



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

60th Parliament

Wednesday 21 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'Keeffe, 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
Famham, 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

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Wednesday 21 February 2024

The SPEAKER (Maree Edwards) took the chair at 9:31 am, read the prayer and made an acknowledgement of country.

*Documents***Documents****Incorporated list as follows:****DOCUMENTS TABLED UNDER ACTS OF PARLIAMENT** – The Clerk tabled:

Statutory Rules under the following Acts:

Bail Act 1977 – SR 8

Co-operatives National Law Application Act 2013 – SR 9

Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 – SR 10

Rail Safety National Law Application Act 2013 – SR 11

Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal Act 1998 – SR 7.

*Bills***Service Victoria Amendment Bill 2023**

Council's agreement

The SPEAKER (09:33): I have received a message from the Legislative Council agreeing to the Service Victoria Amendment Bill 2023 without amendment.

*Members statements***Lunar New Year**

Gabrielle WILLIAMS (Dandenong – Minister for Government Services, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Public and Active Transport) (09:33): I rise today to acknowledge recent celebrations around Lunar New Year and Tết and of course the incoming Year of the Dragon. I send my warmest wishes to all those who are coming together with family and wish them prosperity and good health into the new year. Victoria's multiculturalism is part of what makes me so proud to be someone of this state, and our Chinese and Vietnamese communities are huge parts of that multicultural fabric. I am incredibly fortunate to represent one of the most, if not the most, multicultural regions in the country – 158 different nationalities, over 200 languages and over 100 different faith groups. I know well that our diversity is without doubt our greatest strength and walking side by side with so many different cultures only serves to foster a more inclusive and peaceful community. I am always thrilled to see so many celebrations across the state on these cultural holidays. In particular I want to thank the Springvale business association for organising my local events.

Southside Flyers

Gabrielle WILLIAMS (Dandenong – Minister for Government Services, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Public and Active Transport) (09:34): I also want to acknowledge that the Southside Flyers play their last home game this coming Saturday at Melbourne Sports Centres in Parkville. It will be great to see Lauren Jackson in action again, because she recently announced her retirement from international basketball after helping the Opals qualify for the Paris Olympics. As of last Sunday she also moved into the top 10 WNBL all-time scoring list with a total of 4162 points from 201 WNBL games in a career spanning 26 years. How impressive is that?

Country Fire Authority Yarck brigade

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (09:35): The Labor government's investment in rural CFA brigades is nothing short of woeful. Yarck CFA brigade is a prime example as they have been waiting for a new station since land was purchased for that station in December 2016, more than seven years ago. The current station is poorly located on the Goulburn Valley Highway next to the busy, and one of my favourite bakeries, Bucks. It is just up the road from the hall, the bookshop and the pub. When the town is pumping with traffic and people, it can be a real challenge to get the truck out quickly. Building at the new location would solve that problem. Although the members were excited when I delivered their new flag, their level of excitement would be much greater if the government announced that the build of their new station will begin soon.

Eildon electorate year 12 students

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (09:35): Year 12 can be a tough year, one full of challenges. I want to congratulate the classes of 2023 from my electorate and note those who topped their year as dux. This takes determination, organisation, dedication to study and talent – great attributes for future success. To these young people, I believe the world is your oyster. Congratulations to Casey Clark of Alexandra Secondary College; Reece Smith, Healesville High School; Harry Lutz, Upper Yarra Secondary College; Madeline Granter, Yea High School; Brianna Anstee, Mansfield Secondary College; Jed Stebbing, Diamond Valley College; and Mae Ellis, Whittlesea Secondary College. With young people like this I know the world will be in good shape. They can do whatever they want, and I wish them and their colleagues who have just finished year 12 all the best for their future.

Sydenham electorate education funding

Natalie HUTCHINS (Sydenham – Minister for Jobs and Industry, Minister for Treaty and First Peoples, Minister for Women) (09:36): I rise to provide an update on the latest investments by the Allan Labor government across my electorate of Sydenham since the start of 2024. I am proud that the local community is benefiting from the following initiatives that have been announced: a new school bus service for students at Springside West Secondary College living in the Aintree area; and the Delahey Children's Centre, Taylors Hill Kindergarten and Whiz Kidz Early Learning Centre and Preschool in Delahey will all have access to the early years assessment and learning tool this year, making education a much richer experience for both students and staff. There is more, and that is for the littlest learners. I am very excited to announce that Whiz Kidz Early Learning Centre and Preschool in Delahey, a really great facility, will receive more funding to offer a bush kinder program in 2024, providing kids with an opportunity to get outdoors and learn about the environment.

Green Links grants

Natalie HUTCHINS (Sydenham – Minister for Jobs and Industry, Minister for Treaty and First Peoples, Minister for Women) (09:37): Finally, I am really pleased to announce that Brimbank City Council have been one of the successful recipients of the Green Links funding program to deliver the Maribyrnong River valley habitat restoration project. The project is located at the recently opened Sydenham Park, holding high ecological value and deep historical cultural significance for the Wurundjeri and Woiwurrung people. Not only will this deliver vital infrastructure and habitat corridors but it will also provide local students and young people with an opportunity to collaborate more.

Morwell electorate storms

Martin CAMERON (Morwell) (09:38): I rise from a new seat today, Speaker, to keep you on your toes as we shuffle around in here. The storms that swept across the state last week damaged many homes and left thousands without power. The Latrobe Valley was not as badly affected as other areas, but my office received calls from people who have lost hundreds of dollars worth of food due to spoilage, and many cannot afford to replace it. One Morwell resident who is on a pension estimates they lost \$1000 worth of fridge and freezer food during a 48-hour outage. They have been told by their

energy retailer and AusNet that they are not eligible for any monetary compensation, only a \$90 credit which will be on their next power bill. They have no food until their next pension payment.

People are slipping through the cracks. The state government support payment only applies for people who have been without power for seven days, but we must also consider our most vulnerable who are quite literally without food on the table. Janet, who may be an aunty of mine and who is in her late 80s, was telling me how she was in her electric recliner when the power went out. She was stuck in her chair for over an hour. I am trying not to smirk as I say it, but it took her over an hour to get up on her feet. She asked me the question: how many people would have been in the same boat as her?

Leakes Road–Clearwood Drive, Truganina

Sarah CONNOLLY (Laverton) (09:39): It is nearly three years since the government's milestone \$1.8 billion western roads project was completed. This project transformed several of our major roads and thoroughfares in the outer west, of which the City of Wyndham was the primary beneficiary. Roads like Leakes Road, which was once a never-ending set of roadworks from one development to another, is now in many places a three-lane major arterial for the whole of Truganina in my electorate. This project has been absolutely life changing for commuters in this part of my electorate, busting congestion and making it easier for communities to get where they need to go.

It is really important that we recognise these improvements to our roads are fantastic, but we also need to take steps to ensure that as commuters adjust, and indeed many continue to do so, our roads remain safe for drivers and pedestrians alike. That is why I want to acknowledge the many parents who have written to me regarding the traffic safety risks at the intersection of Leakes Road and Clearwood Drive. Located just down the road from this intersection is Truganina P–9 College, and this intersection is used by many of my local students, many of whom are just small kids, to walk to school each and every single day. Local residents have started an e-petition here in the Assembly to request that the road safety camera site selection committee conduct a review of this intersection for a red light and speed camera to be installed in the vicinity and other potential safety measures. I welcome the opportunity to table this petition here in the Legislative Assembly in the coming months, and I look forward to the committee's assessment of how we can make this intersection safer for my local community.

Warrnambool train services

Roma BRITNELL (South-West Coast) (09:41): Public transport is essential in regional Victoria, ensuring that rural residents can access services in the city without requiring a car. Critical to this in South-West Coast is the Warrnambool V/Line train. Sadly, week after week I am contacted by constituents who are forced to take replacement buses, and some are left waiting at the station because there are not enough seats. Yet when the trains do run, there is a good chance they will not get to Warrnambool on time. In December last year just 59 per cent of Warrnambool V/Line services met their punctuality target, whilst in August it was a poor 48 per cent. For the entirety of last year there was not one single month in which the Warrnambool V/Line service met its punctuality target. This is a disgrace. The Labor government's V/Line have not met their targets on the Warrnambool line over the past year – not once – yet long-suffering residents taking the train receive no compensation as only Myki pass users qualify for compensation under this Labor government. Yes, fares are cheaper, but that does not mean we should accept poor performance. South-West Coast needs modern trains that are new, accessible and on time. They were promised by the Labor government almost seven years ago, and we are still waiting on them. If we want to encourage public transport usage, we need to ensure the public has confidence that there will be a train and that it will come on time.

Bentleigh electorate storms

Nick STAIKOS (Bentleigh) (09:42): I rise to thank Victoria State Emergency Service volunteers from across Victoria for their tireless efforts during the catastrophic weather event last week. I happened to be out and about during the time that the wild winds and hail struck, and it is fair to say

that this was a storm unlike any we had previously seen in Victoria. I was really struck by driving around my electorate in the aftermath and seeing damaged buildings and cars and massive established trees uprooted as though someone had just pulled out a root vegetable. This was no ordinary storm. As we know, the storm caused power outages due to trees falling on poles and wires, and many in my electorate, particularly those of us who live in East Bentleigh, were without power, some for days. I would like to thank the dedicated volunteers of SES Moorabbin, who responded to 172 requests for help in just 48 hours. I also thank the volunteers of SES Glen Eira, who responded to 190 requests for assistance. Of these requests, 93 came from East Bentleigh. I also acknowledge all the locals who lent their neighbours a helping hand during this difficult time. It is important to remember that people who themselves were impacted by this weather event went out and helped others. Thank you to our selfless and hardworking volunteers.

Hampton Primary School

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (09:43): Hampton Primary School deserves the capital funding Labor promised them during the state election would be committed in the budget. The school has finalised a game-changing plan. With Hampton growing and the school being a community hub, the school deserves the money they were promised. Congratulations to principal Joshua Sheffield on his leadership and vision for the future of the wonderful school.

Rusden Street, Brighton, bus stop

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (09:44): The Labor government promised to temporarily relocate the bus stop at 23 Rusden Street, Brighton, during the works at the nearby public housing redevelopment. The minister said in 2021 that the existing bus stop would be temporarily relocated during construction works and would be reinstated close to its original position. Labor has since broken that promise, and concerned residents have started a strong petition calling on the government to reverse their broken promise.

Brighton electorate hoon driving

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (09:44): Brighton residents are regularly reporting that unsafe drag racing is taking place at night along major roads in our community. The noise and behaviour are dangerous, and it is scaring residents. As Errol recently said to me, 'At night it is a drag strip on Hampton Street and Nepean Highway. When someone gets killed, maybe someone will get something done.'

Elster Creek

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (09:44): The Elster Creek canal runs through my community like an artery. It deserves to be protected from plastic litter and toxins. The growing volume of plastic and polystyrene litter is causing harm to wildlife and humans. Residents have started a strong petition calling on the state government to partner with other authorities and the community to both dredge the canal and remove toxic waste from our beautiful Elwood.

Footscray High School

Katie HALL (Footscray) (09:45): I am always proud to speak about Footscray High in this place, and last week I was absolutely delighted to have a sneak peek at the incredible new \$25 million upgrade and modernisation of the Kinnear campus. Footscray High of course has a history; it was closed down by the Kennett government and has been rebuilt into three beautiful campuses across Melbourne's inner west. In total we have spent more than \$100 million bringing those three campuses back to life. We have had \$16 million for the modernisation of the Barkly campus, \$29 million to build the Pilgrim campus in Seddon and now the completion of the works at the Kinnear campus. The students who showed me around last week were so excited to see their new VCE facilities, the light and bright spaces, their new science classrooms and their new classroom next to the gymnasium. It has been a beautiful renovation, which complements Footscray High's amazing farm.

Robinvale Basketball Association

Jade BENHAM (Mildura) (09:46): Recently the Robinvale Basketball Association once again held its all-stars night, which has become such a brilliant night for the association and the whole town. Two teams in both the women's and the men's divisions were named after life member and stalwart families of the association Noter and Turner. In towns like Robinvale basketball is the thing that brings the entire community together regardless of ethnicity or background. And in a place like Robinvale, a town of 8000 people with 46 different cultures, that is no easy feat. So I give a huge shout-out to Leon and his committee of the Robinvale Basketball Association for all the work that they do.

Mildura electorate neighbourhood houses

Jade BENHAM (Mildura) (09:47): I have mentioned already in this place this week that Charlton really copped the full force of last week's storms, and I wanted to send a shout-out not only to our emergency services but to Charlton Neighbourhood House and the neighbourhood houses right across the region – Mildura, Robinvale, Birchip, Ouyen, Donald, Charlton, Sea Lake and surrounding areas. During this cost-of-living crisis these neighbourhood houses offer incredibly important services and are really under the pump. Meanwhile, they are still having to worry about concurrent funding. I call on the government to ease the stress and back it in this year's budget, because neighbourhood houses across the state are in times of uncertainty, and they really need one pressure point lifted. During the cost-of-living crisis these houses are a place of refuge for some, learning for others and necessity for some.

Kevin Cooper

Lauren KATHAGE (Yan Yean) (09:48): I rise not in sorrow but in celebration of a life well lived. I rise to pay tribute to Kevin Cooper, who passed away on 13 January at close to 92 years of age. He had a poor but happy upbringing in Western Australia as the third eldest of 10 children. His experience of hardship fuelled a passion for social justice that followed and burnt brightly throughout his life.

Kevin was a proud union man who represented the Printing and Kindred Industries Union members at the *Age's* monthly board of management and union meetings. He worked at the *Age* from 1969 to 1994, the last of the machine compositors. Kevin was known as someone who was always willing to stand up and defend others. He was in his early 30s when conscription for the Vietnam War began. He felt it was wrong and was not afraid to stand up for his belief. It was with some bemusement then as a resident of Dianella Village Aged Care Hostel that he told us he was enjoying his weekly outings with the Kilmore Wallan RSL Sub-branch. Something that Kevin often spoke about passionately was his abhorrence at the ability for a prime minister to lead the country to war without a vote in Parliament. Kevin loved peace and he loved the RSL. His weekly visits with the local RSL came to mean a great deal to him, and they kindly hosted his memorial celebration. I am sure the angels in heaven are singing *Solidarity Forever* with him now.

Housing

Tim READ (Brunswick) (09:49): Last week Mark, a Northcote resident, got in touch to talk about rental stress. As the housing crisis worsens this is unfortunately not unusual, but there was something unique about this message: Mark had written a song. Do not worry, I will not sing it, but it was a poignant way to illustrate the problem. Mark had written to the Premier asking her to act to protect renters because a lack of stable housing was affecting his mental health, but instead of a response addressing his policy concern, all he got was a referral to a mental health service. We know that housing stress and homelessness can cause or exacerbate mental illness; a good government would treat housing as the important form of primary mental health care that it is and prioritise rent controls and public housing in Victoria. We cannot just ignore the issue and leave our overstretched mental health system to deal with the fallout, and if we are going to be referring people to Lifeline, we had

better make sure it is properly funded. I suspect it is not right now. The Premier and her government must do better than what we hear in the final verse of the original song *A Lifeline* by Mark Hall:

Then she gave me her reply,

“Call 13 11 14”

...

“Call 13 11 14,

That’s all we can offer, nothing more”

Oakleigh electorate storms

Steve DIMOPOULOS (Oakleigh – Minister for Environment, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events, Minister for Outdoor Recreation) (09:51): Last week we witnessed some of the worst of what nature can do: wild storms, flooding, bushfires and extreme heat all in one day. We also witnessed what our community does best. In my area wild storms hit so quickly and with incredible force. We saw significant damage to homes, businesses and vehicles; trees ripped out; roads blocked; and powerlines down. I would like to express my sincere thanks to our teams at Monash SES and Glen Eira SES. These amazing people, mostly volunteers, are in action at a moment’s notice for 24 hours, seven days a week – often in dangerous and difficult conditions.

On Friday I visited the Monash SES in my electorate to show my appreciation. This is a team that in just three days responded to over 1000 requests for assistance – the biggest response by any SES in Victoria. I would also like to say thank you to all our other emergency responders, including local police, council officers and others who were responding and directing traffic in challenging circumstances.

Finally, thank you to our schoolteachers. In my community, the storm hit just before school pick-up at 3:30 pm. With many parents stuck out in the open, this was especially difficult for the younger students. The support given by the teachers to keep the kids calm and safe is very much appreciated.

These storm events, which unfortunately are becoming more common, really do challenge us all, but as always Victorians have shown they will meet the challenge with a real community spirit, and I cannot thank my community enough for doing so.

Nepean electorate student leaders

Sam GROTH (Nepean) (09:52): I have been lucky enough recently to get out to a bunch of schools to present leadership badges for 2024, and I want to thank at Rye Primary School principal Lachie Featherston and school captains Blake and Alice, who greeted me at the door. I also want to congratulate house captains Isabelle, Lachie, Maxi, Novi-Lee, Zeke, Hunter, Freddy and Molly; environmental leaders Misha and Madi; visual art leaders Sunday and Vai; performing arts leaders Lily and Jada; STRIVE leaders Archie and Frances; STEM leaders Pim and Fabian; numeracy leaders Kai and Harlan; literacy leaders Dylan and India; and flagbearer and bike shed leader Finn. All the best for 2024.

I was invited recently by Gus Wettenhall, the principal at Red Hill Consolidated School, to present their leadership badges for this year. I want to congratulate school captains Priya, Charlie, Alex and Milla; their student voice team captains Scarlett and Liv; house captains Millicent, Aubrey, Hudson, Jaxon, Josh, Indigo, Finnegan and Flynn; art captains Barney and Fred; performing arts captains Ritchie and Will; science captains Beth and Ruby; sustainability captains Mary and Alice; Japanese captains Evie and Zahlia; wellbeing captains Mila and Seth; RAP captains Olive and Nate; and their events coordinator captains Fletcher and Koby. All the best to all those at Red Hill Consolidated for 2024.

I was recently down at Tootgarook Primary School, where their principal Wayne Whitworth invited me to come and present their leadership badges for 2024, and I want to thank school captains Fletcher and Coraline; vice-captains Darcy and Chelsea; and house captains Alexis, Kiarra, Qi Qing, Ben, Reuben, Brayden, Amber and Angus.

Langwarrin Junior Football Club

Paul MERCURIO (Hastings) (09:54): Last Sunday I had the pleasure to attend the annual open day for the Langwarrin Junior Football Club. It was a cracker of a day, with over 1500 locals turning out to enjoy a coffee, have the opportunity to dunk a coach, run some foot races or just have a snag on bread with the onion on the top. This season they will field 37 teams, and 10 of them are female.

Luke Batty Memorial Shield

Paul MERCURIO (Hastings) (09:54): On another matter, last Friday night I had the honour of bowling the first ball for the Luke Batty Memorial Shield T20 match between the Tyabb Cricket Club and the Victoria Police Cricket Club. I am very relieved to say I actually bowled the ball straight down the middle of the pitch, with only one bounce. I am also happy to say that my home team, the Tyabb Cricket Club, took out the shield.

Hastings electorate events

Paul MERCURIO (Hastings) (09:54): On another matter, there are two fantastic events coming to my electorate of Hastings. The first is happening on 10 March at the Tyabb airport. It is of course the fabulous Tyabb Airshow, the second-biggest air show in Victoria and an absolutely amazing event. Gates open at 8:30 am. Planes start flying 10 am. There will be music, food trucks and an amazing display of a wide range of awesome flying machines, including a real-life UFO.

The following day, on Monday the 11th, the ninth Somerville Family Day will be held in the centre of Somerville at Fruit Growers Reserve. This is a massive day, with food trucks, local craft stores, a massive car show, performances by local groups and displays by community groups. I invite everyone to come down, share the fun and support my locals.

QHub

Chris COUZENS (Geelong) (09:55): Last week I had the great pleasure of officially launching the new QHub in Geelong. I want to acknowledge the years of advocacy, influencing, collaboration, hard work and care that has been led by many people. Without their fortitude and vision to improve safety and supports for our LGBTIQ+ young people, we may not have this life-changing service. I want to thank Karen Field, the CEO for Queerspace Drummond Street, and Jack Khouri, the manager for QHub, and his amazing team, for all their valued work. QHub aims to increase inclusion and connection and improve mental wellbeing for young lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender-diverse, intersex, queer and asexual people across regional Victoria. It will be a safe, affirming, inclusive space, set up to provide services and connection for local LGBTIQ+ youth up to the age of 25 who are referred to the service. It will provide critical and centrally located supports and services for young rainbow people in the Geelong region, and it will also have an outreach to Surf Coast shire. This is a vital, life-saving rainbow program that has the voices of local communities and young people at its heart. Local safe spaces can greatly help to address the health and wellbeing issues experienced by vulnerable young people in regional areas. Young people – *(Time expired)*

Kennedy community centre

Meng Heang TAK (Clarinda) (09:57): I was honoured to join the Prime Minister, along with the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events, colleagues and friends at the sod turn of the Kennedy community centre in Dingley on Saturday 9 February. This is an amazing project with an amazing contribution from the Allan Labor government. Hawthorn AFLW players, friends and the whole community will soon enjoy brand new facilities in Tootal Road, thanks to a \$15 million investment from the government. Last year the minister announced this outstanding investment as part of the Allan Labor government's pledge to level the playing field in funding infrastructure for women and girls in sport. The entire community will benefit from this \$103 million project, which will draw fans to the new home ground for the Hawthorn AFLW team in Dingley. The facility designs are incredible: the dedicated match player pavilion and the oval, including a 500-seat grandstand, team change rooms,

umpire change rooms, media facilities, coaches box and a function space, as well as the Harris elite training and administration facility, complete with a training oval, gym, indoor training facility and recovery facility. The centre will be used by the Hawks women's and men's teams and will give them the infrastructure to compete at the highest level. A great result for the club and for the entire south-east of Melbourne. Go Hawks!

