cost for dental check-ups and treatments for kids can really add up. That is why Smile Squad is so important. We estimate that Smile Squad is delivering real savings for Victorian families of around \$400 per child per year for every child at a government school, and indeed we are implementing it at low-fee-paying private schools – real kids, real families, real savings. Only an Allan Labor government can be trusted to meet the cost-of-living needs of Victorian families, take them seriously and provide real relief. That is exactly what we are doing in the health portfolio and what we will continue to deliver.

Ambulance services

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:18): My question is to the Premier. A woman from the Premier's electorate with extreme abdominal pain was recently told that an ambulance would take 5 hours to respond to her request for help and that taking a taxi to hospital would be quicker. The Premier has claimed the government provided extra funds to Bendigo

ambulance services so that locals ‘get the care they need, when they need it’. Why can’t Victorians get an ambulance when they need it?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:19): I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question. I understand the shadow cabinet had a nice day out in Bendigo last week. I hope you enjoyed travelling on that duplicated Calder Highway funded by the Labor government, seeing the new Bendigo Hospital and the schools that have been upgraded. The Leader of the Opposition asked about ambulances. He asked about ambulances –

Cindy McLeish: On a point of order, Speaker, the Premier is clearly not being relevant to the question asked and is deliberately doing so, and I ask you to bring her back to the question.

The SPEAKER: The Premier was about to answer the question.

Jacinta ALLAN: The Leader of the Opposition asked about ambulances and investment in health care, and I hope when the Leader of the Opposition was in Bendigo he had the opportunity to see the brand new ambulance stations that have been built in recent years at a number of locations across Bendigo – Epsom, Strathdale – and the work that is being done in central Bendigo, Speaker, that I know you know so well.

I make these points because it takes a sustained investment in our ambulance services to support our hardworking paramedics to deliver services to the local communities. As I said to this house yesterday, since we have come to office we have had to repair the relationship with our hardworking paramedics. We did not go to war with our hardworking paramedics, and we have invested an extra \$2 billion in our hardworking –

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, the Premier is clearly debating the question. The constituent of the Premier deserves a response.

The SPEAKER: The Premier was being relevant to the question that was asked.

Jacinta ALLAN: I was referring to the \$2 billion of additional investment that we have made in our ambulance services, and we have made this investment so that we can continue to provide support for our hardworking paramedics. As we know – and the Minister for Health knows this very well – up until the pandemic we had the best response times on record, and that took that sustained effort. And coming out of the pandemic we have continued to work hard to support our paramedics by bringing in paramedic practitioners and dedicated training programs, and last week we saw that the latest data is showing ongoing improvements on the other side of the pandemic. This might not be news that the Leader of the Opposition wants to hear. We know, Speaker, in large busy communities like ours that we represent that coming out of the pandemic there are pressures on our hospital system, pressures on our ambulance services.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! Leader of the House! Leader of the Opposition, I would ask you to cease interjecting across the table.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! The Premier will come to order. I have asked the Leader of the Opposition repeatedly to cease interjecting across the table.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! The house will come to order. This is unacceptable. Leader of the Opposition, your microphone is off, and you think that no-one can hear you interjecting across the table. We can hear you interjecting across the table. I have ruled that you do not do it many times, and you continue to ignore my rulings. I would ask you again to cease interjecting across the table when ministers and members are on their feet.

John Pesutto: On a point of order, Speaker, seeking your clarification, on a number of occasions my colleagues and I have raised points of relevance. You have upheld many of those points of relevance. It is a concern for my colleagues and me; we are asking questions for people like Jess and others. We just want the truth, and we do not get it. You have upheld –

The SPEAKER: That is a completely different point of order to what I was just referring to, Leader of the Opposition. If you wish to discuss this matter, I will speak to you after question time in my office.

Jacinta ALLAN: As I was saying, the latest data shows that we are seeing improvements in our ambulance services. We do know that there is more work to do, which is why we will continue to support our paramedics. We will not run around with fake ambulances like those opposite have done. We will support them so we can continue to provide the support our communities need from their ambulance services.

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:24): Productivity Commission data shows Victoria employs more paramedics than any other state, yet Victoria’s median statewide ambulance response time was worse than Western Australia, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory. When will the Premier fix Victoria’s ambulance crisis?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:25): Let me say this to our hardworking paramedics: we respect and support the work that you do. We are proud to have employed more paramedics. We are proud to be partnering with Victoria University on a dedicated training program to bring more paramedics into Victorian ambulance services. Given they go out every single day to support and deliver quality health care to our community, they do not deserve the imputation that we are seeing from the Leader of the Opposition about the quality of care they deliver to our community. We will support them.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, imputations are unparliamentary, and I would ask you to ask the Premier to cease it.

The SPEAKER: The Premier has concluded her answer.

Ministers statements: energy policy

Lily D’AMBROSIO (Mill Park – Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (14:26): I rise to update the house on the progress that our government is making on slashing energy bills for Victorians, not with expensive nuclear energy or fossil gas, which will simply send people’s energy bills skyrocketing, but with cheaper renewable electricity in our system, because we know that the cheapest form of new-build electricity that you can make is renewable. And that has been confirmed in the Australian Energy Market Operator’s (AEMO) most recent report –

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Mildura is warned, as is the member for South-West Coast.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, the minister knows that answers do have to be factual, and bills have gone up 25 per cent in the last year.

The SPEAKER: Manager of Opposition Business, that is not a point of order. The minister is not answering a question; she is giving a ministers statement.

Lily D’AMBROSIO: I am absolutely delighted to focus on things that are relevant – relevant to people’s lives – and those opposite are certainly far from that. AEMO’s most recent report says Victoria’s wholesale power prices are the lowest in the country, remain the lowest in the country, and that is thanks to our renewable energy programs. We are getting on with building up the SEC, because

we know that working faster than ever to get more renewables into our system, which the SEC will accelerate, will continue to reduce power bills. Construction is on the way on the SEC's first investment project, the project in Melton, the Melbourne renewable energy hub, one of the biggest batteries in the world, which will also help facilitate the building and connection of more renewable energy, sending more power prices down, down and down for Victorians – down, down, down.

And what is more, the SEC is gearing up to help Victorian households get off expensive fossil gas and electrify their homes, because we need to look at novel ways to be able to support Victorians dealing with the cost of living. As from 1 January this year, we know, new homes requiring a planning permit will need to be all electric, and that will save Victorians a thousand dollars a year off their energy bills, each and every year. Our Solar Homes program and our Victorian energy upgrades discounted products regime – all of these come together to deliver real cost-of-living relief for Victorian consumers.

Middle East conflict

Gabrielle DE VIETRI (Richmond) (14:28): My question is for the Premier. The Victorian Labor government has entered into a secretive agreement with the Israeli defence ministry to support the development and manufacturing of military equipment. The Israeli government called it a formal framework that paves the way for industrial defence cooperation between Israel and Victoria, but the details of this agreement remain secret. Premier, Victorians have the right to know what agreements are being entered into in their name by the government. What exactly has the Victorian Labor government agreed to provide for the Israeli defence ministry?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:29): I thank the member for Richmond for her question. Can I at the outset make it very clear that it is not a secret agreement. On the member for Richmond's characterisation of the memorandum of understanding that has been entered into, it is simply that: a memorandum of understanding. Indeed it is listed on the Australian government's foreign arrangements scheme public register along with 8000 other cooperative international agreements.

I make this point: we as a state are proud to partner with overseas companies, many of whom have a base here in Victoria. We want to work with overseas companies to support jobs here in Victoria. Particularly when it comes to advanced manufacturing, as a state we have a history of being a strong advanced manufacturing state, particularly in the areas of automotive, transport and, yes, defence technologies. We have a strong record as a state. Those industries support jobs in my electorate, in the member for Benambra's electorate, in regional areas and also in electorates across the suburbs of Melbourne. We will continue to pursue cooperative agreements with companies that are based around the world. Indeed I have quite the list here of memorandums of understanding that have been signed by the Victorian government with a range of countries: Japan, the United Kingdom, Singapore, Greece, Japan again, Cuba – you might get excited about that; maybe, maybe not. David Davis would be pleased to know we have done a few with France.

I think what we are seeing here from the member for Richmond is her trying to join some dots for her own political purposes that are about driving division in our community. We should be focused on providing unity, cohesion and support to all in our community who are feeling the pain and the hurt from the conflict that is going on in the Middle East. I make the point to the member for Richmond that this MOU was signed before the conflict began on 7 October in the Middle East, and she would do well as a member of this place to provide support to people who are suffering, not cause extra division.

Gabrielle DE VIETRI (Richmond) (14:32): To be honest, I am reeling. I am really trying to get my head around how the Premier is suggesting that Victorian commerce is more important than our obligations under international law in the context of a potential genocide. I appreciate the Premier is trying to downplay our involvement as a state in the potential genocide that Israel is carrying out in Palestine, but right now an estimated 100,000 Palestinians are either killed, wounded or missing at the

hands of the Israeli military. The ICJ ruling has made it very clear that all governments have a duty to prevent genocide in Palestine. In light of this ruling and the risk of Victoria being complicit in genocide through this agreement, will the Premier cancel Labor's deal with the Israeli Ministry of Defense?

Mary-Anne Thomas: On a point of order, Speaker, I ask that you rule the supplementary question out of order. As difficult as it was to hear, it was a statement made by the member and it was hard to ascertain a question that bore any relevance to the substantive question.

James Newbury: On the point of order, Speaker, can I concur with the Leader of the House. Imputations and, frankly, antisemitic tones are unparliamentary, and that is what it was. It is offensive, and I would ask you to rule that question out of order.

Ellen Sandell: On the point of order, Speaker, there was a very clearly articulated question at the end. If the opposite side would have perhaps given the member for Richmond the courtesy of listening to it, it was a very clear question posed at the end. I ask you to rule it in order.

The SPEAKER: There was a long introduction to the final question that the member for Richmond asked. I appreciate that that was probably not necessary, but she did land on a question at the end. The question can be repeated – the question only.

Gabrielle DE VIETRI: In light of the ICJ ruling and the risk of being complicit in genocide through this agreement, will the Premier cancel Labor's deal with the Israeli Ministry of Defense?

The SPEAKER: The member for Richmond has changed the words to her question. I believe that the first question you asked was: will the Premier rule out Labor's deal with the Israeli Ministry of Defense? I will allow the question.

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:35): Can I say in answer to the member for Richmond's question she has, firstly, either misrepresented or misunderstood the ICJ ruling around what they did and did not say about the situation around genocide in the Middle East, so the member for Richmond needs to not misrepresent international incidents for her own political purposes. Let me be absolutely clear: our role in this place is to provide support for people in our community who are hurting. The member for Richmond yesterday was pretty quick to talk about a safe workplace and how she feels in this workplace. Well, have a think about people in our community who look to us for leadership and who look to us to provide safe and secure communities and not use words and actions like the member for Richmond has done to further divide, because that is all you achieve from this sort of behaviour.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! The house will come to order. I am on my feet. The member for Narre Warren North can leave the chamber for half an hour. The members for Prahran, Brunswick, Melbourne and Richmond can leave the chamber for 90 minutes. The member for Eureka can leave the chamber for half an hour.

Members for Narre Warren North, Prahran, Brunswick, Melbourne, Richmond and Eureka withdrew from chamber.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, I again put on the record that the coalition is willing and wanting to work with the government on this ongoing behaviour from Greens members in this place. It is frankly outrageous. Any action that can be taken should be taken. Kicking a member out for 90 minutes for this ongoing behaviour – for shutting down our Parliament, for shutting down our Council or our Assembly in this way – is not just causing division in our community but hurting people. I would say to the government: can we work together to take strong action to show that these members cannot use this place in the way that they are?

Jacinta Allan: On the point of order, Speaker – I appreciate this may be a little unprecedented in agreeing with the member for Brighton – in my answer earlier I referenced the member for

Richmond's comments that she made yesterday about all of us having the right to a safe and respectful workplace. We all do. There is the hurly-burly and the slings and arrows of words and exchanges in this place, but we all deserve the right, whether it is those of us who are elected or those of us who are staff and work for us in these roles, to a safe workplace. We have seen a repeated pattern of behaviour from the member for Richmond, who signed in visitors who disrupted Parliament during question time, which – certainly I can only speak for myself – made me feel unsafe, and it impacts on our staff as well. This is a repeated pattern of behaviour, and quite frankly the Victorian community deserves better than this. Whether you are, as the member for Caulfield does and the member for Box Hill does, supporting the Jewish community, which is grieving, or whether, as many others also do, you support the Palestinian community and those from our broader Islamic community, no-one – neither of those communities – deserves this sort of behaviour that we have seen today. I condemn that behaviour today. It is unparliamentary, but worse than that, it is disrespectful to the Victorian community and particularly those communities – the Jewish and the Islamic communities – who are grieving for the death and the loss of their families and loved ones.

The SPEAKER: I would just like to make a quick ruling. I have removed the Greens party members from the chamber today for 90 minutes. I propose to meet with those four members after I have finished in the chair today. I will be seeking an apology. If I do not receive that apology, there will be further matters to proceed with. I ask the Leader of the Opposition to be very brief on this matter.

John Pesutto: Thank you, Speaker. I would echo what others have said in this sequence of discussions. Can I say that it is clear that what was done today was not only an affront to the decorum of this place, which we attend on behalf of the Victorian people, but premeditated. Obviously coming in here with signs they knew what they were intending to do. They knew and intended to cause mayhem. It is not the first time, as others have said. Can I respectfully suggest, Speaker – we fully endorse your proposed action – that we seek from the Greens members also an undertaking that they will not repeat it or anything like it. We cannot allow, in my view, any erosion of the standards that the Victorian people are entitled to expect from all of us in this place. There is a place for free speech, but that was not it. That was not free speech. That was a match to a very delicate situation, and they intended to do that coming in here with the signs that they possessed.

The SPEAKER: I think I have heard enough today on this matter, and I have ruled.

Brad Battin: On a point of order, Speaker, in consideration of what you have done, can you please also note that there were two in the gallery who took photos – to the PSOs, thank you very much for your actions – so during that investigation can you find out who signed them in for that premeditated action for the record as well?

The SPEAKER: Member for Berwick, those matters will be followed up with security.

Ministers statements: Get Active Kids voucher program

Ros SPENCE (Kalkallo – Minister for Agriculture, Minister for Community Sport, Minister for Carers and Volunteers) (14:42): In resetting the tone, I am very pleased to update the house on the successful and popular Get Active Kids voucher program. This program was established in November 2020 to reduce cost-of-living pressures and to address cost as a barrier to participating in sport by providing eligible kids with vouchers of up to \$200 to cover the costs of equipment, uniforms and registrations. In the latest round of the program, round 7, more than 26,000 vouchers have already been dispersed, and with families having until the end of May to redeem their vouchers this figure will continue to climb. When we introduced the program we said that we would provide more than 100,000 vouchers, and we have not just delivered on that commitment, we have absolutely smashed it, with more than 140,000 vouchers distributed.

In this round almost 60 per cent of voucher recipients have indicated that their child would not have been able to participate in sport if it were not for this vital program. This is consistent with previous

rounds, and it shows that the program is increasing participation, it is helping out household budgets and it is having an impact where it matters most. Across the Yarra Ranges LGA, in the electorates of Monbulk, Evelyn and Eildon, around 400 vouchers have been provided in this round, and in the City of Casey, which includes the electorates of Narre Warren North, Narre Warren South, Berwick, Bass, Dandenong and Cranbourne, almost 1000 vouchers have been provided. Through this program all across the state the Allan Labor government is delivering the support that families need so that they can continue to play the sports that they love. Our government was first to introduce a voucher program in Victoria, because we know that providing cost-of-living relief matters to Victorian families.

Payroll tax

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:44): My question is to the Minister for Health. The federal Labor health minister has urged Victoria to review its unfair health tax, saying that the Premier should ‘listen closely to general practice organisations like the college of GPs’. The college has warned that the government’s unfair health tax will increase patient co-payment fees, stop bulk-billing or force GPs to close their doors. Will the government follow the advice of the federal Labor minister and abolish the unfair health tax?

Mary-Anne THOMAS (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Health Infrastructure, Minister for Ambulance Services) (14:45): Once again I welcome the question from the opposition, because it is an opportunity to try and clear up once and for all that what we are talking about here is payroll tax, which has been in place for a long, long time, and the way in which payroll tax is applied has not changed. However, what I can tell you is that we have had the pleasure of working with the RACGP on the delivery of our election commitment, our \$32 million investment to make sure that we are supporting more junior doctors to take up the general practice scholarship. You talked about the RACGP, so I am being entirely relevant, because I want to talk about something else the RACGP –

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, the question asked very clearly whether the government would follow the advice of the federal Labor minister and abolish the tax.

The SPEAKER: A point of order is not an opportunity to repeat the question. The Minister for Health was being relevant to the question that was asked.

Mary-Anne THOMAS: As I was saying, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners’ Anita Muñoz here in Victoria had this to say in relation to our \$32 million commitment:

This program is a meaningful acknowledgment that general practice registrars, when they go into the community, do experience a drop in their income. That can be up to a \$50,000 reduction in income between one registrar type and the other ...

Dr Muñoz said that she hoped other states would follow Victoria’s lead in making it easier and more financially viable to choose the general practice specialty here in this state. The issues with general practice, as the federal health minister well knows –

Peter Walsh: On a point of order, Speaker, on the issue of relevance, without restating the question, could I ask you to bring the minister back to actually addressing the question, please.

The SPEAKER: The minister was being relevant to the question.

Mary-Anne THOMAS: As the federal health minister well knows, because state health ministers are certainly letting him know, he has inherited a system – we have given him that largess – from the failed Liberal–Nationals government that destroyed Medicare. They destroyed Medicare. They had a freeze on rebates.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, the minister is just debating the question.

The SPEAKER: I think the minister was giving some context, but I do ask the minister to come back to the answer.

Mary-Anne THOMAS: Thank you very much, Speaker. What I am trying to explain for the benefit of the opposition – and I recognise I have done it before – is that there are many longstanding issues associated with general practice in this country, and they specifically come from 10 years of neglect by the Liberal federal government when the Medicare rebate did not keep pace with the true cost of delivering medical services.

Our government has done more than any other state or territory to support general practice, and we have done that through the establishment of 29 priority primary care centres. We have done that with our \$32 million to support more GPs. We have done that through our community pharmacy pilot project to make primary care more readily accessible for more Victorians. So once again, I welcome the question from the opposition, because it is an opportunity –

Peter Walsh: On a point of order, Speaker, you have given the minister a long time to come to answering the question, which she has not done. I would ask you to bring her back to actually answering the question that was asked.

The SPEAKER: I cannot compel the minister to answer the question in the way that you would like, Leader of the Nationals, but she is being relevant to the question that was asked. The minister has concluded her answer.

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:49): The Queensland Labor government have now withdrawn their unfair health tax. Why won't the Victorian Labor government do the same?

Mary-Anne THOMAS (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Health Infrastructure, Minister for Ambulance Services) (14:49): Let us be clear: this is about the application of payroll tax in this state, which applies to doctors in the same way it applies to a range of other health professionals, indeed professionals right across the state. We will continue to work with the RACGP, with the AMA and with other stakeholders to support primary care here in this state. We are focused on the patients, not the politics, and that is where we will stay. That will remain our focus, and my focus as health minister will always be on delivering the very best care to all Victorians.

Ministers statements: cost of living

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:50): I am pleased to update the house on the direct and practical action our government is taking to support families and to provide real cost-of-living relief for families right across the state, particularly after that impact that has been felt in every household and in businesses across the country from those repeated interest rate rises. We understood that we had a decision to make about what we could do to provide support for families.

Let me give a few examples and start with free kinder. Free kinder is not only great for kids – getting them into kinder – but also for mums and dads it saves \$2500 per child. Then as the kids get a bit older there is also cutting the costs of student travel through the conveyance allowance for regional students. In the energy space, the energy minister is a busy, busy minister, with electricity discounts, utility relief grants, winter gas discounts and the Victorian default offer just to name a few. If you want to take the kids to the zoo or the museum, that is free as well. Then as the Minister for Education and Deputy Premier has already talked about, we have school breakfasts and the school camps and excursions fund, and then we have got the prep bags, the baby bundles and the kinder bags all for our littlest Victorians.

For those of us in regional Victoria, we just love that the price of a train fare in regional Victoria is the same as in metropolitan Melbourne. You can get on a train in Geelong, you can get on a train in Goornong or you could get on a train in Gippsland on the lines that we have reopened and you will all pay the same as a metro fare. I could go on –

Members interjecting.

Jacinta ALLAN: I knew that would get them. Just like the little anglers kits, we have been out fishing and we got some opposition bait. We got you on the bait. We will continue to provide support to Victorian families because we understand that is the role we can play.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, I note that the Greens now have the capacity to come back into the chamber and one of them is listed down for a constituency question now. I appreciate that you are taking the matter into your hands outside the chamber, but it concerns me that some 10 minutes after this behaviour they have the capacity to come into this chamber again.

The SPEAKER: Manager of Opposition Business, as you well know, I am in the chair until constituency questions are over, and I have indicated that I will speak to the Greens members when I am out of the chair. Until such time as I do, they can be back in the chamber for their constituency questions.

Jade Benham: On a point of order, Speaker, to follow up on some outstanding questions and adjournment matters: 877, 821, 820, 757, 629, 582, 462 and 402. All are very well and truly overdue, so some follow-up would be appreciated.

Annabelle Cleeland: On a point of order, Speaker, I too have some overdue responses to questions on notice. I currently have 44 overdue questions on notice – I beat the member for Mildura – so while I hope the ministers enjoyed a summer holiday, I am still awaiting responses from the Attorney-General and the ministers for climate action, housing, emergency services, education, environment, children, transport and infrastructure, public and active transport, skills and TAFE, and health. My oldest question is 291 days old now and addresses crucial questions about housing availability in my region. The numbers include 256, 508 – no, I am joking. I will hand it to the Clerk.

Bridget Vallence: On a point of order, Speaker, constituency question 428 was asked to the Minister for Environment about the Silvan Reservoir dam and concerns about that being closed still. That is some 55 days overdue, so I would really appreciate a response on behalf of my constituents.

Kim Wells: On a point of order, Speaker, I have a number of questions on notice that are still outstanding: 807, 814, 806, 813, 812, 811, 810, 809, 808 and – the last one – 815. I would appreciate if you could follow those up, please.

The SPEAKER: I ask members to hand their lists to the Clerk.

Constituency questions

Kew electorate

Jess WILSON (Kew) (14:55): (480) My question is to the Minister for Planning. How does the minister intend to exercise her powers under the Planning and Environment Act 1987 to amend the Boroondara planning scheme to apply a specific control overlay on a permanent basis to the land at 7 Mangarra Road, Canterbury? On 9 December last year the 118-year-old heritage-listed Shenley Croft home on Mangarra Road went up in flames in what police have confirmed was an act of arson. In 2009 Shenley Croft was included in Boroondara's heritage overlay as an individually significant heritage place. Since 2020 the heritage dwelling has remained vacant and has fallen into disrepair. The tragic and unlawful destruction of Shenley Croft raises serious concerns about the heritage overlay and its ability to protect places of heritage significance, especially when it comes to neglect and unlawful demolition. On Monday night Boroondara council resolved to request that the minister supply an SCO to the land at 7 Mangarra Road to ensure any future development of the property includes the heritage home's reconstruction.