Fruit2Work

Belinda WILSON (Narre Warren North) (09:58): On Friday I had the pleasure of attending the official opening of the brand new Fruit2Work in Hallam. Fruit2Work is an outstanding not-for-profit social enterprise that creates supportive employment opportunities for those that have been in the justice system. Last October I had the pleasure of visiting Fruit2Work at their Laverton site along with the Minister for Corrections in the other place and the amazing member for Laverton, Sarah Connolly. It was such an incredible experience. It was an honour to meet the team at the Laverton site, and I am really excited they are expanding to the south-east. It is widely recognised as a purpose-built organisation that helps people gain important skills and experience to reset their lives. It is fantastic to see that over seven years Fruit2Work has employed well over 100 people impacted by the justice system, with an outstanding record of avoiding reoffending. Fruit2Work is working closely with Corrections Victoria employment specialists based in 10 employment hubs in Victorian prisons. Each of these hubs is actively advertising Fruit2Work jobs and talking to people about opportunities with Fruit2Work when they are released. The new facility in Hallam will enable Fruit2Work to now service brand new customers right across the south-east region of Melbourne, with the same commitment to providing opportunities for people leaving prison. A huge shout-out to the incredible Rob, Simon, Amanda and everyone else who works at Fruit2Work. You are doing an amazing, fantastic job.

Northcote electorate

Kat THEOPHANOUS (Northcote) (10:00): In Northcote we have hit the ground running with some major milestones kicking off the year. On Sunday High Street, Northcote, transformed into a pedestrian paradise for the Northcote Rise festival, and although Taylor Swift could not make it, over 40,000 others relished our magnificent hospo, small businesses, live music and arts. A huge thankyou to the fabulous traders and organisers who made this happen with a \$450,000 grant from this Labor government.

Last week I also visited Faye Spiteri and the Fronditha Care Thornbury team, who are supporting older people in our community. We opened their \$1.5 million upgrade to the 30-bed memory support unit.

Congratulations to Ann McGregor, Nick Williams, David Gifford and the Merri Creek Management Committee, who will receive over \$463,000 to restore habitat and protect our swamp wallabies along the beautiful Merri Creek. I also joined the Minister for Energy and Resources to launch our Solar for Apartments program, a huge step forward in achieving energy equity for the large number of people living in apartments across our suburbs.

A big congratulations to Jordan Papadopoulos and the Holy Trinity Cricket Club, who celebrated 100 years. It was a joy to be there with you. Croxton Community Garden received a \$5000 grant for an urban orchard. Concept plans for our upgrade to McDonell Park were released, and Thornbury Primary opened its brand new bathrooms. It was also lovely to celebrate Lunar New Year with the congregation at the Northcote Baptist Church.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the communities who were and still are impacted by the extreme weather events over the past week. Our hearts are with you.

Lunar New Year

Mathew HILAKARI (Point Cook) (10:01): I rise to celebrate Lunar New Year alongside the community of Point Cook. In the suburb of Point Cook more than 14 per cent of our community have Chinese heritage, so of course there was a massive celebration over the weekend. We had more than

15,000 people attending the Point Cook Cultural Community's festival. I want to thank former mayor Bob Fairclough, who has been ably leading the crew in making sure that that is a success year after year. Fantastically, the fireworks were back this year. I also want to acknowledge the federal member Tim Watts and the member from the other place David Ettershank, who was able to attend on the day and stood above the crowd as he usually does.

Saltwater P-9 College

Mathew HILAKARI (Point Cook) (10:02): The Saltwater lion dance at Saltwater P-9 College was also an enormous event. We arrived there on Tuesday afternoon just before the storms, and as I was speaking to the wonderful Julia and Aarohi, who I was presenting with awards for the cards that they had produced for both the celebration of holidays and also the Lunar New Year holiday, I was watching outside the window and could see smoke billowing from the fields outside Point Cook. Of course our FRV were wonderful in putting out a fire that was just preceding the storm. FRV, SES and all across the community did enormous work in Point Cook and in Werribee South, and I thank them so much for that work. Well done to Saltwater P-9, who had their first lion dance.

Frankston High School

Paul EDBROOKE (Frankston) (10:03): It was great last week to have spectacular weather to celebrate the Frankston High School 100th birthday and open their brand new building.

Dunkley by-election

Paul EDBROOKE (Frankston) (10:03): Also, with the by-election for Dunkley coming up, people want to know they can trust their candidates. I have had many, many people ask me about a question that Nathan Conroy, the candidate for the Liberal Party, refuses to answer, and that question is: which multimillion-dollar business were you proudly the general manager of? Are you just leading us up a path, and have you misled our community by scamming us as the mayor and the candidate?

Statements on parliamentary committee reports

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

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

Mathew HILAKARI (Point Cook) (10:04): I rise to speak again on the *Gambling and Liquor Regulation in Victoria: A Follow up of Three Auditor-General Reports* by the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, of which I am a member. I acknowledged the chair in my last contribution on this and also the secretariat, but I would like to acknowledge the deputy chair, member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region Nicholas McGowan, and also Bev McArthur from Western Victoria. I always appreciate their gentle humour and subtle irony that they bring to every committee process that we undertake. I know that is something that I can tell the chair appreciates as well. I unfairly besmirched the member for Gippsland South in a previous contribution on PAEC by acknowledging that he was the grandfather of the committee; in fact he is the father of the committee, and I just want to make my apologies again for unfairly doing so.

I also want to thank the member for Melbourne Ellen Sandell for her contributions, which are always sincere, in regard to gambling reform. I also want to thank Dr Krystle Gatt Rapa, the lead analyst; Dr Kathleen Hurley, the analyst; and Mathias Richter and Caitlin Wu, who also helped us ably across the committee's report.

I will take up where I left off last time to talk about the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation. One of the things that I think is important to note is that this has been reformed and changed by this government, and part of this is related to the operation of 11 years of the VRGF. Over this time we have seen only a consistent level of those people in our community experiencing the harms of gambling. Also we have seen that only 1 to 2 per cent of those people who have been experiencing the harm of gambling actually seek support from government services in Victoria, and the effectiveness

of gambling treatment and services provided is simply unknown. For a body who is researching gambling in Victoria, certainly that needs to be improved, and this government is improving that by reforming that and moving that into other government agencies.

I rise on a day when we hear reports of 40,000 people self-excluding through the federal government's program, including 18,000 people who are excluding themselves for their entire lifetime from online gambling. It just speaks to the nature and extent of the problem that we are experiencing as a community. I encourage the federal government to complete some of those other aspects of the report that were made and ensure that advertising for online gambling is in line with the report of Peta Murphy, who I think made an enormous contribution and a lasting contribution, and I hope that contribution is honoured by our federal government.

There were 20 recommendations in our report on online gambling to protect the community from gambling harm. They go to some of those around online gambling strategy and a code of conduct for online gambling providers, many of whom are located in the Northern Territory for what I believe and what the report sets out are largely tax reasons and probably an environment which they describe as more helpful to their business prospects. What I read into that is actually more harm for our community and more ability to take dollars out of our community without the appropriate treatment and support for the harm of those people who are experiencing gambling challenges.

I do want to pay acknowledgement to the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission. I started to talk about the chair Fran Thorn in my last contribution, but since that time, on 15 February the VGCCC fined the Rye Hotel \$80,000 for breaches of their obligations, including falsifying records to cover up erroneous cash payments and providing cheques to ineligible persons. It says that the VGCCC is on the right path and that we have the right personnel there to really take on people who are not doing the right thing in a harm-causing industry. So I say to both the chair Fran Thorn and the CEO Annette Kimmitt: keep up the good work. You are doing a terrific job in holding these companies to account. I cannot but encourage that more. I know I will be coming back on a number of other matters on this report.

Environment and Planning Committee

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

Wayne FARNHAM (Narracan) (10:09): I rise today on the Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee inquiry into employers and contractors who refuse to pay their subcontractors for completed works. I would like to thank the chair and deputy chair and all the committee who worked on this.

It is obviously something that I am fairly averse to. I have been on both sides of the tracks on this one as a builder and as a subcontractor, and it is an interesting industry, the construction industry, because it has numerous challenges. The problem with the construction industry – and I am going to reference the recommendations – is you have two vastly different types. You have the domestic construction industry and you have the commercial construction industry. They really are different beasts when you are working in them, and I worked in both for a number of years. The challenge we have – and I agree – in reading the report is where they describe the construction industry as a hierarchical system. What they failed to mention is that a lot of time in a hierarchy the builder comes in at number 2. The builder is quite often working for someone else – it could be a developer, it could be government, a client – and therefore when the challenges occur, this will filter down. We see it time after time. We are seeing it at the moment with builders going into liquidation. The bottom of the food chain gets hurt the most. I have mentioned on social media that it is always the subcontractor. If a builder goes under for 10 homes, that could probably affect 30 to 40 subcontractors but one builder.

The hierarchy system is a problem, and it is a challenge I think this government, hopefully in a bipartisan way, has to try to fix. When builders go into liquidation we have got to figure out a way to protect the subcontractors, because quite often they have done the work. They are finished, they have

walked away. It is the end trades that always get smacked around – the tilers, the painters, the floor layers, the plumbers on occasion. It is the end trades that always suffer in this, so we need to figure out a way forward. Recommendations 27 and 28 talk about a trust system that I think is really worth exploring.

Also in this, I need to reference the commercial sector of the industry as well. In the commercial sector where a lot of things go pear-shaped is when we get to practical completion. In most commercial contracts there will be 5 per cent retention. Of that 5 per cent, it gets split: 2.5 per cent comes back on practical completion and 2.5 per cent comes back after a 12-month defect liability period. What is happening more and more in the industry is architects – and this includes government agencies as well, and I am going to touch on that in a minute – hold up practical completion. They go, ‘No, we’re not going to give you that 2.5 per cent because there is a \$5000 defect over there’, but they are holding \$100,000. Again, that gets filtered down. The subcontractors contribute to that 5 per cent, so they are getting delayed on payment. I think this is very pertinent, because if we have got a retention system and it is only \$5000 worth of defect, how can you hold up a \$100,000 payment and the subbies cannot get their money?

This is really quite interesting. This might shock you to know – I was absolutely disgusted with the behaviour of the Victorian School Building Authority, our own government agency – but through COVID builders got shut down and delayed and they could not have the workforce on site they needed, so builders put in variation claims for prolongation costs, which are totally legitimate. COVID was a one-in-100-year pandemic that no-one had experienced. Those conditions were never written into a contract. I know builders that had claims over \$200,000 that the VSBA said it would not pay. Again, out of that \$200,000, subcontractors bore that cost. Our own government department screwed over the construction industry through COVID, and that is disgraceful. That is why the government needs to look at the VSBA and get them sorted out, because the way they act is criminal, and we need to protect the subbies.

Environment and Planning Committee

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

Nina TAYLOR (Albert Park) (10:14): I am very pleased to speak further to the Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee’s inquiry into employers and contractors who refuse to pay their subcontractors for completed works, in part because I do want to reiterate a key element here, and that is 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. Therein lies a critical element in terms of why these issues are so important and why the ramifications can be so far-reaching.

I will come back to the core element of the inquiry. The inquiry was into the payment of subcontractors in Victoria’s construction sector, but those who refuse to pay subcontractors for completed works, so the work has been done and yet they are not being appropriately remunerated. I will put a caveat that of course every situation will have its own nuances in terms of who is at fault or otherwise, but nevertheless I will refer to page 7 of the report:

The Committee was informed that payment practices in the construction industry in Victoria are poor. John Murray AM, a specialist in building contract disputes and security of payment legislation –

and that legislation is quite pertinent in this context –

conducted a national review of security of payment laws in 2017. The review included a survey of 526 Australian construction industry contractors.

Now we will get to the crux of why this is important.

It found that 72% had 40% or more of their invoices paid late, and over third had 60% or more of their invoices paid late.

I think in anyone's language we know that that would pose considerable pressure on any business – or on any household, for that matter – but particularly small to medium businesses are those who are most vulnerable. It is much harder for them to be able to weather the storm, so to speak, of those late payment practices.

These results broadly accord with the findings of a national survey conducted in March 2023 ...

Again, I am quoting information that was fed into the inquiry by the National Electrical and Communication Association's national subcontractors forum.

However, Pawel Podolski, Victorian Executive Director of the Association, cautioned that payment issues are –

and there was a reason for reading that long sentence –

'hugely underreported' ...

So that implies that perhaps the ramifications are far worse even than those that are officially recognised, which is alarming to say the least. Another issue – and it was alluded to already in the chamber – was the hierarchical nature of contracting in the construction sector. I will be careful, further to some of the comments that have been made by those who have actually worked in the industry, that we are not necessarily pointing the finger at builders per se.

Evidence presented to the Committee suggests that a range of factors inform the imbalance between principals, head- and subcontractors.

I am going to use that language so that we are being accurate in terms of who we are referring to who may be liable or at fault or otherwise in these circumstances.

This includes significant competition amongst subcontractors to secure work and pressure to maintain ongoing work to ensure steady cashflow.

We can see here there is nothing startling in understanding the causal factor for the problems that we are seeing and the dramatic impact that they are having. Nevertheless, the good hard work of this inquiry has been to dig deep and to discover exactly what is causing the dramatic problems in terms of underpayments in the sector. In essence, it is really inequitable and can have shocking and dramatic impacts on so many contractors, subcontractors and the like who are associated with any particular build, which is a shame to say the least – and 'a shame' is probably understating the impacts. A further element that I suppose is inherent in construction is that there are risks that are innate within the industry. But of course what we are trying to do, or what I would say the committee has worked very hard to do, is to seek to find mechanisms to mitigate those risks – risks that are pretty well understood – in order to ensure a much better performing construction industry with regard to payment practices into the future.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Report on the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

David SOUTHWICK (Caulfield) (10:19): I rise to speak on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (PAEC) budget report, particularly dealing with the way our government funds councils. I refer to council rates, grants and rate caps. One of the things that we hear quite often from councils is that they are really struggling, they are broke and they cannot afford to be able to deliver local services. We hear a lot of complaining and whingeing, and in some instances it is quite warranted. But in particular I note that some of the councils are not staying within their wheelhouse. We have seen that on a number of occasions where councils are seeing themselves more as foreign policy experts running foreign affairs agendas rather than dealing with the basic issues of our roads, our rates, our rubbish, our parks and ensuring that local services are met.

I pay particular attention to Merri-bek, Darebin, Yarra, Maribyrnong, Dandenong and Hume councils, which have recently conducted motions against Israel – boycotting Israeli products, boycotting Israeli

businesses and flying Palestinian flags on their buildings. Again, there is no question that we can have sensible discussion of a humanitarian nature that recognises and acknowledges the pain and suffering of all people, from all works of life. Whether they be those of Jewish background or Muslim background, no matter what, our social cohesion is so important in this state. Particularly when we look at funding and governments wanting more funding for a whole range of their projects, one would question why any government would fund such a council any more than they currently do. When you look specifically at rate caps, grants and all of those things, which are very, very important in terms of local government, I am sure many have had local councils come to them and say 'We need more money for our roads' or 'We need more money for our kinders' or what have you. In our local area of Glen Eira there are three kindergartens that have been closed – council-run kinders. In this particular instance, Glen Eira are not the culprit, but I refer to a number of councils. Last night we saw the City of Melbourne also run up a motion which was a very divisive motion. The last thing that we need is councils running foreign policy agendas. I commend the councillors that stood up against that last night. I know Nicholas Reece and others stood up against those motions last night. We saw again the divisive nature of protests and fighting on the streets of Melbourne. That is not what Melbourne needs. That is not what Melbourne wants right now.

The PAEC report looks at budgets, and it looks specifically at dealing with councils – things like rate capping and things like council services and all the important things that councils need. I would question why any of these councils that are so busy on foreign policy should receive one dollar more than anything that they are currently getting. Obviously they are too busy conducting matters other than what they should be within their local constituency. I think in a cost-of-living crisis, when many ratepayers are paying more for their rates than they ever have before, rather than knocking on the door of state government and saying they need some more money, maybe they should look at what they are doing in terms of their agendas and focus on what their local residents want – ensuring that the roads are okay, ensuring that the rubbish is being picked up, ensuring the beautification of their parks and ensuring that basic council services are met. In the PAEC report it talks about looking at rate caps and looking at grants – why should any of these local councils get \$1 of a grant from any government, whether it be state government or federal government, when they are acting this way? They are not foreign policy experts. They have not got any idea or understanding of foreign policy agendas. Stick to your knitting. Stick to your wheelhouse. I call on those local councils – if they want to look at how the state government or any government should be helping them going forward, how about doing what ratepayers expect them to do rather than wandering and meandering with divisive, hateful motions? All it does is divide our state rather than unite it.

Environment and Planning Committee

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

Sarah CONNOLLY (Laverton) (10:23): It gives me a great deal of pleasure to rise and speak on the Environment and Planning Committee's report on the inquiry into employers and contractors who refuse to pay their subcontractors for completed works. This was something that certainly sparked my attention, because in my family my brother-in-law runs a business in Sydney putting the glass into high-rise buildings. He has certainly been on the pointy end of chasing contractors and employers for money when it comes to being paid for the work that he has undertaken. I have seen firsthand the trickle-down effect that that has – the terrible effects it has on a family and the stress that he was under when chasing huge amounts of money. He needed to be able to pay his debts, and most importantly he needed to pay his workers.

This inquiry, I think, comes at a really important time, with Victoria undergoing a huge amount of construction as part of our Big Build and other things, but it is actually looking at providing better protection for families and small businesses. This inquiry took a really close look at this particular issue when it comes to Victoria's construction industry. It has gone ahead and it has made a number of recommendations – in fact it has made 28 – on how the government can better address the issues of underpayment, which is really important, and non-payment of subcontractors for work in the Victorian

construction sector. Victoria knows just how important a role the construction industry plays in literally building up our state. Like I said before, whether it is our government's Big Build projects or new housing builds and developments, living in the west and being a westie, I am able to see firsthand the absolutely ginormous amount of work that is happening in our construction industry in the western suburbs to help her get up on her feet and deal with the enormous amount of growth that we are currently experiencing.

The construction industry, whether it is employers, contractors, subcontractors or the like, has never been more important to building this state. But what we know is just how complex some construction agreements can be, with all kinds of contractors and subcontractors creating this type of pyramid scheme, which is indeed mentioned in the report, and how complicated the scheme can be. The flow-on effects of non-payment or underpayment are absolutely catastrophic when it comes to the family being able to put food on their table, pay their debts, pay their mortgage and other things and, importantly, pay their own workers.

The report makes clear that the risks of underpayment when it comes to subcontractors are significant. We know it is a real risk; it is happening out there and happening right now. It should not be a controversial statement to say that anyone, whether they are a contractor, a subcontractor or an employee, should be paid for their labour as agreed to. This is about people's livelihoods, remember, it is not just about making huge profits. It is about, at the end of the day, the trickle-down effect of being able to put food on the table. In many cases these subcontractors are small businesses or self-employed individuals. Like I said, my brother-in-law is one of them. Many of these people rely on this type of work to keep the lights on, to pay the bills and feed their families. When you have that significant imbalance between you and the other party that you are relying on for payment for work, we know time and time again – as we have talked about on many bills in this house when trying to rectify a number of issues where there is that significant imbalance – it is a recipe for disaster. That is what this inquiry discovered.

That is why our government did in fact crack down on wage theft last term. It was an absolute pleasure being here in this house watching that policy and legislation unfold and be passed here in this place. The wage theft work that we did last term made illegal the underpayment and non-payment of employees. What this report and this inquiry have said is that we need to apply the same standard of secure pay for contractors and subcontractors in the construction sector. I commend the report to the house.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Report on the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Tim BULL (Gippsland East) (10:28): I rise to make a contribution on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's report on the 2023–24 budget estimates. I would like to cover off on three topics this morning. The first of those is reference to page 148 of that report, which mentions bushfire response and recovery. I say, not for the first time in this chamber – in fact there have been multiple times – that we are now, since Parliament resumed, more than four years post the 2019–20 East Gippsland bushfires. This government at the time when these fires hit, as I have said in this chamber before, stood up at press conferences and said it would walk every step of the way with East Gippslanders through this recovery process. Four years on, we have the East Cape Boardwalk not open. I think I have had five opening dates given to me by Parks Victoria. The last one was prior to Christmas, and then early in the new year was announced in December, but it is still not open. So it is not open early in the new year at all, and it is no wonder that people in the local community are getting sceptical about whether this government intends to complete some of these bushfire works at all.

At the Cape Conran cabins – you would not believe this – there are about eight to 10 cabins there that were burnt down. They are cabins – they are not luxury accommodation; they are cabins – but they are very reliant on our local business community in that area and important to the local economy from a visitor perspective. We are not rebuilding the Taj Mahal here, we are rebuilding eight cabins, and

4½ years on a whole department has been stuffing around for that long with its bureaucratic bungling that they are not yet erected – 4½ years on. If we had a few cabins burn down in a metropolitan Labor seat I reckon they would be up within six months. But four years on, that has not happened. The Thurra River bridge is forecast for 2026. Who knows when that will happen? The Buchan Caves Reserve, which got hit by floods recently and which you all would have seen in the news – tragically two lives were lost – had not had the fire recovery work done from four years prior to when the flood hit. It is a disgrace. The parkies on the ground are fine, but the Parks Victoria management in relation to this bushfire recovery and the minister and the government more generally have been absolutely hopeless – there is no other word to describe it.

Page 149 of the estimates report refers to the timber worker transition packages, and I want to make some quick comments on that. It says on page 149 that transition support programs are already well underway and being fast-tracked. They were to be finalised by Christmas. They are not finalised. We have still got timber workers very unsure of what their future holds. The packages that have been offered to them have been set around a budget; they have not been set around what is fair. It is not fair on these families who have been left in limbo for so long. And in relation to taking an industry away from us – and it is not just my electorate; there are other electorates as well – there is no talk about any replacement industries. Nothing. These people are going to have to move out of our region to other jobs. So your government removes an industry and there is no replacement. Towns like Orbost are dwindling in population, and there is just no effort made whatsoever.

I also want to briefly talk about homelessness, and the one fleeting mention it gets in the budget in the estimates committee's report is on page 108. Now, regularly we get government members coming into this chamber spouting the Big Housing Build and what it is doing and the new homes, and yes, there are new homes, but in many cases they are not additional homes because the old stock is being sold off at the rate or close to the rate that new ones are being built. So an increasing number of people are sleeping rough in my electorate. Compared to 2017, we have got two less public housing homes in my electorate now than we had in 2017, because we have had an enormous amount of stock sold off. There is no plan to deal with it. The minister is our local member, Ms Shing in the other place. We have got up to 15 people now sleeping at our saleyards, and they have been opened so people can use the showers. Let us stop talking off speaking notes and get some new homes on the ground in electorates like mine, which has had a decrease of two public housing homes since 2017. We spruik the dollars, we spruik the money – the action is not being seen on the ground, and it is an absolute disgrace.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Danny PEARSON (Essendon – Minister for Transport Infrastructure, Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Assistant Treasurer, Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC) (10:34): I move:

That the consideration of government business, notice of motion 1, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Private Security and County Court Amendment Bill 2024

Statement of compatibility

Anthony CARBINES (Ivanhoe – Minister for Police, Minister for Crime Prevention, Minister for Racing) (10:35): In accordance with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, I table a statement of compatibility in relation to the Private Security and County Court Amendment 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 Private Security Amendment Bill 2024.