Ripon electorate

Martha HAYLETT (Ripon) (14:56): (481) My question is for the Minister for Housing in the other place. Minister, can you provide me with an update on the rollout of the Big Housing Build and housing statement in the Ripon electorate? As we all know, housing affordability is the top issue across

our state. I cannot go anywhere in my electorate without the topic coming up. In Dunolly, Beaufort and Wedderburn locals are crying out for affordable housing for older residents. In Ararat and St Arnaud our big employers are desperate for key worker housing. In Maryborough and Miners Rest residents need more secure rentals and social housing, and around our lakes and parks dozens are sleeping rough. Delivering more housing in these communities will be a game changer, especially through the \$1 billion Regional Housing Fund. It will create jobs and economic opportunity for our region and help those in need to find a place to call home. So many are excited to see more homes delivered across Ripon, and I look forward to providing them with the minister's update.

Euroa electorate

Annabelle CLEELAND (Euroa) (14:57): (482) My question is for the Minister for Emergency Services in the other place, and I ask: will the government provide financial assistance for recovery and repair to farmers and residents impacted by the 2023–24 flood event? Our farmers are frustrated, having rebuilt fences only for them to be flattened again less than 16 months later. Initial grants were completely inadequate in recovering from the impact of the October 2022 floods, and now they are having to deal with the same issue all over again this year. There are people like Stuart and Julie in Benalla, Chloe of Somerset Farms in Seymour, Celia in Heathcote and Melinda in Broken Creek, all of whom have been left with no help as they start cleaning up yet another flood. On top of the grants not being enough and no longer being available, our residents and farmers are finding it impossible to get insurance, leaving them considerably out of pocket. Our regional producers and residents cannot be left to tread water as the persistent threat of floods remains. More financial support is essential to get them back on their feet.

Point Cook electorate

Mathew HILAKARI (Point Cook) (14:58): (483) My question is for the Deputy Premier in his capacity as Minister for Education. How will the upgrade works at Saltwater P–9 College support the community with access to high-quality education which is close to home? The Victorian Labor government is committed to increasing education opportunities within the community that I represent through the relative recent openings of Homestead Senior Secondary College and indeed Saltwater P–9 College itself. There is always more work to do with high-quality education, and I am glad that the government has committed to these upgrades not just at Saltwater P–9 College, which has an extraordinary principal and staff doing wonderful work, but also across the community, with an extra P–9 and specialist school on the way in the suburb of Point Cook. I look forward to the minister's response.

Warrandyte electorate

Nicole WERNER (Warrandyte) (14:59): (484) My constituency question is to the Minister for Crime Prevention. I ask the minister what is being done specifically in my electorate to reduce local crime. Crime in my electorate is rising every day. The City of Manningham, which makes up the majority of my electorate, has had a 16.5 per cent increase in crime in just the past year. Sadly, this government is about politics first and community safety last. My community is writing to me wracked with fear over the significant increase in crime. To quote one constituent:

Last night there was a home invasion on our street in Donvale, the third in 6 months.

In the family's 60 years of living there, they have never had a home invasion. Now there have been three. I will keep fighting until our community feel safe in their homes. The time to act is now.

Bellarine electorate

Alison MARCHANT (Bellarine) (15:00): (485) My constituency question is for the Minister for Children, and the question I ask is: how is the Allan Labor government supporting young children and families upon their commencement of kindergarten in the electorate of Bellarine? As the new school year began last week there were over 20 centres in the Bellarine providing kindergarten services to

families who are balancing the current cost of living, working and going back to the workforce while supporting their children through this exciting next stage. It is great to see free kinder for every child across the state. I would greatly appreciate more information on how the Labor government is supporting early childhood learning in the Bellarine so I can keep my electorate updated.

Melbourne electorate

Ellen SANDELL (Melbourne) (15:01): (486) I ask this question on behalf of countless constituents who have contacted me asking why the Labor government in Victoria is standing by their MOU with Israel's Ministry of Defense given what has happened in Gaza and why Labor continues to give support –

The SPEAKER: Can you tell me who your constituency question is to?

Ellen SANDELL: It is to the Premier. Why is Labor continuing to give support to Israeli arms manufacturers like Elbit Systems given the atrocities being committed by Israel with these weapons? Over summer I watched with increasing shock and heartbreak the horror unfolding in Palestine. Over 100,000 Palestinians were killed or injured or went missing in the last four months alone, with more than 10,000 innocent, defenceless, beautiful children killed by the Israeli military's actions. Tens of thousands of people in Melbourne have been coming into the CBD in my electorate every Sunday to oppose this war and call for a ceasefire, yet our government is not listening to them. My question to the Premier is: Premier, surely you have seen enough, so why won't you rip up Labor's MOU with the Israeli Ministry of Defense?

Pascoe Vale electorate

Anthony CIANFLONE (Pascoe Vale) (15:02): (487) My constituency question is for the Minister for Multicultural Affairs: what funding programs are available to help support our proud, vibrant, diverse Greek community in Pascoe Vale, Coburg and Brunswick West? On 4 February, on Sunday, I had the absolute pleasure of attending the 40th Coburg Greek festival in Victoria Street, Coburg. Now a feature of Coburg's events calendar, the festival draws thousands of people from across the northern suburbs and is a wonderful celebration of all things Greek: culture, food, music, dance and faith. As part of my remarks on the day, whilst I acknowledged I am proudly married to a woman of Greek Cypriot heritage, I was also very pleased to reflect on the history of the festival, which was first held in February 1984 at Bridges Reserve in Coburg, with the very special guest being then Prime Minister Bob Hawke, the federal member for Wills. Along with local residents in attendance it was a pleasure to celebrate the 40th anniversary alongside His Grace Bishop Evmenios; Father Leonidas Iannou; Father Efstathios Papadopoulos; Bill Papastergiadis, the Greek community council president; and Peter Khalil, the member for Wills. The festival would not be possible without all of the volunteers, but with growing demand the Greek community is looking for further funding opportunities down the track via the minister.

Shepparton electorate

Kim O'KEEFFE (Shepparton) (15:03): (488) My question is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the action I seek is: how is the minister going to improve road safety for Victorians in 2024? 299 lives were lost in 2023 as of 12 December. That is a 24 per cent increase on the previous year and the highest death toll in 15 years. 174 of those deaths were on regional roads. There has been \$230 million cut from road safety programs in the past two years. \$150 million was cut from the TAC-funded Safe System Road Infrastructure Program, and the TAC marketing and road safety budget fell short by \$81 million in the past two financial years. There has been a staggering 45 per cent cut in the roads maintenance budget since 2020, including 25 per cent in this year's budget, leading to crumbling unsafe roads, potholes and poor road repairs. Last Friday I attended a roundtable discussion with RoadSafe Goulburn Valley and my National Party colleagues the member for Gippsland South and Shadow Minister for Roads and Road Safety and the member for Euroa. *(Time expired)*

Cranbourne electorate

Pauline RICHARDS (Cranbourne) (15:04): (489) My constituency question is to the Minister for Environment, and the question I ask is: how many eligible cans, bottles and cartons have been recycled at the reverse vending machine in Cranny West and the over-the-counter refund point in central Cranbourne since the container deposit scheme commenced last year? Cranbourne is home to people who share a profound appreciation of the preservation of Victoria's unique natural landscapes, waterways and wildlife. More than 178 items have been deposited around the state, and I know this initiative offers a terrific opportunity for Victorians to learn about the importance of recycling while putting money back into their pockets. I take this opportunity to thank the people, businesses and community organisations who have participated in the scheme and acknowledge the meaningful impact this has had on our environment, and I look forward to reporting back to our community what the minister's response is.

Bills**Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023***Second reading***Debate resumed.**

Sam HIBBINS (Pahran) (15:05): I resume my second-reading contribution on behalf of the Greens to the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. The point that I was making prior to the lunchbreak was that right now Victorians are really suffering from the cost-of-living crisis, the high prices that supermarkets are charging for food. More and more Victorians are unable to put food on the table and cannot afford the essentials. The impact is profound. It is significant. It is impacting on people's mental health, their quality of life. There is increasing hardship. People simply cannot afford the essentials and are going without. This is a massive impact right across our community. At the same time that this is occurring – this profound harm across our community – supermarkets are increasing their profits and their profit margins. They have got a combined market share of almost 70 per cent – it certainly is a duopoly – and this is allowing them to jack up the cost of groceries for already struggling Victorians.

By using the Essential Services Commission to regulate supermarkets the government can stop them from price gouging. It can lower the cost of food for everyone. It can give the Essential Services Commission the power and the objective to deter and stop excessive price increases, and this is something that governments used to do. There have previously been policies in this state and legislation enacted to actually prevent supermarkets from unfairly hiking up the price of groceries. It was once the purpose of the Department of Consumer Affairs; it had an express objective to deter excessive price increases. They did this through the Office of Prices. They even had a Minister for Prices overseeing this objective. They could monitor price rises. They could receive complaints. They would undertake price investigations. They would support community groups in collecting information about prices. They even had, for a period, legislation that backed up their targets for limiting price rises and gave power to the minister at the time, if they found that prices were unfair, to actually set a reasonable price.

So what we are calling for is for the government to give the Essential Services Commission that objective of deterring excessive price rises; the ability to monitor and report on grocery prices, including, for consumers, retail prices, but also wholesale and supply chain prices; the ability to monitor and report on the competitiveness or lack thereof of the supermarket industry in Victoria; and if supermarkets are found to be price gouging and refuse to lower their prices, the ability to set a fair price for consumers and make sure that, for consumers and producers, there is a fair price for all.

It has been good to see in recent months that in the upper house the Greens have secured an upper house inquiry into food affordability and food security. The federal Greens have secured an inquiry into supermarket price gouging, and subsequent to that the federal government commissioned the

Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to do their own review. We had the ACTU releasing their review today, with some damning findings about unfair price hikes and profiteering right across the economy. But I would point out that in terms of powers, although in terms of competition it is mainly the federal government, the state does have a role to play when it comes to planning laws and retail leases to prevent land banking and unfair deals that lock out potential new entrants to the supermarket sector. These are issues that the state government, when it comes to competition, needs to look at very closely. It is state governments that have the power over price regulation.

By legally making groceries in the supermarket sector an essential service and having them covered by the Essential Services Commission Act 2001, supermarkets would face greater, ongoing monitoring – not just a one-off inquiry that will take a year but more scrutiny than ever before. This would bring greater transparency to the supermarket sector and the prices paid – both retail prices and to producers – pressure the supermarkets to stop unfair price hikes, make sure farmers get paid a fair price and, importantly, give the essential services commissioner the power to stop price gouging if supermarkets continue with unfair price hikes. This can either be done by way of separate legislation or, alternatively, the government can make a declaration under section 4 of the Essential Services Commission Act, which goes into great detail about how the government can do that and what the government can actually regulate. They have wideranging powers when it comes to regulating industry, and they can do this to prevent supermarkets price gouging. I urge the government to act, because there is an immediate, urgent need for the government to act on price gouging and make food affordable for everyone.

Daniela DE MARTINO (Monbulk) (15:10): It gives me great pleasure to rise today to speak on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023, and as others have noted, this reform bill is the second regulatory reform omnibus bill that this government has brought before the Parliament. Our government is committed to making it easier to do business in Victoria, and this bill forms a key part of our agenda. This bill is full of relatively simple reforms which will have great benefit for our state by supporting increased productivity, making it easier to do business in Vic and protecting consumers, community health and safety and the environment, and that is exciting for all involved and affected by the outcomes of the changes proposed herein.

Having run two businesses concurrently, I can assure you that when the regulations which govern your business are made easier to follow, this has a significant and really positive impact on the experience for business owners and by extension their families, their staff and their customers. When you are in business, every minute and every hour saved from burdensome paperwork is time a business owner gets back with their family or spends working on their business as opposed to in their business. For anyone wanting to build a successful one, this is a key component.

With my organic greengrocer and cafe, life was very, very busy, and I have got to say honestly, sometimes overwhelmingly so. Weekends were pretty much non-existent, and the second I was out of the shop I was working on paperwork at home. So every bit of regulatory burden that we lift as a government off the shoulders of businesses – which are run by people – but in particular small businesses, is hours we give back to them to have a chance to catch their breath and maybe even spend some extra time with their loved ones.

Across my electorate of Monbulk there are cafes, restaurants, takeaway stores aplenty, retail stores supplying the goods we need, trades-based businesses providing the services we require and a large number of horticultural businesses making the best of the beautiful rich soil of the hills to grow the fruit-bearing trees that feed us, the ornamental trees that provide us shade and capture the carbon emissions and the indoor plants and flowers which decorate our homes and buildings across the country. Small businesses collectively, as we all know and have acknowledged, are the largest employer in our state, and so it is important that we support them. This bill goes quite a way in doing so.

It was wonderful actually, speaking of agriculture, to have the Minister for Agriculture come and visit some of my growers in Monbulk and launch our biosecurity strategy at Auravale Alpacas. That was only back in November, and that is a key legislative reform that we have actually made too which protects our agricultural industry even further. And I would like to echo the member for Yan Yean, who stated earlier how great it is that we as a state are leading the nation as the largest exporter of food and fibre in this country. That is no mean feat, I have to say. In the financial year 2022–23 we had \$19.6 billion in exports. Victoria on our own amassed 24 per cent of our nation's total, and that is something to be celebrated. It is an excellent achievement for our state, and I am really proud because I know quite a bit of that fibre and food is coming from my beautiful electorate of Monbulk.

So for these business owners everything we do as a government to ease their burden is absolutely a wonderful thing, but not with the scattergun 'Let's cut red tape and make a headline out of it' approach, as was the case with the previous coalition government when they came to power in 2010. It is more than just a headline. When you amend or cut some red tape you need to fine-tune it carefully. You need to be considered, precise and judicious with how you do it. That is the only approach to take if you are being responsible, and that is exactly the approach we as a government have taken here. And I do have to say, having mentioned the opposition, that whenever I hear them sort of stand on their feet to speak – as I was listening intently to several contributions beforehand – it really does sound like all doom and gloom, which is a bit of a shame because it is actually not the reality.

Our economy in Victoria is a powerhouse. My good friend the member for Pascoe Vale here and my good friend the member for Yan Yean both referenced the *Deloitte Access Economics Business Outlook*, which forecasts that Victorian growth in gross state product in 2023–24 will be 2.5 per cent. We are leading the nation on this one, and we are forecast to continue doing so over the next five years. I know that sometimes those opposite like to be the harbingers of doom, but here we go, let us bring some reality into the chamber with some actual facts. We can see that things are actually going well for our economy, and we should be incredibly proud of that. I know I am, as a member of this government, the Allan Labor government.

Addressing a specific part of the bill, I want to look at a matter very close to my heart and stomach, and that is food. We have simplified Victoria's food safety requirements throughout our term in government. We have saved 25,000 businesses nearly 40,000 days per year in preparing and managing their food safety programs, which is time back, as I mentioned before, that they can spend on their business. I am not sure how many people who sit in this chamber have actually had to provide or produce a food safety program – I know of at least one other – but I can tell you I had to do it a good seven times. It is a lot of work. We are now amending the Food Act 1984 too to make sure that the regulator has the capacity to issue directions to a proprietor of a food premises to revise a food safety program. I consider this to be a really important change. I remember only too well how much time, effort, energy and thought needs to be given to your food safety program, and it is for very, very good reason, because poorly handled food has the ability to kill people, especially those with vulnerable immune systems. And I am not overstating a fact here – unfortunately, food poisoning can end up with terrible outcomes. Those who provide food to the public have an absolute duty to do so safely, and authorised officers who are obliged to check that food premises are handling their food safely have an equally important job.

If you are unfamiliar with a food safety program, it is a requirement for any class 1 or 2 food premises. To work out which you are in, put simply, if the food you sell requires temperature control, your business is going to fall into one or the other category. That food safety program becomes a manual which any business that handles food, from production through to retail or serving, must abide by. It sets out processes and procedures for each establishment. It incorporates templates for the recording of key information, such as the temperatures of your refrigeration for cold storage and the temperature of the food which you cook and reheat. Every morning in my business we took the temperature of every single fridge and every single freezer. You track and monitor how the temperature changes. If you see it trending up, if it is your fridge or your freezer, you know you may need to call someone to

service it. It might be losing a bit of gas. You do not want to get to a point where the food being stored in there is being held at an unsafe temperature.

These food safety programs are not an ethereal concept, they are practical ways to ensure that when we all go out and eat food at a cafe or a lovely restaurant, or we go and buy it from a deli or we buy it from the butcher or wherever, that food has been stored and handled correctly to ensure that we are not going to get incredibly sick or hospitalised or, even worse, have a fatal outcome. I have got to say, no-one wants to eat chicken that is raw, so I am sure most of us felt quite ill when we saw the former Prime Minister's curries at home. I know I did. I still cannot look at that picture without going a little bit pale and the hairs on the back of my neck standing up, I tell you what. To be quite honest, the former Prime Minister probably could have done with a good Victorian food safety program. Things may have been better.

Anyway, as I was saying, currently the Food Act 1984 relies on third-party food safety auditors to approve and certify food safety programs as being adequate, but there are occasions where the council or the secretary may form an opinion that a previously certified food safety program used by a specified food premises is inadequate. It does happen; circumstances change. This bill, importantly, includes a power to provide a clear mechanism for regulatory intervention where risk to health is identified. Again, I cannot overstate the importance of this. I know with an omnibus bill everyone sort of thinks 'Okay, there's some tweaks or changes here', but these are really practical changes which will have better outcomes for those who manage food premises and actually more widely for Victorians when we go out and eat anything that has been produced there.

So I have got to say it is a really vital reform. I am very pleased to see it in this bill. It is excellent to see that this work is being done, because as I said before, we are fine-tuning regulations and trying to lift some of that regulatory burden from businesses – in particular small businesses, who do not have HR departments and who do not have a coterie of people who can deal with and manage the paperwork; usually it is just one person or perhaps them and their partner doing all of that work. So everything we do as a government – as the Allan Labor government – to make it easier for businesses to conduct their business and thrive is absolutely the best step forward. It is the only way forward, and I commend this bill to the house.

Danny O'BRIEN (Gippsland South) (15:20): I rise to speak on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023, and I pay tribute to my predecessor who somehow managed to make this quite interesting and entertaining. Very passionate about this particular piece of legislation is the member for Monbulk. I dips my lid to you, because I am not sure if I am going to be able to do that. With the greatest respect to our advisers in the box – I am sure they and many other public servants have put a lot of work into it – this is what I would call the boring but important legislation. And it is important, but some of it does boggle the mind when you read certain things that absolutely make no sense whatsoever unless you understand the particular area of interest – something for example like our part 2 provisions, which amend the Monetary Units Act 2004 to provide greater flexibility in fee setting by allowing regulations in Victoria to prescribe small fees in the form of fee units by removing an unnecessary prohibition that means a fee less than the equivalent of one fee unit, currently \$15.03, cannot be fixed in fractions of a fee unit. This means that fee units can be set to small fees and indexed annually to keep up with inflation.

Mathew Hilakari: Finally.

Danny O'BRIEN: Finally, says the member for Point Cook. We have all been waiting for this for years. Yes, I am taking the mickey a bit, but I do understand that we have this type of omnibus legislation quite regularly, and the people of Victoria have no idea what we do sometimes. This stuff actually is important because there will be people – organisations, businesses and others – that will find some of the small little things in legislation absolutely perplexing, frustrating, flabbergasting, whatever it may be, and it is important that they are reviewed and updated from time to time.

I understand the process for this legislation was effectively an invitation to all departments to come forward with their minor amendments to things that can reduce red tape, that can clarify aspects of legislation and that can make the world a little simpler and more efficient for everyone here in Victoria. At least that is the intention. As I said, I am not going to deliver the world's greatest speech here, but as I understand it that is the intention of this. I literally have not read the entire bill. I will acknowledge that from the very beginning but say that I do hope the intention of streamlining legislation is actually being addressed here, because this legislation before us amends 14 acts across 10 different portfolios, at least one of which is actually mine in the liquor and gaming space – so I might say a few words about that in a moment.

As I said, it is important to be tidying up pieces of legislation to make changes that better reflect the modern world, which is often the case with legislation like this. What was passed in 1986 is no longer as relevant today or may not have the nuance that is required to operate efficiently and effectively within today's environment. So it is that this goes to those 14 acts and across 10 different portfolios to address these issues.

The government claims that these regulatory reforms will provide \$2.6 million in annual savings to businesses in Victoria. There is not much detail on how in fact that will occur, but even if we take it on face value as my previous colleagues have spoken, if you apply that just to small businesses – of which there are 710,000 in Victoria – that would equate to a saving of \$3.66 per year. If you are a bit tight and like a coffee from the Shell servo, you can maybe get two coffees for that. But if you are a usual at your local cafe and go in to get a latte or a flat white, you are not even going to get a coffee for that.

I do not know that there will be dancing and singing in the streets from our small business community that these savings are being achieved, let alone from the wider business community – the larger businesses that have copped a whack in tax from this government over the last few years in particular. Indeed I want to go to that and highlight the concerns. We have heard some of the government members speaking in glowing terms about how this continues their regulatory reduction journey. But in fact, as the member for Gippsland East pointed out, the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry undertook a report two years ago titled the *Cost and Ease of Doing Business in Victoria*. It highlighted that effectively with a technical investigation, with a ranking of the ease of doing business across the state and with a survey of more than 700 of its members capturing the experience of doing business, and it came up to the conclusion that Victoria was the worst state for doing business.

One of those issues was that Victoria ranked seventh out of the eight states and territories on the average number of permits needed to start a business. What was concerning too were some of the statistics from the survey of 700-odd business members of the Victorian chamber. Less than half of businesses feel they get fair value for money from the taxes they pay. Only 7 per cent of businesses think the government is doing a good job of reducing the cost of doing business in Victoria. Forty-four per cent of businesses think government service waiting times are getting worse. We will have some debate tomorrow on the Service Victoria Amendment Bill 2023, which may allow some members to highlight the issues with direct government service in this state. Eighty-five per cent of these businesses said regulatory culture was a barrier to doing business. Some of those statistics are pretty alarming, or they should be alarming for any government that values the job creators of our state and gets on and makes sure that it is supporting business and removing regulation and red tape to ensure that they can create the jobs that Victorians depend upon.

I mentioned that there are some minor changes to gambling regulations through the Gambling Regulation Act 2003 and the Casino Control Act. Part 3 amends the Casino Control Act 1991 to remove a requirement for casino special employee licence applicants to provide evidence of certain former employment that is not relevant to the licensing criteria. I am sure that is neither here nor there for the vast majority of us, but for those people applying for those jobs – and indeed the people reviewing their applications and their suitability for casino special employee licences – hopefully that will remove somewhat of a burden. But it reminds me of the government's attitude when it comes to

the casino. We saw the government be dragged kicking and screaming into the Royal Commission into the Casino Operator and Licence here in Melbourne. While we have seen a number of pieces of legislation come forward, I think three, to implement the findings of that royal commission, some of those issues have now been extended to others in the private sector.

I know the minister at the table, the Minister for Police, and possibly a few others in the room – no, pretty much only ministers I think – attended the Australian Hotels Association drinks last night, where I am sure ministers were regaled with the concerns of the hotels industry about the gaming reforms that have been proposed by this government. In particular mandatory carded play and mandatory precommitment for gaming the government has announced and is apparently now consulting with the industry on. But there is great frustration that after the appalling and, as was described by the commissioner, disgraceful behaviour of the casino and the amendments that came about as a result of that those amendments are now being extended to the hotels and clubs sector when it comes to gaming venues. I do not think that is fair. I think it is certainly the wrong decision by this government.

As I said, this legislation contains a multitude of minor changes. They are boring but they are important, and I wish the bill a safe passage through both chambers.

Mathew HILAKARI (Point Cook) (15:30): It is always a pleasure to follow the member for Gippsland South. He did raise issues around one of the regulatory changes, and as he knows, I am always here to help and assist. He raised an issue around \$15.90 being the regulation for fees at the moment, and that the intent of this bill is obviously to change that so we can take fractions of those fees, which is important. An example that the opposition may be interested in of course is FOI requests, which currently have two fee units, and that is \$31.80 at the moment. Now, as we reduce regulatory burden in Victoria and we make our systems more efficient and easier to use, the costs can therefore come down. We could bring that down by the full unit, but that would take a great deal of efficiencies within the system. But maybe we can save 20 per cent and take those units down by 20 per cent, and that would save the opposition a lot of money in those fee requests. So I know that that is your active support for this particular piece of legislation. It is now improved in your understanding as well.

The member for Monbulk raised her cafe days and her food handling days, and it was such a pleasure just to be reminded of my own time working in cafes and monitoring various different fridges for their temperature and recording them in a fairly clunky way on pieces of paper with thermometers that I hoped worked. When we got the better thermometers we could press them and they would tell us the temperature wherever we pointed them. They got even better. There are some real practical examples, and she discussed some of the practical examples of when things go wrong and people get unwell, and that has a real cost. It is not just a regulatory burden, it is a cost on people and the lives that they experience and their wellness.

The member for Mornington – I heard his speech earlier, and I just wish he was not so down on Victoria. I want to give him some hope. He should not be so down on Victoria. CommSec has said Victoria is the number one for economic activity in all of Australia. The ABS's most recent report talked about our wonderful record jobs growth in regional Victoria, which I know so many members of the Nationals would be very pleased with – 826,000 more jobs in regional Victoria and unemployment at 3 per cent, which is amazing. It is an amazing effort by this government, in helping to coordinate, and that is sometimes through the decrease in regulatory burden, because people can spend their time and their money and their efforts on growing their business rather than filling in paperwork, which is so often the case.

The member for Gippsland East did spend a little bit of time going through the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) report, and it is unfortunate that he skipped the very first dot point of the summary. It is worth putting on the record for the house that unfortunately he missed that. He must have just passed it over:

The Nour Cost and Ease Ranking puts Victoria first in the country for skills and labour and second in entrepreneurship and growth ...

A member interjected.

Mathew HILAKARI: I might not have picked up the skills part of the ranking, but certainly others around me have, and I thank them for the assistance there. But it is always important to read the first dot point and the first thing that VCCI would like to say about the state of play in Victoria in the report's findings.

This bill goes through 54 amendments across 14 acts and 10 ministerial portfolios, and it is important that we keep on this effort of regulatory reform, because it does change the experiences that we have. If we think about every action that we do that interacts with government departments or with business, there is a lot of paperwork, and technology has been a great advantage in making changes to that. We are seeing these changes across businesses and social services, to support emergency preparedness and ensure technology neutrality and other simple and uncontroversial changes. The uncontroversial nature of these changes means that we should see a speedy passing through the house. I am really glad to see so many members of the opposition making strong contributions on this bill. Of course \$2.6 million in benefits is estimated by the Department of Treasury and Finance. That will be an annual benefit, so we will keep getting that year in and year out. I expect those benefits to be of more value over time as the economic activity in this state continues to grow.

The first objective of the bill is to modernise and streamline requirements for business and social service providers. Some members here have talked a little bit about refrigeration and the movement and production of dried beef versus fresh meat, which is an interesting topic but not an area of particular expertise for me, so I might move by that. But it is good to hear that we are no longer requiring poultry and game processors to provide information to PrimeSafe that PrimeSafe does not need, a particularly obvious improvement that we can make. This bill enables a streamlining of mandatory notifications by registered social service providers. It ensures that the Secretary of the Department of Health and local councils can direct a business to undertake improvements in inadequate food safety. The member for Monbulk did a wonderful job of talking the chamber through that.

The second objective of the bill is to improve emergency preparedness through the transportation of waste for the purposes of meeting a temporary emergency, providing for the temporary relief of a public nuisance or community hardship or enabling the commissioning, repair, decommissioning or dismantling of any item of plant or equipment. Of course we need this. We are seeing more floods and fires and emergencies across our state. Continually we are seeing them increase, year on year, and I have no expectation with climate change that that is going to change – heavier rains, more fires, more emergencies and more need for our emergency services and our councils to be flexible. We should give them the opportunity for that flexibility, because they improve the lives of Victorians when they are given that opportunity.

The third objective of the bill is to support technology-neutral legislation and allow for the electronic transmission and publication of closure orders, amongst other matters. Increasingly with electronic transmission – and we see this with signatures – where once members of our community would always have to provide a written document with a physical, wet signature on the document, more and more we are seeing that become a relic of the past. People are able to provide electronic signatures for all sorts of things. It is an important thing that we are able to continue to improve as technology improves.

We have been on this path and this journey of improvement for almost a decade now. We have had so much rich opportunity to make regulatory reform because we were left so much opportunity by the previous government. The previous government obviously had some good catchphrases like 'cutting red tape' and a scattergun approach to regulatory change, but it really did not go beyond that, so we were left with a rich vein of opportunity to make the changes that we have continued to make in this state to make things efficient and fair, because we have got a clear pathway of making things more efficient and fair, not just having a slogan.

Over the last 10 years we have reviewed and reformed regulations in liquor, environmental protection, essential services, electricity, building and construction, health, planning, consumer affairs, fee pricing, owners corporations and so much more – the list just goes on and on. The member for Gippsland South mentioned the gambling reforms. We both sat on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee most recently to consider those. We heard from the commissioner of the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission about how those reforms are changing the work that she undertakes and the really significant findings that have come out of the Royal Commission into the Casino Operator and Licence and those activities that happened afterwards.

We also see the changes in cladding safety. That affects so many people across our community with the building and the rectification works that they need to support them as well as worker screening processes, green energy and greater energy market protections, to name a few.

There is one in particular that I just want to mention before my time runs out – and I could really go on on this bill before the house – and that is wage theft. When we talk about efficiency and support for the business community, for those businesses who pay their workers properly, they are put at a severe disadvantage to those who rip off people's wages. And every day we should be fighting for those wages to be properly paid for businesses who do the right thing and for those workers who need the right thing to be done for them. So I commend the bill to the house, and I hope it has a safe passage shortly.

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (15:40): I rise to also make a contribution on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. As has been noted by most speakers, this is an omnibus bill that amends 14 acts across 10 portfolios, and given that it is doing so, it is actually fairly skinny in its form. I will just quickly point out some of the purposes of the bill. There are amendments to the Monetary Units Act 2004 about the use of fee units; the Essential Services Commission Act 2001; the Water Industry Act 1994; the Meat Industry Act 1993; the Seafood Safety Act 2003; the Food Act 1984; the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981; the Regional Development Victoria Act 2002 – it really does cover quite a broad number of elements; the Environment Protection Act 2017, which we have heard just previously; the Casino Control Act 1991; the Gambling Regulation Act 2003; and the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005. So there is a lot in this bill, and because it is actually quite skinny and there is so much in it, it is fairly easy to leap to the conclusion that these changes are mostly minor technical changes, that they clarify the nature of some areas and that they in essence do not represent substantive changes to the acts in question.

The majority of the amendments are aimed at streamlining requirements or rectifying specific instances where current provisions are not working as intended or have become impracticable, and we often see that these bills provide that opportunity to clean up a whole lot of things at once. There are drafting errors that happen; small mistakes get in there, and things alter that do need to be cleaned up here and there. As I said, they are typically not controversial, and as such the coalition do not seek to oppose the passage of this bill, but we do want to draw the house's attention to a number of areas, in particular how the government performs in regulatory reform and red tape reduction. And whilst you hear the government sing their praises, there is anything but the truth there. We had an omnibus bill last in 2022, which was not terribly long ago, and as I have mentioned, there are a range of portfolios and acts that are touched by this.

The four objectives of the bill are about streamlining requirements for business and social services providers, and I am going to talk about this in relation to small business in a moment; improving emergency preparedness – for somebody who lives in the region that I do, which was subject to flooding only just a few weeks ago in January and in October 2022, and noting today is 15 years since the Black Saturday fires, which were a completely different type of emergency situation, and we have had a large number of storms or little cyclonic activity in certain areas that have brought powerlines and trees down on houses and things like that, improving emergency preparedness is certainly important; supporting technology-neutral legislation; and, fourthly, making simple and uncontroversial amendments to support an efficient regulatory system through the amendments to acts.

I have got to get to the government's red tape reduction, some of their claims and certainly what the private sector and the business sector have to say about this and a lot of the taxes that have been brought forward. The government claims that these regulatory reforms are going to provide over \$2.6 million in annual savings to businesses in Victoria. We did ask for details about this at the bill briefing, how that figure was put together, and it was pretty surprising that we were not really able to be given answers.

Firstly, at the bill briefing the government did not have representatives from each of the portfolios that were represented. Now, I understand that with 10 portfolios that is a tricky thing, but we had a lot of questions around some of the areas, and I do not think there was anyone from Agriculture Victoria in the room that could answer the questions in that area.

With regard to the \$2.6 million in annual savings, how is it cobbled together? We are not quite sure about that. The government says these are achieved by removing licensing and permit fees and making regulatory compliance easier. We are amending the Essential Services Commission Act 2001 to remove requirements to provide notice of price determinations to all regulated entities. The Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 amendments create a mechanism for the secretary to authorise a specified class of entity to undertake an activity that would otherwise require a licence or a permit – so perhaps there are some savings there. And we are amending the Gambling Regulation Act 2003 to provide licences with remote access to keno systems and allow for single approval for linked jackpots. When you have a look at this, there are 710,000 small businesses in the private sector. The importance of the private sector is absolutely not lost in this instance. But if you have got \$2.6 million worth of savings, that averages out to \$3.66 a year. So we have got these huge changes – the omnibus changes about streamlining – when we are going to save each business on average about \$3.66 a year. I think we can do a lot better, particularly within the current state.

I want to have a look at the landscape for business, because this is about streamlining for businesses. The landscape for business in Victoria, whether you are small, medium or large, is there are a host of new or increased taxes. There have been 53 new or increased taxes since Labor came to office. We have got a tax on jobs, a tax on health and a tax on rent. WorkCover premiums went up by 42 per cent and power – electricity and gas – prices have gone up. I was at the Australian Hotels Association function last night, and it was not lost on a lot of the employers there. Hotels and clubs are small. They did talk about the impact of these increased taxes. Not everyone owns their own property. You might be leasing a building or a shopfront. It might be a warehouse; it might be a storage shed. There are so many ways you could be leasing or renting, and this all adds up if the land taxes increase and get slugged back to the tenant.

The government always seem to look at businesses as being cashed-up. And you may have some pharmacies, perhaps, that have done very well over time, but we know that a lot of businesses at the moment are really doing it tough. They are cash-strapped. In fact I went to a pizza place where they said that they cannot afford staff anymore. He had his parents in there working because it saves on the payroll, because the cost of cheese had gone up significantly and that was putting pressure. They could not put the price of pizzas up because they knew everyone was doing it tough in their area.

I want to refer the house to the Partners in Wellbeing program, which ceased last year from 1 July. This was put together coming out of COVID to recognise the difficulties with business. What it did was it saw 14 qualified mental health clinicians embedded with peak bodies – the chambers, for instance – to support members through the challenges of surviving COVID. I know Ballarat, Wodonga, Bendigo and Geelong's chambers were all involved in this. Following that, it was around the ongoing financial stress that many businesses continued to suffer. Whilst the government was looking to cancel that – they did not have budget allocation – they did kind of keep it going to a degree through flood recovery. But again, businesses are doing it exceedingly difficult with the cost of living, and it has been referred to previously in VCCI's *Cost and Ease of Doing Business in Victoria* report from January 2022. It is not easy to do business in Victoria. There are a lot of things that can be done.

\$3.66 savings on average for each business is not particularly a great start, because we are overburdened with the permits that are needed.

A business in, say, the CBD would deal with councils. Maybe if it is on the Yarra, they would deal with Parks Victoria, Melbourne Water – all the relevant water authorities as you go further out – or the EPA. You might need fire services involved. You might have to get a liquor licence. All of these things add up, and the more time businesses have to spend going to multiple agencies where they get different advice is more lost productivity. VCCI at that time were saying having a one-stop shop where you can get one lot of advice – a concierge service – would be a lot better and a lot more efficient way of doing business, and I hope the government will provide that.

Bronwyn HALFPENNY (Thomastown) (15:50): I also rise to speak in support of the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023, which of course, as all the previous speakers have said, is a piece of legislation that deals with numerous amendments to many pieces of legislation that have been passed in this chamber over many years. Much of the legislation that we deal with here in this chamber makes amendments to existing legislation, although the Victorian Labor government has also introduced and implemented completely new acts of Parliament, because we have been on a path of huge reform to make a better and fairer Victoria for Victorians, as well as doing the necessary work of updating legislation from time to time because things change. Our experiences guide us, and we often need to modernise what has been done before.

I know that the opposition coalition is not opposing this omnibus legislation, but they are using it as an opportunity to do their normal whingeing and complaining. This bill is about amendments to change legislation and in particular regulations that are designed to make it easier to obtain permits and licences while retaining the protection for which the regulations were designed. This also demonstrates that the Allan Labor government is a doing government, that we are always looking for continuous improvement and that we are always looking to introduce bills that can make those improvements, make the adjustments, in order to make them work better and also to be better for the Victorian community. We look at identifying loopholes and unnecessary difficulties. It is also something that we look at in changing times. We need to change legislation, to make amendments, to keep up with things such as technology, community attitudes or even restructuring. This demonstrates how the law is something that changes and must adapt to the changing circumstances of society.

As with all speakers, I have not got the time in my 10 minutes to talk about all the aspects of this bill, so I want to identify just a few areas to talk about and give some examples. This piece of legislation covers 54 amendments across 14 acts, and the areas that it relates to are really around the social services area, business, emergency preparedness and also some consumer protection. A lot of this legislative change that we are talking about here today demonstrates how the Allan Labor government is a listening government, because many of the changes that are contained here are based on the consultation process with individuals, organisations and departments. We are often trying to address problems that they have identified, that they have found in the real-life working of pieces of legislation. This is an attempt to listen to people, to take on and understand and recognise their expertise and then to use that information to change legislation to make it work better for all of us. We have talked about some of these changes being relatively small, but even small changes often make big impacts. We expect that this omnibus bill will make a big impact and make things easier for people in many areas of their life.

When we are talking about smaller changes with big impact, I would like to give the example – and I know the member for Broadmeadows raised it earlier in the day – of aged care facilities. At the moment each individual entity must make an application for a permit or a licence to hold and dispense or use particular medicines. This legislation will allow the Secretary of the Department of Health, instead of looking at individual entities, to talk about a class of entities. For example, a class of entities would be aged care facilities, and therefore it would make it easier for them to then obtain and administer, for example, antiviral medicines, which we know are so important in protecting lives, particularly since their major development and coming to the fore in combating the worst aspects of

the COVID virus. Aged care facilities have a lot of things that they need to do, and it is much better that they are caring for older citizens of Victoria rather than spending a lot of time working out how to fill out paperwork for antivirals when of course they already have licences and they already have oversight and people in the medical profession in those facilities.

Another good example of changing technology is that this omnibus bill also makes amendments to the Meat Industry Act 1993 to allow for the same regulation or system for dried meat sold online as it does for that which is sold in a normal store. It is about not just the technology but also a different way that people buy goods and services, and again it is about making changes to legislation to ensure that people continue to be protected by law even though the way they do things may change. Habits may change, but those protections must continue to apply, because of course the same protections are needed and the same regulation is needed whether it is online dried meat or you are buying it from a store.

Another example is the legislation to make changes to provide for the EPA to be able to transport waste during emergency situations. We might sort of think, 'Well, wouldn't that already happen?' The issue is that there is often legislation that applies to, for example, transporting waste or making orders around making things safe in emergencies such as a flood or fire or an animal disease outbreak. Often the legislation does not actually cater for that particular case, and this will broaden out the ability of the Environment Protection Authority Victoria. We are all protected just as well, but the legislation provides for some flexibility depending on what the emergency is and what the requirement is for the community to make sure that not only are we dealing with that emergency situation but we are also trying to prevent further things from happening as a result of, for example, the dispersion of waste in a flood. We want to try to remove it from the area, and that is why we are giving organisations like the EPA that ability to do that.

Over \$2.6 million has been assessed and calculated as savings for businesses. This of course is particularly important for small businesses, who we as a Labor government really want to do what we can to support. We recognise small businesses are great employers within Victoria and also contribute hugely to our economy and are often people that want to use local content and want to ensure that they are committed to their area.

The SPEAKER: The time has come for me to interrupt business for the grievance debate.

Business interrupted under sessional orders.

Grievance debate

The SPEAKER: The question is:

That grievances be noted.

Government performance

David SOUTHWICK (Caulfield) (16:01): I grieve for all Victorians. I grieve certainly for those constituents in the greater part of my electorate, throughout my electorate in Caulfield, for the waste, the mismanagement and the fact that our great state is now broke thanks to Labor. We have a government that cannot manage money. It is something that we have known for many, many years – that Labor cannot manage money. But as a result, life is getting harder. Life is absolutely getting harder for all Victorians, and it is Victorians ultimately that are paying the price.

I know that the government like to stand in this place and pat themselves on the back about all the wonderful things that they are doing and absolutely disregard what everyday Victorians are facing in a cost-of-living crisis. They will blame everybody else. They will say, 'Well, it was Jeff Kennett's fault. It was 20 years ago. It was the federal government's fault' – before the current government got into power – 'It is everybody's fault.' But the sheer fact is we have had a Labor government in Victoria for now 20 of 24 years or thereabouts. In those 20 years you would think that they would take some responsibility for the absolute mess that we are in. It is absolutely typical of this government, because

we know that Labor cannot manage money and they cannot manage major projects. We saw that in the time leading up to Christmas.

We have a situation where Victoria has more debt than every other state in the nation – more debt than New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania combined, more debt than we have ever seen, escalating up to \$200 billion worth of debt, which we are all paying for. It is not the Labor government's money, it is taxpayers money. It is ordinary Victorians, everyday Victorians, that are struggling – it is their money that the government is using. We saw the absolute contempt with which the government is taking other people's money and using it for political points. We saw that when the government signed up to half a roller-coaster of the Suburban Rail Loop (SRL) and literally two days later recognised that there would be an \$8 billion blowout to the North East Link. On one hand we have unprecedented blowouts of major projects of this Big Build, which are now up to \$38 billion and counting, largely under the Premier's watch, when the Premier had major projects in her portfolio. So the Premier cannot blame Daniel Andrews for this mess. The Premier is absolutely responsible for the Big Build blowouts because the Premier was actually responsible as the minister for these projects, and SRL is one of those.

The government has signed Victorians up to decades worth of debt, decades worth of projects that will build nothing more than half a roller-coaster, and absolutely ignored the growth corridors of the north and the growth corridors of the west, where people are living and they cannot get basic transport, they cannot get a hospital, they cannot get a school, they cannot get their roads and they cannot get to work, because the government has said, 'We're going to take \$200 billion worth of infrastructure and we're going to put it into one line, if we can build it, and forget about everybody else.' A project that the government and Jacinta Allan the Premier said would be \$50 billion is now up to \$125 billion, without all the on-costs – \$200 billion for a project where even the government say they will not see the whole project in their lifetime.

The Treasurer himself has stated that he will not see the full SRL being built in his lifetime. So this is a pie-in-the-sky project, but it is symbolic of the waste and mismanagement that this government is responsible for. And we are all paying the price. We are all paying for this mismanagement, and I think it is time for the government to take the politics out of what they are trying to do and look at what Victorians need, look at what Victorians deserve. Particularly when it comes to infrastructure the government themselves acknowledged this when Daniel Andrews went to the election in 2014 and said, 'We're going to take the politics out of infrastructure, and we're going to set up an infrastructure committee that will look at how they actually fund infrastructure.' So Infrastructure Victoria was established to independently cost these projects and to give a tick of approval that we need to do them. Did the SRL go through Infrastructure Victoria? Not likely. Did half of these projects go through? Not likely. There was no business case for the SRL, and the SRL did not go through Infrastructure Australia either. So bad was this project that a month before the last election we know it was rebadged SRL Airport to make it more attractive for those people out in the west, so at least the people in the west would get some kind of infrastructure, and then straight after the election – broken promise – they have taken off the airport component.

Now, my father was a hardworking Victorian who taught me a lot about the value of money and had a business out in the west employing people, and I spent a lot of time out in the west. He would turn in his grave now to think about how this government is wasting money. When we used to ask Dad about how things were going, he would refer and say, 'Life's tough. It's a bit of a struggle.' He would come to the dinner table in his work clothes. You would not have dinner at home until 8 or 9 o'clock at night, because you would be waiting for Dad to come home. You would see each and every day how he worked to put food on the table and teach the values and the things about everyday life and what it is like to work. He treated every one of his workers like they were part of his own family. And do you know what? That is just like every small business now. Times have not changed. Many of those small businesses now, I would say, do the same, where they go without to ensure that their family and their workers are supported, to ensure the business survives.

But this government does not care, as we have seen in so many cases – in terms of energy costs. We are the highest in cost of living. We are the highest in energy costs. The Minister for Energy and Resources has the audacity to say prices are going down, down, down in electricity. Has she had a look in the mirror? Energy prices are up 25 per cent in Victoria alone – absolutely not going down. And on top of that the government wants to cut gas off in people's homes and people's businesses. We had the Australian Hotels Association come in last night, in front of the Premier – one of the largest groups, which supports many of the pubs and clubs in many electorates right across the state – saying that cutting off gas is going to cost more to small business, that it limits choice and is ultimately going to put more businesses to the wall. The same was said by the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry; the largest employer representative said that businesses are leaving the state because this government wants to increase the cost of living and energy costs.

Everything we do in terms of energy affects your prices, from groceries to food to transport to logistics – everything you do in a hospital or in a school, when you turn the lights on or when you get goods. Every bit of thing in life is connected to energy, and when your energy bills go up every Victorian ends up paying the price. Do not take my word for granted here. We did a survey in my electorate of Caulfield about cost-of-living pressures. Four hundred members of my community had to say that cost of living was the single biggest issue that they are facing. 87 per cent of respondents said they are finding it harder to financially support their household. 71.9 per cent of respondents said they have had an increase of more than 25 per cent in their energy bills in the last 12 months – 25 per cent! – while this minister says energy prices are going down, down, down. This minister is in la-la land if she thinks energy prices are going down, down, down. We had 38 per cent of people responding saying that they have to cut back on basic food.

We met with Community Information and Support Glen Eira just before Christmas. As I went in, there was a client who had come in to see them to get food parcels. This gentleman, Warren, was really, really struggling. I bought Warren a coffee. He did not want a coffee; he did not want to take it. Later on I found out that he has not been able to buy his own coffee in five years because that money, the \$4 or \$5 for the coffee, is something he could never afford. Warren has \$900 or thereabouts in fortnightly income. His rent is over \$1000. He is going backwards. He supports two kids on a single income. He goes into the community information support network to pick up food parcels because he cannot afford to put food on the table.