In my opinion, the Private Security Amendment Bill 2024, as introduced to the Legislative Assembly, is compatible with human rights as set out in the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

Human Rights Issues

No human rights protected by the Charter are limited by the Bill.

In drawing this conclusion, I have considered the potential engagement of the right to be free from forced work in the context of amendments in this Bill which are designed to discourage sham contracting.

In one sense, sham contracting could be considered a form of forced work where a vulnerable private security licence holder is engaged improperly by an employer who directs the worker to obtain an ABN so that the employer does not have to pay them a wage covered by the Industry Award, or afford them other employee entitlements such as superannuation, leave and Workover insurance.

Provisions in the Bill which seek to deter sham contracting by requiring the worker in this situation to obtain a business licence if they are engaged under an ABN are intended to work by making it largely impossible for the worker to become engaged under an ABN because obtaining a business licence requires a full set of business plans, and financial information. While there are various Commonwealth and State laws that prohibit sham contracting, the proposed amendment is a practical way of deterring employers from engaging in sham contracting because the people they seek to engage in this way will not be able or willing to comply.

I also note that the right to privacy may be engaged by the new requirement under the Bill in relation to the requirement for a person sub-contracting security work out to provide the name and licence number of the individuals who will be carrying out the work. However, this information will only be available for the purpose of ensuring that the client and head contractor are aware of the name and licence number of the individuals carrying out the work. The purpose of the amendment is to increase accountability and transparency for clients who need to know who is carrying out the work. This would be expected by those working in a regulated industry. Accordingly, the right to privacy is not limited by the Bill.

Further, Part 5 of the Bill is compatible with the Charter. Section 24(1) of the Charter provides that a person charged with a criminal offence has the right to have the charge decided by a competent, independent and impartial court or tribunal after a fair and public hearing.

Section 24(1) of the Charter is relevant to Part 5 of the Bill to the extent that it extends the operation of the County Court Drug Court Division, which operates alongside the mainstream criminal court. The Bill promotes the right to a fair hearing by providing a specialised court that is targeted to the complex needs of offenders with a drug or alcohol dependency.

The Hon Anthony Carbines
Minister for Police

Second reading

Anthony CARBINES (Ivanhoe – Minister for Police, Minister for Crime Prevention, Minister for Racing) (10:35): 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:

Almost 20 years ago to the day, the Private Security Bill 2004 was introduced to the Victorian Parliament by then Minister for Police, the Hon Andre Haermeyer, going on to pass the Legislative Council on 25 May 2004. That Bill replaced the *Private Agents Act 1966* and was the first formal recognition in this jurisdiction of the importance of a robustly regulated private security industry.

One of the drivers for the establishment of the *Private Security Act 2004* was the tragic death of cricketer, coach and broadcaster David Hookes during an altercation with a crowd controller outside a nightclub. This tragedy brought to the fore the importance of seeking to ensure that those entering the private security industry are properly trained and vetted by police to engage in these important, high-risk roles. While the crowd controller in that matter was ultimately cleared of any wrongdoing, the events of that night highlight the serious risks and potential consequences inherent in private security work and the need for better training and regulation. Together with a decision of the Council of Australian Governments to require people applying for private security licences to undergo probity checks, the *Private Security Act in 2004* was a robust and progressive piece of legislation. Over the past 20 years, we have seen a much better regulated industry emerge,

together with a vast improvement in matters such as the infiltration of organised crime into the security industry, which has been a huge step forward.

However, a great deal has changed over those 20 years and the private security industry is no exception. Over time, the industry has grown and diversified. This along with social and technological developments, has required increasingly complex skills. Over that time, issues have also emerged with the way some members of the industry are prioritising profit over fair pay and work conditions, leaving a highly casual, mobile and vulnerable workforce in its wake. Key industry advocates have identified serious concerns about the rights of workers, the barriers to healthy business competition and the behaviour of some trainers and workers that bring down the reputation of the entire industry.

This is not to say that there are not many highly skilled security guards operating in our jurisdiction who make a significant contribution to keeping our community safe. My attention has recently been drawn to the remarkable skills of guards at a medical organisation who were able to use high level verbal de-escalation skills to take someone intoxicated by methamphetamine, and who was agitated and in possession of a weapon, from being an imminent threat to workers and patients to having a calm conversation and being able to be removed from the environment before harm came to anyone. We do not hear about these sorts of situations in the news. Nor do we hear about highly skilled security advisors, organisations and employees who plan, manage and work with police to ensure the safety of participants and members of the community at public events.

This Bill is not aimed at the type of individuals I have just been speaking about. It is aimed at employers who do not pay fair wages and do not afford workers genuine flexibility and access to legal entitlements such as superannuation, leave and insurance. It is aimed at training organisations who do not deliver the required training and who sign off on untrained and wholly unprepared workers as being qualified to obtain a private security licence. It is aimed at those workers who do not understand the importance of their role and do not have the skills needed to deescalate and address emerging threats.

These are the workers about whom we often hear anecdotes: crowd controllers deliberately leaving the scene of a physical altercation between patrons on nightclub premises, training organisations failing to deliver even half the required hours before certifying a person as competent to provide security services, and inept or unlicensed workers seeking to provide security services.

Other matters, such as uncontrolled and unrecorded sub-contracting and poor training and supervision of security staff were brought starkly to light following the inquiry into the COVID19 hotel quarantine failures. The Inquiry was not directly critical of the guards involved, but noted that the issues relating to sub-contracting, training and supervision needed to be addressed.

Industry leaders have raised these issues with Government over time, and in 2018, the then Premier, the Hon Daniel Andrews made an election commitment to undertake a full review of the industry should his Government be re-elected for a further term. That review was managed by the Department of Justice and Community Safety and Industrial Relations Victoria over 2020–2021. It included a discussion paper written in consultation with key industry stakeholders, which was the subject of public consultation in mid-2020. The final Report on the review was published with Government's endorsement in late 2021, containing 21 recommendations. This Bill addresses the 11 recommendation of that Report which require legislative amendment.

The aim of the Bill is to improve worker access to fair pay and other legal work entitlements, as well as to improve the professional standards across the industry so that it can continue to play a positive, significant role in contributing to community safety right across the state.

One area of particular growth, in line with advances in access to technology, is what is known as the technical sector which consists of security installers and security advisors. When the Private Security Act was enacted in 2004 these roles were more limited, with this part of the industry much smaller and dominated by very small businesses. At the time, this led to them being treated differently under the private security licencing scheme – instead of requiring a licence, they were only required to be registered. Registration requirements are of a lower standard and lower cost than licence requirements. The key differences are that registrants do not need to prove their competency or provide their fingerprints to obtain registration.

The Bill recognises the growth and expertise of the technical sector, as well as the Importance of proof of identity including fingerprints, and proof of competency by replacing the now outdated two tier licensing and registration system with a single licensing system that treats all sectors of the industry equally.

The Bill also addresses significant concerns across the industry, including sub-contracting. Until recently, sub-contracting of security work in Victoria was un-regulated. Following the report on the Inquiry into Hotel Quarantine, Government contracts now limit sub-contracting. The Bill follows suit by making it clear that if a person or organisation signs a contract with a security provider, they must approve any sub-contracting by

that provider in writing. In addition, providers must supply the name and licence number of each worker hired under a sub-contracting arrangement. Penalties attach for failure to comply.

Another key amendment is the introduction of refresher training for private security workers in high-risk roles, such as crowd control, bodyguards, or static guards. Under the current legislation, the only training requirement applies at the time a person applies for their licence. The licence expires in three years, and the person can then apply for a renewal without further training. For many workers, this is not particularly problematic: they will have acquired and practiced their skills in the field. However, for many others in higher risk public facing roles, there are potentially significant consequences of not keeping up to date with skills such as first aid, verbal de-escalation and safe physical restraint. The Bill addresses this by requiring refresher training at licence renewal. The training requirements will be confined to those who need them most and will be set by the Chief Commissioner, taking into consideration the need to keep costs low for employers or already lowly paid workers.

The Bill provides for the greater involvement of people who hire private security – the ‘client’ – in working out their security needs before handing the job over to hired security. This is not for people hiring a security adviser in-house, who can do that assessment for them, but for those who own businesses or intend to host events. It is too often the case that no real consideration is given to the actual security risks or to important matters such as evacuation plans. Security staff walk into these situations without necessarily knowing the layout of the facility, or what to pay attention to. For example, is there a blind corner in a club where drug deals are suspected to occur? Is there a door that does not lock properly so minors can sneak into licensed premises? If it is a large teen party at a private home, what has been done to guard against gate crashers, and how will admission to the premises be handled? How will the hosts deal with a minor who is under the influence of alcohol or other drugs? All of these are important matters that need to be clarified to help security staff do the best possible job. The Bill therefore requires clients to prepare a risk management plan which must be provided to security staff before they start work.

While there are genuine expert sole traders with ABNs and private security business licences offering expert services under contract, sham contracting is a significant issue in the private security industry. Sham contracting is where would-be employers ask individual licence holders to obtain an ABN and act as a sole trader, rather than taking them on as an employee. By doing this, the employer does not have to pay the costs associated with hiring the person under a genuine agreement – they do not have to pay an Award wage, provide for superannuation or Workcover insurance, and they do not have to provide for leave. As we all know, sham contracting is unlawful under Commonwealth and State Industrial Relations laws. However, the problem persists. The Bill seeks to assist in deterring sham contracting by making it far less likely that a worker will agree to such an arrangement. The mechanism for this is requiring anyone offering security services as a sole trader with an ABN to also hold a private security business licence. This will add a cost and an administrative barrier – as to obtain such a licence, a fee must be paid and financial information and business details must be produced.

To close out in relation to the private security components of the Bill, I want to emphasise that Government recognises the very important contribution our private security workforce makes to keeping our community safe. We remain committed to raising professional standards across the industry and ensuring that all workers are paid appropriately.

In relation to the drug courts amendments, drug courts are specialised courts that provide a therapeutic approach to addressing the complex needs of offenders with drug and alcohol dependency. Traditional sentencing options can fail to adequately address the needs of drug offenders. By contrast, the drug court model seeks to address underlying causes of offending by providing intensive drug treatment services to offenders. Addressing these underlying causes will ultimately enhance the wellbeing and community connectedness of participants by improving their relationships, housing stability and life skills, and reducing reoffending.

The County Court Drug Court Division was established as a three-year pilot program in 2021. The Bill will amend the *County Court Act 1958* and the *Sentencing Act 1991* to extend the operation of the Drug Court Division within the County Court of Victoria for a further two years. This will preserve the benefits that have been derived from the Drug Court’s operation for as many eligible people as possible. These benefits include reduced reoffending rates and reduced substance use. It will also ensure that the lessons learned from recent evaluations of Victoria’s Drug Courts can be implemented to enhance the operation of the Drug Court.

I commend the Bill to the house.

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (10:35): 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 6 March.

Statute Law Revision Bill 2024

Statement of compatibility

Gabrielle WILLIAMS (Dandenong – Minister for Government Services, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Public and Active Transport) (10:37): In accordance with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, I table a statement of compatibility in relation to the Statute Law Revision Bill 2024:

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Charter), I table a Statement of Compatibility for the **Statute Law Revision Bill 2024** (Bill).

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

Overview

The Bill makes minor and technical amendments to a number of Acts to correct typographical and grammatical errors and to update references.

In particular, the Bill makes minor and technical amendments to the:

- *Building Act 1993, Docklands Act 1991, Eastlink Project Act 2004, Forests Act 1958, Gas Industry Act 2001, Heritage Act 2017, Impounding of Livestock Act 1994, Major Transport Projects Facilitation Act 2009* and *Heavy Vehicle National Law Application Act 2013* to correct typographical and grammatical errors;
- *Victorian Energy Efficiency Target Act 2007* to repeal the second occurrences of mistakenly duplicated items in tables in sections 56 and 56B;
- *Domestic Building Contracts Act 1995* to substitute the words ‘building designer’ for the word ‘draftsperson’ in sections 6(1)(e) and 54(1)(c)(ii), to reflect the change to the definition of ‘building practitioner’ in the *Building Act 1993* made by the *Building Legislation Amendment Act 2023*;
- *Safety on Public Land Act 2004* to remove a reference to another provision of that Act which was repealed by the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) and Wildlife Amendment Act 2014*; and
- *Road Safety Act 1986* to update a reference in section 84(2)(ea) to a provision which has been moved by the *Transport Legislation (Amendment) Act 2004* and remove definitions of terms which are no longer used either in the Act or in regulations made under the Act.

I consider that the amendments under the Bill do not engage any rights under the Charter.

Hon Gabrielle Williams MP

Minister for Government Services

Minister for Consumer Affairs

Minister for Public and Active Transport

Second reading

Gabrielle WILLIAMS (Dandenong – Minister for Government Services, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Public and Active Transport) (10:37): 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:

The Bill before the House, the Statute Law Revision Bill 2024, is a regular mechanism for reviewing Victoria’s statute books and is required in order to ensure Victorian statutes remain clear, relevant and accurate.

The Bill makes minor and technical amendments to various Acts, including updating references and correcting typographical errors. This serves the broader purpose of ensuring these Acts remain relevant and accessible to the Victorian community.

The Bill:

- corrects typographical errors in various Acts, including the *Building Act 1993*, *Docklands Act 1991*, *Eastlink Project Act 2004*, *Forests Act 1958*, *Gas Industry Act 2001*, *Heritage Act 2017*, *Impounding of Livestock Act 1994*, *Major Transport Projects Facilitation Act 2009* and *Heavy Vehicle National Law Application Act 2013*;
- repeals mistakenly duplicated items in the tables in sections 56 and 56B of the *Victorian Energy Efficiency Target Act 2007*;
- updates the *Domestic Building Contracts Act 1995* to reflect a change to the definition of ‘building practitioner’ in the *Building Act 1993* made by the *Building Legislation Amendment Act 2023*;
- amends the *Safety on Public Land Act 2004* to remove a reference to another provision of that Act which was repealed by the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) and Wildlife Amendment Act 2014*; and
- makes various updates to the *Road Safety Act 1986* (*Road Safety Act*), including amending a reference in section 84(2)(ea) to a provision which has been moved by the *Transport Legislation (Amendment) Act 2004* and repealing definitions of terms which are no longer used either in the Act or in regulations made under the Act.

I commend the Bill to the House.

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (10:37): 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 6 March.

Estate Agents, Residential Tenancies and Other Acts Amendment (Funding) Bill 2024

Statement of compatibility

Gabrielle WILLIAMS (Dandenong – Minister for Government Services, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Public and Active Transport) (10:38): In accordance with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, I table a statement of compatibility in relation to the Estate Agents, Residential Tenancies and Other Acts Amendment (Funding) 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 Estate Agents, Residential Tenancies and Other Acts Amendment (Funding) Bill 2024 (the Bill).

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

Overview

The purpose of the Bill is to amend the *Estate Agents Act 1980* (EA Act) and *Residential Tenancies Act 1997* (RT Act) to authorise funds from the Victorian Property Fund (VPF) and the Residential Tenancies Fund (RTF) established under those Acts to be utilised to fund alternative dispute resolution and consumer advocacy and assistance services.

The Bill will also amend the *Business Licensing Authority Act 1998* (BLA Act) to close the Sex Work Regulation Fund as part of the final phase of the decriminalisation of sex work in Victoria.

Finally, the Bill will amend the *EA Act* and *Public Records Act 1973* (PR Act) to abolish the Estate Agents Council (EAC) and Public Records Advisory Council (PRAC).

Human Rights Issues

Human rights protected by the Charter that are relevant to the Bill are the right to freedom of expression (section 15(2) of the Charter), the right to freedom of assembly and association (section 16 of the Charter) and the entitlement to participate in public life (section 18(1) of the Charter).

Abolition of EAC and PRAC***Right to freedom of expression (section 15(2))***

Section 15(2) of the Charter provides that every person has the right to freedom of expression which includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, whether within or outside Victoria and whether orally; or in writing; or in print; or by way of art; or in another medium chosen by him or her.

The EAC provided appointed industry and community representatives an opportunity to advise the government on the operation of the EA Act. Similarly, the PRAC provided members with a broad range of skills and expertise an opportunity to advise on the operation of the PR Act. Abolishing EAC and PRAC removes the ability of persons to express their views to the government as a member of an advisory body in a formal setting.

However, the Bill does not prevent persons from expressing their views through other means outside of this formal setting. Alternative avenues to consult with the government are open to those wishing to express their views, including through Ministerial correspondence and invitations to provide feedback on issues papers or policy proposals via public and other consultation processes. Government will maintain ongoing engagement with relevant industry, community and sector stakeholders to inform policy development and practice in the regulation of the real estate industry and the administration of the PR Act.

I therefore, consider that any interference with the right to freedom of expression resulting from these provisions is negligible and a reasonable limitation that can be justified in a democratic society.

Right to freedom of assembly and freedom of association (section 16)

Section 16(1) provides that every person has the right of peaceful assembly. Section 16(2) of the Charter provides that every person has the right to freedom of association with others, including the right to form and join trade unions.

The right to freedom of assembly may be engaged in a limited way in relation to the abolition of EAC and PRAC. Whilst the abolition of these bodies may somewhat limit the ability of persons meeting to exchange ideas and information as members of EAC or PRAC, as membership of these advisory bodies was subject to a formal appointment process, the membership is not so broad as to be considered a 'freedom of assembly' right. The abolition does not in any way impede the right of persons to form their own lobby or advocacy groups to pursue policy objectives in relation to the real estate or public records sectors.

Further, the right to freedom of association may also be engaged as abolishing EAC and PRAC prevents persons gathering as members of EAC or PRAC. However, the Bill does not prevent persons to gather, as well as to exchange ideas and information as concerned stakeholders on issues concerning the EA Act or PR Act.

I therefore consider that any interference with the right to freedom of association and freedom of assembly are a minimal and reasonable limitation that can be justified in a democratic society.

Taking part in public life (section 18(1))

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.

The right to take part in public life is engaged in relation to abolishing EAC and PRAC. These provisions engage the right to take part in public life as the abolition limits persons from holding membership, and in doing so may be perceived to limit participation in issues relating to the operation of the EA Act or PR Act.

However, the formal abolition of EAC or PRAC does not remove the ability to participate in decisions regarding the EAC Act or the PR Act. Alternative avenues to advocate or consult with government on policy reform remain open, ensuring that persons may continue to take part in public life. For instance, consumers, advocacy groups and industry representatives will continue to be able to provide industry advice through public and other consultation processes.

Therefore, to the extent that these provisions impose a restriction on a person's right to take part in public life, I consider they are a minimal and reasonable limitation that can be justified in a democratic society.

Conclusion

I am therefore of the view that the Bill is compatible with the Charter.

The Hon Gabrielle Williams MP

Minister for Consumer Affairs

Second reading

Gabrielle WILLIAMS (Dandenong – Minister for Government Services, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Public and Active Transport) (10:39): 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:**Expand the use of existing statutory trust funds to support the delivery of alternative Dispute resolution services to Victorians**

The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring access to fair, safe, and secure housing for all Victorians. As part of that commitment the Government released the Housing Statement on 20 September 2023 outlining a 10-year plan to improve housing supply and housing affordability in Victoria. The Housing Statement announced a new alternative dispute resolution service to be known as Rental Dispute Resolution Victoria. The new service will assist renters and residential rental, providing a one-stop shop for renters, agents and landlords to resolve tenancy disputes over rent, damages, repairs and bonds.

The proposed establishment of Rental Dispute Resolution Victoria is a significant reform. This service will be a faster, fairer and cheaper way to resolve a range of rental disputes and will enable the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal to use its resources to address more complex matters such as disputes around termination of residential rental agreements or applications for an order for possession of rented premises.

The amendments carried by this Bill are the first important step in supporting the delivery of the government's Housing Statement by expanding the use of the Victorian Property Fund and Residential Tenancies Fund to fund the establishment and ongoing costs for alternative dispute resolution services arising under housing and property related Consumer Acts. To ensure that this new service is accessible to all Victorians, the funds will also enable government to resource community organisations to provide advocacy and assistance services to consumers in relation to housing and property issues. This includes funding for the Financial Counselling Program administered by CAV that alleviates the impacts of economic abuse and financial hardship, helping people to manage debts, stabilise their financial situation and rebuild and get on with their lives.

Closure of the Sex Work Regulation Fund

The Bill will also close the Sex Work Regulation Fund which was established as a trust account to support the operation of the previous sex work licensing and registration scheme. Following the full decriminalisation of sex work on 1 December 2023, it is fiscally prudent for the Government to make the administrative change to close the Fund given it no longer serves a required purpose.

Abolishing the Estate Agents Council and Public Records Advisory Council

The Government is also committed to modernising how we engage with consumers, advocacy groups and industry.

To achieve this, the Bill will abolish the Estate Agents Council and the Public Records Advisory Council while the Government works towards establishing more informal, flexible and ongoing consultative mechanisms to inform policy and practice in the regulation of the real estate industry and in managing public records requirements.

The Government acknowledges and thanks past and current members of the Estate Agents Council and the Public Records Advisory Council for their work and support in administering the Estate Agents Act 1980 and Public Records Act 1973, and will work with sector representatives and the public on the most appropriate approach going forward to ensure that consumers, advocacy bodies and industry will continue to have access to, and can inform policy and practice in the regulation of the real estate industry and in managing public records requirements.

I commend the Bill to the house.

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (10:39): 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 6 March.

**Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill
2024***Second reading***Debate resumed on motion of Ben Carroll:**

That this bill be now read a second time.

Jess WILSON (Kew) (10:39): I rise to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024. I am excited that I have 30 minutes today, unlike on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2023 from a couple of weeks ago. I think we will have a little bit more to say about this piece of legislation.

A member interjected.

Jess WILSON: It was a very important piece of legislation, and I think everyone in the house appreciated me going through it part by part in great detail. But today on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024 can I thank from the outset Liam from Minister Blandthorn's office in the other place –

Members interjecting.

Jess WILSON: they are usually here – for organising the bill briefing and for always being very responsive to our questions and coming back to us very quickly with detailed information. I am sure I have put him in a little bit of trouble now, but I do pass on my thanks to him and to the department representatives as well for making the time to brief us on this important piece of legislation.