When I asked Warren about this, do you know what Warren said? It used to be food was your first priority and then housing. People are making the switch to say, 'We've got to get a roof over our heads because we can't live in a tent. We can't sleep rough anymore, especially when we've got kids to support. And then I worry about food afterwards.' Where have we got to in this state when people are prioritising a roof over their head versus food because unfortunately the government is not supporting and providing for them? I would not be patting myself on the back if I was the Labor government. I would not be saying we were doing a wonderful job. I would be embarrassed, quite frankly. To blame someone else is not taking any responsibility for getting things done and fixing it. This government has run out of other people to blame. They have had plenty of time to do something about this. I think what they should do is just get on with it and do things.

We have got a perfect storm with a Big Build that is building these major infrastructure projects, that is sucking out housing stock, that is sucking out building materials and that is sucking out workers who could build housing, so then we have a housing crisis because we cannot build housing because you have got people on \$200,000 working on a Big Build infrastructure project not being able to build the housing. You can only get enough materials to do certain things at one time. Why? Because we are not planning this. We have no Planning Victoria to ensure we build housing, we build infrastructure where it is needed and we look after everybody in the state and we make sure all Victorians are treated equally in the state. This government does not care about all Victorians, they just care about where they can pick up votes, where they can do a press release and how they can cut a ribbon and look after their mates. Again, it is just not fair, because people are missing out.

What my constituents are saying in terms of cost of living is this. 'Everything is going up except my salary,' says Aaron. 'Basic expenses have become unaffordable. In Victoria our mental health has been pushed too far. Our businesses and economy are destroyed, and now this!' says Nicola from St Kilda. 'Needed to borrow money from retired parents to pay a mortgage and school fees. Cut back on food to basics only,' says Jenny. 'After reducing bills, I am still having to choose between food and medical necessities,' says Ron. 'I am only eating twice a day so I can pay my rent. Help,' says Harrison. These are people that are crying out for help, saying, 'Fix it. Do something about it. You've been in government long enough. What are you doing, government? Why aren't you fixing the cost-of-living crisis?'

We see that the cost of a GP visit has gone up 30 per cent, so people instead of paying \$40 a visit will be paying \$52 a visit. What does that do? You make one of two choices: either you do not go to the doctor because you cannot afford it and you make your priorities, so you do not go and it impacts your health, or secondly, what you do is you go to the hospital and crowd out the already crowded out emergency areas in hospitals.

You look at our schools. We have the highest cost in the country for public education – over \$100,000 for the lifetime of a student in a public school. Child care – have a look at the increase in child care, let alone childcare centres that have been closed down. Three in my electorate have been closed down. In every single measure Victorians are paying more – for their electricity it is 25 per cent and their groceries are 28 per cent more than any other state.

We had situations on the wharf over the last few weeks – and the Minister for Ports and Freight is here today at the table – and that was reported in terms of the cost of those strikes, which again is impacted by the government that are in power at the moment. It meant a \$4 increase on people's grocery bills each and every week – \$4 on each and every week to people's cost of living. And what is this government doing about it? Absolutely nothing.

So by every single measure Victorians are worse off. In crime Victorians are worse off – and repeat offenders in terms of crime. People do not feel safe from a community safety perspective. We have got the cost of living through the roof. We have got money that is being spent like there is no tomorrow, debt that is increasing. We have a government that simply cannot manage money, a government that simply cannot manage major projects, a government that simply cannot manage hospitals. They cannot manage schools; they cannot manage the cost of living. At every single measure the Allan Labor government is failing, but ultimately life is getting harder under this government. And who is paying for it? Not the Labor members of Parliament. It is each and every Victorian paying the price for Labor's incompetence.

Transport infrastructure

Josh BULL (Sunbury) (16:16): I am delighted to be back, and isn't it terrific to be back in the house as part of an Allan Labor government spending each and every day investing in local communities. I do, however, this afternoon grieve for those opposite and the fake way that they go about their business compared to the very real, very tangible way that this government go about ours. What we know and understand is this government has a strong, bold, ambitious plan for transport right across this state – investments in road, investments in rail, investments in all of those services that we know, Speaker, and you know mean such a difference to local communities.

We are of course a government that gets on and delivers the real – not fake – projects that people know and rely on within local communities. Whether you live in the city, whether you are from the suburbs or whether you are from the regions or right across country Victoria, we know and understand that having access to your job and having access to education facilities is important, and making sure that you have got the opportunity and the option to move around our state in the most effective and most efficient way is indeed something that we, the entire team, are focused on.

There is a very long list, and I know members have referenced this list before. I indeed have. But with the Metro Tunnel – those five new stations, the direct connection of the Cranbourne–Pakenham line through to my home town, Sunbury, but right down the Sunbury line and of course access to all of those precincts within the CBD, a terrific project that I think of course people will benefit from – we know the opportunity to move thousands more people through the CBD but of course also to our growing suburbs is exactly what is needed. The Metro Tunnel, like the city loop, is an incredibly important project, a real project delivered by this Allan Labor government. There is the West Gate Tunnel, the North East Link, the removal of 110 dangerous and congested level crossings by 2030 and the Suburban Rail Loop, just to name a few.

We are a team that put forward a clear alternative to Victorians at the election around a year ago. We – in stark contrast to those opposite, who promised to cancel major transport projects – gave Victorians, as we have done on other opportunities, a clear plan. We articulated that plan and of course took it to the Victorian community and were again comprehensively elected – those 110 dangerous and congested level crossings, 74 gone for good, the preparation for the Metro Tunnel to open in 2025 and also making the Cranbourne, Frankston, Lilydale, Pakenham, Sunbury and Werribee lines boom gate free.

A member interjected.

Josh BULL: Absolutely. Absolutely, team. This of course supports the increase in train trips, fast-tracking nine level crossing removals along the Melton line. I can see the very hardworking member for Melton over there. I love getting out to his community and seeing how he gets things done. He is a very good operator, Speaker, as you know. And what we know and understand is the community in Melton are very excited to see their level crossings go, and we of course will back him in each and every day. He gets things done. Whether it is delivery of his hospital, whether it is the upgrade to the many schools that he has got, he is getting on and getting it done.

We know that not just the Melton line but the Werribee line, the Frankston line and indeed the Sunbury line, which I have already referenced, are incredibly important to helping get families home faster, helping students get to school and helping people get to work.

Those on the other side do not really know where they stand when it comes to level crossings. They did not really get rid of many at all in their humble four years in office, and they spend a lot of time talking about them. They are in the wrong location, they are the wrong solution, they are the wrong design, they are undercosted, they are overcosted – it is just astonishing, and it is not astonishing that there was a very measly, sluggish sort of effort when it came to getting rid of level crossings from those on the other side. This show, our show, is a vastly different group. Victorians know: 74 gone, 110 by 2030, making sure that we are delivering, making communities safer –

Tim Richardson: Are there any left?

Josh BULL: Indeed, member for Mordialloc, I am not sure there are going to be many left in your part of town.

The SPEAKER: Through the Chair, member for Sunbury.

Josh BULL: Of course, Speaker; I was waiting for that. What we know is that we are a hardworking outfit that listens to local communities and gets on and gets things done to make sure that we are providing a safer, less congested and better local community.

We know that there is plenty more work to be done. I mentioned the Metro Tunnel. The tunnel is due to open early 2025 – not a mythical project, not printing train tickets to platform 9¾ in *Harry Potter* where you push the trolley through the wall, but a real project, put on the shelf by those opposite, making sure that we are connecting those key train lines to move more and more people in our state, which grows each and every day. We are delivering that key, central and critical project.

We are also delivering the \$4.5 billion Regional Rail Revival. That is upgrading every Victorian regional passenger line. I did hear today reference to the fare cap, another terrific initiative by this government. But this Regional Rail Revival includes delivering new services and creating over 3000 jobs, including removing the first level crossings in regional Victoria at South Geelong and the Surf Coast Highway and major upgrades to Waurm Ponds, Marshall and South Geelong stations. Indeed, there is a lot of work to be done. There is a very, very, very long list – 135 additional weekly services on the Ballarat line, over 800 additional regional services statewide. We know that passengers are already benefiting from more than 316 kilometres of new and upgraded track across regional Victoria, more than 200 new and extended services, new stations, 14 completed station upgrades, new stabling facilities and much, much more. This forms a vast majority of the work that this government will continue to do each and every day.

There are of course some key milestones that have been reached with the Suburban Rail Loop. Those opposite, again, spend quite a bit of time procrastinating about the Suburban Rail Loop, whether they are for it or whether they are against it. What I think is most important is that we have taken this project to not one but two elections, and the Victorian community have overwhelmingly supported the project. Yet again those opposite are still trying to make up their minds, as opposed to the people of Victoria, who have made up their minds twice on this project. When it comes to this investment we have heard there are more than a thousand people working on this project. There will be 4000 by 2026, 8000 across its peak – real jobs supporting real people, a real project that is well and truly on the road to delivery. By 2026, major works contracts will have been signed and we will have our very fabulous tunnel boring machines in the ground digging.

This will make a massive difference to people right across the state – to nursing students, to TAFE students, to physical therapists working at our hospitals. It will take more than 600,000 – I need to check that figure – daily car trips off our roads, of course slashing congestion. The economic benefits of that are incredibly important as well, because we know and understand that if we have people moving around our state in a more efficient, more effective, quicker way, that provides great economic benefits to the people of Victoria.

So when we add all of this up – this sustained and strong investment from this government – we know and understand that the importance of continued investment, of listening to local communities, of upgrading small infrastructure projects within communities but also delivering the big key pieces of infrastructure that I have mentioned this afternoon make for a state that assists every single Victorian to get to where they need to go as quickly as possible. So you have opportunity. Maybe it is free TAFE that you are interested in. Maybe it is a new skill. Maybe it is a new job that you have just picked up. Perhaps you want to go to sport on the weekend. There are so many opportunities that are unlocked by providing these key transport projects, and we know and understand that this is incredibly important work.

Unfortunately when we compare and contrast that to much of the murmurings and discussion that come from those opposite, we just cannot – not that we spend a whole heap of time thinking about it – understand many, if any, of the policy positions that they take. That is why Victorians see through the team that is over the other side of the chamber, and that is why, successfully, we have taken these projects to election and continue to be voted into office. What we know, though, is that that is indeed a great privilege – a profound opportunity to sit on the Treasury benches and to govern in this state. We do not for one second take that for granted. We do not for one second assume that re-election is just a matter of course. No, it is not. It is about working with local communities each and every day. It is about listening and continuing to evolve as a government as we bring legislation, projects, programs and initiatives into this house so that our state becomes better and fairer and people have the opportunity to move around their local community, people have the opportunity to come in and out of the CBD, people have the opportunity to travel down to Pakenham, for example. There is plenty to do down there, and there are some level crossings that are also going as well.

Danny O'Brien interjected.

Josh BULL: I will take up the interjection from the fine member. He seems to always be in the house when I am in here. We know and understand that major transport projects cause disruptions. We work closely with our departments and government agencies to manage those processes, because in the end the net benefit is all the benefits that I spoke about earlier: benefits to be safer, benefits around less congestion, benefits that carry on not just for months and years but for decades. We know that safety of course is paramount to our community. But even in an economic sense, having these projects in place, we are making sure that we continue to invest, making our community know and understand that this team – this Allan Labor government – is a hardworking, effective, dynamic and incredibly committed team. Victorians know and understand that these are the projects that we took to the election and these are the projects that we will deliver.

The transport portfolio of course forms a significant component of what we do in our core business of government, but whether it is free TAFE, whether it is the opportunity to study nursing for free or whether it is upgrades to local schools, to kinders, to community facilities or to local government facilities, this is all about ensuring that we give every single Victorian the opportunity to be their best and to grow and to thrive and of course to develop, and that is incredibly, incredibly important.

When we come into this place – and it is fair to say I think we all miss coming in here when we are on our break – what we do see from those opposite is unfortunately a team that is not united, a team that does not really know where they are at on most big policy issues. And unfortunately, rather than putting forward a positive plan that the people of Victoria may one day vote for, they spend more time trying to –

Darren Cheeseman interjected.

Josh BULL: A fake plan indeed, member for South Barwon. This of course is a real government with real plans, with plans that are both bold and visionary but also achievable and practical, plans that we know address the challenges. And there are challenges within local communities. That is indeed the life that we know comes with being in government, but we never forget that that opportunity to be in government is an extraordinary privilege and a great responsibility. I know, looking at these outstanding members on this side of the house, just how hard they work for their local communities, just how much they get done. Each and every day we will continue to invest in Victoria, because that is the show that we are.

Rural and regional roads

Danny O'BRIEN (Gippsland South) (16:31): I rise today to grieve on behalf of the people of Victoria and particularly motorists in the state of Victoria, who are putting up with what would have to be described as the most disgraceful roads in our country.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Before the member for Gippsland South continues, the member for Euroa, the member for Narracan, the member for Morwell and the member for Mildura are not in their allocated seats, and I would ask them to cease interjecting.

Danny O'BRIEN: This is a conspiracy to take away the cheer squad from behind me!

The member for Sunbury knows this is going to get a bit more interesting, because the member for Sunbury was talking about how this government is investing in infrastructure right across the state. Well, the one thing that they are not investing in is the most simple and most basic thing, and that is a road network that can be driven on by the people of Victoria without breaking an axle, without damaging a tyre, without cracking a rim, because that is what we are seeing under this government with the cuts that have been implemented by this government, and from day one. From day one, the very first budget – the 2015–16 budget brought down by the then Andrews Labor government – cut the roads maintenance budget by 10 per cent and axed the country roads and bridges program that had been so successful under the previous government in actually helping local councils to build their

roads and bridges. But it is now gone altogether, as with the state of our roads, the VicRoads roads that are managed by the state of Victoria.

We have seen, according to the government's own budget papers, a 45 per cent reduction in the road maintenance budget since 2020. That includes a 25 per cent cut to the road maintenance budget this year, in the 2023–24 budget. It is there in budget paper 3, page 310. Literally there are the brackets – a 25 per cent reduction. That brings the total spend this year down to \$441 million on road maintenance. That is less than what was spent by the former coalition government 10 years ago. Ten years ago the former coalition government was spending more than this government is now on road asset maintenance. I will jump in, because there might be someone who is paying attention on that side who will say, 'No, no, no. You've got to read the footnote on that budget paper page 310, which says we are in fact spending \$770 million.' I asked the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, who happens to be at the table, in a question on notice, 'Could you tell me where you got that \$770 million figure from?' I said, 'Give me a breakdown,' because the budget papers say \$441 million, and the answer I got was:

The total road asset management expenditure is calculated from the forecast road asset management output cost as shown in Budget Paper 3, plus the forecast expenditure on relevant asset initiatives as shown in Budget Paper 4.

In other words, 'It's in there somewhere. We can make it add up. Just trust us that it's actually that much.' In the answer from the minister she still could not even actually give me an answer to where the breakdown is. But then there is one more line that says:

This also includes funding from previous budgets.

The government is trying to claim money in this year's budget that it obviously did not spend in the past, and what we are seeing is an outcome that has absolutely devastated our roads right across the state. If you go from the Western District to the north-east, from Gippsland to the Wimmera and the Mallee and right across even metropolitan Victoria, you will see the absolute carnage that is being caused on our roads because of the reduction in maintenance spending by this government. That is one of the telling things about the reduction in road maintenance spending. Those of us in regional Victoria are sort of, sadly, quite used to it because under this government in particular our needs are always placed second, third, fourth, fifth, but what has been happening, particularly in the past 18 months in my experience, is it is impacting on roads in the metropolitan area. Whether it is the Hume Freeway, the Western Highway coming into and out of Melbourne, the Frankston Freeway – we had a situation last year where 25 cars in one night popped tyres on the Frankston Freeway because of a pothole that had been left to develop there – it is happening right across the state.

We are seeing everywhere the poor state of the roads and the fact that the government is, instead of fixing those roads – because poor old VicRoads does not have any money to do so – instituting what they call road pavement management plans.

Martin Cameron interjected.

Danny O'BRIEN: 'What's that?' I hear the member for Morwell ask. What does that entail? You know what it is, you just have not seen the title. You have seen it everywhere.

The SPEAKER: Through the Chair, member for Gippsland South.

Danny O'BRIEN: Speaker, you have seen it too, I am sure. I was in Bendigo last week, and I am sure the Speaker has seen it too. What it entails is speed reductions – signs that say 'Rough surface ahead', '60 kilometres an hour', '80 kilometres an hour' – and this is happening everywhere. The member for Euroa highlighted it is happening everywhere. Data provided to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee shows that at 30 October last year there were more than 540 of these zones around the state where the speed limit had been reduced not because of a danger, not because of a bend, not because of something physical that could not be addressed but because the road surface itself was so poor. That is an indictment on this government.

I have seen this firsthand in my own electorate. The South Gippsland Highway, which runs from Cranbourne through to Sale – if you go from Korumburra to Foster –

John Pesutto interjected.

Danny O'BRIEN: They are beautiful places, Leader of the Opposition. If you take out the towns, where clearly the speed limit will go up and down, the speed limit goes from 100 kilometres an hour down to 80, back up to 100, back down to 80, back up to 100, then to 60. Then there is another 100 and then there is another 60 before it goes back to 100 kilometres an hour. That is just between Korumburra and Foster. The road surface is so bad that the government has had to reduce the speed limit in those locations.

Of two of those between Stony Creek and Foster, one is rutting, potholes, the surface is bad and the other one is where the road has become so polished, because the government has not been spending money on resurfacing programs – it is going up a hill – that trucks cannot get traction on that section of road. I know that a very prominent local milk factory has directly contacted VicRoads and has raised its concerns about the safety of that bit of road, and I wrote to the minister about that way back in the middle of last year. To this day all that has happened there is that there have been speed reduction signs. I understand that in the last couple of days – I have not been there of course; I have been here in Parliament – almost all the 60-kilometre-an-hour signs have been vandalised by frustrated motorists who are sick to death of the government putting up speed reduction signs instead of fixing the roads.

On Rosedale-Longford Road, same thing – it is such a poor piece of pavement that the government in what should be a 100-kilometre-an-hour zone has put up a 60-kilometre-an-hour area. It had lights installed there for some preparatory works the other day so that on the Australia Day long weekend people were taking half an hour to get through the blockage. That is not on the road to Torquay or to Phillip Island, that is on Rosedale-Longford Road. They are down to beautiful places, no doubt, though – Longford and Loch Sport, Seaspray, along the Ninety Mile Beach – but there were 45-minute waits for Australia Day because the roads are so bad that people have got to wait for the traffic lights.

I might just quickly add too the other one dear to my heart, on the Hyland Highway at Carrajung Lower, where a small dip in the road was first reported to VicRoads in April last year. A patch-up job was done. It was not fixed properly – a patch-up job was done. Now, everyone in regional Victoria will know about ski jumps, and that is what this one became known as very quickly by the locals because there was a big dip and a big pile of asphalt on the other side with a great speed hump. Then guess what happened: it got worse. At the start of December it slipped entirely, so that one side of the road has now been closed, and in the ensuing month that entire side of the road slipped away. It is a genuine landslip, and it would be 3 metres high. It is well over my head. So the Hyland Highway, servicing a district of about 6000 people between Traralgon and Yarram, is now down to one lane and has been since the start of December. I am told we are going to be waiting at least another month before anything will be done to actually fix that landslip. On an issue that developed in April last year and was patched and not fixed properly, as a result we have got the highway down to one lane.

I mentioned the performance of VicRoads. We have seen some of the data come out in recent months. In the annual report the government fell 25 per cent short of its targets for road repairs in regional Victoria. In a Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearing in November we got the updated figures, and in fact it was 30 per cent across the state. The government had missed its targets for fixing roads by 30 per cent, and one of the reasons given for that when PAEC asked the department was, 'The lower area of road treated in 2022–23 was due to increased costs arising from market price escalation and inflation.'

Well, we have got \$38.8 billion of costs and market escalation that the government has spent and put on the tab for all Victorians for the future, adding to the \$177.8 billion of debt this state has. It is different if it is a project in the metro area – the Metro Tunnel, the level crossing removals that the member for Sunbury talked about or the North East Link, which is \$10 billion over budget, \$10 billion

over its most recent figure. It is just unconscionable. But the government says when it comes to fixing roads, 'Oh, sorry, the costs went up a bit, so we didn't do as much.' It is just extraordinary that the government has given so little attention to this.

We are seeing that this is not going to get any better. This is not going to get any better because industry has told us – this is the people that do resurfacing every year – that there will be no resurfacing contracts this year, 2023–24. Resurfacing is the important bit, where they spray the tar and they put new rock down every year. It re-creates a seal, making sure the seal is there and that water does not get in and it does not create more potholes, cracking, rutting and all those things. I asked the secretary of the department about it in November, and he confirmed the general rule of thumb is they try and do about 8 per cent of the network a year, which means that the entire network gets resealed about every 10 to 12 years. This year for the first time in more than three decades there will be no resurfacing program, because this government has cut the budget so savagely that it simply does not have the money to do it.

We are seeing this in every way, shape and form impacting on Victorians, and this is ultimately what it is all about. We are seeing people suffer the consequences of poor roads. It is not just discomfort or inconvenience. We have seen, thanks to the member for Euroa, who put these questions on notice, what the number of compensation claims for damage caused by the roads has been. In 2021 it was 298 claims. In 2022–23 it was 1532 claims, a 414 per cent increase in the number of Victorians claiming compensation because of damage to their vehicles caused by Victorian roads. That tells the story very, very strongly. The message I get is people coming to me and saying, 'Can you lower the threshold?' There is a threshold of \$1580 this year before you can claim anything. I say, 'Well, I don't want to lower the threshold. I want the government to fix the roads so your car doesn't get damaged in the first place.' But sadly, we are simply not seeing that from the government.

Indeed I was doing a bit of a look around this week and found some work that the government had done. It had engaged the National Transport Research Organisation to do some papers on structural condition assessments, going back to 2021. In 2021, of 8400 kilometres surveyed, 32 per cent was rated 'poor' or 'very poor'. After the floods in 2022 – so the 2023 figure – 91 per cent of that part of the road network was rated as 'poor' or 'very poor'. Virtually the entire road network was rated as 'poor' or 'very poor' because the government simply has not put the money in for this.

I have not even had time to talk about the road toll, which sadly increased by 22 per cent last year. At the same time the government cut \$230 million from TAC programs, including \$150 million from the SSRIP program, the Safe System Road Infrastructure Program. It is just extraordinary that this government has failed so badly. This government has failed dismally to do the basics on the road, due to the fact that Labor cannot manage money. It cannot manage projects, and it is Victorians and motorists in particular that are suffering the consequences. Our cars have to be roadworthy; it is about time the government made sure that our roads were carworthy.

Health system

Tim RICHARDSON (Mordialloc) (16:46): I rise to speak on the grievance motion and grieve for Victorians if Victorian Liberals and Nationals were ever let loose again on health and mental health services in Victoria. But to follow the member for Gippsland South, he says a lot – he had a fair crack; he had a better turnout than the member for Caulfield – but it just was not the spirited participation he was looking for. All the Nationals sort of came in, but maybe it is a bit late in the afternoon. He was looking around. He was looking for a bit of crowd participation, a bit of a rev up. It just was not quite there, and maybe it is because they have seen *Nemesis*; they have seen what has happened.

Danny O'Brien interjected.

Tim RICHARDSON: If the member for Gippsland South was listening – it is only a minute in and he has already gone off the trails, a bit like Barnaby Joyce last night. That was well and truly off the trails – one of your former, I think, employers back in the day. We look at just the chaos and disarray of the Liberal–Nationals.