I say from the outset today that the coalition understands the need to improve the availability of child care and early learning outcomes right across the state, particularly in regional Victoria and in our growth areas. For that reason the coalition will not be opposing the bill before us today. I say that from the outset so any talking points can be updated as per our position.

Members interjecting.

Jess WILSON: Just send that through: not opposing. We know how important early learning and child care are not only for women and for mothers but more broadly for families and very importantly for children right around the world but particularly when looking at increasing access here in Victoria across the state. But we know that the government's track record when it comes to delivering on what are lofty promises that sound very hopeful and very good is hugely problematic, and I will come back to that throughout my contribution today.

First can I raise the importance of early childhood education and care to parents and to families. The lack of availability of child care is a handbrake on our workforce in Victoria, particularly when it comes to participation of women and mothers in the workforce. One of the many functions of child care is to enable greater workforce participation, particularly for women. According to Deloitte, a lack of access to child care takes almost 27,000 women entirely out of the workforce in Victoria and costs our economy here in Victoria about \$1.5 billion a year in lost earnings. But the economic imperative is only part of that story. The most pressing imperative is to empower every mother and every family to strike the right balance between time spent with children and the myriad of tasks and mental load that go with raising a family and juggling the many demands on a family with time spent in the workforce making sure that income is available to provide for the family's needs.

The earnings that go along with the time spent in the workforce are only part of that story too. Women do not only want to return to work after having children for financial reasons, but for many women their careers provide them with a way to derive meaning and fulfilment in life and, most importantly, of being able to continue on that career trajectory to ensure that they are moving through the ranks of their workforce and up the ladder so we see more women in leadership positions right across the state. Many women wish to continue to be in the workforce once they do become parents, even if it does

mean trying to juggle their time, trying to strike a balance between time spent with their kids and time spent at work. It is important to recognise that that balance looks very different for one family than it might for another family, and we need to be able to understand the different needs of families right across the state. Every family is different, every family is unique and every family deserves to have a childcare and early learning setting that is available and that suits their needs and their priorities. The challenge for us as policymakers in this space is to design a system that has flexibility and adaptability at its core and is available for all families no matter how many hours of child care they need, what their income need is or where they live.

It is also important to note that child care and early learning do not exist purely so that parents can go to work. There is a mounting body of evidence that points to the vital importance of early childhood education in future learning outcomes. The Productivity Commission is considering these very issues at the behest of the Commonwealth. Its draft report issued late last year states:

... there is recent evidence from Australia and overseas that shows that most ECEC programs ... have positive effects on children's early academic, cognitive, or non-cognitive skills.

The evidence is particularly strong for early childhood education for children in the three- to four-year-old age bracket. Dana McCoy of the Harvard Graduate School of Education states:

We know from decades of studies that children who are enrolled in quality early educational services demonstrate immediate gains in their academic and non-academic skills, and these benefits can even persist all the way into adulthood.

Over in the United Kingdom, a landmark study of the benefits of preschool was conducted in the two decades prior to 2017. It found that children who had attended preschool had higher English and maths results in high school, had better self-regulation of social behaviour and were less inclined to hyperactivity. It also found the significant benefits of preschool education to society more broadly: an estimated lifetime earning benefit of up to £36,000 per household, plus an extra £9000 in tax takings for the exchequer.

Crucially, the research shows that children most likely to benefit from early childhood education are those from disadvantaged backgrounds. To again quote Dana McCoy of Harvard:

Research has also shown that low-income children often benefit the most from early educational services, and that preschool can help to close the gap between them and their more advantaged peers at school entry.

So we can view early childhood education as an equaliser, helping to ensure that our most disadvantaged children can have the very best start in life and enjoy the benefits of our primary and secondary schools alongside their peers. Given the mounting evidence of the benefits to children and parents and to the economy, how to get the best settings right for early childhood education and care is a public policy question governments in the country are over and over again seeking to solve.

I mentioned previously that the Productivity Commission's inquiry into early childhood education and care is ongoing, with their draft report released in November last year. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission also conducted an inquiry into child care and released their final report in December 2023. These reports provided excellent context and reform directions for all parliaments right across Australia to consider. But the consistency of these reports and what they highlight is the need to achieve availability, affordability, inclusivity and flexibility in the sector. They also shine a light on the gaps in the market and where families, children and indeed whole communities are falling through the cracks in the system.

A 2022 report by the Mitchell Institute of Victoria University found that more than 9 million Australians live in an area where there are insufficient childcare places for families, with 1 million of those having no access to child care at all. Twenty-eight per cent of metropolitan and 52 per cent of regional Australians live in areas considered childcare deserts, where three or more children under the age of four are vying for every one childcare place available. I know the member for South-West Coast, the member for Euroa and the member for Mildura speak regularly about the impact of what

we call childcare deserts in their own electorates in regional Victoria. In Victoria the median stands at 0.41 childcare places per child, with multiple regions across the state designated as childcare deserts, as I said. Unsurprisingly, you will often find that these deserts are in regional Victoria, in remote communities, where families face severe shortages of early childhood education and care opportunities. In many cases this is due to workforce challenges within these regions and areas, and I will certainly come back to the issues around workforce.

Just to turn further to the research from the Mitchell Institute, what it shows is that areas of Victoria with fewer childcare places have lower levels of workforce participation for women who have a child under the age of five years. There is a direct correlation between having fewer childcare places available and women's participation in the workforce. For example, the member for South-West Coast's electorate of Warrnambool in the south-west region has an average of 0.29 childcare places per child combined with a 56.5 per cent female parent workforce participation. Now, Deputy Speaker, if you contrast that to Melbourne and the inner suburbs and areas which you and I represent, the region has an average of 0.58 childcare places per child and a female parent workforce participation rate much higher at 69.1 per cent, demonstrating that correlation between fewer childcare places and women's participation in the workforce.

The ACCC in its final report, which I spoke to earlier, noted the highly localised nature of childcare markets and drew three broad categories of childcare users, being those that are (1) adequately served, (2) under-served or (3) unserved. It notes that current policy settings in child care tend towards demand-side interventions and principally the Commonwealth's childcare subsidy. In order to meet under-served and unserved locations and cohorts, the ACCC flags the need to consider supply-side funding mechanisms in locations where centres would otherwise be unviable. For unserved markets in particular the ACCC states there may be a potential role for government to support the direct delivery of childcare places. According to the ACCC, the fragmented nature of the sector means:

To ensure there is supply of childcare services in areas that have very high costs to supply ... supply-side subsidies should be considered.

The Productivity Commission's draft report appears to align with the ACCC's thinking, stating:

... in persistent 'thin' markets or communities with complex needs, the Australian Government should provide additional funding to support the establishment of appropriate services and, where necessary, ensure their ongoing viability through block funding.

You may note that the Productivity Commission mentions the Australian government specifically, which you would expect given it is Commonwealth-commissioned research. But it is worth reflecting on the fragmentation of the sector both in a market sense but also in a regulatory sense. Centre-based and family day care have generally been the policy domain of the Commonwealth, while preschool and outside-of-school-hours care have tended to be managed by the states, and these historical distinctions have become increasingly blurred, particularly when we are now seeing significant growth in the offering of three- and four-year-old kindergarten with long day care settings. The Productivity Commission's draft report warns that moving towards universal access to early childhood education and care:

... will require staged and coordinated implementation of reforms to maintain quality and avoid bottlenecks that exacerbate unmet demand.

Further, the commission states that:

The planned expansion of preschool in a number of states ... will also ... further increase the demand for staff.

And I will certainly come back to those workforce challenges shortly.

The commission advocates for a new partnership agreement between the states, the territories and the Commonwealth to ensure clear lines of responsibility, communication and coordination.

This is all simply to highlight that there are a lot of moving and interconnected parts when it comes to the early childhood education and care sector and that any changes in this sector will have flow-on consequences right around the country and right here in Victoria. So it is incumbent on all of us in this place and indeed in every parliament across the country to ensure that any reforms in this sector are carefully scrutinised for unintended consequences.

That brings us to the specifics of this bill, the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill. The bill seeks to confer upon the Secretary of the Department of Education the authority to employ childcare workers and other support staff as necessary to operate government-owned childcare centres. It also allows the secretary to charge fees to parents sending their children to government-owned childcare centres. The bill primarily amends the Education and Training Reform Act 2006, but it also makes amendments to the Long Service Leave Act 2018.

I note that the Secretary of the Department of Education has existing employment powers when it comes to the employment of public school teachers, and the government has advised that these powers are not suitable for use in early childcare and early learning settings. As a result, the bill gives the Secretary of the Department of Education the authority to employ childcare workers and other necessary staff, such as the early learning centre (ELC) directors and administrators, and charge fees to parents sending their children to government-owned childcare centres. The bill also enables the minister to make ministerial orders setting out the employment conditions for the public sector childcare workforce and the fees to be charged to parents sending their children to government-owned childcare centres.

I want to say from the outset that the coalition does not oppose supply-side interventions in the early childhood and education care space. We note the work of the Productivity Commission, as I have spoken about, and the ACCC, the alignment of their work in this space and their recommendations for a role for government in ensuring supply in thin markets or those underserved markets, particularly in remote and regional Victoria, where service provider viability is likely to be an ongoing issue. We are of the view, though, that the interventions must be made with the utmost care so as not to disrupt existing service providers or distort the market for those many not-for-profits. Such distortion could result in a reduction in the number of childcare and early learning places, which would obviously be counter to the goal of increasing availability.

Any distortion in this sector carries significant risk because we are already at a crisis point when it comes to the early learning and childcare workforce. Chronic and severe workforce shortages are already plaguing the sector and hindering availability of places. In 2023 the Australian Childcare Alliance surveyed over 600 childcare centres, and over two-thirds of them stated they had capped enrolments because they were unable to recruit enough workers to cover the mandated staff-to-child ratios. As a result, some 16,000 childcare places are offline due to the workforce crisis right across the country – that is 16,000 families who cannot strike that balance between work and family time, that critical balance that is so important for the wellbeing of the children and the parents.

Those families who are already struggling to find a place do not need a poorly planned intervention in the sector that takes staff away from existing centres. Without a comprehensive plan to increase workforce capacity the government's plan to open government-owned ELCs will simply result in childcare places being shuffled around the map without any significant impact on the overall availability for families. We will end up in a situation where we are robbing a childcare place from Peter to give to Paul without actually growing the capacity of the system. These government ELCs will have access to the same workforce that every other Victorian centre and preschool currently has access to. The government has no plan beyond its pre-existing workforce strategy to create more workforce capacity in the system to support the new government-run ELCs without taking staff away from the existing centres. I think it is fair to say that the existing workforce strategy is not improving the situation. The chronic and severe workforce shortages are not being eased in any meaningful way by any measure this government has put in place over recent years.

Where does the government think that these workers are going to come from? There are 800 vacancies being advertised as of today right across the early childhood workforce, and this bill estimates that they are going to need some 700 educators, over 100 teachers, not to mention the dozens of centre directors, assistant directors, educational leaders, admin supports and cooks. The government says they plan to employ trainee educators to help build the pipeline. While this is one positive step, it is certainly not in isolation going to solve the hundreds of staff that will be needed in these centres from day one. The answer is that these staff will be coming from existing centres already in place across the state. They will be coming from the ELC down the road, the kindergarten up the street, the childcare centre in the next suburb over and the council preschool in the neighbouring shire. What will these existing centres do when they can no longer fill their own shifts? They will reduce the number of places that they have to offer, which they are already doing now given these workforce shortages.

The picture could be even more dire in regional and rural areas. We know from the experience of trying to attract teachers to primary and secondary schools in these locations that additional resources need to be deployed to get staff on school sites. Of the 50 new government-owned ELC sites, 17 are located in regional or remote locations according to ABS classifications. But the government has no specific plan in place to overcome the likely staffing challenges in these locations that are being experienced now. Sadly, I am unconvinced the government has given any further consideration to the impact of this intervention on existing providers in the sector.

Another factor that seems to be largely ignored is the potential of these new government-owned ELCs to crowd out existing centres. The government says they will set fees at these ELC centres according to the principle of affordability. This is an important aim, but again there seems to be a lack of consideration about what these childcare fees might do to enrolments at existing centres. The ACCC did not find significant evidence of price gouging in their review. So we have a situation where the government is seeking to establish new centres that are backed by the Victorian Treasury to operate in the same market as centres that must completely cover their own costs, whether they be not for profit or for profit. The government claims that each location has been carefully chosen in areas where existing capacity is limited, but in a dynamic and changing market and with many of the government sites still being years away from having the first sod turned, let alone specifically identified – the member for Mildura before was saying that she would love to have some input into where that actual site might be placed in her area – the risk of unintended consequences from the establishment of government-run ELCs is very real.

My concerns about this bill are not because the coalition objects to supply-side interventions in the early childhood sector – we have covered those in much detail – but as the Productivity Commission and the ACCC both point out, there is both a social and an economic imperative for governments to increase capacity in the childcare and early learning sector and in doing so they will need to involve both demand and supply-side measures. My real concern is that the establishment of the government-run ELCs without a broad and coherent sector-wide strategy to increase workforce capacity risks market distortion and could actually undermine the availability in the long run. To again refer to the work of the ACCC and the Productivity Commission, there is a need to look at the much broader role for government in terms of acting as a market steward in this space.

The Productivity Commission notes that overall there is little coordination in the setting of early childhood education and care policy and a multitude of different programs with overlapping objectives that have been engaged over the years. The ACCC states that the range of market types and the need to develop appropriate government measures to suit the needs and characteristics of local government communities strongly suggest that some form of broad government stewardship for childcare markets across the sector is warranted. What these two reports are saying is that an overarching strategy for market stewardship is needed.

Again, on the government's record in this space, we look at the rollout of the free kinder program, where we have had councils across the state and across Melbourne – Knox City Council, Warrnambool City Council, Mornington shire, Glen Eira, my own council of Boroondara – talk about

the impact of the rollout of the free kinder program and the impact that has on existing sessional kindergartens not having the resources to continue to operate. We have reason to not trust that the government has thought through the implementation of this plan, and that is why I today move a reasoned amendment. I move:

That all the words after 'That' be omitted and replaced with the words 'this house refuses to read this bill a second time until the government:

- (1) provides a preliminary or draft fee structure for the early learning centres (ELCs) scheduled to open in 2025 and 2026;
- (2) seeks written feedback from any childcare centre, kindergarten or preschool within a 15-kilometre radius of the proposed government ELC sites regarding the likely impact of a government ELC on their workforce capacity and enrolments, and provides their feedback to the house;
- (3) conducts an analysis on the childcare workforce implications of the new government ELC sites, including:
 - (a) establishing the workforce vacancy rates around the locations of the new sites; and
 - (b) providing the house with a comprehensive plan on how the government will ensure existing childcare centres and kindergartens are not disadvantaged in their ability to recruit and retain staff in their existing programs; and
- (4) provides an estimate of the budget impact of the operating costs for the government ELCs scheduled to open in 2025 and 2026.'

I have said it before and I will say it again: the coalition understands the critical importance of increasing capacity in the early childhood education and care sector, particularly in regional Victoria and in our growth areas here on the outskirts of Melbourne. Availability and flexibility in child care and early education are vital to family wellbeing in the 21st century, and that flexibility and that availability of places is absolutely paramount to any system that we are seeking to design or improve. It provides the social and the academic benefits to children that I have spoken about and that they enjoy well into adulthood, and it sets them up much better than they would otherwise be for starting school at the age of six. It enables greater workforce participation and increases female participation in particular in the workforce, but that economic imperative is only part of the story.

Most importantly, the design of this system should empower every mother and every family to strike the right balance between time spent with children and time spent in the workforce. Achieving that balance between time where they want to be at home and family time with their kids and time where they want to be in the workforce is key for many parents trying to unlock that fulfilment and meaning. That is why it is so important that we get the design of the early childhood and care system right.

We have expert federal bodies putting out a myriad of recommendations and commentary in this space talking about the need for the federation, the states and the Commonwealth, to work together on the design of this system. Unfortunately, as I have said throughout my contribution today, we on this side of the house, the coalition, have little trust and confidence that the Labor government is going to be able to roll out this plan and implement it in a way that does not see the reduction of workforce in the existing ELCs and does not see staff having to move from existing ELCs into government-run centres. We do not want to see the market distorted any more than it is. We want to be able to provide a system that increases capacity and places for children whilst also providing that flexibility for parents.

That is why we on this side of the house have moved the reasoned amendment today to understand the detail behind the bill before us. This is largely a structural bill, a bill that provides the department secretary with the ability to employ teachers and educators and other staff right across these centres and to set fees for parents without any detail as to how that will be done and what the plan is for the government when it comes to dealing with the immense workforce challenges in this space. Particularly when we look at regional Victoria, the workforce challenges are crippling in these areas. As of today we have 800 vacancies for early childhood workers right across the state, and what this bill proposes is that another 1200 workers will be required in the years ahead without any plan to actually increase that workforce capacity.

Finally, what we have seen in the government's rollout of the free kinder program is a concerning lack of detail and plan around the implementation of how this is going to operate in the market and actually impact existing providers. As I said, we have seen Knox City Council, Mornington Peninsula, Glen Eira and Warrnambool councils, as the member for South-West Coast says, all questioning their ability to continue to run their council kindergartens. Knox City Council has stopped running all but two of their 28 kindergartens as a result of the government's rollout of the free kinder program. Now, we all want to see greater access to free kinder, but there is a lack of resourcing in this program and a lack of funding provided to councils to ensure that their sessional kindergartens can continue to operate. Sessional kindergartens that have been the absolute foundation of kindergarten for decades in this country are shutting down as a result of the lack of funding and lack of resources from this government. We on this side of the house want to see an increase in the availability of child care right around Victoria, particularly in regional Victoria and our growth areas, where there are unserved markets and there are very thin markets and there are a lack of places, which results in a lack of participation in the workforce. That is why we do not oppose this bill, but we call on the government to do a lot more work and a lot more homework on its implementation.

Colin BROOKS (Bundoora – Minister for Development Victoria, Minister for Precincts, Minister for Creative Industries) (11:09): I have been in this place for a little while now, and I have to say I was not expecting the opposition to move a reasoned amendment on this bill, which would kill off the bill. It is as good as voting against the bill even though the opposition are saying they are not opposing it. But to effectively try and knock this bill off, which is simply seeking to establish 50 early learning childcare centres and preschool programs in some of the most disadvantaged parts of our state – many rural communities – absolutely floors me. I cannot believe the opposition, after all the rhetoric we have heard about supporting access to preschool and kindergarten programs and childcare deserts and so on, would move a reasoned amendment that this house refuses to read this bill a second time until the government does a number of things.

Members in this chamber know that a reasoned amendment is effectively an attempt to kill off a bill. I think that is a great shame because communities around the state have been identified through a process that the government has undertaken to look at the availability of child care in different communities. What does the existing supply look like? What is the estimated demand for child care in those particular communities? What is not being met by existing providers? And what is the level of disadvantage in those communities based on socio-economic indexes. You are talking about the areas that most need those services to be implemented. The government took to the election a commitment to deliver 50 of those services in those areas that need them most, and this bill, without going through the fine detail, effectively helps the Secretary of the Department of Education to make the arrangements for employment and fees at those centres. It is an enabling bill for that election commitment to be delivered.

Those communities – places like Alexandra, Casterton, Churchill, Cohuna, Drouin, Foster, Mildura, Newborough, the Nicholson district, Rochester, Numurkah, Portland South, Warrnambool, Shepparton, Hamilton, Maffra, Wonthaggi, Woori Yallock, Yallourn North – are being told by the opposition today that this is not an urgent priority for those local communities. I am absolutely floored, because I thought it was an agreed position across this chamber that investment in early years education is critical for preschool-age children growing to their full potential. We heard just then from the opposition about the importance from an economic point of view as well. There is well-established research from the big reforms of the early 2000s pointing to the benefits economically if you invest in those early years and then you have a good school education system, how people can contribute to the economy. There is a great economic benefit from investment in early years education. Of course that leads to the government's Best Start, Best Life reforms, a \$14 billion investment. This is a really small but important part of those early years reforms. I am genuinely shocked that the opposition would seek to delay this rollout. I think it is a misjudgement on the part of the opposition. I understand the arguments that have been put. It flies in the face of that then to say we want to put this legislation onto the back burner.

As I said, the government has carefully determined where these centres are to be established. It is very important to note that many of these are in regional communities, but many of them are in disadvantaged parts of Melbourne as well. This is on top of our three- and four-year-old free kinder, which is saving families up to about \$2500 a year, so it is a really important measure not just in terms of encouraging families to participate in kinder programs and early learning programs but also helping to take pressure off family budgets at this time. When we know budgets are under pressure, that saving of up to \$2500 per family is really important. As the opposition have pointed out, investing in early years also means you are giving many parents, predominantly women, the opportunity to return to the workforce, which is such an important thing as well for those women as a point on its own but also economically as well.

Importantly, I did hear the opposition point to their concerns around the rollout of free kinder. I understand that last year, 2023, some 97 per cent of services were funded, a nearly total take-up of that program, so an overwhelming success. Who could argue against the rollout of free kinder for three- and four-year-olds? It is a great program introduced by the Allan Labor government. The opposition quoted I think it was the Mitchell Institute when they were talking about the provision of child care. Of course child care is a federal government responsibility. It does mesh with our early childhood education and preschool programs, as it does with local government, but we have had nearly a decade of inaction in terms of child care from the federal government. Peter Hurley from the Mitchell Institute, at a time when Josh Frydenberg was one of our treasurers, said:

... there's need for a 'change in mindset' that puts children at the centre of new funding rather than just making subsidies to private providers more generous.

I think if you listen to the opposition's arguments in this debate, it is a market-first approach and a children-second approach. I do not think this government would be anywhere near an argument that says we would not put children ahead of every other aspect and make sure that they get the preschool education that they deserve. That is about working with the market but also intervening in areas where the market is failing and not providing appropriate services for families.

As I said, I think that the opposition have erred in moving this reasoned amendment and saying to these communities that they do not want to act quickly to provide these centres in their area. It does not surprise me. I remember back to the last time the opposition was in –

Members interjecting.