Now, I wanted to categorise this in a few formats, but this is a time where the Victorian Liberals and Nationals have the gall to stand up and try to say that they are on the side of our healthcare system and our mental health system. This is a mob, as we saw just last night, who tore the heart out of health federally. They say in finance terms that past performance is not an indicator of future behaviour, but in the political scene your past performance is your values. It is everything in your DNA, and what is the first thing that Liberals and Nationals go after when they are looking for budget savings and measures? They go after health care. They go after the people that support Victorians and indeed Australians in their time of need.

Victorians do not forget what happened during the pandemic – the undermining of health advice, the undermining of our health workforce. While the member for Hawthorn was doing fireside chats with Virginia Trioli at the ABC –

Sam Groth interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Nepean!

Tim RICHARDSON: trying to indicate that he was a moderate Liberal – if anything he is a fake moderate Liberal, and I will come to that and what we saw last night in *Nemesis*. But when he was doing that, we had the member for Bulleen and the former member for Kew attacking the health services and undermining health advice, and the very people that each and every day covered themselves in PPE to front up and save and protect their fellow Victorians were having to fight a narrative that was stoked by conservatives in this state. So while moderate voices stood by and let, time and time again, our health services, our nurses, our paramedics and our doctors front up to a more difficult circumstance, we sat by and saw how devastating that was.

Danny O'Brien interjected.

Tim RICHARDSON: The member for Gippsland South was in some of those COVID hearings and was sitting around at those times and witnessing exactly what his colleagues were doing. How many times did he speak up on it? Never.

Danny O'Brien interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Gippsland South, you had your turn.

Tim RICHARDSON: He never put a voice forward. So we go back to then – those 2013, 2014 days, where there was a tax on our nurses, where I remember Marshall Baillieu literally giving the middle finger to our nurses as they campaigned for better wages and conditions and when they campaigned for nurse-to-patient ratio, which was enshrined into legislation in our constitution in 2015. When paramedics were in hallways, struggling to make ends meet and pleading with the government to listen to them, the then health minister David Davis called them liars and said that they were faking those circumstances.

When you have that track record – when Prime Minister Abbott was gutting health services and health outcomes across our nation, where were the Victorian Liberals? Premier Napthine did not say a thing. He was challenged, asked and pleaded with for bipartisan support, to put forward that support and protection of Victoria. They did not say a thing, and they were dealt with at the ballot box.

We have come forward to a circumstance where the Andrews, now Allan, Labor government have made record investments in health. We see a hospital building fund that is substantial, we see 36 per cent more nurses and midwives, we see 66 per cent more doctors and we see 10,000 students given the opportunity to study nursing and midwifery. That is on a past performance record of protecting and supporting our health services. And then you have those opposite. When you cannot find a paramedic or an ambulance, what do you do? You go to the scrap yard and you say, 'Can we grab one of those old-school 1960s or 1970s ambulances? I only need it for an hour press conference.' Then you go to the steps of Parliament and you grab the fake ambulance and you stand in front of it. That

was the member for Caulfield. Such was the level of desperation and the lack of ability to connect with our health services, because they saw them coming a long way off.

What about when we literally bought private hospitals on behalf of Victorians – Bellbird, and Frankston down my neck of the woods – to catch up on the impacts of the pandemic on surgery waiting times. We had significant challenges to get those people through. What did the shadow minister say?

Members interjecting.

Tim RICHARDSON: We are on the hook here. Here we go. We are getting a bit of crowd participation here. Do not worry; we will come to all of you soon. There is plenty of time. \$1.5 billion COVID catch-up payments and the buying of private hospitals that lowered the patient waiting list by 50,000 in that quarter – now, what did the Shadow Minister for Health say? This was ‘socialist manoeuvring’ – which then a few days later they supported, knowing how significant it would be and knowing how absurd their position was to oppose it.

You see, when you stand for nothing, you get found out by Victorians. That is what has happened time and time again. We saw it last night on *Nemesis*. Goodness me, wasn’t that compelling viewing. I got home a bit late last night. I got back to Mordy and thought I should probably have a sleep, but I am going to watch it. You saw Turnbull there and you thought ‘There’s the fake moderate of the Liberals.’ The fake moderate who got captured by the Nationals and who got led around for two years of his prime ministership. And we see a similar context happening here. We see it in the opposing of the treaty that was put forward in October in the joint coalition party room, and we see the fake moderate – the Aldi low-priced version of a moderate – John Pesutto, the member for Hawthorn, the Leader of the Opposition. That is the fake moderate right here –

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Member for Gippsland South, I know what your point of order is. I do ask members to call other members by their correct titles.

Tim RICHARDSON: You are all doing the numbers, we know. It is okay. We know there is a lot of tension over there. We know –

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Member for Mordialloc, through the Chair. Member for Nepean, I ask you to cease interjecting.

Tim RICHARDSON: We know there is a bit of counting going on. We know there is a bit of sensitivity. There is just a bit of a harsher lull at the moment. But luckily, unlike on *Nemesis*, where there were contenders left, right and centre, there is not a logical contender to the member for Hawthorn. When the answer is the member for Bulleen, you have got to wonder what the question is. There is a substantial lack of talent and depth on that side because, guess what, when you stand for nothing, you get found out. We saw during that program the ventilations by the Prime Minister of how they were captured by the far right and how the Queensland Liberal–Nationals led them around, and we see some really significant similarities in Victoria. We see an opposition leader who fronted up to First Nations people talking about health and mental health policy and health outcomes for First Nations people and did not have the guts to tell them that he had backed down on treaty. He had backed down on that policy which had been bipartisan. Members of Parliament came into this place and witnessed one of the most significant moments in this Parliament’s history, and then he had the gutlessness to walk away and not tell anyone until a few people backgrounded it to media and they were exposed. That is the level of decency that the Leader of the Opposition is bringing forward.

So when you have that kind of behaviour and that kind of conduct, you know that Victorians cannot trust you. When you know that Victorians and health workers have shown that they do not want to stand with you – they did not want to stand with the member for Bulleen during the campaign.

Remember when they were standing out in paddocks and in front of hospitals having weird doorstops and there was no third-party endorsement of any policy proposal they put forward, like when they opposed the Suburban Rail Loop and went down that cul-de-sac, which they are completing for the third time.

Remember when the then Leader of the Opposition, the now member for Bulleen, said ‘Oh, well, we’re gonna scrap that project, shelve it, still do it, shelve it,’ but there was not anything significant on the budget papers at that time – and they were going to go on this funding spree of health outcomes that no-one believed. It was as crazy as the then Leader of the Opposition’s proposal in 2018, remember the intersection removal policy where they had almost futuristic roads hovering over each other? I remember Balcombe Road in Mentone. Like, where on earth did the road go? Maybe it was out in the bay. We still do not know. They do not talk about that policy, those random freeway level crossing removals. Even though the member for Gippsland South is in the road space now, he will never ever talk about that crazy policy. They announced it one day and never campaigned on it again. It was twice as expensive as the level crossing removal policy, and they have never talked about it again – that ‘freeway of awesomeness’ policy or whatever it was.

That is the level of policy now. We see reasoned amendment after reasoned amendment, pushing off bills. That is an example of not fronting up to do your homework. It is an example of, ‘Oh well, we don’t consult, we don’t do any work in shadows.’ You see their low speak rate in here, and what you see is that the Greens are becoming the true opposition, which is a terrifying prospect. The primary diminishment of the coalition, but particularly the Liberals, undermines the two-party system not only in our nation but in our state, and that has serious ramifications. We see that across Europe and we see that across the United Kingdom and what that means for stability in democratic systems. It is not just us looking on and saying, ‘Okay, well, there are 56 seats now and where does this go.’ We saw the stunts today from the Greens political party and where you take the low road on particular issues and we see that only the Nationals are really increasing their viability. We are seeing the Liberals being diminished.

That is what the state of play is. You see a system of governance here, and you see a shadow cabinet that for the last 438 days has not been known for anything. You see the murmurings, you see those looking across, you see during question time the eyes looking down. There is not a coherent opposition strategy, and the Leader of the Opposition and member for Hawthorn could not be described as a moderate if you tried. Luckily for him, there is not a successor. There is not a logical choice other than the member for Bulleen to come forward. So what we see now is a situation where –

Danny O’Brien: On a point of order, Speaker, the latest edition of *Rulings from the Chair* under the term ‘grievance debate’ is a ruling from Speaker Maddigan on *Hansard* page 880, 9 April 2003:

The grievance debate is not an occasion to personally attack members of the opposition.

That applies to the Leader of the Opposition as well.

The SPEAKER: It has been a very wideranging debate today in the grievance debate, member for Gippsland South. I do remind members that it is inappropriate to impugn other members; however, there have already been some attacks from both sides, so I will allow the member for Mordialloc to continue but to be mindful of those rulings from the chair and the standing orders.

Tim RICHARDSON: Thank you, Speaker. I had this whole section on trials and legal counsel, and I might just leave that for another time. I will let that one go – and diaries – but anyway we will let that go.

When you are distracted by what is happening in your own party room, when you are distracted by counting numbers rather than counting the policies for the people that you are meant to represent, when after 438 days of the 60th Parliament you are known for nothing other than fighting each other and going further to the right and when you claim in your fireside chats and your opinion pieces that

you will be a better Liberal and a better outcome for Victorians and yet you walk away from some very important and progressive policies in our state –

Danny O'Brien: On a point of order, Speaker, I think the member referring to 'you' is disrespectful to the Chair and he should be brought back to addressing people correctly in this chamber.

The SPEAKER: Indeed, member for Gippsland South. Member for Mordialloc, I ask you to refrain from using the term 'you'.

Tim RICHARDSON: At least he will get a good shout-out at shadow cabinet for the stirring contribution that he made in his references and the great, stern defence of the Leader of the Opposition. Well done, member for Gippsland South. You are not known for much. You have been parked on PAEC indefinitely, but at least you rolled the arm over on that defence of the Leader of the Opposition.

We all know that on this side we are supporting the health outcomes of Victorians, we are investing in education and we are delivering the transport outcomes that are needed for the future.

We have had the member for Kew and the member for Sandringham come in and criticise where the budget is up to, but they will not look back – and I note that the member for Kew was not here in the previous Parliament, but the member for Sandringham certainly was – and say what they would have done differently during the pandemic. You cannot get up on doorstops and whinge to the clouds but not say what you would have done differently or what you would do in the future. There is never an alternative put forward.

There was the stirring baritone of the member for Sandringham. He has done Toastmasters a bit, I think – looking through the cameras and looking around the place. He has got some leadership aspirations, we all know. Get the nice blue tie going. But when you dig down deeper into his 7-minute speech on the budget, you sort of wonder where he is going with it. What does he actually stand for? Where is the depth in that contribution? All there is is the interest amount – he does not talk about the undermining of our health system, does not talk about the opposition that they had to the \$31 billion invested in business support and health outcomes during the pandemic. It is okay for them to take a few hits from the sidelines, but it takes a bit more to actually do the policy work and say what you would do differently. That is where Victorians have found this mob out. So my challenge to the Liberals – not so much the Nationals, because they did all right last election, as they like to remind everyone; they are carrying the team – is to front up and do some work. Front up and get on bills. Do some policy rather than punching on internally, rather than undermining each other – otherwise we look forward to the next ABC episode of *Nemesis 2.0*, on the Victorian Liberals.

Government performance

Tim READ (Brunswick) (17:01): A few weeks ago the wonderful team at our parliamentary library prepared an online tool that ranked the 2021 ABS census data for each Victorian electoral district. As the members representing these districts, I am sure much of this was not surprising to us; although for my part, learning such details as the fact that 2493 people in Brunswick ride a bike to work is not only interesting but adds weight to my calls for better cycling infrastructure in my electorate. By the way, that is the highest number in Victoria, and in fact Brunswick made up 11 per cent of all Victoria's bike trips to work that year. Brunswick is also the 11th-youngest electorate, with a median age of 34. Given this is a grievance debate, I can admit to grieving somewhat for my own relative birthdate, but I feel more aggrieved knowing the many challenges the majority of these young constituents are facing today, particularly as someone who has enjoyed so many of the opportunities afforded to my generation, like free university and affordable housing.

I felt some hope for a safe future climate when I marched amongst almost 100,000 students and families during the School Strike 4 Climate in 2019, but since the pandemic I have been growing more concerned that we are losing our momentum on climate. While there have been some positive initiatives by this Victorian government, we must do more to avert extreme global heating, which will

bring more catastrophic weather events, coastal inundation, droughts and floods, and the resulting loss of biodiversity. The Victorian Greens believe that the government should do much more and do it faster, and that with more ambition we could progressively close all of Victoria's dirty coal-fired power stations well before 2035. Labor must commit much more funding to renewables, more than the paltry \$1 billion – and admittedly a nice retro logo – currently committed to the SEC. The fact remains that catastrophic climate change cannot be avoided while governments like Victoria's continue to prolong the life of coal and open up multiple new gas projects.

Everyone agrees much more will be needed, so the question is: why is much more not being done now instead of years later, when it will cost more and may be too late to influence other jurisdictions? It is already too late to avoid significant climate impacts which could have been prevented, considering we are almost at 1.5 degrees of global heating already. At this level of heating, many climate tipping points are within reach, and these include the release of methane from melting permafrost, the loss of protective reflection from polar ice and the loss of CO₂-absorbing forests around the world. All of these losses will accelerate global heating. So let us do what we need to do to close coal faster and boost funding to the SEC. It is the least we can do.

While climate may be the most significant, there are plenty of other issues disproportionately affecting young people right now, and one of the biggest is housing – a problem especially felt by young people and the almost 50 per cent of people who rent in Brunswick. Today's young generation are paying the price for governments that have promoted housing as a speculative asset for investors, developers and land bankers rather than as an essential human right to shelter – or, as Alan Kohler recently put it:

... a cartel of the majority, with banks and developers helping them maintain high house prices with the political class actively supporting them.

Australia's only apparent human right relating to housing is the implicit right of those privileged to own a home – or multiple homes – to see the value of their assets and rental income streams increase year on year. At the same time, government policies continue to promote housing demand, encouraging young people to literally mortgage their futures to try and get in at the bottom of this pyramid scheme, lest house prices actually fall, jeopardising the stamp duty that comprises over a third of the state's revenue.

I grieve that, like a guest arriving decades late to a party, the Victorian government's belated housing solution announced last year was simply a rebranding of the same failed policies of yesteryear – more aspirational annual building targets, no mandatory social and public housing requirements on new housing developments and an inexcusably naive hope that property developers will for some reason voluntarily lower their profit margins by selling cheaper homes. Meanwhile, a single young person with a Twitter account called Purplepingers has done more to enforce Victoria's legislated minimum rental standards and hold dodgy landlords to account than the whole panoply of departments in the Victorian state government. So I grieve for those facing continuing unlimited rent increases, prohibitive stamp duties, the primacy of investor rights to profit through negative gearing and capital gains discounts, unenforced minimal rental standards and, incredibly, the privatisation of two-thirds of prime public housing land, which will be forever lost as a housing safety net for future generations.

But I also grieve it seems almost every year for the senseless stubbornness of the Victorian government, which is risking the health and sometimes the lives of young people taking pills at music festivals and venues. I cannot believe that after five years I still have the same talking points today, calling on the government to introduce a pill-testing and early warning drug alert service. I am still contacted by peak health agencies, unions, doctors, paramedics and pharmacists frustrated by a government that for political reasons will only do pill testing on a blood sample from a young ICU patient or on an eye fluid sample from someone in the morgue. How many coronial inquests on young lives are required for the government to finally listen to health advice on pill testing? Sadly, it seems it is not a rhetorical question. We know the answer is currently more than four.

On the question of Victoria's drug policy more broadly we should all grieve that Labor has wasted the last decade by persisting with the prohibitionist drug strategy devised by Richard Nixon more than 50 years ago. Despite half a century of failure Victoria continues to treat too many young drug users as criminals in this state. They are very often disadvantaged and often have one or more mental or physical illnesses when they are charged with possessing a small amount of cannabis. Billions have been wasted on law enforcement and prisons as a solution for drug use and the related antisocial behaviour of children and young people, which typically results from their own trauma, abuse, neglect, mental illness and poverty. So let us make cannabis legal, introduce pill testing and save billions of dollars on law enforcement for use in health-based drug and alcohol programs.

I have talked already about inequality and opportunity for housing, and financial inequality more broadly is one of many drivers of mental illness in our society. It does not take an expert to work out that if you cannot afford to live, to feed yourself or your family, to keep a roof over your head and to see a doctor, dentist or therapist when you need to then your mental health can suffer. There is no shortage of studies clearly demonstrating the links between disadvantage, financial insecurity and mental ill health. Here in Victoria the Greens found last year in a survey of people in our electorates that there is a very clear link between mental distress and the cost-of-living crisis. We heard from people who are struggling to see a psychologist or pay for medication on top of all their other bills, and we heard from people who are suddenly experiencing a decline in their mental health precisely because it is so difficult to stay on top of rent and food. It is a vicious circle, and a bold government would step in and stop it.

Of course recognition of the legitimate statewide crisis in mental health is one of the rare points of agreement among us in this place. The Greens commended the government for calling the Royal Commission into Victoria's – cruelly underfunded – Mental Health System, and we support the implementation of all of its recommendations. But we should acknowledge that even the full implementation of these recommendations will not solve some of the big problems impacting young people's mental health today.

We need to build and fund the workforce responding to their needs. In this regard we need to fund Lifeline so that it can respond to the increased number of calls it is receiving from Victoria. The current low level of funding means that Lifeline centres in Victoria are unable to meet this new level of demand. In fact Victorians making calls to Lifeline are rerouted to other states, and the state government seems happy knowing that other states are picking up the tab.

Someone recently said to me that any failure in policy ends up being a problem of mental health. There is a whole lot we can do to reduce preventable mental illness, to fix up our failed social policies so that many people will not end up experiencing avoidable mental distress in the first place and to ensure that people who need treatment for mental illness are secure and supported. Housing is a human right, and we should recognise this not by knocking down 44 public housing towers in Victoria and selling off land to private developers but by investing in world-class public housing as the primary health policy that it is, keeping Victorians stable, secure and out of homelessness. We can stop the shameless price gouging of the big supermarkets and other corporations who are driving up our cost of living, contributing to mental distress and, indirectly, to housing insecurity and homelessness, and while we are doing all of this we could also make sure our mental health sector in Victoria is properly resourced to support people in need of treatment.

We are beginning to fall behind in implementing the recommendations of the royal commission. This includes implementing recommendation 29, to establish a new agency led by people with lived experience of mental illness or psychological distress to ensure that the sector is informed by their experience. It also includes further progress on recommendation 10, to shift to a health-led response to mental health emergencies instead of a default police-led response, and most importantly it includes supporting and properly funding the mental health workforce so that under-resourced teams do not feel the need to rely on outdated practices like seclusion and restraint.

Despite my grievances today, I still believe that there is hope for younger Victorians in the generations to come, and this hope of course comes from the current younger generations themselves. It is the younger generation today that is more engaged in the politics and problems of our society, both in Victoria and across the world, and surely the future is bright when we are increasingly seeing that even as people age they are not retreating into a life of privilege but are continuing to live up to their values. The trend is that they are continuing to work for a better world and continuing to vote progressively. It seems more and more are defying the old adage that you get more selfish and conservative as you age, and this change is something I certainly do not grieve about.

Treaty

Chris COUZENS (Geelong) (17:12): I grieve for Victoria's First Peoples, who have had to endure another shocking blow by the Liberal-Nationals, who have turned their back on treaty. They have displayed their fake commitment to treaty at the expense of First Peoples. The cultural load that has been carried by First Peoples in recent times is immense. It has been traumatic, and we all know the experiences that First Peoples have had. They have been forced to carry the racism and hateful behaviour thrown at them with issues such as Australia Day, the Voice referendum, treaty, closing the gap, cultural heritage matters and anything else relating to First Peoples. First Peoples in Victoria have to carry that load and the trauma and put up with racism and hateful comments, whether it be on social media or – you know, I heard many stories in my community of First Nations people walking into shops and being abused, particularly during the referendum period but also during the debates, if you want to call them that, around Australia Day or Invasion Day, depending on how you see it.

For those opposite to turn their back on them at this time – I mean, any time is bad, but at a time when they have already been experiencing such great trauma – is unacceptable, and to not even go to those communities, to the First Peoples' Assembly, and tell them that they were withdrawing their support for treaty is unacceptable. I do not blame Aboriginal communities for being angry at those opposite for what they have done.

I am just so pleased that this government, the Allan government, continues to support what we started seven years ago – seven years of sitting around, letting Aboriginal people, or First Peoples of Victoria, make the decisions about what impacts on them. Good policy is what this is about – allowing Aboriginal people to identify what their community needs, whether it be in the treaty process, Closing the Gap, cultural heritage, whatever it might be. We know that listening – real listening, deep listening – to First Victorians makes a huge difference in the successful outcomes. Some will argue that seven years is too long for this process and it should have happened a long time ago – or should never happen, whatever the argument might be. I am really proud of the fact that we have spent that time, that we have allowed that time, because if we did not, from my experience and that of many First Victorians, it would not work. If we do not do it properly, it just will not work. So I am very proud of the fact that we have allowed that time. Yes, it is a long time, and we have still got a fair way to go yet, but it means that whatever the outcome is, it is going to work for First Victorians – something that all of us on this side of the house want to see.

This is really significant for Victorians, not just First Nations people but all Victorians, because this is a beautiful culture. What often happens is we talk about all the deficits. We talk about the health issues, we talk about drugs and alcohol, family violence – all those things – but at the end of the day what we need to be looking at is supporting this beautiful culture and protecting it and allowing First Peoples to put their treaties to the Treaty Authority and have a really great outcome.

For those opposite to turn their backs is an absolute disgrace. I have listened, particularly during the debate on the Treaty Authority and Other Treaty Elements Bill 2022. That was back in 2022. When I listened to that I actually thought it was weasel words. I did not think it was genuine, and I will go back to that shortly. Now they have just proven that it was all a bit of a farce, for whatever reason. They have not even really given a reason, apart from the cultural heritage side of it, which is absolute rubbish.

Vicki Ward interjected.

Chris COUZENS: Yes, it is completely different. They seem to target these things, whether it be Australia Day or the referendum or cultural heritage, and use them for their own political benefit. My view of what is going on right now with their withdrawal of support for treaty is that most Victorian people are already on that journey. I have not had one person say to me 'Oh, I support what the Liberal Party have done' – not one. They have been horrified at the fact that they have withdrawn that bipartisan support that they committed to without even talking to First Nations people about why they actually did it. They did not tell them, but also did not ask questions about it and did not ask questions about the cultural heritage matters that have been in the media recently. But then we have dodgy developers coming out and saying they are being overcharged and there are all these terrible things happening, which in fact have been proven to be untrue. Who is encouraging that? Who is throwing fuel on the fire to allow this garbage to continue at the expense of First Peoples of Victoria? They are the ones carrying the load. We are horrified by it and we have great empathy for their experiences, but we are not the ones that are suffering. We are not the ones that are being abused in the street or on social media or whose children are experiencing that at school. We need to be really mindful of that, and obviously those opposite no longer care about the impacts of that. That is clear. The fact that they have not actually sat down and had a conversation with First People is an absolute disgrace, and I support the First Peoples' Assembly in their condemnation of what those opposite have done.

We know from that deep listening with First Peoples that started I will say seven years ago – I am sure it was earlier than that, but the journey started seven years ago under treaty – to sit down and listen. We get it. We understand what that means and how closing the gap and truth telling are really important to this whole process. We heard from the Productivity Commission today that the only way forward is through that deep listening, self-determination and really making transformative change, which is what we are doing in Victoria. I have to say, when I move around this country, which I do occasionally, and go to other states, people say to me that they want what we have got in Victoria, particularly the Aboriginal communities. They want what we have got in Victoria because we are making that transformative change, which is what the Productivity Commission is talking about in their report today.

I know we have a long way to go. I am not saying it is all perfect and we have got it down pat because we have not, but the fact that we continue to listen and act on what First Peoples in Victoria are telling us is what really matters, and as I said earlier, that is what works. We allow them to lead what is best for their communities. That is what closing the gap is supposed to be all about. As governments around this country we have a responsibility. We have all signed up to the Closing the Gap agreement. There were significant changes made a couple of years ago in the reforms, but that deep listening is so important not only to areas of treaty but also to closing the gap. We know that that will make a difference. We know closing the gap will make a difference, but it is taking too long. What treaty will do in Victoria is help close that gap and address the issues that impact on First Peoples every day of their lives.

I know this side of the house and many Victorians understand the importance of closing the gap. Whether it be in health or education, employment, training, all those areas, as I said, we have got a long way to go to close the gap. But it has been identified by First Victorians that that is a key part of the treaty process, of making sure that they are providing for their communities what their communities need. They know what they need. They can tell you right here and now what their communities need to ensure that that gap starts to close. But it is up to governments, including ours, to work with them to make sure that in closing the gap the needs of their communities are being met.

A member: They don't need white paternalism.

Chris COUZENS: No, that is right. We do have a long way to go. As I said, I am not suggesting that we have solved all the problems – far from it. But the important thing is that we continue to listen, and we continue to allow First Nations people to look at what treaty means to them. It is really exciting

that those commissioners are coming on board. That will make a huge difference, and that will start later this year.

In speaking on that bill to establish the treaty commission, as I said earlier, I thought that there were some weasel words from those opposite, and I do not think from memory they had a lot of speakers either. We did hear from the member for Murray Plains, who in his speech said:

The Liberal and National parties absolutely support this legislation and want to see the whole process progress further. The ... journey will mean different things to different people, and it will be a difficult process for a lot of people. There is no argument about that – that as we work through these issues, as we have worked through the discussions, they will not always be easy. But I think the first thing is the truth telling that has been going on, because as people would say, the truth sets you free. Whatever the truth is, the truth is, and we need to acknowledge that truth and move forward. But as the Leader of the Opposition said yesterday, it is important that those discussions are actually respectful and that that journey is carried out in a respectful manner. It is not about conflict, it is about actually resolving past conflicts and making sure we walk forward together, as I have said.

The member stated that the truth sets you free, so why is he leading the opposition away from the truth? Why is he turning his back on Aboriginal Victorians in the most disrespectful way? Why won't he tell the Victorian people the truth and explain that the opposition's walk away from treaty is really about Peter Dutton, clearly holding the opposition hostage with his fake agenda on the right?

We will not be telling Aboriginal communities what is best for them. We know that that has not worked for over 200 years, and we are not in the business of repeating history, unlike those opposite. This is a government that will fight for the future of Aboriginal Victorians – for all Victorians – and as I have said, I think we need to not politicise this. We have all been saying it for the last seven years, and now suddenly those opposite have decided to politicise it. There are some comments that others have made. The Western Victoria Region upper house member Bev McArthur, her comments have been absolutely disgraceful – that First Nations people should be grateful for what we gave them. Well, we gave them smallpox and measles; we took their land, took their language and took their children. Why would they be grateful for that? I think those opposite need to have a serious think about the decisions they have made and the impact that they are having on First Nations people right now, start looking at how they can make a difference and join the government in ensuring that treaty has a successful and smooth pathway.

Government performance

Roma BRITNELL (South-West Coast) (17:28): I rise to make a contribution to the grievance debate this afternoon, because the people of Victoria have been let down by this state Labor government. This government has been in power for almost 10 years. They are a tired, burnt out government, and not only are they tired but they are incompetent, and I will back up my statements.

The state Labor government has managed to rack up a massive debt and has no plan to address it – a debt greater than Queensland's, New South Wales's and Tasmania's put together. The state Labor government have spent a decade spinning the spin so they can present a facade that they care about community, care about Victoria and care about families, but the wheels of spin are falling off, and the gaping hole left by the mismanagement of this government is demonstrated by the hole in the budget that they now have to deal with and have no idea how. Labor have billions and billions of dollars in debt. Labor have lost billions and billions of dollars in cost overruns, waste and poorly managed projects, and yet Labor continue on their reckless program of major investment, like the Suburban Rail Loop, which the state just cannot afford. Now, because of the waste and mismanagement, families are struggling. I am sure it is a nice concept to have; however, with no business case it is not appropriate. We cannot do this. The costs are so wrong. They have even got the experts who usually back Labor calling for Labor to halt their reckless program. The new Premier continues in the same manner as her corrupt, aggressive predecessor. This reckless and tired government, who cannot manage money, are sending Victoria broke. Once again it looks like *Back to the Future*, like the 1990s under Kirner, where we are starting to hear phrases again like 'the rust bucket state of Australia' and it is Victoria that they

are referring to. Jacinta Allan is Joan Kirner mark 2. Just like John Cain, Daniel Andrews flew the coop, and the chickens are now coming home to roost.

And what are the consequences of the Labor government not being able to manage money for the last 10 years? Because that is what really needs to be understood. That is what really matters – the consequences of mismanagement. Well, these consequences are real and they are distressing, and they are hurting every Victorian family who is now struggling under a government who have been wasteful and ignore their governance responsibilities and have been laid bare in the seven IBAC reports recently published and are ignoring the levers they could pull to assist the struggling and hurting Victorian families that are now left in this state of debt created by Labor. What are the consequences? They are 53 taxes and charges that Labor have imposed on families because they have no way of paying for their debt and their mismanagement except to reach out to Victorian families and take more of their hard-earned money in the form of the increased taxes and charges – 53 of them since they came into government.

What are the consequences in my electorate? Well, the obvious first one is the crumbling state of our roads. It is often said you can judge a state or a country by their regional roads. If a government is in turmoil, corrupt or broke, across the world it is often seen in the state of their roads, and our roads in regional Victoria are in a dangerous state of disrepair and are being completely ignored by this irresponsible government.

You can see it in the healthcare system. Just recently the Minister for Health came to Warrnambool, and instead of doing what she has done for the other 10 health services in the metropolitan areas and increasing funding for Warrnambool Base Hospital in line with the increased cost of building, she simply denied Warrnambool that. Instead of delivering the hospital to the original design and scope, the building will be cut because of increased costs incurred under Labor. Labor are not giving the money required to build the hospital, which is needed for the specifications that have been set. And they will not be able to deliver services if they do not get these specifications as required by the families of South-West Coast.

We saw the Commonwealth Games cancelled, a clear indication that the government has run out of money. We have seen taxes imposed on renters; taxes imposed on schools and education; taxes imposed on holidays and holiday rentals; taxes imposed on cruise ships, costing Melbourne businesses more than the government is generating in the income they are receiving from the taxes – how stupid – and, yes, a patient tax. That is right – a tax put on patients, making it more expensive to see a doctor in a healthcare crisis and shifting burdens onto the accident and emergency centres instead of promoting and enabling and encouraging patients to go to GP clinics. Labor are taxing the cost of a patient seeing a doctor. Consequently from Labor's mismanagement, the health system under Labor is groaning under the stress of a system that has been let go by Labor.

Let us recall the fact that per capita there is less investment in the health system in Victoria than in any other state. Nurses are burnt out. Nurses are leaving. We need them most of all, and the government has left them unsupported and feeling undervalued. Police are striking. They feel disappointed by a government that does not value them. They do not feel backed in by the government and supported. They are able to be attacked whilst on the job. During COVID they were forced to send grandmothers home for sitting on park benches. They have had to stand by idle and watch terrible atrocities occur because they have not been given the laws, such as move-on laws, by the Labor government nor the support to stand up for them.

The recent protests at the Port of Melbourne saw the port held to ransom for four days. Nowhere else in the world is this happening – nowhere else. Vital medicines and necessities were obstructed from getting to the community by a handful of people. Again, nowhere else in the world is this occurring. The government are too weak to show leadership. Still the government have not explained why they did not act quickly and move these protesters on. The Treasurer actually said it was a minor

inconvenience. With 100,000 containers sitting out at sea, this government clearly has no understanding of the vital role the port plays in Victoria's economy.

Criminals in Victoria under this Labor government are given more and more rights, while victims feel let down by the Labor government. The perfect example of this is the weakening of the bail laws under Labor. Further consequences of this incompetent Labor government are the fact that ambulance services have not had the investment required to keep up with the demand of a growing population. As one person who could not get an ambulance said to me, 'In my state I have what I believe is a basic expectation – that if I call an ambulance, an ambulance would turn up.' Too many are left stranded today under Labor when they expect an ambulance.

The mismanagement of this government has even left our teachers unsupported. These are the educators of our future generations. The burnout experienced by teachers is real and cannot be denied by this government, and that is why we are seeing a massive teacher shortage. In my electorate the schools are struggling with kids who have not readjusted after COVID with situations where assaults are taking place in school. There are not enough teachers to escort the children who are at risk between what are now known as 'safe spaces'. I still cannot get over the fact that schools have to have safe spaces and boast of how many they have. I thought all school grounds should be safe. Teachers tell me that the Labor government is not giving them the tools to set the boundaries for the students, and the students, as a consequence, are in control, not the teachers. That is what the teachers tell me.

This Labor government has taken away the rights of an individual to heat their home with firewood even. Restaurants and hotels will eventually lose the ability to cook with gas for their customers. Energy has got more and more expensive under a government who rush to meet their energy targets without the ability to fulfil their promise of delivering energy in a reliable and affordable manner. There are more people with no roof over their head than ever before. Labor say they will build 80,000 homes a year – 800,000 over the next 10 years. I ask: what have they been doing for the last 10 years to be in this position? They are failing already on this. They are miles behind already on that target too.

There are real consequences of this government. In my shadow portfolio of ports and freight I have learned of the next tax to be imposed on all Victorians. It is a tax on trucks entering and leaving the port. It will be the 54th tax for Victorian families. Trucks going in and out of the Port of Melbourne will be slugged between \$150 and \$250 per container. Ninety-six per cent of our goods we use here in Victoria come in through the Port of Melbourne. Most things we buy will be affected by this tax, even things manufactured here in Victoria, because often ingredients are imported. The income our farmers bring to the state of Victoria through exports will also bear the brunt of this new tax. This tax will increase the cost of living. The government is touting it as an emissions reduction move. The reality is the government did not deliver the promised rail network they have been talking about for the last 10 years. They have failed to deliver on this, so now to fund their rail infrastructure they are taxing trucks, and this tax will be passed back to the consumer, whose goods the trucks carry. Goods being carried on rail under Labor over the last 10 years have gone down from 14 per cent of goods carried by rail to 5 per cent. That is a fail. They failed to meet their own targets to grow rail freight, and now they are going to tax the consumer to fund the job they should have done by now. So we have less freight on rail even though over the government's 10 years in power they have spent half a billion dollars on rail and things are worse for that spend, not better. Fail. Fail.

Whilst all these things are horrific and affect every single Victorian, what I think is most horrific is the fact that under Labor our children who are our most vulnerable, who need the support of the state when their family is unable to deliver for them, are also being treated with disdain. When families let children down, the child protection system steps in. A state system in good order is needed. Under Labor our children are being let down by the Allan Labor government. In the words of the first Commissioner for Children and Young People Bernie Geary, 'The state is a terrible parent.' That is Labor he is talking about. I raised in Parliament the need for an inquiry due to the fact that children are dying in the state's care, being criminalised whilst in the state's care and being sexually abused in

the state's care. The reports identifying this continue to be tabled, and yet the government ignores the children in their care. This despicable government denied these children that inquiry so their voices now cannot be heard. Nothing can be more abhorrent.

I cannot even speak about some the despicable accounts I have been given by concerned family members or caseworkers about different cases of young children and the sexual acts being described as performed by young girls in state care, because it is too shocking for our community to hear the details. I know our caring community would be shocked if the government were honest with them about what is really going on. The fact the government go to the Supreme Court to prevent information getting to the public and use the children as a rationale for the gag order they seek is low. Even the courts denied the government this recently and stated it was not to protect the child. Clearly it is the government trying to protect themselves. They do not want the community to know they are failing in their role to protect innocent children.

The commissioner for children and young people would not say the system was broken if she did not mean it. Under Labor, in real terms, each child in care gets \$26,000 less allocated to their care than they did in 2017. I know Labor say they put more money into the system – that is because there are more children. Labor are not fixing the problem, they are just underfunding the system. Our children then suffer.

Foster carers get less in Victoria to care for the state's children than they do in any other state in Australia – \$14,000 out of pocket is the figure, they tell me. The government is asking foster carers to take on a child out of the goodness of their hearts at a cost to the family. Many families want to do this but simply cannot afford to. They are struggling themselves to meet the challenge of the cost of living. The reimbursement that they get is actually only to clothe, feed and keep the child warm. If the child in the care of foster carers needs dental work or even just the pleasure of being allowed to have an activity after school, such as dance lessons, the foster family has to pay for that, not the state. No wonder foster carers are leaving the system in droves. Labor have more children in residential care, which is not a family environment – the loving, caring environment that they should be in – when they should be in the loving arms of foster carers. You can see why: when the figures are laid out, all families are struggling under the cost of living. So how can the Allan Labor government expect any family – any foster caring family – to take on an extra child without the right financial costs getting covered to house the child?

This is why I grieve for the people of Victoria. This is why I grieve for the people of South-West Coast. The evidence is all laid out to see. Daniel Andrews's corruption, secrecy and mismanagement of funds were a hallmark of his reign, and many wanted to see a different Victoria under the new Premier, but we have more of the same. People are homeless. No-one can get child care in regional Victoria. The roads are a mess in regional Victoria. Police are striking. Nurses are leaving. We have teacher shortages. Ambulances do not turn up in Victoria. Rents are soaring. Families are hurting. The government cannot keep up the spin that they care. It is just not stacking up.

Education system

Darren CHEESEMAN (South Barwon) (17:43): It is with some interest this afternoon that I rise to make my contribution on the Allan Labor government's real approach for delivering for the people of Victoria, versus the very fake approach adopted by John Pesutto and his Liberal Party cronies –

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member knows to use correct titles.

Darren CHEESEMAN: by the Leader of the Opposition and his cronies when they are given that great gift of government. With the Allan Labor government, every single Labor MP, every single day, lives their values. I am particularly passionate about the values that we bring to the debate when it comes to public education in the state of Victoria. We know that every single child in Victoria deserves the very best education, and the reason why every single child deserves the very best education is because it lifts the productivity of our community. It lifts people out of poverty. It gives every single

Victorian the opportunity to achieve with their life. That is why, when we are given that great gift of government, the Allan Labor government go about investing in our public schools. That is why we have set a very bold agenda of delivering more than 100 new schools for the people of Victoria.

When you contrast that record of achievement since 2014 and we look at what the Liberals did when they were given that great gift of government, what we saw is only one new school opened. What we saw is them going after TAFE after TAFE after TAFE in the state of Victoria, denying Victorians the opportunity to get the skills that they need for our growing state.

This fake opposition leader stands for nothing. He has no spine. He is not Tony Abbott. Tony Abbott at least knew what he stood for. This opposition leader stands for nothing. He represents fakeness at every single opportunity. I must say I was somewhat amused when I picked up a copy of 'Backroom Baz' in the *Herald Sun* last Sunday. That very esteemed political commentator made the observation that the Liberal Party had had a love-in in Bendigo. He made the observation that perhaps they now stand for something, but it was a bit unclear in his writings what they actually stand for. Well, I can assure Backroom Baz they stand for nothing. They stand for division. They stand for only the elites in our community. They certainly do not stand up for public education at every opportunity. They do not stand up for the TAFEs that are so vital for the people of Victoria.

If we look at, say, the budget handed down seven months ago, last year's budget alone had \$3.8 billion of investment made by our government into the people of Victoria. We are delivering those 100 schools in the growth corridors of Melbourne and in the growth corridors of our regions, and we are doing that because we believe that no matter where you live, which corner of the state, you should have the opportunity of a great government school. Great education should not just be delivered by the elite private schools where the Liberal Party members and their cronies in this place went.

The Allan Labor government believes that every single child in the state of Victoria deserves to have a great public school in their backyard that they can go to to get a great education. That is why at every single opportunity government MPs, Labor MPs with their values, go out and visit their schools. They champion the needs of their schools and the investments those schools need, because they know how important those schools are for their communities. They know how important those schools are to give every child the opportunity to be lifted out of poverty, no matter the socio-economic background of those families from those communities.

I must say I have had some pleasure in the last week or so in watching the Premier of Victoria and the Deputy Premier of this state, who is also the Minister for Education, getting around with Labor colleagues to brand new schools and opening those schools. I am pleased about that because that is testament to the hard work of those MPs in championing the needs of those communities, no matter where that community is – whether it be in the south-east, whether it be in the western suburbs or the northern suburbs, whether it be in the regions.

Our education system is so precious to our communities. Our communities engage with Labor politicians on it. The reason why they do it is because they know we lead and live our values at every single opportunity. The Leader of the Opposition is no Tony Abbott. He does not stand for anything at all. He is not even a fake Malcolm Turnbull in a vinyl jacket. That is certainly not him either. He stands for nothing when it comes to education.

Labor's values say not only that we need to invest in the schools and the TAFEs in our state in every single suburb and every single town but also that we need to invest in our very youngest. That is why in childcare drought areas we are investing in new childcare centres. That is why we are making those important investments for three-year-old kinder and for four-year-old kinder, because we want to give every child in the state of Victoria that opportunity to get the start that they need. We are co-locating them. We are co-locating our kinders where we can with our schools. The reason why we are doing that is because we know how busy mums and dads are in the state of Victoria, and we want to make

sure, where we can and where it makes sense, that we co-locate kindergartens with our schools. We want to make sure that every single Victorian is given that great start.

From our perspective it is not about the postcode you live in. It is not about the wealthy suburbs. Those families inevitably have options – that is, those options come because you have privilege more often than not because you come from those wealthy suburbs. From our perspective, for the communities we represent it is about giving them a great local school, because that is likely to be the only choice those families have. That investment will not only benefit those individual students, those families, but ultimately lift the productivity of this state. It will provide the state of Victoria with the workers of the future that we need to continue to make sure Victoria is a livable state and that we have the set of skills that we need in this economy and a future labour economy in the state of Victoria. That is why we make these investments. That is why we have identified so many priority areas for free TAFE. We want to create that incentive, that opportunity, for people to get a set of skills that our economy needs, and we value that so highly that we are willing to ensure those students who pick those priority areas for their futures get those skills for free, because that is how important it is. It is important for them, it is important for the jobs that we need right now and it is important for the jobs that we need to build our state. That is why we are making those investments.

As I say, and I have said this on numerous occasions, we live our values, and we do that every single day here. We do that every single day in our community. I think the Liberals live their values when they are given that great gift of government. What we saw when they were given that great gift of government in 2010 was them living their values, going after our TAFEs and not investing in the growth corridors of Melbourne and regional Victoria to provide those kids with that opportunity that they need for a great public education system. What we also saw was fake qualifications. We saw fake qualifications. We saw the Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party claiming and professing to be a professor, and that was fake.

Brad Rowswell: On a point of order, Deputy Speaker, the member on his feet at the moment, given his history in the federal Parliament and the state Parliament here, should know that accusations such as that can only be made by substantive motion.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member does know that imputations on members are disorderly. I ask the member to refrain from that and continue without them.

Darren CHEESEMAN: I will more than happily move on, and I might move back to Backroom Baz. Reading the article, it went a little bit further and suggested that maybe the opposition leader had found a bit of a spine. Well, I think that is actually fake news. The Leader of the Opposition has not found a spine. He continues to stand for nothing. He continues perhaps to stand occasionally for something at best.

The Andrews Labor government and the Allan Labor government of course are committed to and passionate about education in this state. It is not surprising a significant number of my colleagues are educators. In fact I am looking at the member for Wendouree – a very good educator with a fantastic reputation as an educator in the Ballarat community and now a fantastic reputation as a legislator representing that fine community in that seat.

From my perspective, from the perspective of my colleagues, we will continue at every single opportunity to invest in education for the state of Victoria. We do that for young people. We do that for their families. We do that for the economy. We do that for the jobs that we need to fill. We will continue to make those investments into our schools, into our kinders, into our childcare centres and into our TAFE colleges, and we will do that because we know the importance of what education does for people. We know what that means for their communities. We know what that means for their families. We know what that means for employers in this state. That is why we will continue to target it. That is why we will continue to be focused on delivering that.

It was mentioned right at the start of this grievance debate that we have got a massive infrastructure agenda underway and we have got a massive health reform program underway, and when you look at the education needs of our state, we will continue to invest in those students to give those people the opportunity to connect with those opportunities, because that is Labor living its DNA, living its values. We will continue to be focused at every single opportunity and at every single budget on investing in the young people of our state, because that is what makes Victoria so great – it is a place that values education.

Question agreed to.

Bills

Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023

Second reading

Debate resumed.

Bronwyn HALFPENNY (Thomastown) (17:58): It is great to be able to sum up with the 50 or so seconds that I have got left. In summing up, this piece of legislation really is important. It really demonstrates the commitment that the Allan Labor government has to making sure that legislation operates as it is intended and is flexible enough to be useful and to serve its purpose in all circumstances, to making sure that consumers and the Victorian public are always protected as well as can be, to using the consultation process and the feedback from residents, businesses and other stakeholders and to listening to that to make sure that our legislation reflects their experiences and loopholes are closed.

Martin CAMERON (Morwell) (17:59): I rise to also make my contribution on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. First off, I would like to acknowledge and thank the member for Kew, who had to do 30 minutes of speaking on the regulatory legislation amendment bill, which was a great effort, and I have listened to just a few people from both sides of the house that have spoken about this reform bill of 2023.

I would just like to re-engage with everyone that is back in here just so they know what it is about. It would be remiss of me to just talk about other stuff into the ether. I think that we should all re-engage with the amendments. The Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023 – I like using ‘regulatory’; that sounds good coming out of my mouth – is a piece of omnibus legislation that amends 14 acts across 10 portfolios. Acting Speaker Marchant, it is good to see you in the chair too.

The reforms contained in this bill are mostly minor, technical or clarificatory – which is a good word – in nature and do not represent substantive changes to the acts in question. The majority of the amendments are aimed at streamlining requirements or rectifying specific instances where current provisions are not working as intended or have become impracticable. The coalition does not seek to oppose the passage of this bill through Parliament. It is important work that needs to be spoken about and done, even sometimes where it is not as enthralling as other bills that we do get to speak on. But it is work that needs to pass through the house to make the lives of Victorian workers a little bit easier as they move through. In talking about these changes – if I had the chance I would love to go through all 14 acts across the 10 portfolios, but hopefully I will not have to – I will be able to talk about a few other bits and pieces.