Colin BROOKS: I get my best material from the opposition. The last time the opposition were in government, I remember very clearly the cuts that were made to occasional care. I remember talking about the impact that that had on my local occasional care service, Watsonia Occasional Child Care, the Take a Break program, which meant that particularly women who were, for example, looking for work and needing care occasionally to attend job interviews, to go out and find work or to train were not able to do that because the Baillieu government cut funding. The Baillieu government cut funding from that important program at the very same time that the federal government at the time was putting lots of money into child care and early learning across the country. There is a track record here in Victoria of the opposition when they are in government and there is a track record at the federal level, and we are even seeing it now at this level when they are in opposition seeking to delay this legislation's passage through this place. This government will support this legislation on behalf of all those communities, particularly those disadvantaged families that are keen to see those services rolled out in additional communities.

I know we have a very, very long list of government members who want to speak on this bill, so I will wrap up my contribution there. But I will say again: we will not be supporting the reasoned amendment put forward by the opposition. We will push on and make sure this legislation passes this place as soon as possible.

Emma KEALY (Lowan) (11:17): I rise today to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024. As I came into the chamber then, it was interesting to get a history lesson from the government on what happened in the deep, dark past. When parents are now probably working very hard and trying to put their young adult children into a home that they cannot afford or supporting them to find a place to rent that they cannot afford, we are being told that that is the reason that parents today cannot access child care and return to work. I think that we see so many times in this place this retelling of old, old ancient history, and there is zero accountability for the decisions that have been made by the Andrews and now the Allan Labor governments. This government has been in for now a 10th year. The women who cannot access child care today can only look to the failed policies of the Allan Labor government and the Andrews Labor government before it for why women cannot get back to work now – why they cannot make the decision on whether they want to be a stay-at-home mum or make sure they can get that all-important early years education from zero to four years.

I note that the member for Euroa is in exactly the same situation that I found myself in until very recently, where we could not access early years education for our children either. We understand it firsthand.

Juliana Addison interjected.

Emma KEALY: I note the interjections, and I know it is unparliamentary both to interject and also to take interjections, but for the member for Wendouree to even question that the childcare system in Victoria is working anywhere near adequately is a blight upon the people that she represents in Wendouree who cannot access child care today because Labor have failed to plan for the workforce that they need to care for the kids today. The government should have looked at training the workforce up a long time ago. Free TAFE has been a failure in recruiting workers in the childcare sector. I hear from the Labor side of the chamber cries of disbelief. Have a look at your resources. Have a look at the number of vacancies that exist in early years education across the state. The reason that women cannot access child care is because Labor has catastrophically failed to build the workforce that every single mother needs and every single father needs to get their child into early years education and give them the best possible start for life.

It is not only failed workforce policies – and this will be exacerbated through this piece of legislation we see today – but it is also additional things that we see in there. We love seeing things like free kinder. We love seeing things like having pre-prep come through. We love to see investment in new childcare facilities, and for my electorate of Lowan there are two facilities listed as part of the rollout. I am so proud because these are facilities that I have been calling for, standing side by side with my communities, for years and years and years. It is not like passing a piece of legislation is going to make a difference to the number of workers that are available out in the workforce, and that is where the critical need is. I absolutely, as do all of my colleagues on this side of the chamber, welcome further investment into early childhood education. We understand that particularly in areas of remote Victoria there simply has been market failure. The money just is not there, because you have to provide such big incentives to pull people out of Melbourne so that we have got a high level of support and availability of childcare places in rural and remote areas.

Murtoa in western Victoria is a great example of that. Through speaking to families in that area for many, many years, we have an interesting situation where we have actual childcare workers living in Murtoa who cannot access child care for their own children. I recall speaking to a mother who is a qualified childcare provider and educator, and she had to take her child to child care in Warracknabeal and then drive another 45 minutes away to work as a childcare educator in Horsham and then go back to Warracknabeal, pick up her child and then go back home to Murtoa. It is an absolute childcare desert through that region, and this is because there simply are not enough incentives and enough support for our valuable and vital early years educators. Until that situation is addressed, we are only going to see policies like the legislation that is before us today just make that market even thinner and

provide so many more challenges for anybody, particularly in rural and regional Victoria, to be able to access child care.

I think we need to get beyond this concept that when the government puts out a media release all of a sudden like a magic wand it fixes the problem. We all acknowledge there is an issue. My frustration is that this issue has been in place for a long time and Labor has had 10 years to fix it, and yet still all we get are media releases and nothing actually on the ground, no additional workers in this space, no additional support to make sure our kids in rural and regional Victoria are getting the very, very best start to life. The questions that I would like to see fully rounded out as part of this legislation as it passes through this chamber, which it inevitably will, but also through the upper house, are a comprehensive plan on how Labor are going to train up the additional childcare educators and managers that are required to fulfil this promise. We are very good at setting the expectation that all of a sudden everyone will be able to access a childcare place if they want one – and that absolutely is something we should all aspire to as members of this place – but without the vital workers it simply will not be delivered. It simply will not be delivered, and it is impacting people today.

I know of so many people. I know of ICU nurses, in incredible shortage across the regional areas of the state, even in Melbourne – we know there is a healthcare workforce challenge – and other nurses who cannot return to work because there is no-one to look after their children. On the other side I know of families where the wife is a nurse and the husband is a chippie, where he is going to work during the day and she looks after the kids, and then she goes to work at night-time while he looks after the night shift of the kids. They do not see each other anymore. They cannot see each other because there is no child care available.

Not only is Labor's failure to build the early years education workforce having an impact on the opportunities for our youngest Victorians to access high-quality education in that vital zero- to four-year period; we have also got lower productivity, particularly in the workforce areas that are most in need. The examples I have given today are childcare workers themselves. I know of teachers, I know of nurses and I know of people in the construction centre – these are all people that we could unlock to fill those vital job vacancies that need to be filled to keep our economy ticking over.

I absolutely support the reasoned amendment put forward by the member for Kew, and I congratulate her for the comprehensive work that she has done in speaking to the key stakeholders, constructing this and pointing out to the government the areas where they could do better. It is not saying that we are objecting to the bill, but we are saying, 'You know what? There's an opportunity here. When legislation comes before the house we can do the very best we can.' You do it once and you do it right. That is how I was raised, it is clearly how the member for Kew was raised, and I would like to see that brought through in legislation we bring through the house.

While I have heard those interjections hurled across the chamber that somehow because we have got a reasoned amendment we are killing this bill, that is absolutely untrue. What we are doing is offering a list of suggestions of improvements – how we can make this legislation better – to ensure that vital early years education is provided and actually delivered in a funded way and in a way that caters for the workforce and makes sure that we are actually filling the gaps in early years education right across the state.

I would like to congratulate the Yarriambiack Shire Council in particular but also the schools and the parents in the Murtoa area and the Yarriambiack area for their considerable work and the advocacy that they have done over many years to secure funding for that vital childcare centre in Murtoa. It was fabulous to make an election commitment about that, it is even better to be able to deliver it, and I am very proud of that. Of course we have got Hamilton on the list as well – again an area which is in a childcare desert. I have strongly advocated for another childcare facility in that region for a very long period of time. I do welcome that investment, and I hope that it continues in other areas of my electorate of Lowan in the west of the state. We are in a childcare desert, and our parents deserve to be able to send their kids to the best quality early years education.

Melissa HORNE (Williamstown – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Local Government, Minister for Ports and Freight, Minister for Roads and Road Safety) (11:27): I rise in support of this bill today, and I have got to say, listening to the debate on the other side of the chamber I am quite surprised that those on the other side are actually claiming to support this, because that certainly does not seem to be the conversation that is going on.

I know that you, Acting Speaker Marchant, actually trained as a teacher, didn't you? That love of education and the importance of education particularly in those foundational years is so critical to a child's learning. This is indeed what this bill strives to do, whether it is about employing staff, investing in admin staff or investing in childcare centres to make sure that every child in Victoria has got that right to a good education and to free education. After all, this is a historic investment. Can I say as the daughter of two schoolteachers, nothing makes me more passionate than seeing the ways that we actually invest in the next generation coming through. Being able to have the minister make those ministerial orders to fix the fees to pay for attendance at government early learning centres and setting the employment terms and conditions for the government early learning centres workforce is actually critical to that equity.

Let us not underestimate just how much we have invested in early learning for Victorian children. We have made kinder free, and this is transformative, particularly for people in my electorate, where there are some low socio-economic people and where that access is so vital to be able to give people, particularly first-generation migrants, that first start to life. Free kinder will save families up to \$2500 in fees per child each year. Particularly in a cost-of-living crisis, it is about being able to provide that much-needed relief for family budgets and give women that freedom of choice to be able to return to the workforce. After all, we know that a workforce is so much better when we see that diversity represented in every aspect of our society. Did you know that in 2023 approximately 97 per cent – that is more than 2750 services – of funded kindergarten services were participating in free kinder? That is of benefit to up to 140,000 children – absolutely to be commended.

On top of that, we continue to lead the nation in early childhood education and care. We are establishing pre-prep over the next decade, a new universal 30 hours a week program of play-based early learning for four-year-old children. This is part of, as I said, an absolutely historic investment of \$14 billion in the Best Start, Best Life reforms. I can remember, late last year actually, going down to one of my kinders with the then Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-Prep, Ingrid Stitt in the other place, along with Bachar Houli, who is one of the iconic people in my electorate, to announce this program. It was absolutely fantastic, and it was particularly wonderful to see Bachar at a kindergarten that he had attended. He was also able to say that he was on the cusp of being able to go out there and say, 'Where are the kinders that my kids are going to go to?' We understood that this program that we were introducing would benefit so many kids across our community.

In 2025 pre-prep will start in the Rural City of Ararat. I know from having been there just late last week, after those devastating bushfires tore through Pomonal, that this sort of support for Ararat rural city will be extremely welcomed. It is going to be rolled out in Gannawarra shire, Hindmarsh shire and Murrindindi shire – again, another local government area that was really impacted by the floods earlier this year but also the storm event that tore through on exactly the same day. Northern Grampians shire will benefit – again, I was up there late last week – and Yarriambiack shire. This is so critical.

If I have a look at, say, some of the kinders in my electorate, to be honest an astonishing level of investment has gone on. We have got Altona Gate Kindergarten – \$20,000 of school readiness funding has gone in there. We have got Altona Kindergarten, with \$185,000 for a Building Blocks improvement grant. Altona North Children's Service have received \$200,000 to upgrade the outdoor space and \$30,000 for the school readiness fund. Goodstart learning in Altona has had \$8000 for a sensory sand and water table, and that is a beautiful area, let me tell you. Guardian Childcare and Education at Altona North has had \$6000 for school readiness funding. But it does not stop there. Emma McLean Kindergarten has received \$3000 in school readiness funding, but it is also an early learning centre that is receiving significant capital upgrades as well. We have got the Explorers Early

Learning in Williamstown, with \$8000 for school readiness funding. The Shine early learning centre in Brooklyn has received \$6000 for school readiness funding. Home Road Kindergarten – I have been there many, many times, and the staff there, particularly Carly Conlon, who runs that centre, are amazing human beings – have had staged upgrades over a number of years, but their latest one was \$180,000 for a Building Blocks inclusion grant for an all-abilities playground. The kids were so delighted when I went down to announce that.

South Kingsville Pre School have had \$175,000 in a Building Blocks improvement grant as well as a multisensory play space, and that is a beautiful little native garden down there. The Kids by the Bay Children's Centre have had \$4000 in school readiness funding, and Newport Gardens Early Years Centre had a \$600,000 Building Blocks capacity grant which expanded the centre in preparation for three-year-old kinder. The growth that is going on through that suburb is absolutely phenomenal. This will make such a difference to those young families in the area.

Robina Scott Kindergarten, an absolutely iconic place in Williamstown, has had a number of different grants – \$180,000 for the Building Blocks inclusion grant, \$110,000 for new child-safe toilets and \$8000 for new safety padding and equipment. Seaholme Kindergarten is an entirely new build. It is fantastic. This is a \$9.9 million Building Blocks capacity grant modular kindergarten. On top of that we have got Sutton Avenue Kindergarten, which is a brand new building as well, and The Range Children's Centre has received an enormous grant to upgrade their outdoor play areas, which are absolutely spectacular. I was down there with the then minister for early childhood Ingrid Stitt in the other place to have a look when it opened, and it is an absolutely spectacular area. Finally, the One Tree Altona North childcare centre has received \$200,000 in the Building Blocks inclusion grants to upgrade their outdoor space, and that will finish sometime next year.

As a government we have provided more than \$9.95 million in funding to support five projects that will deliver 370 new kindergarten places across the Hobsons Bay LGA. Among these there will be 66 places at the new two-room modular kindergarten at Seaholme and a further 66 at the new Sutton Avenue Kindergarten in Altona. We are a government that is absolutely committed to making sure that kids, the next generation, have the absolute best start in life. We have got the investment that actually matters. We are delivering the teachers and all the staff that will make such a transformation to these young people that will come up and be the leaders of the future.

David SOUTHWICK (Caulfield) (11:38): Good childcare options give children the best start in life. We have already heard from a number of speakers about the importance of childcare places to ensure that we have young people with all of those options. There have been so many studies that have indicated what good child care does just from an educational perspective, from maths and English, and how that benefits them later in life; and with behavioural issues, how child care in those early childhood years helps remedy any potential child behavioural issues later in life. There have been umpteen studies about that. We are absolutely on a unity ticket, and the Liberals and Nationals absolutely support the importance of child care and providing the best possible child care that we can.

On top of that, what good childcare options provide for workforce participation, particularly for women, is absolutely imperative. Again we have seen so many studies where women have been locked out of the workforce because of poor childcare options. We have heard that there have been many reports, including a Deloitte report that said lack of access to child care takes almost 27,000 women entirely out of the workforce in Victoria and costs our economy about \$1.5 billion a year in lost earnings. With a workforce shortage, you would think the one thing that we need to do is to get more people into the workforce and particularly more women in the workforce, and that is why more options are important. I acknowledge that the government are looking at expanding 50 childcare centres, and that is important. Many of those will be in areas where there is a lack of childcare options altogether, particularly in many rural and regional areas. But I do want to point this out because while we are opening 50, we are closing many because of poorly managed options and a poorly managed education system here in this state.

I want to particularly take note of three which are in my electorate: Caulfield, Murrumbeena and Carnegie early learning centres. These are council-run centres. Many of those parents that have been sending their kids to those centres over many years talk about the importance of council-run and government-run childcare centres in terms of ensuring that it keeps competition so they can get the best possible child care they can and the fact that these centres provide a quality of learning that many private centres do not provide. Whether it be dealing with children with special needs or whether it be dealing with kids with different cultural backgrounds that require specific attention, these centres have been second to none and have been very, very successful over a long period of time. But unfortunately at the end of March three of these centres will close. So while the government are opening new centres, particularly through rural and regional Victoria, there are three in the City of Glen Eira that will close at the end of March. What does that mean? That means that effectively we will have 118 children displaced out of those childcare centres who will have to find other options. It will mean probably a ripple effect with some 300 children and their families also having to look at options. That has been devastating for the local community, as you would imagine, and ultimately it is due to bad government policy.

There are policies like free kinder, which the government talks up as being a fantastic silver bullet. Well, there is no such thing as a silver bullet and there is no such thing as free. Ultimately someone ends up paying the price. When you distort the market and you have policies like free kinder, you see that many of those childcare centres have not been able to provide free kinder at the rates that the government is offering and have then needed to be topped up. Ultimately you see pressures on many of the government-run kinders, and then you see issues like the three of these having to close. Local councils – because of a lot of this interference from, effectively, government policy – have pressure on a number of these local kinders in terms of numbers, and ultimately that causes closure of good local services.

We have been trying to keep those three centres open, and we had a petition that some 7000 locals signed, particularly to keep Caulfield and Murrumbeena open. Those centres go back so many years. We had a rally just before Christmas, and I met a doctor who went to that child care and is now sending his kids to that child care. I met his mother, who was talking about when she would send her son and how now her grandchildren are going to that child care. That is the history – you are talking years and years; 30-plus years or more – of these childcare centres that will ultimately close.

I want to particularly put on record Ashlea Diamond, Emiko Hunt, Jeremy Koadlow and Sarah Fischer, who were key drivers to try to keep the childcare centres open and alive. It was not through a lack of their effort, because it was second to none. Hundreds and hundreds of families turned up to try and keep those centres alive. Mother of two Emiko Hunt told Nine News that she was hoping to keep them going, and now unfortunately she has said she might have nowhere to send her children:

It will mean that I can't return to work next year ...

That is what Emiko Hunt said. It will mean that, because of the closure, she cannot return to work. The Deloitte report that I referred to before about women not returning to the workforce because of childcare is Emiko's story. It is real if you do not have options. These mothers unfortunately have to stay at home to look after their kids because they do not have those real options. So that is a real-life case story of not being able to provide child care.

Parents from out of the blue have been really trying to keep those centres open. Katerina, a mother whose children attended one of the centres, said she had hoped the council would keep them open for another 12 months. She talked about the 300 children being impacted by the closures and the ripple effect of the closures:

We've all called multiple child care centres and we don't have places ...

There are so many examples of this. One of the things that it is important to note of these government-run and council-run centres, particularly in the petition that many of the locals signed and was started by Ashlea Diamond, is:

All three of these centers are magical places of nurturing and learning. **All three centres consistently rate 'Exceeding' in all aspects of the National Quality Standards. They are places where children thrive.** They are workplaces where an industry of highly-qualified and committed educators have built their professional careers for ... decades.

Without these centres, the early learning options in our community become privatised ...

with less options. That is what this is about. We are talking about real options. The government talks about the new centres that are opening, and we think that is important, but we also need to ensure that we do not see centres closing like we have in my City of Glen Eira. I commend the member for Kew on the amendments to this bill that she has put forward, because we need to look at what the implications of some of the government policies are, what they are doing for the existing centres and how we are going to plan the rollout in terms of how we ensure that we have workforce participation of educators in these centres. These are real issues, because you cannot just magically put out a press release and think you are going to fix something unless you have the educators available, you have the centres ready to go and you have the community involved. There are many areas that have been identified, as we have said and many of my colleagues in seats in rural and regional Victoria have said, where there are no options or very few options. They are important, but we need to look at what this does across the board. This government thinks that they can solve a whole range of things with free programs. Ultimately the taxpayers pay. The free kinder program has cost the survival of many of these childcare centres because it has been a poorly rolled out policy. That is what we need to get right. We need to ensure that we have a plan, we have a commitment and we have a rollout.

I want to finish where I started: childcare options give kids the best start and options in life. We have got to do whatever we can to invest in child care. We have got to get more women into the workforce, and to do that childcare options are so imperative. We support that; the Liberal–Nationals absolutely support that. We will work with any government to ensure we get the best childcare options for all, but this bill does not go far enough. This bill does not deliver the silver bullet that this government thinks it does.

Nathan LAMBERT (Preston) (11:48): I also rise to support the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024. I do want to perhaps begin by picking up on a few of the comments from the member for Caulfield. The member devoted most of his remarks, as we heard, to the closing of council-run facilities in Glen Eira. I just want to make it very clear to the member for Caulfield that nothing in this bill seeks to close down community or council-run early childhood centres. In fact the complete contrary is true. This government is absolutely on a unity ticket with the member that as we step up our investment in early childhood, councils should do the same. I believe that Ryan Batchelor in the other place, Josh Burns and other Labor representatives have spoken about that issue at some length, as the member for Caulfield is well aware, because he attended those rallies with them. I do not think it is in any way correct to tie that issue to this bill, as the member has sought to do. But we do agree with him on his general principle. In fact we have some experience of that up in Darebin in our part of the world, although I give credit to Darebin council that they have really addressed those issues well and continue to support our community early childhood centres in particular.

As we know, this is in fact the third early childhood bill that we have discussed in this place in the last four months, almost one every second sitting week. I know in my own very brief time as a public servant I would have been petrified to have had to prepare and support three bills within four months, but it is an absolute credit to the minister, her team and her department that they are pushing on with this legislative program in support of our Best Start, Best Life reforms.

We have heard already today from the member for Bundoora and the member for Williamstown about the broad benefits of that reform package. I will not repeat their remarks, but I would just like to note my particular excitement at the bush kinder grants that Minister Blandthorn in the other place announced just last Thursday, I think. We are lucky enough in our family to be benefiting at the moment from bush kinder and free kinder, but availability is limited, certainly in our part of the world. I was very excited to see 150 kinders take up those grants, or thereabouts, including four in our area: Goodstart Reservoir up in Gertz Avenue; Wood Street Childcare; Guardian Preston West on Murray Road, just near Preston West Primary; and Inspire Early Learning, just behind the church also on Murray Road. Well done to those four kinders. As they implement those new programs with our state government support, I think that will more than double the number of bush kinder programs in our area, which is wonderful news. But today's bill deals more specifically with the 50 new state-owned early learning centres.

There are some important details in this bill, particularly with respect to the industrial relations arrangements for workers in those centres. As the title of the bill suggests, employment powers are central to it. But I want to just begin by touching on the key part of the debate we have listened to, which is the question of whether the state government should operate early childhood centres at all. Historically, we have not done that. We are now going to be doing so. If you think that is a good idea, you should support this bill, which will enable it to happen. If you do not think it is a good idea, well, you might seek to hold up the bill. We have heard a very mixed reaction from the opposition and perhaps not an entirely coherent one, but there has certainly been some pushback.

Cindy McLeish interjected.

Nathan LAMBERT: The member for Euroa is not here, but there have been some interjections to the effect that we are crowding out non-government operators in the area, and I do want to mainly just address that line of argument. I would say there are lots of reasons for the state government to operate early childhood centres. If I can start with a very simple one, co-location with government-run primary schools has a huge amount of value and I think is something that we are learning has even more value than we hoped for. We are lucky enough in our part of the world, at Reservoir East Primary now, to have a co-located centre there. That one is run with Darebin council and another provider. But I think it is a really important part of this bill – a small but important part – that it will now give the state government the capacity to do that on our own in perhaps areas where we cannot so easily partner.

More broadly I think it is a general principle in public policy that only the state government and the federal government ultimately ensure that 100 per cent of people have access to important services. We live in a very big state, and for various reasons of geography, demography, special needs and so forth there is always the chance that there will be gaps. I think it is important for the state government to have the capacity to step in and fill those gaps. I do not think, really, we have heard any argument from the opposition speakers on that. In fact, somewhat inconsistently, a lot of their points have been that gaps exist, and they are now saying they want to hold up a bill that will address those gaps in order to do more analysis on the gaps. As some people know, I love a bit of data analysis more than most, but there is no need at all to hold up this bill to do more analysis of something we know self-evidently to be true. Again, the member for Bundoora spoke eloquently about this. There are gaps that need addressing. We know that. We should proceed with this unamended bill now.

I think it is important to also note the size of what were doing here. Fifty new early childhood centres will be well received. It is important to remember there are about 3000 or so kindergarten services across the state – I think about 5000 if we include the care services as well. That means that the state government's market share, if I can use a term perhaps the opposition might use, is 1 or 2 per cent state government provided. This is not anything like primary schools, where it is around 70 per cent. It is a relatively modest involvement, and I think that is important with respect to the workforce issues and the so-called market distortion issues that have been raised and that I think frankly are scaremongering by opposition speakers. I will note on the workforce front that there is this imputation that we are unaware of this issue. Of course that is not at all true, and in fact we have appropriated, I

think, now over \$370 million in initiatives to address that issue, through scholarships – I think over 4000 have been taken up so far – and not only our free TAFE program, of course, but a range of specific programs to let people move from cert III to diploma and to further education for teachers and educators.

I think, finally, if we look long term where we are going with universal pre-prep, we are obviously trying to address that challenge where young children have very holistic needs across health and their development and their confidence and provide support for them in what is of course a very intense time of parenting, and then as children get older the state government's predominant role moves to education. I think we still have a bit to learn. The great dream of pre-prep is that we are going to do both of those things better, that we are going to do school readiness better whilst also doing that broad understanding of what young children in particular need better. It is done well at the moment; I think we still have a bit of learning to do between now and 2032 about how we are going to do it best. A lot of that learning will come from listening to early childhood professionals, but I think some of that learning will come from operating our own early childhood centres.

There is a funny saying in computer science, which was my background, about eating your own dog food. It is an expression that means that if you are developing an application you should use it yourself so you know how it works, and I do think amongst all the other benefits of our new early childhood centres, the fact that the state government and the Department of Education specifically are operating these facilities will be an opportunity for them to learn more and ensure that we get those reforms right.

I will just touch very briefly on the specifics of the bill. As we know, most of the clauses are relatively straightforward, and I think we have not heard any contest today over them. They extend arrangements that already apply to schools and other education and training programs. The most substantial part of course is clause 11, which I think takes up more than half of today's bill and relates to employment matters. We see that we have extended some important components of the Education and Training Reform Act 2006. Long service leave outside work and working with children checks, things like that, have been extended across to the new arrangements. Not everything has been extended across, and of course we have left a lot of the employment decisions to future ministerial orders. I appreciate that the AEU and the United Workers Union and other worker representatives will no doubt have a keen interest in how those future ministerial orders are made and will be involved and consulted in those discussions. But my understanding is that they are comfortable with the approach the government is taking, and I think as a general principle of course they are very happy to have those discussions with the minister rather than seeking to embed things in legislation and for them to ultimately have to negotiate with the Parliament. And of course we have the Victorian Early Childhood Teachers and Educators Agreement and other instruments in this state and a very general commitment to ensuring that we lead the nation in terms of our support for early childhood staff, and those commitments will guide those discussions.

I would love to touch on the reasoned amendment, but in the brief moment I have got left I will just thank Bronwen Fitzgerald, Darren Youngs and the team in the department and the minister's office for their work and commend this unamended bill to the house.

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (11:58): Acting Speaker Marchant, I do look forward to your undivided attention as I make my contribution today. I am here to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024. In short, this bill is really about how the introduction of the 50 early learning centres is going to be done across the state, and it puts a few of the nuts and bolts in place, where the Secretary of the Department of Education has the authority to employ workers and support staff to operate these government-owned early learning centres. Previously we have known that the government has had those powers, and this actually brings that in line so that they can move forward in this regard with this particular program.

It also allows the secretary to determine the fees that are charged to the parents that send their children to these early learning centres. We have no idea about the level and the extent of the fees, how high or how low they are. They are going to be in more disadvantaged areas, so I would expect that they would be on the lower side rather than the higher side, but when we raised these issues in the bill briefing we were not given a lot of information.

I do want to start, however, with the benefits of early learning. I think everybody does agree that there are well-documented benefits of early learning. Historically we have had children go to kindergartens to do the four-year-old kindergarten and then also the three-year-old kindergarten, and as more and more women participated in the workforce over the last decades there has been a need for greater childcare arrangements. So we have seen a swelling of childcare centre numbers across the state, and a lot of those centres began then to offer the kindergarten programs as part of that. I know when my daughter was in child care she was indeed able to be the beneficiary of a kindergarten program, and although there were only so many hours a week that it was going to be for, it essentially ran a full-time kindergarten program. Following that I did enrol my daughter in a pre-prep program, a four-year-old program which was full time, and that was a wonderful experience for her and certainly for us as a family. It did in fact make some of that juggle a lot easier.

But I want to talk about the benefits, particularly firstly the benefits for children participating in early learning. When you enrol in something that is quite formal, you learn how to participate, you know what to do and when to do it. You get some understanding of a bit of a timetable – we stop for morning tea, we stop to go out and play, we stop to do this and we read books here. They understand structures of programs, which gives them a good basis for going to school. They can develop great habits. They learn to cooperate with other kids and they learn teamwork whether you have to work together just in a little group of two or three or in a bigger group. The socialisation is so important for kids. They learn to respect and interact not just with adults but if they have not had children around them, they get to socialise with kids and to take turns and to know that ‘If it is my turn with this, then you have a turn.’ Numeracy and literacy are also absolutely key to that. I know that reading is an absolute key to success, and you can do the basics of counting, so when children start to go to school they are on the front foot, they are not on the back foot. It is really important to engage and include children in education early on.

Sadly across the state there are many disadvantaged areas. There are a number in my electorate, and I have been to different places across the state to see some real disadvantage. In those places a lot of the parents do not do the things that we might think are stock standard parenting approaches. They do not read to their children. Even when a kid is at school, they do not necessarily do the reading at home to make sure their children are reading. They do not count with them. They do not do a lot of the activities that many of us in this place would just do as part of the course of being a parent. I remember being in the Latrobe Valley at one point in a particularly disadvantaged place and the principal of the primary school was talking about the initiative to try and co-locate some childcare centres with primary schools. He said that they had children that had come to prep who were not toilet trained. They had been wearing pull-ups – I think that is what they are called – for years and the parents did not take that seriously. Most parents would send their kids along to primary school and to prep thinking they are going to learn to read and write and at the same time you have a teacher quite distracted because she is trying to make sure that the kids are toilet trained because that has not happened. This is something that is so fundamental and that really needs to be tackled early on. Having that earlier year will help get on top of some of these issues in very disadvantaged areas; you cannot penalise a kid who has lousy parents. You need to give children a good start in life. Absolutely the co-location of child care with schools is a good idea, and it does allow that easier transition between that four-year-old kinder and heading to prep.

Also beneficiaries of child care are parents, particularly women, and over the years there has been greater workforce participation for women. We know that there are workforce shortages everywhere, and I will touch on that a bit later, but we have a lot of people who stay at home because they cannot

access child care and return to work – they cannot get the number of days they want, they cannot get every day – and that is particularly detrimental to women’s participation in the workforce. We know Deloitte has done a study that said \$1.5 billion is lost in earnings because women are unable to participate in the workforce. I met with KPMG a number of years ago out of Canberra, and they had done similar work in this area. And it is not just women’s participation in workforce, it is also providing women with the opportunity to be leaders in their workplaces. If a woman is back at work three days or more, they have a greater chance of being in the mix for leadership roles. I am not talking about leadership of multinational companies, I am talking about leadership in an organisation that may have 10, 20, 30 people. Women need to be able to devote time to their leadership. Being in the workforce and having child care really does help that.

There are a number of shortcomings with this bill and the rollout of this strategy. At the moment we see people not being able to take up jobs because they cannot access child care, and there are shortages of child care. We know that there are childcare deserts across the state, and the member for Lowan in her speech mentioned the issues in rural and regional Victoria in detail. She is a lot further from some of the major hubs than I am in my electorate, and I know that we have issues certainly in my electorate.

Through this program there is an intended rollout in Alexandra in the Murrindindi shire and Woori Yallock in the Yarra Ranges shire. Both of those are in my electorate, and no-one really knows what is going on. We have got a bill here, and we were unable to get a lot of answers at the bill briefing because no-one really knows. We think that in Alexandra the early learning centre is going to be co-located with the primary school. Certainly that is ideal; I am not sure how much space they have got. In Woori Yallock all I know is what everybody knows: that there is no location determined yet and that people are working towards this. So there is a lot of work to be done. We were not given a lot of satisfactory information at the bill briefing. I would have thought that things had been progressed a little bit further here, and that has not been the case.

On the workforce issues, we know that there are workforce issues in child care already. There are workforce issues with teachers. How many schools have started with way under the number of teachers that they need? We are going to have to find a lot of staff to actually manage and deliver the program at the early learning centres. This is not 50 people; this is a number of people across each location, and to find the staff in country Victoria is very difficult. If staff are coming to live in country Victoria, often there are no properties for them to either rent or buy, so there are a lot of challenges in this field, which is why we have put the reasoned amendment forward saying to the government, ‘Look, get your act together. Get a little bit more down the track and let us know what’s happening here.’

Everybody supports and understands the benefit of early learning here. I sincerely hope that Labor do not botch this. Their record on implementation is very poor. We do need a comprehensive plan. We do need to know that this is not going to be botched and have overruns, like so many other projects that have happened in this state. As I said, their record is very poor in this area, and I really hope that this is one that does well out of it.

Iwan WALTERS (Greenvale) (12:08): Acting Speaker Addison, it is lovely to see you in the chair and such a privilege and a pleasure to be back here contributing to yet another piece of really important legislation regarding early childhood education in Victoria. Nothing is more important to the future of our state than the beginnings, the preparation that we give our young people across Victoria. Wherever they live, whatever their parental circumstances might be, whatever their socio-economic circumstances might be, it is an absolutely central tenet of this government that we are committed to children and to their future. It is why the portfolio for children was created – to reflect the central importance of children to our legislative agenda. I commend and thank the committed public servants like Bronwen FitzGerald and like all of those that the Parliamentary Secretary for Children identified before, but also the minister’s team, for the huge volume of work and exhaustive consultation that has taken place in bringing this piece of legislation to the Parliament.

We have heard some confused and confusing comments from the members opposite. Apparently they share our commitment to early childhood education, but the compelling lack of members opposite would suggest that they have other things on their minds and things that they consider far more important to their life in this Parliament than the future of Victoria and Victorians. I cannot imagine what that might be, but I can only assume it has something to do with poor leadership.

I do want to talk about the way in which this legislation builds upon previous bills that have been brought to this place that I have had the pleasure to comment upon recently, bills that enabled the minister to acquire land to ensure that the kind of co-location that the Parliamentary Secretary for Children talked about in his outstanding contribution a few moments ago can happen to ensure that families do not have to do the double drop-off and that you have the kind of linkage between early childhood education and school education.

Dylan Wight interjected.

Iwan WALTERS: It is indeed fantastic for families, as the member for Tarneit rightly notes. Other bills have enabled early childhood centres to be located in more densely populated areas of Victoria so that wherever a family is living in Victoria they have access to high-quality, accessible early learning for their children. This bill of course is focused on ensuring that the Victorian government has the capacity to deliver on its really important commitment to establish 50 government-owned early learning centres across the state. It needs to do this by ensuring that the Secretary of the Department of Education has the capacity to employ early learning professionals. I am a former employee of the Secretary of the Department of Education, and I believe you may have been at one point, Acting Speaker, in our capacity as teachers, and while it sounds like the opposition on the one hand support this initiative, they are also cautioning that the sky might fall in should that possibility come to pass. Of course these 50 government-owned early learning centres are a core component of our government's \$14 billion Best Start, Best Life reforms. These are landmark reforms in our state, and the 50 government-owned early learning centres are going to be in areas that need them most, in areas that the private sector is not adequately serving at the moment in part because of very rapid growth in certain parts of Victoria or because geography renders it difficult to ensure that every child has the capacity to access quality early learning.

I was reflecting in reading the bill about the nature of the powers that the secretary needs to take on to establish these 50 government-owned early learning centres and to employ early childhood teachers and educators, including trainee educators, centre directors and assistant directors, administrative staff and cooks, because it is illustrative I think of the operational complexity of high-quality early learning centres and early childhood education. I want to acknowledge the outstanding work that so many centres across my electorate already do to manage this complexity, centres that I have had the immense privilege of visiting recently, like Kool Kidz Childcare Greenvale, like Pelican Childcare Fairways early learning in Craigieburn and like the co-located centres at Bethal Primary School in Meadow Heights and Roxburgh Park Primary School and kindergarten, which is just being built at the moment. These are fantastic centres that do an amazing job of delivering for the children that they educate.

I had the pleasure of visiting with the Minister for Children the newly reopened early learning centre at Bethal Primary School. These centres do a fantastic job at positively intervening and supporting the young people who they educate and working with their families to smooth the journey into school education and to provide the kind of life skills that the member for Eildon talked about in her contribution. They do this every single day amid significant operational complexity, and I just want to take a moment to acknowledge and thank them for the work that they do every single day and also to wish the Secretary of the Department of Education the very best as the secretary goes about ensuring that these 50 government-owned early learning centres replicate that outstanding education and that supportive environment wherever they should be located around Victoria. I will be delighted to see one of these centres – or more, potentially – serving my own community in Greenvale.

I do want to talk a little bit about the reasoned amendment and particularly the member for Preston, the Parliamentary Secretary for Children, who reflected on the need for these centres and the fact that they will not be crowding out existing provision. There will be no negative impact on existing services. We know from the anecdotal feedback we get through our electorate offices constantly as well as the empirical evidence base that the department has that there are areas that are under-served by high-quality early learning in Victoria. There is a need to ensure that in growing areas and in areas that have significant socio-economic disadvantage we are providing access to high-quality early learning. It is the role of government to correct for market failure and to ensure that there is outstanding universal service provision in this most important area of social policy, early childhood education. That is why I am so proud to be part of a government that is genuinely committed to ensuring that every Victorian has the best start in life.

Best Start, Best Life reforms are not just a slogan, they are a \$14 billion program of real, tangible programs including 50 new early learning centres but also all of the reforms we are making around free kinder and pre-prep and ensuring that there is a pipeline of really highly skilled and qualified early childhood educators who are working to support our young Victorians. It makes a difference because every Victorian deserves the opportunity to have a great start in life, and too many for too long have been held back. We know that one in five Victorian children starts school behind and that not getting the best start in life has long-term consequences not just for that child and their family but for the state in its service provision and for all taxpayers who pay for that service provision. It is both the moral and the fiscally prudent thing to do to intervene early to ensure that every child has access to great early learning. Regrettably across Australia and across Victoria a child's family circumstance plays an unacceptably large role in determining their outcomes long before they get to the school gate.

The member for Eildon has just left the chamber, but I believe she referred to the member for Lowan's earlier contribution talking about some of the challenges of distance and geography in ensuring high-quality early learning. I reflect on my own time teaching in the Grampians, in the member for Lowan's electorate, where too often children were arriving in my classrooms not having had access to high-quality early learning. They were getting to primary school in such a way that it was really difficult for the primary school teachers to counteract the legacy of inadequate early childhood education. This bill and the government's broader agenda seek to counteract those challenges to ensure that every student has a platform to succeed and thrive.

In reflecting on my experiences at Stawell, I want to pause – if you will permit me, Acting Speaker – and reflect upon the community that I lived in when I was teaching at Pomonal, which has really suffered very grievously in the last week, and all the families who are worried about their children with their school being closed. I thank all of the emergency services workers and all of the educators who will be supporting families this week – early learning and schoolteachers – but also all of the government workers, the volunteer firefighters, every single person in the Pomonal community who has been working to provide the 39 houses I believe –

A member interjected.

Iwan WALTERS: 45 houses that have been destroyed and the families who lived in them with the support that they need going forward.

This is an incredibly important bill. It will help to ensure that students in Pomonal, students in Stawell – students across Victoria – have access to outstanding early learning. I thank the minister and her team for the consultation and the work they have done to bring it to this place. I commend it to the house, unamended.

Annabelle CLEELAND (Euroa) (12:18): I rise today to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024, a bill that would benefit significantly from the reasoned amendment moved by the member for Kew. This piece of legislation aims to strengthen the government's commitment to opening 50 new government-owned early

learning centres (ELCs) by employing staff and setting and charging fees for parents. This commitment, announced in advance of the 2022 election, with further details provided in the 2023–24 budget, stated these new government-owned and government-run centres would be in communities of greatest need. Sadly, so many communities across our state, including many in my electorate of Euroa, are set to remain without child care despite desperately needing it.

A 2022 report from the Mitchell Institute indicated that the Euroa electorate had significant issues when it came to childcare availability and accessibility. The Seymour region, Benalla, Avenel, Nagambie, Kilmore and Broadford were some of the areas pinpointed as struggling the most, whilst similar towns, such as Murchison, Rushworth, Tooborac and Redesdale had no child care whatsoever. These are major towns, not inaccessible backwaters, but they are being placed at a disadvantage when child care is so rare. The lack of childcare options is placing a significant barrier on young people who want to raise their families in regional Victoria. We have got incredible local childcare providers, but in most of these places there are up to six children competing for one place. It is not sustainable. Not having facilities will have a massive impact on the town's future, with families choosing to relocate most of their lives to bigger centres like Shepparton. The lack of child care perpetuates generational disadvantage, something that is disproportionately impacting regional towns.

The Allan Labor government's inability to manage money or manage a project is now impacting the education opportunities of our children. We already have extreme cost-of-living pressures as well as a labour crisis, making more accessible child care so important to ensure parents can return to work and alleviate these issues. Towns like Nagambie and Avenel were not even included in this government announcement, despite serious problems finding local child care in these areas. I had asked on several occasions that Avenel be included as one of the towns to receive a new childcare centre. Avenel is a growing township, with housing developments attracting residents, families and businesses to the town. Unfortunately, like many regional towns in Victoria, they have insufficient childcare facilities. They literally have none at all. With neighbouring towns, like Nagambie, also struggling with waitlists, it is imperative that Avenel is given the facilities needed to provide child care locally to all who needed it. It was incredibly disappointing to see them miss out on being included in the most recent announcement as towns and inner-city suburbs with far more childcare options were included ahead of them.

As part of the government's rollout of the new early learning centres, I was initially pleased that Seymour, located within my electorate, was included to alleviate some of the strain on the system locally. But let me tell you my community has been incredibly disappointed about this misleading announcement. The reality is that the centre will not be delivered until well beyond 2028 if it is delivered at all. The headline-grabbing announcement of a new early learning facility prevented private and not-for-profits from filling the childcare void, while this government has no goal to actually deliver and relieve childcare waitlists. This government has a clear track record of overpromising and underdelivering for Victorians. I have serious concerns that this childcare initiative will be added to the ever-growing list of failures.

One major issue of concern for this program relates to getting staff at these childcare facilities. We know from experience that trying to attract teachers to primary and secondary schools in regional communities requires additional resources. For the few childcare facilities that my region has, staffing still remains a key issue despite them operating for years. With 17 of the 50 new government-owned ELC sites being regional or remote, this is something that must be addressed. So far there are very few details and no clear plan to overcome the very probable staffing challenges that will arise in these locations. In 2023 the Australian Childcare Alliance surveyed over 600 childcare centres, with over two-thirds of respondents saying they had capped enrolments due to staffing shortages. As a result, about 16,000 childcare places lay dormant due to the workforce crisis. Given we are already at crisis levels of workforce shortages, any interventions in the sector must be well thought out, organised and executed so there are no disruptions to existing service providers. Disruptions and distortions to the

market could result in a significant reduction in the number of childcare places. We must ensure that getting staff to these new facilities does not take away from our already struggling system.

The government estimates they will need 700 educators plus another 100 teachers as well as administrators, support staff, cooks and more. Hundreds of staff will be needed, ready to go in these centres from day one, and there is no plan to ensure that these staff are not coming from existing centres. Neighbouring centres and kindergartens will be sacrificing their own staff for the new centres, and we are already seeing it locally in our community. They will have to reduce the number of places that they offer, taking places offline at a time we need to be growing capacity in the sector.

Due to how significant an issue this has been throughout my electorate, I created a survey and a review for local parents last June so they could explain the challenges and difficulties they faced accessing child care locally. Responses were received from major towns across the electorate, such as Avenel, Benalla, Broadford and Rushworth, as well as other smaller towns in the region. The responses shared overwhelmingly negative experiences, with 98 per cent of respondents saying they had been adversely impacted by access to a childcare centre in the region. Of those that were working, the responses highlighted a significant reliance on family and friends for child care due to limited options in the area.

Inaccessible child care has been an absolute slap in the face to parents not wanting but needing to return to work. One of the many functions of child care is to enable greater workforce participation, particularly for women. According to Deloitte, lack of access to child care takes almost 27,000 women entirely out of the workforce in Victoria and costs the economy about \$1.5 billion a year in lost earnings. This is unacceptable. I want to share some of the responses to my surveys as well as personal stories shared with me that demonstrate the enormity of the problem we are faced with.

Felicity is a PR and marketing expert who lives on a property near Seymour with her family. She has been on a waitlist to get adequate care for her beautiful son Sebastian and has been forced to seek private babysitting support and nanny help, which means many days she is working entirely to pay for the care of her child. It is unsustainable, unfair and at times dangerous when leaning on people for care who do not have adequate experience or first-aid knowledge, but we have no other option. She has to work to remain relevant and experienced in the field that she is damned talented at. In a way, she is lucky enough to be able to seek some private care, because many people like single mums or those without family support can only work the hours their children are in care, which is so limiting.

Lauren in Seymour is an incredible landscape architect with two gorgeous boys. She volunteers on absolutely every community event in town. Last year she had to quite literally wait at the door of childcare centres for access, waiting for a child to not attend because they were sick or absent. This is completely unacceptable. Another mum Lou, a local nurse who recently had two twin boys Freddie and Tommy, is on a 40-strong waitlist in Seymour for a centre that takes eight babies. Can I quickly say happy birthday, Freddie and Tommy – we adore you. But this government has genuinely promised a centre so far down the track that boys like Tommy and Freddie will be at school before it even starts to get built. There are countless more responses we received to these surveys. One mother said:

We have been on a wait list in Nagambie for over 6 months and still predicted to be waiting until December 2024. Unfortunately, I've now had to claim jobseekers payment due to lack of childcare, even if we have the baby and childcare we're still limited with before and after-school care.

Another had to change jobs to one that is 40 minutes away just to be able to get full-time day care. One mother, a nurse in our community, said it is almost impossible to get child care:

... unless you want to be on a waiting list for 12 months. That is not always an option.