Being a small business owner before I came in here, I know the pressures and the time-consuming time frames that need to be met to do all the checks and balances – ‘Are you complying with your business and doing what you need to do?’ When you are a small business owner, it is the last thing on your mind. I talk to small business owners in the Latrobe Valley quite often, and their thoughts are turning to actually doing the work, getting up in the morning and making sure that their workers are right to go out and do the work. So at the end of the day when they come home exhausted and they want to – have to, not want to – spend the time doing all the checks and balances, maybe, hopefully,

some of these minor changes that we have in this amendment legislation may go toward somehow helping them.

I have got a good small business owner that travels with me; his name is Martin from Traralgon, and he is a plumber. I speak to him quite often as I move around. The things that worry small business owners are obviously the real changes that they need for business. Although we do this legislation and it is just part of the bigger picture, their thoughts are on how they are going to make a living and how they are going to be able to pay wages for their staff and make a wage for themselves. At the end of the day, they have got to go out to work. As the member for Wendouree spoke about earlier today, they are going out to do a fair day's work for a fair day's pay, so of course they are thinking about having to pay their tax bill. They are thinking about having to pay their rates if they have got a house or if they have got a workshop that they need to be able to do work. They are thinking about being able to pay the costs of power and water and gas, if they have got to pay those bills also, so there are a lot of struggles that small businesses actually have to go through to keep the doors open, for one.

Anything that we can do, if we do have these regulatory pieces of legislation, we do need to do to make sure they pass through the lower house and become part of the reform bill. We need to be able to do that to take a little bit of the pressure where we can off the day-to-day proceedings of owning a small business. As I said, trying to make a wage every week for a small business operator, that is the key goal that they are looking toward doing.

Also – it has been mentioned a couple of times here and I will bring it up – I was at the Australian Hotels Association launch last night, listening to the president of the AHA as he stood and spoke about changes that we make here in Parliament and how they actually affect his small businesses, being pubs and clubs, and how changes that we have made in the gaming sector really affect outcomes and really affect the bottom line and the day-to-day workings of businesses in the pubs and clubs sector. Another issue they did highlight for pubs and clubs was the use of gas. Obviously, the government is winding back on gas, but gas in their clubs and pubs is important so they can actually run the commercial kitchens properly so their chefs and staff are actually cooking to standard. So we need to make sure that we know that bits and pieces of legislation that we do talk about here in the chamber have real concerns and outcomes for small business. You may think I am harping on about small business, but it is something that is really close to my heart and I need to make sure that we get those points across.

The bill is similar in composition to an omnibus bill passed by the Parliament in 2022. Like the 2022 bill, the 2023 bill brings together a number of minor and technical amendments across a range of portfolios, as we discussed before. The bill is the result of the government inviting departments to submit minor amendments to improve regulatory compliance or produce administrative efficiencies, so it is needed. When they talk to all the departments, if there is little bit of cleaning up that needs to be done to make it work better, we know that it needs to be done.

The bill has four objectives. Number one is to streamline requirements for businesses and social service providers; number two, improve emergency preparedness; three, support technology-neutral legislation to make sure we get that right; and number four, make simple and uncontroversial amendments to support an efficient regulatory system through amendments to various other acts. As you can see, it is a ripping bill to be able to stand up here and talk on – it gets everyone engaged in the chamber – but we do need to do these things.

One of the things the government estimates is that there will be an annual saving of \$2.6 million for Victorian businesses that will result from this bill. We might think \$2.6 million is a fair amount, but there are over 710,000 small businesses in Victoria. If you are a small business owner, you do the simple maths of dividing \$2.6 million by 710,000 and you work out that the average saving for small businesses and businesses right across Victoria with these changes works out to be \$3.66 per year, so the monetary side of things may not actually add up to much. We hope that the savings for everybody that is going to be affected by this bill may be done in time, but as I have read through what is in there, I am not sure whether my small business, when I used to have it, would actually have been using any

of this. But as I said before, we need to make sure that when these bills do come up, we treat them with the respect that they need to make sure they do get through. Just as households grapple with the increasing cost of living, so do all businesses in general. It does not matter what field we are in, we are all grappling with trying to make ends meet.

As I said at the very start, we are not opposing the bill. It is a bill that is rather tedious, but it is a bill we need to have.

Paul HAMER (Box Hill) (18:09): That was a sad note to end on. This was described as a ‘tedious’ bill; I think it is a very exciting bill.

Members interjecting.

Paul HAMER: Look how many members have been coming in, obviously just to listen to this contribution. I am sure it will be riveting. I will try and keep it as exciting as possible. The bill does make a number of regulatory reforms. I think there are –

Sam Groth: Fifty-four.

Paul HAMER: Fifty-four of them, that is right. Thank you, member for Nepean. There are some very important regulations in relation to monetary units, the Essential Services Commission, the meat industry and the seafood industry – which have been talked about quite at length by a number of members – and of course the Food Act 1984, the Regional Development Victoria Act 2002 and many, many others. This is part of the ongoing regulatory reform agenda that has been a hallmark of this government over its close to 10 years. There are obviously other elements of the government’s regulatory reform agenda, which include the Business Acceleration Fund, rapid reviews of regulatory settings, better approvals processes for regulators and businesses and establishing an economic growth commissioner to undertake inquiries into impediments to economic growth. This is obviously something that I have become quite interested in since being given the role of Parliamentary Secretary for Economic Development. Identifying these opportunities is obviously a critical part of future success in our state.

I want to reflect on the savings that will be driven by these changes in regulation. They were dismissed quite flippantly by members of the opposition a number of times. They were talking about the total amount being \$2.6 million in savings, and that was rejected because the number of small businesses is so great that it is not even the value of a cup of coffee. It did remind me of the famous repeal day – some people might remember this – back in the first term of the Abbott government. It was launched to much fanfare, but only –

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! There is too much audible conversation in the chamber.

Paul HAMER: I know everyone is very excited about the bill, particularly the member for Morwell, and more and more people are coming to see this important contribution, and I thank them for it. As I was saying, the famous repeal day was launched with much fanfare back in the first term of the Abbott government, but all of the savings totalled only \$13 million and most of it was to repeal outdated and redundant legislation. For all the talk about how effective all of this reform is, any regulatory reform that can assist with red tape and make it easier for small businesses to operate is obviously something that is going to be beneficial to the state.

As I was saying, these reforms are relatively simple and straightforward reforms, but the continuing fine-tuning of legislation is something that is the responsibility of our Parliament and of the government. It is essential to maintaining the Victorian government’s vision of a high-performing state and a regulatory system that supports increased productivity, makes it easier to do business in Victoria and protects consumers, community health, safety and the environment.

I just want to touch a little bit on the reforms that we have made over the last 10 years. The reforms to regulations include liquor, environmental protection, essential services, electricity, building and construction, health, planning, consumer affairs, fee pricing, owners corporations and more. I want to reflect on one of the regulations in legislation that we changed in relation to the liquor licensing laws that was specifically relevant to my electorate of Box Hill, and that was to remove the dry zone that had been operational.

Members interjecting.

Paul HAMER: Minister for Health, you could not find a place to have an alcoholic beverage without getting some food.

The SPEAKER: Order! The time has arrived for the joint sitting to choose a person to hold the seat in the Legislative Council rendered vacant by the resignation of Dr Matthew Bach MLC.

Sitting suspended 6:15 pm until 6:22 pm.

Paul HAMER: Obviously I was going so well that even more members, including our friends from the Legislative Council, have come to join us. And as I was referring to briefly before, an important reform agenda in our previous term was actually removing the dry zones from the areas of Box Hill and the old city of Camberwell, which now means that you can order a drink without having to order a meal, as you can anywhere else in Victoria, which is fantastic.

There is another important regulatory reform that we have made as part of these reforms, and that is about simplifying Victoria's food safety requirements, which will save 25,000 businesses nearly 40,000 days per year in preparing and managing their food safety programs. Now, I do want to give a shout-out to the food businesses in Box Hill, because they are fantastic. I know the Minister for Small Business has come out; every Friday we try to go out to a local Box Hill restaurant and sample the fantastic dumplings. We have got many, many members; I know the member for Croydon wants to come and join me for dumplings, because why? They are the best dumplings in Melbourne, and I will not take any other complaints or issues with that, they are definitely the best dumplings. The breadth of the Chinese cuisine that is available in Box Hill is just fantastic. A lot of people that are migrants; they come to Australia and start food businesses and they are in many ways the heart and soul of our community.

Many of these restaurateurs and many of the other business owners have joined forces and become part of the Asian Business Association of Whitehorse, which is a fantastic organisation. I think it is about 30 years strong this year. In the lead-up to Chinese New Year, Lunar New Year, I do want to give a special shout-out to the Asian Business Association of Whitehorse because they really do a fantastic job not only with the local businesses that they represent but the entire community. They do try and get out and provide information to the community about what they are doing and how to grow their businesses. Particularly at the moment, when we have got the Suburban Rail Loop project underway in Box Hill, they are just making sure that the business community have the information that they need during the construction disruption.

A member interjected.

Paul HAMER: Yes, as the minister said, it is a fantastic festival. Every year the Asian Business Association of Whitehorse do host the Lunar New Year festival right in the heart of Box Hill, and each year close to 100,000 people turn up. It is the biggest and best new year festival in Victoria, and I know I will be joining the Leader of the Opposition there. He will be very proud to be out in Box Hill in a couple of weeks time.

A member interjected.

Paul HAMER: That is right, it is an amazing time. It just shows the strength of our local business community and particularly the Asian business community in Box Hill. Anything that we are able to

do to assist those small business operators and the business communities that they create is of benefit to the state.

Unlike what someone was saying in referring to this bill as a tedious bill, I know everyone is in the chamber – the whole chamber has arrived for this bill – because they have listened to what I have had to say and they have realised how important this bill is. They realise how significant it is to the restaurateurs and the businesses in Box Hill, and I could not commend the bill to the house in a more wholehearted fashion.

Jade BENHAM (Mildura) (18:27): How lovely that everybody is here for the thrilling speech I have prepared about this regulatory reform. I was going to go through it piece by piece in thrilling detail –

A member: Fine detail.

Jade BENHAM: fine detail with a fine-tooth comb – in the approximately 2 minutes I will have. Usually when you put yourself down the speaking list, everyone has tuned out, so I had better actually perform.

A member: Read your notes.

Jade BENHAM: I will not read my notes. I listened to all of the speakers performing today.

A member: No, you did not.

Jade BENHAM: No, I have not. Member for Kew, I listened to you describe this omnibus bill in thrilling detail, and I got a lot from it. Actually, the member for Murray Plains I did listen to, particularly around the small business regulatory reforms and the cutting of the red tape, as a former business owner well aware of how hard it is to own and operate a business. I see it day after day, being in a border community in Mildura on the Murray River. We see people every day selling their businesses in Victoria, having exactly the same market, going over the river and setting up shop over there with far less red tape, far less taxes and far more support. They get a lot of love in Far West ‘outback’ New South Wales. To us it is a mecca and a city in the far north-western state in Sunraysia and that bit over the river.

But it happens every day, so I was paying attention to the thrilling omnibus bill that is the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023 today. When we talk about the savings from cutting the red tape that sometimes strangles small businesses in Victoria, when the government says it is going to save \$2.6 million, it sounds like a lot. But given that there are 710,000 businesses in Victoria, that adds up to about \$3.66 per business per year. Even in Mildura that is not going to buy me a cup of coffee. It certainly will not buy me and my staff a cup of coffee.

Business interrupted under resolution of house of 6 February.

Members

Member for Mulgrave

Inaugural speech

Eden FOSTER (Mulgrave) (18:30): Before I begin, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. I extend my deep respect to their elders past and present, recognising their enduring connection to this land which has been a place of cultural, spiritual and social significance for millennia. I would also like to pay my respects and acknowledge the land on which the Mulgrave electorate sits, the land of the Bunurong people, and pay my respects to all First Nations people here today.

The Mulgrave electorate is situated on lands with a rich cultural history and significance to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is important to reflect on the ancient traditions, wisdom and custodianship of the land held by the First Nations people. Their profound connection to the land, their resilience and their contributions to the diverse tapestry of our nation are integral to the shared history of our nation and our state of Victoria. In representing the people of Mulgrave, I commit to fostering a spirit of reconciliation and collaboration, working towards a future that respects, values and honours the rights and perspectives of First Nations people. I am proud to be part of a government that engages in a meaningful and respectful process of treaty making with Aboriginal Victorians.

I wish to thank the wonderful people of the Mulgrave district for entrusting me this opportunity and honour to represent them in our Victorian Parliament and to be part of the Allan Labor government. It is so truly humbling to be standing in this chamber chosen to serve my local community, and I commit myself to representing all constituents of Mulgrave and listening to their needs. Having served as a local councillor and mayor of the City of Greater Dandenong, I have witnessed firsthand the strength and resilience of our community. Now as their representative in the Victorian state Parliament I am eager to continue advocating for the issues that matter most to them, from local infrastructure improvements to enhanced education and healthcare services. I am dedicated to championing policies that will contribute to the wellbeing and prosperity of Mulgrave.

My journey to this point started with my mum Patsy, who immigrated with her family to Australia from Kolkata, India, in 1969 seeking better opportunities. Over a decade later she met my late father Robert and without planning I came into existence. My mum was ahead of her time really. She did not need a partner in her life to complete our family. We were the start of a non-traditional family, just the two of us. In 1982 my mum courageously decided to move to Springvale as a single parent with an 18-month-old child in tow. During a period marked by challenging 16 per cent interest rates she purchased our first home, a humble, modest two-bedroom unit conveniently located near public transport. Having no car, our activities were confined to the schedules of buses and trains, and as a child I understood the significance of an affordable and comprehensive public transport system. For this reason, I take pride in being part of a Victorian state government that invests in public transport, whether it involves the elimination of level crossings for enhanced train frequency and a safer transport network or initiatives like the Metro Tunnel transforming our travel experience into Melbourne's CBD. I will continue to advocate for accessible and affordable public transport in Victoria and the seat of Mulgrave.

My upbringing, though, was never easy but it was certainly one filled with love and support. My mum worked tirelessly to pay off the mortgage, rushing from her city job to ensure she was home for me after child care. Juggling work and family life on her own was always challenging, to the extent that she was given an ultimatum by her employer: choose your family or choose your job. The pressure she faced to try to maintain both led to an unfortunate workplace injury, and it was the invaluable support of her union that aided my mum through this ordeal.

Despite her efforts, my mum struggled to sustain the work–life balance and went on to a single parent benefit and later, due to health issues, a disability support pension. Our lives were lived day by day with a constant focus on meeting mortgage and bill obligations, and even at the age of seven I found myself with a calculator in hand, helping my mum crunch the numbers to manage the weekly budget. These early experiences witnessing my mum's strength, determination and 'never give up' attitude have shaped me into the woman I am today, cultivating my resilience, courage and, most importantly, my sense of compassion for those facing adversity. It has shaped my values of fairness and equity, of social justice and acceptance of all.

Growing up I often felt a sense of embarrassment that I was different. I was biracial, came from a broken home, lived in a modest house without a car and never went on holidays like the other kids, but looking back, I was truly fortunate. I had a roof over my head, I had a safe and loving environment to call home and, most importantly, I had the loving presence of my mum. And thanks to the Labor Party values, I had access to good public education, affordable public transport and a public and free

healthcare system. Without these fair and equitable values and policies, I would not be standing here before you today.

These values have also been shaped by my faith. As a Catholic my faith holds significant importance in my life. Like approximately two-thirds of the Mulgrave electorate who also acknowledge a religious affiliation, faith has been a source of great solace and fortitude in moments of challenge. It has also taught me the importance of social justice, compassion, fairness and equality – values that I have aligned greatly with the Labor Party values.

Like me, three-quarters of individuals in the Mulgrave district have at least one parent born overseas, reflecting the cultural diversity of the community. The electorate was once home to the Enterprise Migrant Hostel in Springvale, which housed new arrivals to Australia in motel-style accommodation from 1969 to 1992. The hostel welcomed over 30,000 individuals from 58 nations, contributing to the formation of the diverse community we have today not only in Springvale but in surrounding suburbs.

Each suburb of the Mulgrave district has its own unique charm and character. Springvale is a cultural melting pot with lively shopping strips and an abundance of great food, exhibiting the beauty of multicultural Australia. It is renowned for its South-East Asian cuisine and is home to one of the largest communities of Victorians with Vietnamese heritage. Then we have Noble Park North, a sliver of Dandenong North and of course Noble Park, where I attended school and now live. They are known for their diverse communities, recreational spaces and their proximity to amenities – and I might add it has the best skate park in Victoria. There is Wheelers Hill with its beautiful parks and open spaces and the suburb of Mulgrave, characterised by a blend of residential and commercial spaces and home to Waverley Park estate, once known as VFL Park, now home to 1400 new dwellings for 3500 people and of course the Hawthorn Football Club.

The Mulgrave electorate is an inclusive and vibrant place to live, work and play. Embracing South-East Asian and South Asian communities, including individuals of Vietnamese, Chinese and Indian heritage, and European communities, including English, Greek and Italian, Mulgrave represents a vibrant tapestry of cultural diversity and harmony. Having grown up in the suburbs of the Mulgrave electorate, I have had the unique privilege of witnessing the evolution and transformation of these areas over the past four decades. I have lived in a community that has helped forge my identity and continues to shape my deep and ongoing appreciation for the diverse and dynamic community I call home.

My own Indian heritage, stemming from my mother's side of the family, has borne some influence on who I am today, including my love for cricket and curry, my hardworking values and my passion for democracy. But it is also a reminder of the past impact colonialism has had on India and for many Anglo Indians like my mum. As a daughter of an Anglo-Indian mother, I have experienced the loss of language and loss of culture. I look back now at my early years and long to have had traditional Indian dance lessons, to be able to speak the language of my mother's homeland and cook Indian dishes that go beyond prepackaged options. The expanding diversity within the Mulgrave electorate has fuelled my curiosity and eagerness to delve deeper into my cultural heritage, and I take pride in identifying as a woman of Indian heritage and – as I have been informed – the first woman with Indian roots to serve in the Legislative Assembly in Victoria. My election to the Legislative Assembly not only contributes to the cultural diversity within the Victorian Parliament, mirroring our state's rich cultural tapestry, but also stands as a milestone for gender equality. A century after women were given the right to stand for election in the lower house, my victory in the Mulgrave seat achieves gender parity in our state's Parliament for the first time, and I am so proud to be part of an Allan Labor government that continues to work hard for gender equality.

My early life experiences set me on a path of helping others, a journey I pursued through my career as a clinical psychologist. My early work involved supporting individuals with substance use issues, which led me to offering expert witness opinions to a Victorian Parliament inquiry into the supply and use of methamphetamines in Victoria in 2014. This experience fuelled my interest in working with

young people for prevention and early intervention, leading me to the education sector. Now drawing upon my experience and a genuine desire to aid those in need, I aim to contribute to the broader Victorian community and my local community through my new role as member for Mulgrave and a member of the Allan Labor government. I take great pride in being part of a Labor government that conducted the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, actively listening to the needs and perspectives of those with firsthand experience to implement meaningful recommendations. This has meant the current Victorian government has made the largest investment into mental health ever made by an Australian government.

But I cannot speak about the district of Mulgrave without acknowledging the great work of my predecessor and our state's former Premier, Daniel Andrews. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to him for his outstanding contributions to the Mulgrave electorate and the wider Victorian community over the past 21 years as member for Mulgrave and past nine years as our state's Premier. His exemplary leadership and unwavering commitment to public service has left a remarkable legacy for our state and the electorate of Mulgrave. From championing crucial local infrastructure projects, such as level crossing removals, and improvements to local schools and education, to enhancing our health services, including the recently built Victorian Heart Hospital, to policies that enhance the quality of life, his hard work and dedication has set a commendable standard with – as I am regularly reminded – big shoes to fill. But I am honoured to follow in his footsteps as member for Mulgrave and build upon the great work already achieved in my electorate. His legacy of service is an inspiration, and I am committed to continuing his great work in my own way – and in my stilettos, I might add – for the betterment of Mulgrave and all its constituents.

I certainly would not be in this position if it were not for the support of my local community, friends and family. I want to take this opportunity to thank them now. Julian Hill, the federal member for Bruce, a mentor, good friend and comrade – his guidance, honesty and support are greatly appreciated and valued, and without his faith in my abilities, and encouragement, I would not be present in this chamber today. Minister for Government Services, Minister for Consumer Affairs and Minister for Public and Active Transport the Honourable Gabrielle Williams, as well as a member for South-Eastern Metropolitan Region in the other place Lee Tarlamis – their guidance, support, mentorship and friendship have been invaluable, not only during my campaign but also in my previous roles in local government. I also want to thank senior party figures, including Alan Griffin, for their support during the preselection process. I wish to express my gratitude and appreciation to the Premier and my parliamentary colleagues for regularly taking time out of their busy schedules to accompany me on the campaign trail.

A big thankyou to my campaign team Connor Grant, Riley Eggleton and Walter Koch; Labor head office; the many ALP members and supporters who assisted me with doorknocking, phone calls and street stalls; Young Labor and EMILY's List volunteers; volunteers from the great union movement; the Mulgrave branch members; and all Labor volunteers who went out of their way to help me, along with various organisations and community leaders. Their hard work and commitment assisted me greatly through the campaign. To my staff – I cannot forget you: you have been my rock and sounding board as I establish my electorate office.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, particularly my mum, who has made many sacrifices in her life to give me a wonderful future and has supported my accomplishments. Thank you to my friends and my local church for their support and encouragement and of course to my local community and the Mulgrave constituents.

I pledge my commitment to the people of Mulgrave and thank them from the bottom of my heart for the opportunity to represent them here in our Parliament of Victoria. They took the little girl from Springvale to Spring Street, and for that I am truly grateful and commit myself to working hard to be their voice. Thank you.

Members applauded.

*Bills***Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023***Second reading***Debate resumed.**

Jade BENHAM (Mildura) (18:52): I have still got, well, not even half the audience that was around for my thrilling contribution on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill earlier, but I will return to talk about this piece of omnibus legislation. I know everyone had wanted to stick around and hear me talk about some of the technicalities of this bill that amends 14 acts over 10 portfolios. There is a bit to it. I will not go through it all because that would take substantially longer than 7 minutes and the member for Kew did a wonderful job of that earlier today for 30 minutes and probably could have gone even longer than that. However, as an attempt to try to cut some of the red tape that strangles businesses, as I was alluding to earlier, in the state of Victoria and that makes it the most expensive state to do business, this piece of reform legislation does fall a little bit short.

There are a few amendments, however – I like to err on the side of positivity most of the time – that actually do make some positive changes, such as supporting technology. Obviously legislation needs to keep up with technology. The amendments to the Meat Industry Act 1993 and the Seafood Safety Act 2003 and the licensing technicalities will benefit probably the department, the officers, the bureaucrats within the department by bringing it all together and streamlining that process rather than helping the industry and the operators themselves. However, whether it will help some of those businesses operate their enterprises is yet to be seen. But the \$3.66 that they will save each year I am sure will go a long way to putting an extra prawn on one plate, perhaps, or maybe even not really. I do not even know what the price of prawns is at the moment. Anyway, I digress.

A member interjected.

Jade BENHAM: I live a long, long way from the ocean. However, there is some really good sushi in my part of the world considering we are so far inland, but again I digress. Some of the government's claims of the red tape reduction included, as I was stating before, the \$2.6 million – we do not hear millions bragged about by the government very often anymore. That M has been changed to a B. It is not impressive unless there is a B there. Clearly when you divide it over the 710,000 businesses that it is divided amongst that is \$3.66 that they will get every year. I mean in my day – that ages me, doesn't it – \$3.60 would buy you an enormous bag of mixed lollies or some hot chips. I do not think it would even do that now. So surely we could do better than that when we talk about red tape reform.

We hear every day about how small businesses in particular need red tape reform. They need more of it, but they need it so it actually benefits operators and small business owners in this state rather than the departments that are causing all of the hurdles with regard to it.

Victoria is the only state in this country that actually went backward in terms of small business operators in 2023. We have lost 7600 small businesses in Victoria over the past 12 months, and like I mentioned earlier, I can literally see them – physically see them – jumping the river. They have got the same market there. All of the infrastructure and all of the resources might be located in Victoria and all of the customers – most of the customers, I should say – are still located in Victoria. They can take Victorian money over to New South Wales where it is far less taxed and it is far easier to set up a business and far easier to get licensing – far easier than getting through all of that bureaucratic red tape that Victoria has – and they reap the benefits, with Victorians' money. Like I said, their customers are in Victoria. We can physically see some of those in border communities right along the Murray River from Mildura to the electorate of Benambra. They are literally jumping the river to make things easier on themselves.

I know how hard it is to operate a business in this state. It is really quite difficult, and some will pay for it long after the doors have shut because of the unfavourable conditions. There will be tax bills. I

am sure the member for Morwell knows this, having previously been a business owner, as well as the member for Narracan – even though he is not here – and the member for Shepparton. Having had businesses, you know that just because you close the door on a business in Victoria it does not mean that you stop paying the price for trying to contribute to the economic landscape or for being one of those entrepreneurs that might have had a business idea that lasted longer than you expected it to, as in my case.

According to the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) *Cost and Ease of Doing Business in Victoria* report – and I know the member for Gippsland East and probably even the member for Gippsland South mentioned it – of the members that were surveyed for that report, more than half of those businesses with operations elsewhere in Australia or overseas said it that is harder to do business in Victoria than anywhere else. Less than half of those businesses felt that they were getting fair value for money from the taxes they pay, and the government just keeps adding more. Only 7 per cent of businesses – 7 per cent, not 70 – think the government is doing a good job of reducing the cost of doing business in Victoria; maybe that might add up to ‘fair’ with an extra 3½ dollars. Only one in five business owners feel supported with their mental health. Forty-four per cent of businesses think the government service waiting times are getting worse. Hopefully these little technical changes that are supposed to will cut the red tape and streamline processes and provisions. We will see. And 85 per cent of businesses surveyed for the VCCI *Cost and Ease of Doing Business in Victoria* report said that regulatory culture was a barrier to doing business in Victoria. So we see them every day jumping the river, building new premises and engaging local businesses in New South Wales, some in Victoria. They are physically building new businesses on the New South Wales side, while the infrastructure is not there, so that they can operate interstate. It is really quite alarming.

When we talk about red tape and regulatory reforms we actually need to see some commitment to actually making a difference rather than the thin, token effort that we see here. We will see. Like I said, there are some positive aspects to this bill, but how much positivity and how much they will actually benefit businesses we are yet to see. I hardly think that \$3.66 is enough to benefit business.

Meng Heang TAK (Clarinda) (18:59): I am honoured to join this side of the house to speak on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023. The bill is the second regulatory reform omnibus bill that is –

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member will have the call when we return to the bill, but I am required by sessional orders to interrupt business now.

Business interrupted under sessional orders.

Adjournment

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The question is:

That the house now adjourns.

Flood mitigation

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (19:00): (501) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Water. Minister, communities across the Murrindindi shire continue to suffer from what are becoming regular flood events impacting their properties, their homes and their lives. The action I seek is for the minister to put in place an effective flood-monitoring network across the district and to assign consistent responsibilities for water management and flood mitigation duties in rural Victoria.

The Yea River experienced a large flood event on 8 and 9 January this year which saw the Yea township cut off and isolated for a period. The lack of effective real-time gauging at strategic locations across the catchment meant that incident managers, emergency service staff and locals alike were unaware of the escalating situation. This resulted in the community being left in a very vulnerable position. If not for the efforts of the SES and CFA and other locals further up the catchment sharing observations across the area, the situation may have been a lot worse. The Murrindindi shire has a

number of large waterways with significant catchment areas, the largest being the Goulburn River, but other significant waterways such as the Yea River, Acheron River, Rubicon River, King Parrot Creek and Murrindindi River exist and contribute to flow conditions.

The Bureau of Meteorology relies on rain and river gauge information to issue flood warnings across Victoria. The number of rainfall and flow gauging sites across the district is low, and there are many areas and waterways where there is no gauging taking place at all. The lack of data available in these areas limits flood mitigation planning and warnings that might otherwise be put in place if a broader network existed. Given the large scale of the area there can be significant variation in the rainfall that falls across the district, creating a variety of flood outcomes. The intensity of the rainfall in the recent January event came from tributaries that do not have adequate flood gauging to inform the incident control centre or the bureau, leaving both without crucial data needed to manage the event effectively.

The current gauging network needs to be evaluated and expanded with additional real-time telemetry stations as necessary to provide a comprehensive flood response. The gauges that do exist in the region are managed by different agencies, including the bureau, Goulburn Murray Water, the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action and local councils. Waterway responsibilities and flood management roles, such as flood risk identification, flood mitigation and flood planning, are split between different agencies. This too can lead to an inconsistent approach. A more coordinated and strategic approach is required to enable effective catchment management in the region. In short, water management and flood mitigation are fragmented in rural Victoria, with mixed agency responsibilities compared to the metropolitan model, where Melbourne Water is responsible.

JC Donath Reserve, Reservoir

Nathan LAMBERT (Preston) (19:03): (502) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Community Sport, who has just left the chamber, and the action I seek is for the minister to join me in visiting the Keon Park Football Club pavilion at JC Donath Reserve. As the minister will know, JC Donath Reserve is a large expanse of sporting fields in northern Reservoir. It is home to a lot of clubs, including the Donath Cricket Club, the Keon Park Cricket Club, the Keon Park Stars, Reservoir United, the Keon Park Tennis Club and the Keon Park Football Club, and I want to acknowledge all the amazing volunteers who keep those clubs ticking over, including Terry Brooks, Nami Yilmaz, Patrick Wood, Jacqui Mackertich and many others. At the moment the Nepalese Association of Victoria are playing their annual NAV cricket cup at the grounds, and I know a number of the teams competing are from the member for Narre Warren South's part of the world. Well done to Alok Paudel and Raju Adhikari and all those who organised the event, and good luck to the teams in that tournament.

Unfortunately a lot of the facilities at JC Donath Reserve are showing their age, especially the pavilions. They are Darebin council facilities, but as the minister knows, the state Labor government made a commitment at the last election to help upgrade the Keon Park Football Club pavilion and specifically to build female-friendly change rooms there. Of course this announcement is part of this government's ongoing important work to support our female and gender-diverse athletes, a very important body of work that has seen 235 projects now completed at an overall value of over \$250 million.

But we would love the minister to come out and just have a bit of a chat about the timing of that funding for the Keon Park Football Club's pavilion. There has been a suggestion that Darebin council might contribute some further money to allow for a bigger upgrade. That would be great, but it might have the effect of substantially delaying the time before the club gets to see some upgraded facilities. We are hoping to chat to the minister about maybe a two-stage or modular approach to the project that will ensure that first tranche of funding gets on the ground faster. We were up there the other day talking to Jess Halabi from the club and a number of the senior women players, to their hardworking club secretary Theo Tsouras and to Ged Kearney, our local federal member. I think everyone was in

agreement that we would like, if possible, to do something – certainly sooner rather than later – for the club’s women athletes.

We thank the minister for her consideration of this matter, and we thank her more broadly for her ongoing work supporting community sport and supporting women in sport.

Flood recovery

Jade BENHAM (Mildura) (19:06): (503) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Emergency Services, and the action I seek is for Emergency Recovery Victoria to finish the final scope of works as outlined and completed to standard for Mr Kim Gathercole, who has had communications with the department but still finds his inundated property unlivable.

Let me give you some background. After the 2022 floods Mr Gathercole, like many others, faced the daunting task of rebuilding his entire life. A scope of works was diligently outlined in collaboration with Make It Safe, a reputable agency entrusted with the responsibility of restoring normalcy to those affected by the floods. Unfortunately the reality on the ground for Mr Gathercole paints a very, very different picture. Make It Safe is now exerting undue pressure on him to sign off on incomplete and substandard works and unsafe works. The discrepancies are glaring. There are walls out by 20 millimetres. Anyone that is a tradie knows 20 millimetres is a lot. Anything that is not millimetre perfect, in my opinion, is not okay. There is an electrical box that has been exposed to the elements, and a final inspection is nowhere in sight. They wanted to sign it off. However, when rains came again a few weeks ago, they left the power box unsafe, inundated and with no power to the house. Clearly it is not ready for final inspection. With the location, I am not an electrician, so I will not comment on that.

The gravity of the situation is exacerbated, though, by the absence of local trades. These tradies that are doing the job are coming from out of town with no skin in the game and no care factor, and it is leading to huge cost blowouts. We see this all the time. There are logistical challenges as well, and they are therefore putting profit before safety and accountability. Mr Gathercole did have it inspected, and the email that he received back was following a site visit to visually check the existing distribution switchboard. This is not the half-plastered houses that are out by 20 millimetres. There were seven clauses of the Australian standard AS/NZS 3000:2018 Amd 2 Electrical Installations (Wiring Rules) as to why in the expert’s opinion the switchboard should be replaced in accordance with the scope of works. There are photos, there is documentation, there is a long line of emails and Mr Gathercole is having a hard time getting a resolution to this, which should be pretty straightforward. I ask the minister to action this asap.

School breakfast clubs

John MULLAHY (Glen Waverley) (19:09): (504) My adjournment matter is directed to the Minister for Education, and the action I seek is for the education minister to join me at a school breakfast club in the Glen Waverley electorate to serve brekkie to our local students. In recent weeks we have surpassed a great milestone, with over 40 million meals served to Victorian kids thanks to the Allan Labor government’s breakfast clubs. It is a huge milestone, because breakfast for Victorian schoolkids is more than just a yummy meal; it means students improve their concentration levels, they achieve higher academic results and socialise better with their peers. It is an absolute no-brainer, and I am proud to be part of the Allan Labor government that is funding it. But it has not always been this way, because back when the Liberals were in government they cut the education maintenance allowance, cutting support for Victorian students and their families. But we are backing it, because kids in the Glen Waverley district deserve nothing less. It is great news for families too, as we support them by lowering the cost of living.

But it is not the only way we are delivering that relief. Our terrific schools in the Glen Waverley district also host Smile Squad to deliver free dental care for kids. There is also our Glasses for Kids program delivering free specs for our young Victorians as well. Combined these programs are saving Victorian

families hundreds while ensuring kids get the best possible education with full bellies, healthy teeth and focused eyes.

I am paraphrasing Andrew Clark from *The Breakfast Club* here when I say the Victorian Liberals could disappear forever and it wouldn't make a difference – I am sure it was something like that. Only Labor is committed to supporting Victorian families with the cost of living.

Extractive industries

Richard RIORDAN (Polwarth) (19:10): (505) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Planning, and the action I seek from the minister is for her to write a letter to me explaining recent amendment VC219, which is a planning scheme amendment that was prepared by the minister and altered again last year for extractive industries. What I would like the minister to write in this letter is what provisions she has made – or the Department of Transport and Planning has made – for existing households and landowners who are currently adjacent to an extractive industry site.

We all know that we are in a bit of a resource crisis here in Victoria and that we very much need building materials, whether it is rock, sand, gravel or whatever it may be. In this case it is actually an important sand mine in my electorate. The matter that is now affecting my community is that while these homes and houses have been in place for 30, 40 or 50 years and have coexisted quite well with the sand mining operation, the residents are now aware that there is a new overlay process, and these overlays are becoming a little bit of a weapon of choice of this government. Rather than dealing with issues of the day, they put overlays on them. These overlays across my electorate have affected people adjacent to wind farms, they have affected people adjacent to the Big Housing Build homes and now they are affecting people adjacent to extractive industries, and in this case the sand mine.

The question that, hopefully, the minister will answer when she writes her letter to me is: if there is a bushfire – and in this case the sand mine is in a bushfire-prone area – and these homes are affected by fire and people suffer the loss of a home, will they in fact be able to rebuild their home? This is an important question, because as it currently stands the sand mining company has the ability to override and refuse a permit for any building works whatsoever within 500 metres of their boundary. This affects some 65 homes in my electorate immediately adjacent to this.

It is really important to know, and in the letter that the minister will write I hope she can highlight to me what planning has been made for this and what advice the minister has received on how to deal with events that are beyond the control of the neighbours but that will greatly affect them, because it is an untenable situation that someone could lose their home through no fault of their own and then have no capacity to rebuild because a third party then wants to stop them. So I really look forward to receiving that letter for my constituents.

TAFE funding

Gary MAAS (Narre Warren South) (19:13): (506) The adjournment matter I wish to raise is for the attention of the Minister for Skills and TAFE in the other place, and it is regarding the free TAFE program. The action I seek is that the minister provide an update on how the free TAFE program assists my constituents in Narre Warren South.

Free TAFE was initiated by the state Labor government back in 2019, as we understand the importance of education in providing pathways for life and employment. Many in my electorate attend the Chisholm Institute in Berwick, and they appreciate the opportunity to embark on a meaningful career or upskill and re-skill for the next stage of their career. Over the years the free TAFE program has expanded to include more and more courses in high-priority areas, with nursing, community services, accounting and bookkeeping and building and construction being amongst the most popular. I understand that there is now cooperation with the federal Labor government as well under the National Skills Agreement, which is providing more than 55,000 new fee-free TAFE and vocational training places.

Free TAFE just changes lives – it is a fact – and it is breaking down barriers to learning and contributing to the skills and workforce that Victoria needs now and into the future. I know from the incredible community feedback that families in my electorate really appreciate the opportunities that free TAFE provides, especially for those on low incomes, unemployed people, those with disabilities and women too. The Allan Labor government is committed to the continued rebuilding of TAFE after its decimation by the last coalition government. I know that 156,000 students of free TAFE so far appreciate the chance to boost their employability, earning potential, self-belief and confidence. I really look forward to sharing the minister's response with my community.

Housing

Gabrielle DE VIETRI (Richmond) (19:15): (507) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Consumer Affairs, and the action that I seek is for the minister to provide a time line for the implementation of renting reforms announced six months ago. It has now been six months since Labor announced its housing statement, which included a number of welcome reforms for renters that Labor promised would ease the crisis. But since then the renting crisis has only got worse: rents continue to rise, ceilings continue to fall, the mould is spreading and renters are still being evicted for no reason. They are still waiting for months if not years to have their cases heard at VCAT, and yet there is no sight of these reforms.

Victorian renters need help now, and at the very least they deserve clarity. So I ask the minister to provide a time line for when they are going to act on the announcements that they made six months ago, specifically when and how Labor is planning to fulfil promises to (1) restrict rent increases between successive fixed-term rental agreements, (2) ban all types of rental bidding, (3) establish rental dispute resolution in Victoria, (4) introduce a portable rental bond scheme, (5) extend notice of rent increases and notice to vacate periods to 90 days, (6) introduce mandatory training and licensing for real estate agents, property managers, owners, corporation managers and conveyancers, (7) make rental applications easier and protect renters' personal information and (8) deliver a rental stress support package.

Monbulk electorate small business

Daniela DE MARTINO (Monbulk) (19:17): (508) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Small Business, and the action I seek is for the minister to join me to meet with some of the fantastic small business owners in my electorate of Monbulk. Small businesses are the heart of our local economies across my electorate. As a former small business owner myself, I understand how challenging and rewarding operating a small business can be. Thankfully, the Allan Labor government recognises the importance of supporting our small businesses and actively provides a range of help, such as the Small Business Bus, which I was so pleased to have in Tecoma and Upwey last year. I know my community are very much looking forward to the bus's next visit.

The Business Victoria website also hosts a wealth of information, from grant opportunities to skills development, advice and even a 65-page human resource manual template, because small businesses do not have their own HR department. All of these initiatives assist small businesses to help them thrive. I look forward to warmly welcoming the minister to Monbulk to meet with some of our wonderful small business owners.

Evelyn electorate drainage

Bridget VALLENCE (Evelyn) (19:18): (509) The Lilydale, Coldstream, Yering and Yarra Valley communities suffered significant flooding again last month, late December and early January, with inundation leading to flooding of properties, roads, communities and sport facilities and exposing inadequate drainage infrastructure. My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Water, and the action I seek is for the government to urgently upgrade the Lilydale open drain and other state-owned drain infrastructure in the Evelyn electorate.

Over a year ago I wrote to Melbourne Water requesting the Lilydale open drain be upgraded to mitigate flooding of homes and streets in this vicinity, including Nimblefoot Way, Delta Close, Nelson Road, Cave Hill Road, Winnetka Drive, The Gateway, Morokai Grove and others. Melbourne Water admitted to me it was responsible for ensuring the open drain conveys water effectively and is responsible for maintaining the hydraulic function of the drain and culverts, but this is not happening. The hydraulic functioning of the drain and culverts is compromised, and water is not being conveyed effectively because the culverts are always full of weeds, rubbish and other debris, which not only makes this an extreme safety hazard but has residents living in fear of being flooded every time it rains.

The Lilydale open drain and culvert is clearly no longer fit for purpose. It is a waste of money and a nonsense for contractors to reactively clear the drain after complaints to Yarra Ranges council or Melbourne Water, only for the weeds to regrow and the rubbish to pile up again. I am aware Yarra Ranges council owns the drain and is responsible for maintaining the built structure of the culvert at Nelson Road, Lilydale, but unfortunately council has so far refused to address the drainage and flooding issue adequately for our community, despite me making representations to them for three or four years now. Surely the state government and Melbourne Water have an ability to require Yarra Ranges council to fulfil its obligations to upgrade the drain and culvert, replace the twin pipes with a larger capacity single-span crossing or single large-box culvert, to reduce flooding risk and to address the known problems that Melbourne Water outlined in a letter to me nearly 12 months ago. Otherwise the state government and Melbourne Water have no chance of meeting their own obligations to ensure the hydraulic functioning of the drain and for it to convey water effectively.

Hundreds of residents in Lilydale – indeed thousands across the Yarra Valley – continue to be impacted by the inaction of council and the state government to ensure drainage in our region is adequate and fit for purpose. I wish to acknowledge the hundreds of residents who have raised this issue, and I pay tribute to the Lilydale Flood Watch group, in particular Michelle de Lima, Jodie Thexton, Lyette Stegert, Natasha Archibald, Deborah Richardson and the many other residents who continue to work tirelessly in their advocacy to get this drainage and flooding issue fixed on behalf of our local community.

Endeavour Hills ambulance station

Belinda WILSON (Narre Warren North) (19:21): (510) My adjournment matter is directed to the Minister for Ambulance Services and is regarding the Ambulance Victoria station in Endeavour Hills. The action that I seek is that the minister come to visit the station to meet all the hardworking first responders that work there. The paramedics and staff at the station do incredible work in our area, providing essential healthcare services for those that most need it in our electorate. Our government is working really hard to recruit paramedics to assist our emergency services. Since 2014 we have doubled the paramedic workforce. This is because the Allan Labor government is committed to backing our ambos, because we know what they do to save lives. I am looking forward to visiting the station with the minister very soon.

Responses

Colin BROOKS (Bundoora – Minister for Development Victoria, Minister for Precincts, Minister for Creative Industries) (19:22): The member for Eildon raised a matter for the Minister for Water to put in place flood monitoring and water management in the Murrindindi shire, and I will ensure that the minister has that matter brought to their attention. The member for Preston raised a matter for the Minister for Community Sport in relation to her joining the member to visit Keon Park Football Club, specifically the JC Donath Reserve with some great local clubs, to inspect and talk about the new female-friendly changing facilities that have been committed to as part of our election commitments. The member for Mildura raised a matter for the Minister for Emergency Services in relation to Emergency Recovery Victoria completing final scope of works for a Mr Gathercole. I think I have got the name correct. The member caught my attention when she spoke about the Australian standards wiring rules. That is fantastic.

The member for Glen Waverley raised a matter for the Minister for Education to join him at a school breakfast club in the Glen Waverley electorate to serve breakfast to local school students. What a fantastic idea. The member for Polwarth raised a matter for the Minister for Planning to write a letter explaining how amendment VC219 provides for existing landowners next to an extractive industry, and I will ensure that the minister gets that adjournment item. I did wonder whether writing a letter was a request for an action, and I checked the *Rulings from the Chair* and indeed it is an action, so it is in order.

A member interjected.

Colin BROOKS: It was a ruling from Speaker Brooks at the time. The member for Narre Warren South raised a matter for the Minister for Skills and TAFE to provide an update – which again is completely in order – on how free TAFE programs benefit constituents in his electorate, a good issue to raise. The member for Richmond, who has left the chamber, raised a matter for the Minister for Consumer Affairs to provide a time line for the implementation of rental reforms announced by the government. That would be further to the two tranches of 130 rental reforms that this government has implemented, but I will ensure that the minister responds to that issue that has been raised.

The member for Monbulk raised a matter for the Minister for Small Business to join her to meet with local small businesses in her electorate, and I will make sure that the minister gets that request. The member for Evelyn raised a matter for the Minister for Water to urgently upgrade the Lilydale open drain in response to flooding concerns, and the member for Narre Warren North raised a matter for the Minister for Ambulance Services asking that they visit the ambulance service station at Endeavour Hills with the member, and I will ensure that matter is raised with the minister as well.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: I thank the minister for his assistance. The house stands adjourned until tomorrow morning.

House adjourned 7:25 pm.

*Joint sitting of Parliament***Legislative Council vacancy****Members of both houses met in Assembly chamber at 6:17 pm.**

The Clerk: Before proceeding with the business of this joint sitting, it is necessary to appoint a Chair.

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier): I am delighted to move:

That the Honourable Shaun Leane, President of the Legislative Council, be appointed Chair of this joint sitting.

I understand he is willing to accept the nomination.

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

The Clerk: Are there any other proposals? There being no other proposal, the Honourable Shaun Leane, President of the Legislative Council, will take the chair.

The CHAIR (Shaun Leane): Under the Constitution Act 1975 this joint sitting must be conducted in accordance with the rules adopted by the members present at the sitting. The first procedure, therefore, will be the adoption of the rules.

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier): I move:

That joint rule of practice 2 be the rules for this joint sitting.

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

Motion agreed to.

The CHAIR: The rules have been adopted; I therefore invite proposals from members for a person to occupy the vacant seat in the Legislative Council.

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier): I propose:

That Mr Richard Welch be chosen to occupy the vacant seat in the Legislative Council.

He is willing to accept the nomination. In order to satisfy the joint sitting as to the requirements of section 27A(4) of the Constitution Act 1975, I also advise I am in possession of advice from the Liberal Party's registered officer that Mr Richard Welch is the selection of the Liberal Party of Australia, the party previously represented in the Legislative Council by Dr Matthew Bach.

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

The CHAIR: Are there any further proposals? As there are no further nominations, I declare that nominations are closed. The question is:

That Mr Richard Welch be chosen to occupy the vacant seat in the Legislative Council.

Question agreed to.

The CHAIR: I declare that Mr Richard Welch has been chosen to occupy the vacant seat in the Legislative Council. I will advise the Governor accordingly.

I now declare the joint sitting closed.

Proceedings terminated 6:20 pm.