As an RN in a struggling healthcare system, she cannot work as much as possible because she cannot get the care for her child.

Many of the concerns about getting mothers back into the workforce can be found in amazing work done by the Sustaining Economic Empowerment and Dignity for Women, or SEED, project. I want to thank the local girls in Seymour for the extraordinary research they have done, highlighting the lack

of child care as one of the major contributing factors in Seymour. The SEED project's *Flip It!* report points out that a lack of access to childcare services has reinforced traditional gender roles in Seymour as women who may want to work are often obliged to stay home, work part time or take on lower paid jobs closer to home in order to look after their children. The report notes how these attitudes have manifested in high rates of domestic violence.

With that being said, I would like to make a big shout-out to all of our local teachers and childcare providers for what they do considering the lack of investment: to Narelle, Evie, Jacquie, Nicole, Jen, Trean and Amanda.

Alison MARCHANT (Bellarine) (12:28): It is a pleasure to rise to speak on this bill, the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024. Education is certainly a passion of mine, and I have spoken in this place about it before, being a former primary school teacher. We all know that the early years in a child's life and early childhood are the most critical phases in their development. In their formative years they are laying the foundation for that learning, the growth and the social and emotional development. But the whole key to unlocking that potential is our early years educators. I can imagine a world where every child has access to quality early childhood education, where potential knows no bounds and children have the opportunity to thrive and succeed. That is the world that we as a government are trying to create and are working towards creating. It does start with recognising the importance of early childhood and this government certainly recognises that for our youngest Victorians and for our families.

This investment in early education that has occurred over the years, in more recent years with Best Start, Best Life, is certainly unprecedented. As part of the \$14 billion Best Start, Best Life reforms the Victorian government has committed to building these 50 new government-owned and operated early learning centres across Victoria, giving families further options. These centres will open in a few years to come, and all 50 centres will be located where they are most needed, in areas where there is significant childcare shortage and higher rates of disadvantage. This is going to increase the ability of carers and families to access child care and give particularly women options and choice when they are looking to return to work.

I am really proud to have one of the 50 centres announced in my electorate in an area that was in desperate need of a service, and this is in what they call the Portarlington statistical area 2 region, which takes in the towns of Portarlington, Indented Head and St Leonards. The state government and local government are working together really well to have a dedicated service, a preferred service, at the St Leonards township, where there is no current service for families. I remember that when announcing this there was a lot of excitement. It was just so well received by that St Leonards community because they had been advocating for a service for a while. They have been eagerly contacting me in the last little while to get regular updates on where we are at with that. With the growth that we have seen across the Bellarine, in particular down on the coastline of Portarlington, St Leonards and Indented Head, it is vital that we have this service to keep up with that growth. It is a great place to raise a family, and many families have moved to the area. This childcare centre will be absolutely welcomed by the families there, and I am really pleased to see this investment.

This bill does empower the Secretary of 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. So that is just a little bit about what this bill is trying to achieve. The bill also will make sure that we expand the scope of the act in matters relating to early childhood to create this new government workforce under the act. It also recognises changes to enable the Secretary of the Department of Education to employ staff to deliver on these 50 early learning centres. When we talk about staff in centres, we are including early childhood teachers, educators, trainee educators, centre directors, assistant directors, administration staff and maybe cooks as well. As we promised in the election, these staff will be directly employed by the Secretary of the Department of Education.

Obviously being very passionate about this issue is one thing, but it is another to have a deeper understanding of what the local impacts are. Last year it was a privilege to be part of the Victorian parliamentary internship program, where an intern comes to your electorate and is paired with you. I was really fortunate to work closely with a student, Indigo Coulson, who was studying at Melbourne University. When we discussed what issue we thought would be a good one to investigate for the Bellarine, she and I decided that early childhood would be the main focus. Her report titled 'Socio-economic and geographic inequality: early childhood education and care in Bellarine' is an absolutely incredible report that highlights some of the challenges and issues going forward for our local Bellarine communities. I will give her a shout-out: she actually won the internship award for her report. It was fantastic.

For her report, Indigo surveyed families, providers, local government and educators and got a really good snapshot of what was happening across the Bellarine and, depending on where they lived, what type of early childhood service was available to families and the quality as well. She identified suburbs that were definitely in need of additional early learning centres, and I suppose it was probably no surprise that she did identify the St Leonards and Portarlington areas, where one has now been committed to. I am so proud of that report. It is on my website if people would like to look at it closely. It really does highlight the importance of families having easy access to child care – like when you are a new parent and you are navigating a new system. Making sure that it is easy for parents to access their closest or most easily accessible childcare centre and that they feel comfortable with the quality of service that they receive when they are there is really important to families. We do have an incredible number of high-quality early learning centres across the Bellarine; we are very fortunate.

The research does show, though, time and time again that early years development is so critical for our little ones. It does shape their cognitive, emotional and social skills and sets them up, and our educators, as I said, play a pivotal role in ensuring that. I would like to take the opportunity to really thank all of our early education staff for what they are doing with our littlest ones on the Bellarine. You are amazing. Thank you for all the work that you do. Your dedication, your passion and your commitment to nurturing our young minds make such a difference. You are not just educators; you are mentors, role models and champions of our little children's futures. You have that power to instil the love of learning and you foster that creativity, and we thank you. On this side, the government certainly thank you for that work, and in thanking you for that, we show our support with these initiatives and the things that we have done to support you.

This bill, though, does impact beyond that classroom, and investing into our childhood education is investing into our future. In the electorate of the Bellarine, as I have said, we have some wonderful centres, and I have been really pleased to see some further investment this year and last year into some of those centres to support the programs that are happening. Bush kinder is a wonderful program that gets the children out and about in the natural environment. We have such a great environment on the Bellarine, both in bush and parkland but also in a beach setting. I would like to congratulate Headstart Early Learning Centre Ocean Grove, who I visited the other day and who were recipients of a bush kinder grant; Woodlands House Child Care centre in Ocean Grove; and Lonsdale House Childcare in Point Lonsdale. It is fantastic to see that they will have support for their bush kinder programs. Lonsdale House Childcare in Point Lonsdale and Woodlands House in Ocean Grove also received support for early years assessment and learning tools, which will be really great initiatives for the staff there to be assessing and to be doing best practice in their centres, which is absolutely fantastic. I am really pleased to see that support.

This initiative, though, is not just about dollars and cents. As I have said, it is about investing in our future. It is by investing in early childhood and quality educators that we are setting up our future. We are building a stronger and more inclusive society where every child has the opportunity to thrive. I am proud of what this government has done to accomplish that. Let us continue to champion early childhood education and ensure that every child in Victoria has that chance to reach their full potential.

Roma BRITNELL (South-West Coast) (12:37): I rise to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024, a bill that gives effect to the government's commitment to opening 50 new government-owned early learning centres by employing staff and setting the charging fees for parents. This is an announcement that the government made prior to the election, together with making three-year-old kinder available to all children and complementing four-year-old kinder. It is obviously something that we need. There is plenty of evidence that tells us that the earlier we start with children having the supports around early learning, the better the educational outcomes. But also it is important because in South-West Coast we have a childcare desert, and this goes some way to addressing the issues. I say 'some way' because it is quite concerning that we have this big announcement that gets these parents, who are desperate for child care, really excited about a solution, but the dates that are forthcoming are quite disappointing.

But that being said, in Portland we do have a commitment that the facility that will be at Portland South Primary School will be completed by 2026. This is a good thing for the parents of Portland, because they are absolutely desperate. I have had many forums in recent times to talk to the parents about what we can do to solve the childcare desert issue at a local level, and I will maybe talk a bit more about that later on. In the community of South Portland the teachers that I met with on the day that announcement came through were really excited, because there is only one toilet there for all the teachers – 19 teachers, support staff and adults that support that community at Portland South school. The very fact that they are hoping that the childcare centre will provide toilets is a good thing, if nothing else.

Of course it is a terrific announcement, but for the parents who are needing child care now, 2026 is a long way away, and then there are the Warrnambool parents who are on probably the never-never list of 'We'll get to you in maybe 2028'. When you look at the children who are born now, they will actually be starting primary school by then. So it really does not help those parents who are struggling with the cost of living and interest rates on mortgages – even that one factor, and there are many, many more than that, with energy prices going up under this state Labor government by 28 per cent. With the cost of groceries I really do wonder how families are making ends meet. That is why women are needing to go back to work and parents are desperate for childcare facilities, and we just do not have enough places in Warrnambool. In my part of the world, South-West Coast – in Warrnambool, actually – for every child there are 0.29 places available, and we have 56 per cent female workforce participation. So 56 per cent of women are participating in the workforce, but there are only 0.29 places for the children to go. Compare that to Melbourne, which has 0.5 places per child and has female participation in the workforce of 69.1 per cent. That figure there shows you that we are very much in a crisis situation, and I feel it in my office most days when families are ringing up saying, 'What are we supposed to do? We can't manage the cost of living without both parents working, and we simply can't get child care.'

That actually led me to in the Parliament last year put forward a motion for debate to take place so we could thrash out what we could do here and now. I believe there are regulations, without compromising child safety, that we can put in place, according to the childcare operators in my electorate. As long as we can get the federal government to cooperate with the state Labor government – and they are both Labor, so there is probably good reason that you would expect cooperation – we can make the fees more portable and we can find ways that work in the regions. I have raised this in the Parliament before. There is an example of a doctor who has children of preschool age, and three nurses in the clinic. They have the room, they have the space and they are happy to employ someone to help look after their group of children, but it does not fit under the regulations and rules of a daycare centre, because it has to be in someone's own home rather than somebody else's home. Those sorts of things that do not compromise child safety do not really make any sense. So it was disappointing that I put forward the motion to ask for a debate to occur so we could thrash this out and put forward those ideas that our communities have put forward but it was denied.

You heard from the member for Euroa just before me, and the situations that she brought forward about families needing answers now. They have the solutions. We have been listening to our communities, and whilst this bill will set up early learning centres, it will not actually solve the problem today. I think it is important that we listen to families, and the fact that that debate that I suggested in the house was denied by the Labor government is an absolute disgrace.

These early learning centres – whilst I see the benefit, and we also agree with three-year-old kinder – they have to actually come with some degree of planning. Labor have not put forward a plan, so whilst we are building 50 centres, what is the answer? What is the solution for the workforce shortages that we already have in the region? To actually say we are going to have more places for children in care centres and three-year-old kinders does not actually acknowledge the fact that you cannot do that without training. You cannot do that without planning and you cannot just say ‘Here’s a new centre’ and poach people from other places to fill it, because it does not actually solve the problem. It just shifts the problem around and probably distorts the market and disrupts the service of the families who may have a placement but then lose one of the workers.

I really do hope that the government thinks a bit harder and does something magical in the next two years between now and 2026, because I am not sure where these workers are going to appear from. Given there are 800 vacancies in the childcare workforce today, I am not sure where the solution is going to come from. We tried to ask some of these questions in the bill briefing. They are reasonable questions, but the government could not tell us where the money was going to come from to run the services. The 2023–24 budget, which included the \$921 million to establish the 35 new government-owned early learning centres by 2027, did not actually cover anything other than the building costs and did not include any forecast operating expenses, including wages.

On that, part of the bill is set up to enable the employment of the early learning educators, the administrators to run the centres and the cooks to feed the children, but I am still confused as to why we need a piece of legislation to do that because we do not do that for nurses, ambulance officers or teachers; that is part of the appropriation bill that we pass each year to be able to pay the public service. I often think that this is just a way of the government saying it will shout everyone down by saying it has solved the problem of childcare deficits and deserts, like in South-West Coast. Here is a bill and it can just put out press releases with these announcements. If you peel back a bit of the detail, you see that, like I have said, in Warmambool it will be at least 2028, when many of the children who have been born are at school, so it is pretty disappointing.

We have seen a million examples of this; maybe that is an exaggeration, but dozens of examples of this. The bill we had in the Parliament last year about giving people the ability to walk into a pharmacy and get treatment for a urinary tract infection – it is a great concept, but it is still not possible in South-West Coast because there is no protection for the pharmacists. They are not aware of what the rules are because the trial had just started when the bill went through and there was no detail. This is very similar – a great concept, we need to fill the desert that we have got in child care, but without the detail, without understanding where the people are going to come from to fill this beautiful building that we are building in Portland, which hopefully will have toilets for our teachers rather than 19 of them sharing one toilet. As a parent who has four children and who relied on day care as a nurse, as a shiftworker – every single child of mine was in day care – it is a real concern for parents.

Child care is something that is putting enormous pressure on families in a region that already has massive workforce challenges. It is trying to attract people to the area, but they cannot find child care and they cannot find houses. How on earth is this government proposing that we fix this in this short time frame without the level of detail needed? A shout-out to all the families who are struggling. I am advocating for you. We are trying to find a solution. I am trying to get the government to listen. Let us have that debate because I know the parents have the solution, and we can get some solutions now.

Paul MERCURIO (Hastings) (12:47): I rise to make my contribution to the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024. It will amend the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 to provide the state with appropriate legislative powers to operate government-owned early learning centres in this state. I would like to thank the member for South-West Coast for being positive at the beginning of her debate. It is great to hear that you will be getting a centre in 2026. That is a good news story. I think we all agree that we need more, and that is why Labor is in fact building 50 more centres. That is what this bill is about, and that is what we are doing. We are getting on and doing it, and it is not always easy. It is complicated and complex work, and that is why we need a bill and legislation to help us guide the way that we move forward on building the 50 extra centres.

This bill will primarily make changes to the principal act that will give powers to the Secretary of the Department of Education to employ staff at government centres to deliver early childhood education, enable fees to be fixed and charged to parents and allow the minister to make orders regarding fees and employment conditions for the early learning centre workforce. Although the secretary currently has powers that pertain to this, they are unsuitable for employing and setting out the conditions for early childhood employees, so this bill will establish a more modern power for the secretary that better reflects what this government's early learning reforms are trying to achieve.

Since I began my time in this place I have talked on a number of bills that were for early childhood education. Indeed the member for Preston said this is the third time we have spoken on early childhood education, which again shows that Labor are putting the work in. I have been to kinders in my community and seen firsthand the wonderful kinder kits that they get at the start of each year, and I have heard absolutely brilliant stories from families that are not only benefiting but thriving from this government's reform to early childhood education. It is clear to me that this Labor government not only cares deeply about the future of our kids but actually puts action behind it. It is very easy to just say some fancy lines or buzzwords about what is going to be done; it is harder to plan and implement these policies in an effective way. But that is what we have been doing and that is what we will continue to do as we are now debating this bill.

On reading this bill and writing this speech, I looked back on what was available to me and my wife when we had our three daughters. Actually it was more when we had our first two daughters way back when. Back then we were a one-income family. Believe me, the wage of a professional ballet dancer was not very generous, and it was a bit of a struggle. As my girls are now 28, 32 and 34, I had to really strain to think back on what was available to them. In fact I called them all so that they could remind me of what we did. There was certainly nothing free, and there was very, very little, if any, financial help. On my one wage we struggled to get my two girls into what was known as a day care/child care/kindergarten sort of set-up.

That was really important, because having a young family, as we all know, is not a ride in the park. It can be very stressful, and having the ability to get my kids into kindergarten or preschool gave my wife some time for her mental health and also helped with our relationship, because having kids is incredibly stressful. It was an important time for my girls. They loved being in kindergarten, once they got over the crying at the morning handover. It was a great environment, and the staff were all so incredibly warm, caring, patient and kind. As I said, it was also a much-needed break for my wife's mental health and some quiet time for us to be together, a break from the kids to reset, refresh and do the shopping without having to constantly say, 'No, you cannot have that.' It does wonders for the soul.

Mathew Hilakari: Unheard of.

Paul MERCURIO: Unheard of. In essence we coped through that early time in our life, but I am aware that we all have different experiences, so it is refreshing to know that Victorian families are better off under this government as we are making massive and needed changes to early childhood education, and this bill will only continue to strengthen our commitments.

These changes are all part of the Best Start, Best Life reforms, but this bill in particular will help deliver over 50 new government owned and operated early learning centres in areas where they are most needed. However, we will also need the staff to fill these centres. To make sure we have the workforce needed, we need to invest and create pathways to enable educators, and we are doing that work as well, despite what those on the other side might say.

Part of the massive \$14 billion investment we have made is to make sure we are upskilling people by providing support to 780 diploma-qualified educators to become degree-qualified teachers. We are providing support for more placement and mentoring experiences for 550 students and allowing another 200 trainees to undertake paid traineeships in early childhood services whilst they complete their certificate III. Whilst we support the pipeline of workers coming through the system, we are also providing immediate support to current qualified teachers and educators through providing financial incentives of up to \$50,000 if they move to an area where it has been hard to find staff. If you are someone who has left the profession but still has eligibility, incentives of up to \$9000 are available to rejoin the workforce.

Once teachers have begun their education career, supporting them through their journey is just as important, as we do not want to be seeing burnout occurring so early on, because that would create more staff turnover. There are free career development opportunities that include conferences for first-year teachers and coaching and mentoring support for teachers and returning educators, and we are establishing early years learning networks for teachers that have been recognised as leaders to share their professional expertise and, crucially, experiences, building on our commitment to include more people with lived experience in developing the future of the education workforce.

We have consulted and worked with not only early childhood teachers and educators but also over 5000 Victorian families to hear their input and what would work best for them and to listen to their feedback, which is invaluable when making decisions as important as this. On top of listening to educators and families, we also need to have on board our service providers, peak bodies, unions, and our universities and TAFEs so that everyone is on the same page and understands what we are trying to achieve, greatly improving how early childhood education is being done and building on the work that has already been started. This bill is just another part to revolutionise how we educate and the logistics of it all. There is talk, which is what the other side only does, and there is action, which is what this side does. These centres will start to open from next year until 2028, and these bills and various amendments are all part of that important process.

The first few of these centres are being opened in 2025, and that will be exciting for those communities, starting with Eaglehawk North, where the Premier will be quite happy to see that one built; then on to Fawkner, where I am sure the member for Broadmeadows will be keen for that one; then across to Sunshine for the next centre, where the amazing member for Laverton is eager to get it underway; and then finally we have another being started up in Murtoa, which should make the member for Lowan quite happy to see that provided for her community. As I said, for the member for South-West Coast, there will be one opening there in 2026, which is something to actually celebrate and not complain about. Not only are they in places that need that support most, but also co-locating these early learning centres with services like maternal and child health, parenting programs and community spaces and having them next door to our schools where possible to eliminate the hassle of a double or triple drop-off just makes sense to me, and I am sure it does to every other parent in this place. Less time in the car means more time in the learning environment.

This is the start of 50 new childcare centres. This is the start of 50 new places that will educate and be a safe place for our children and 50 new places that will be new career beginnings for some workers and the revitalisation of careers for others. It is for our educators, it is for our parents, and most importantly, it is for the future of young Victorians. I am glad to see that those on the opposite side support this bill. Unfortunately, I am not happy to see the reasoned amendment, because I support this bill. I commend the bill to the house.

Gary MAAS (Narre Warren South) (12:57): It is a thrill indeed to get up and to speak to the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024. It is also good to see that the Leader of the Nationals has decided not to take an early lunch and to be here with us for this very important bill.

I was just reflecting on the words of the member for Hastings in his very, very solid contribution. Investment in our youngest Victorians is just so important. It lays the foundation for our Education State. But to hear the member for Hastings reflect upon his time when he had young children and the difficulties that went with earning a wage – being able to support family and also able to raise your children in the best possible way that you can – there are many instances that all of us in this chamber have seen of the extraordinary work that our ECEC workers, our early childhood education care workers, do.

Before I get into the substance of my speech, because I suspect I will be truncated at some point –

The ACTING SPEAKER (Juliana Addison): Order! The time has come for the house to break for lunch. The member will have the call when we return.

Sitting suspended 12:59 pm until 2:02 pm.

Business interrupted under sessional orders.

The SPEAKER: I acknowledge in the gallery today a delegation from the Sabah State Legislative Assembly in Malaysia. I welcome the honourable Speaker, deputy speakers, members and officials to observe question time today.

I also acknowledge the former member for Hawthorn in the gallery, John Kennedy.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: The house will come to order. I hope you will be on your best behaviour for our guests today.

Members

Minister for Planning

Absence

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:03): 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

Melbourne medically supervised injecting facility

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:04): My question is to the Premier. When will the Premier release the Ken Lay report relating to the medically supervised injecting room in Melbourne's CBD?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:04): I can advise the Leader of the Opposition, as I advised Richard Willingham as he interviewed me in this place for an ABC interview about three weeks ago, which was subsequently broadcast on the ABC, that it is the government's intention to release the Ken Lay report. We will release that report once the government has had the appropriate opportunity to consider the report. In anticipation of the murmurings of those opposite, I do note that this is a report that has been in the hands of the government for a number of months. However, I do point –

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, under standing order 58(1)(a), the answer does have to be factual. The Premier said a couple of months when it has been nine.

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

Jacinta ALLAN: As I was indicating to the house, the government has had the report for some time. I will note that –

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! The house will come to order. The Premier without assistance.

Jacinta ALLAN: Given the substance of the report and the serious nature of this report, and noting too that since the government received the report there have been a change of Premier and minister and a number of other portfolio changes subsequent to that I felt it was appropriate, out of respect to both the author of the report and the subject matter of the report, that there was the appropriate time taken to consider the report and to receive advice on the report. I can make this commitment to the Leader of the Opposition and indeed the house: when we make a decision as a cabinet we will announce that decision as soon as possible after that decision has been made. We will not sit on a critical decision for months. We have not –

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for South-West Coast is warned.

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

The SPEAKER: The Premier to resume answering the question. The Premier was being relevant.

Jacinta ALLAN: Thank you, Speaker. As I was indicating, the member asked when the report would be released. I am indicating to the Leader of the Opposition and to the house more broadly that the report will be released once the government has made a decision on the subject matter contained in the report, and I was reiterating the importance of, once a decision is made, it being as soon as possible that it is announced to the community. We will not be sitting and keeping in secret –

Members interjecting.

Jacinta ALLAN: Exactly. This subject matter deserves better than this from the Leader of the Opposition.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! Member for Yan Yean, it was not you. Next time it will be.

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:08): What is the total cost to taxpayers for the Ken Lay report?

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Member for Sunbury! Order! Leader of the Opposition, once you have asked your question I would hope you would give the Premier the courtesy of silence while she answers.

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:09): The details around the process and the work that Ken – and can I also take the opportunity to thank Ken Lay for the work he has done. He has done this work on behalf of the Victorian community on a subject matter that deserves better than this from the Leader of the Opposition. We will release our decision once that decision has been made, with the report that has been undertaken by Ken Lay.

Emma Kealy: On a point of order, Speaker, according to the standing orders the Premier must be succinct. I ask her to respond to the question put: how much did the Lay report cost?

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

Jacinta ALLAN: I look forward to the Leader of the Opposition practising what he preaches on disclosure and transparency around decision-making and money that is in his pocket.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, the Premier is clearly not being relevant and is just being nasty.

The SPEAKER: The Premier has concluded her answer.

Ministers statements: multicultural communities

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:10): On Sunday I was in Glen Waverley with our fabulous members for Glen Waverley and Ashwood. We know Glen Waverley is one of the most diverse communities in Australia, and we saw on Sunday the great multiculturalism of our state in action. We saw it on the streets with the celebrations around the Year of the Dragon as we celebrated Lunar New Year and the lantern festival. I also saw it at the Monash SES on Sunday, where I had the chance to thank volunteers like Jenny and Choong, who are both part of their local SES and proud members of the local Chinese community in the Glen Waverley area.

This gives us much to celebrate, but also at the same time there are some in our communities right now who we know do not feel at peace and who we must support. To quote Julie Szego:

... I never thought that I'd have to be speaking about lists of Jews being drawn up and released in Australia ...

I was shocked, like I am sure almost all of us were. I hope everyone was shocked when they read those reports of these lists. My support goes to those who have been targeted. I also assure you that Victoria Police are investigating any potential criminal acts. It is a fact – we have seen it since 7 October – that antisemitism and indeed Islamophobia have increased. We reject this in all of its forms, which is why we stand in support of the work with communities on banning Nazi symbols and salutes and also on anti-vilification reform, which we are leading. I also commend the Commonwealth for the work they are doing to toughen doxxing laws.

I also want to acknowledge and recognise the heartbreak that Palestinian and Muslim Victorians are feeling as the Gaza conflict continues and support the statement of the Prime Minister last week where he called for a humanitarian ceasefire. We are doing all we can here in Victoria to provide support to our communities who are grieving in this difficult time.

Storm recovery

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:13): My question is to the Premier. Yesterday the Premier told the house that 90 per cent of the 530,000 Victorians who lost power last week were 'reconnected in the first 48 hours'. According to the Department of Health, once food in the fridge is:

... no longer cold to touch, it can be kept and eaten for up to 4 hours and then it must be thrown away.

Despite this, Labor set the eligibility threshold for their power outage support payment at seven days without power. Why is the Labor government setting illogical conditions that stop Victorians who desperately need financial support?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:13): The Leader of the Opposition selectively referred to some of what I answered yesterday on this issue in response to supporting Victorians who have had prolonged periods of power outages. I want to again acknowledge that the latest advice that I have, as of this morning, is that there remain around 1269 customers without power. Again, I acknowledge that this is a difficult time for those customers and that there is ongoing work to support the reconnection of those properties to the network. They are predominantly on the single-wire part of the network, and that is perhaps the most difficult part of the network to reach into and reconnect.

As I said yesterday in the house, it would be both wrong and deliberately misleading to indicate to any member of the Victorian community who has gone through the effects of last week's devastating and

destructive wind event to present the only response from the government as being that of providing support through the prolonged power outage payments. That would simply be wrong, and I would hope that the Leader of the Opposition at a time of emergency response would not be deliberately misleading Victorians about the nature and the range of supports that are provided to communities. I went through some of this yesterday about the supports that are on offer, particularly supports like the personal hardship payments. There is the work around the recovery support program. There are a range of supports that can be provided. If the Leader of the Opposition would like a briefing from Emergency Recovery Victoria, who are leading this effort, he can be precisely across this detail so he can, instead of running around trying to deliberately mislead communities, provide this important information to Victorians.

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (14:15): Yesterday the Premier stated in relation to support for small businesses hit by the blackouts that there are ‘other supports that are available’. If a small business lost power for four days last week, potentially costing them over \$20,000, the single largest government support payment available to them is \$380. Will the Premier now tell Victorians what other small business supports she was talking about yesterday?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:16): As I also indicated to the house yesterday – and the advice I have is this work continues today – because of the size and scale of the destructive wind events that tore through the state last Tuesday there continues to be work on the ground around reconnecting customers to power. I want to thank the emergency services who are continuing out there as we enter into another couple of days ahead of us of extreme weather, who are out there with the clean-up work that is going on –

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, this question asked what other support payments are available.

The SPEAKER: The Premier was a little bit outside of answering the question. I do ask her to come back to the answer.

Jacinta ALLAN: Speaker, this is relevant because, as I said yesterday, there are impact assessments underway right now. As those impact assessments are undertaken on households, on businesses and on community assets, we will get the full picture of what additional support needs to be provided. Again, we thank those workers who are right now doing this work on the ground.

Ministers statements: youth organisations

Natalie SULEYMAN (St Albans – Minister for Veterans, Minister for Small Business, Minister for Youth) (14:18): I rise today to update the house on the exciting start to the year for young Victorians, and I do not just mean Taylor Swift’s record-breaking shows at the MCG. A big plug for all Swifties out there, and I do not mean you, member for Caulfield. How good was the Multicultural Youth Leadership Conference hosted by Endeavour Youth Australia, Youth Activating Youth and Mo Social Impact. A big shout-out to organisers Ahmed Hassan, Mohamed Semra and Mahamed Ahmed for organising a fantastic event. We have many youth organisations in Victoria who provide support and programs for our young people. For 35 years that has been exactly what the Centre for Multicultural Youth is all about. I joined the Premier and the members for Thomastown, Melton and Narre Warren North to celebrate their 35th birthday, and what a milestone. The Allan Labor government is delivering for young Victorians.

Next week I will be seeing firsthand the new Geelong youth hub site with the hardworking member for Geelong. And there is more. The member for Tarneit and the member for Point Cook know all too well we are opening the newly renovated Wyndham youth hub. This is all part of our strong investment in youth hubs across Victoria. And – are you ready for it? – Youth Fest is back for another year, with young Victorians having the opportunity to get involved, get connected and network with one another. The Allan Labor government is backing young Victorians every step of the way. Regardless of your

postcode, your background, your faith or your surname, you have the opportunity to contribute here. The Allan Labor government has a reputation for backing our young Victorians.

Energy security

David HODGETT (Croydon) (14:20): My question is to the Premier. Kilsyth Doctors in the electorate of Croydon is a fantastic medical clinic which has served the local community since 1955. They lost grid power on Tuesday, and it took until Saturday morning for power to be restored. In this period crucial vaccines stored in their fridge were lost, essential medical equipment was inoperable and patient data was inaccessible. Why is this Labor government putting the health of Victorians at risk because they cannot manage our energy network?

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Sunbury can leave the chamber for half an hour. Leader of the House!

Member for Sunbury withdrew from chamber.

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:21): I thank the member for Croydon for his question, acknowledging that his community is one of those that was impacted by the devastating and destructive wind event that went through our state last Tuesday afternoon. I also acknowledge that his community, like that of the member for Monbulk and others, is part of those communities that have a big recovery job ahead of them, and we will support them in that work.

The question asked by the member for Croydon went to the question of supply. It went to the question of energy supply. As the minister for energy and I have been addressing this matter since Wednesday morning, when we held a press conference at the State Control Centre with senior representatives from the emergency response and also a representative from AEMO, the national market operator, who was there as well, the issues of the prolonged outages that we saw in the days after the destructive wind events that tore through our state were as a consequence not of supply but of large-scale damage that was done to localised transmission lines – single lines – right across the state.

It would be wrong to characterise, as the member for Croydon has done, that this is a question of supply. It is a fact that we saw widespread destructive damage. It is not just the energy minister and I who have been providing this information, it is AEMO as well who have been at pains on a number of occasions to make this point. The reality is that here in Victoria we have been working incredibly hard to get more renewable energy into our supply networks, but what we saw last Tuesday – the reason why there were prolonged power outages – was because we had that widespread high wind that did damage right across the state.

It should not be an opportunity for politicking to be made around people who are without power. If the member for Croydon wants to provide the Minister for Health and me with further information about the GP clinic he refers to, we are happy to follow that up. But again I reiterate my thanks to the power workers and the emergency responders who have been working around the clock since last Tuesday to restore the power that was disconnected to those customers – those homes and businesses – as a consequence of the destructive wind.

David HODGETT (Croydon) (14:23): In 2021 Minister D'Ambrosio said that Victorians could install a solar and battery system to 'provide backup during a power outage'. On the basis of this advice, the clinic purchased an expensive solar and battery system which was unable to provide power backup for five days. Why didn't the government explain to Victorians that power outages under Labor might last for many days rather than a few hours?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:24): The answer to this question is indeed mostly answered in my answer to the substantive question asked by the member for Croydon. Last week's event that saw the power outages across the state was as a consequence of the devastating and

destructive winds that tore through the state. Having had conversations with the communities in Emerald and in Mirboo North and in Pomonal and in the western part of the state as well and in Monash, all of the responders who I have met with over the past week talked about the winds being tornado-like. Those tornado-like winds did cause widespread damage to the power network as a consequence of powerlines coming down and trees falling on powerlines as well. That is the situation we are now seeing where we have workers working around the clock, and I reiterate my appreciation to those workers.

Ministers statements: community safety

Anthony CARBINES (Ivanhoe – Minister for Police, Minister for Crime Prevention, Minister for Racing) (14:25): I rise to update the house on the role Victoria Police play to keep our diverse communities safe. Community safety is of course the Allan Labor government's number one priority. We condemn hate and prejudice in all its forms, and we know that for many in both the Jewish and Islamic communities the ongoing conflict in the Middle East has heightened concerns about community safety in our neighbourhoods. The priority and safer communities division of Victoria Police works hand in hand with many community leaders, and the Chief Commissioner of Police has established Operation Park to coordinate this work. Police are providing ongoing reassurance patrols and have increased their presence at schools, places of worship and important cultural institutions. In fact, Victoria Police have coordinated some 4400 patrols as part of Operation Park.

Right across the state, Victoria Police are engaging diverse communities every day. Next week they will be in Broadmeadows at the Multicultural Youth Centre with the member for Broadmeadows as part of the \$2.5 million initiative providing programs and support for the Muslim community, building social cohesion and connection and linking people with the services that they need. In the south-east, local area commanders at Casey, Dandenong and Cardinia are working closely with African community leaders on priority supports that they need to support their communities to get on and make the contribution that they are seeking to make locally in our communities across the south-east.

Our \$5 million commitment to early intervention programs is supporting Victoria Police, with our highly effective Aboriginal youth cautioning program to help reduce the over-representation of First Nations people in the justice system and linking them to the supports they need to turn their lives around. We know that, from the trials of that program in Ballarat and Bendigo, our youth cautioning program is now operating in 20 sites across the state.

We are the multicultural state – diverse, tolerant and understanding. There has never been a better time for diverse communities to consider a career in Victoria Police. Our Made For More recruitment campaign is reaching a wider audience across our state than ever before. Our police service is always better when it reflects the community that it serves.

Supermarket prices

Gabrielle DE VIETRI (Richmond) (14:27): My question is to the Premier. This week a *Four Corners* report revealed shocking evidence of price gouging by the supermarket duopoly. It is clear that Coles and Woolworths are screwing over customers, they are screwing over Victorian farmers and they are screwing over their workers while they are making record profits. Will the Premier declare groceries a regulated industry to stop Victorians from being ripped off by the supermarkets?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:28): The member for Richmond has asked a question about competition policy that is a responsibility of the federal government. I refer the member for Richmond to the recent action taken by the federal government around working with the ACCC as well to have an inquiry into supermarket prices, and I refer any further statements that the member for Richmond may wish to make on this matter to the federal government.

Gabrielle DE VIETRI (Richmond) (14:28): It is very clear that the Premier is saying that there is nothing that she can do in this area, but section 4 of the Essential Services Commission Act clearly

states that it is the state government, not the federal government, that has the power to declare groceries a regulated industry, which would give the commission power to set fair prices. Don't tell me that the Victorian Premier is going to do a Brad Banducci and walk away from struggling Victorians. Can the Premier –

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! Leader of the Nationals! The member for Richmond will be heard without assistance.

Gabrielle DE VIETRI: Can the Premier name one thing that this government is going to do to take on the supermarket duopoly?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:30): Firstly, let me be clear that it would be wrong for the Greens political representative from Richmond to characterise my previous answer as saying there is nothing that can be done. We have a range of measures to support Victorians with the cost-of-living pressures they are experiencing, with free TAFE, free kinder, support for drivers licences. There is a very, very long list that I would draw the member's attention to.

In terms of action with the supermarkets, I again remind the member for Richmond that she is welcome to make a submission to the work that the federal Labor government is leading on this matter as the appropriate body. If the member for Richmond is interested in real action, she will make a real effort to direct her real politicking to the right level of the real government that is taking real action on this matter.

Members interjecting.

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

Member for Bentleigh withdrew from chamber.

Ministers statements: treaty

Natalie HUTCHINS (Sydenham – Minister for Jobs and Industry, Minister for Treaty and First Peoples, Minister for Women) (14:31): I update the house on the progress of treaty with First Nations people. Treaty is about uniting Victorians by resetting the relationship between Victoria's First People and all in our state. To come together to heal we must first understand the truth of Victoria's 250-year history since colonisation, one where First Peoples were deliberately excluded from social and economic life and forbidden to speak their language and celebrate their culture. This is the important work of the Yoorrook Justice Commission. This exclusion has consequences that Aboriginal families still feel today. This is represented by the gaps in life experiences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Victorians, in everything from birth weight through to life expectancy.

In Victoria we are advancing treaty truth, and this is being led by Aboriginal people, because as the Productivity Commission found just two weeks ago, treaty is essential for closing the gap. Treaty is essential to ensuring true self-determination for a better future for First Peoples and their families. Every single Victorian should be proud of the rich First Peoples culture that we have and the connection that they have to land in this state. Treaty will bring us together. It will unite all Victorians and make a new beginning to our relationship. Victoria's journey towards reconciliation and treaty had bipartisan support, including the critical 2022 treaty authority bill, but now those opposite have betrayed Victoria's First People and all Victorians by withdrawing their support for the treaty process.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, under standing order 118 personal reflections are unparliamentary.

The SPEAKER: The minister will come back to making her statement. There is no point or order.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Truth, self-determination and social cohesion are supported by this side. They have turned their backs. Aboriginal communities have been left to pick up the pieces. Our government will continue to back a better future for Victorians.

Country Fire Authority resources

Peter WALSH (Murray Plains) (14:33): My question is to the Premier. Last week our emergency services volunteers and workers battled bushfires that, sadly, saw the loss of 45 homes in Pomonal and a home in Dadswells Bridge. In June 2020 Labor promised to deliver 48 heavy tankers to replace the CFA's ageing single-cab tankers by late 2023. All those new tankers have not been delivered, leaving CFA volunteers and regional communities at risk. Premier, why has this Labor government broken its promise to upgrade the CFA's ageing and dangerous tanker fleet?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:34): The Leader of the National Party again would be wrong to characterise communities who are heading into tomorrow as having been left at risk. The Minister for Emergency Services addressed this issue last year in terms of the rollout of the fire tankers, and I am advised that around half of the tankers have been rolled out, but it would be incorrect to characterise that rollout as leaving those communities at risk, because my advice is they are replacement tankers. It comes in the context of the significant and additional funding we have provided to both the CFA and our broader emergency services across the state in recent years. I have seen this firsthand in my own local community with my own local brigade. I had the opportunity back in October to hand over the keys to a new tanker and acknowledge the great work of my own local brigade and be part of a number of other similar events across my own local community. Whether it is the work in rolling out the heavy tankers, the work in rolling out the \$46 million for not just tankers but truck equipment, station upgrades –

Peter Walsh: On a point of order, Speaker, I ask you to bring the Premier back to answering the question. These trucks were promised by the end of 2023. We are now well into 2024, and quite a lot of them have not been delivered.

The SPEAKER: The Premier is being relevant to the question that was asked. I ask the Leader of the Nationals if he is making a point of order to make it succinctly.

Jacinta ALLAN: I answered the Leader of the National Party's question at the outset, and I was then addressing his commentary around communities that have been supported with significant and additional investment that we have provided to the CFA, whether it is through tankers and trucks and station upgrades and equipment or also important support for volunteering and training for volunteers, who are such a big and important part of the CFA.

Again I want to thank the captain of the Dadswells Bridge CFA, Peter, who I met with last week, and the captain of the Mirboo north CFA, Trent Venten, who I met with last Friday. These are men and women who are supporting their communities, whilst also at times not knowing if their own home has been lost or their property is at risk. We thank them for that dedication and we thank them for that commitment. I also say this: I thank them for the training they do week in, week out to be ready for events like what we saw last week. They will be ready to go tomorrow as well. Let us hope tomorrow is not a day that we have fires or storms, but it is predicted to be a very difficult day again. I also ask Victorians to, in light of that, think about how we too can help our emergency services by making sure that we follow the advice, follow the warnings and, most importantly, support each other with accurate information.

Peter WALSH (Murray Plains) (14:37): Premier, 193 of the vehicles used by the CFA are more than 30 years old. Paul Stanley, captain of the Limestone brigade in north-east Victoria, has said that he does not 'believe that these vehicles are safe in this day and age' – a captain of the CFA's words, not mine. Why won't the government provide the vehicles that are necessary to keep our courageous volunteers safe?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:38): In terms of the matter of the Limestone CFA, I will refer that to the Minister for Emergency Services. In regard to the broader commentary that has been put around the question by the Leader of the National Party, I am advised by the Minister for Emergency Services in terms of the tankers that they will be rolled out by the middle of the year. But, again, it is wrong to characterise that there has not been record and ongoing support to the CFA from our Labor government. It is a stark contrast. The Leader of the National Party was at the cabinet table when they cut the CFA budget. We have taken a very different approach and are providing support.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: The member for Euroa can leave the chamber for an hour.

Member for Euroa withdrew from chamber.

Ministers statements: education funding

Ben CARROLL (Niddrie – Minister for Education, Minister for Medical Research) (14:39): It is my pleasure to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is investing in the future of every Victorian family by building the Education State and investing in social cohesion right across our state. Many members of this chamber will be aware that the Scanlon–Monash index found last year that social cohesion is at its lowest level in 17 years. Sadly, most people around Victoria, indeed Australia, are most concerned about financial situations and the rise of economic inequality. Forty per cent of respondents surveyed by the Scanlon institute found that they themselves felt they were struggling to get by. Incredibly, the most concerned were young adults aged 25 to 34, who said they were pessimistic about the future.

You ask: what is the Allan Labor government doing to support those 25- to 34-year-olds by investing in their schools and in their communities? Let me just tell you. We are providing free four- and three-year-old kinder, a saving of \$2500 per student every year. We are doing the free baby bonus bundles, the kinder kits and the pre-prep bags. We are doing the early parenting centres like Twedde, which the member for Footscray is such a champion of. We are running outside school hours care programs to take up study and sport. We are running Smile Squad, free glasses, free pads and tampons, free school breakfasts, Get Active Kids vouchers and free TAFE and teaching courses.

On a positive note, the Scanlon foundation also found there is high connection to community. In fact, 83 per cent of respondents are willing to help their neighbours. That is why the power of education and building the Education State in every corner of our state are so important. The former member for Hawthorn knew about the power of education; indeed he was a principal for 10 years. It is great to see that he may be back and that he has taken a bit of time out from his doorknocking to be here and watch the Parliament.

Can I also say it is the Allan Labor government that will help every young person get out and achieve what they set out to achieve. We are witnessing firsthand the transformational power, and we know the return on investment education makes. I bet you Baillieu, Napthine and Kennett would love the return on investment – *(Time expired)*

Rulings from the Chair

Constituency questions

The SPEAKER (14:42): I have reviewed the constituency questions from yesterday and those from last sitting week. Last week the member for Murray Plains asked the minister to provide information, which I have previously ruled is a request for action, and I rule the question out of order. Yesterday the members for Eildon and Nepean both asked questions that in substance were questions but requested an action from the minister. I rule both those questions out of order. The member for Northcote asked the minister to update her community on a matter, and in line with my previous rulings that asking for an update is an action I rule her question out of order. I remind all members that

the clerks are running an online training session on drafting constituency questions next Wednesday, and I encourage you and your staff to attend.

Tim Bull: On a point of order, Speaker, I want to raise an issue around overdue questions, and I know you get these subsequent to pretty much every question time. I have got 44 questions that are overdue, and I will provide a list of those to the clerks. But 21 of my 44 overdue questions date back to 2022 – 21 questions overdue from 2022 – and I have got 18 questions overdue from 2023 and already five overdue questions from this year. Speaker, I know that you follow these up with the ministers, but I would be very appreciative if we could take some serious action. A lot of these are really important issues to my electorate, and to have 21 overdue from 2022 makes a whole circus out of the situation.

The SPEAKER: Member for Gippsland East, I would like you to provide the list to the Clerk.

Tim Bull: I will provide the list to the Clerk, but if you could take some serious action I would be most appreciative.

Danny O'Brien: On a point of order, Speaker, I was not going to raise this issue in particular, but given that the member for Gippsland East has too, I would seek your guidance on the provision of questions on notice when they are not remotely related to the question asked. I asked a question that was very similar to a question asked by the member for Euroa, who got the data she was after. I asked the same question but for a longer period and did not get any data – totally irrelevant. I just seek your advice.

The SPEAKER: You are welcome to come and meet with me in my office to discuss, member for Gippsland South, but I will not be answering you in the chamber today.

Danny O'Brien: Okay. I also have some outstanding ones, if I could raise them, please.

The SPEAKER: Can you give the list to the Clerk, if it is not too long.

Danny O'Brien: It is not as long as that. Questions 788, 383, 303, 230 and 172 are all outstanding.

Kim Wells: On a point of order, Speaker, I have a number of outstanding questions on notice and constituency questions. The questions on notice are 807, 806, 811 and 810, and the constituency questions are 322 and 374. Could you follow those up, please.

Constituency questions

Polwarth electorate

Richard RIORDAN (Polwarth) (14:45): (510) My question this afternoon is for the Treasurer. The question I have for the Treasurer is: is he aware that the State Revenue Office's most recent local council valuations have seen for the Colac Otway shire, if you can believe this, a 28.7 per cent increase in actual land values on people's rate notices but surprisingly a 10 per cent decrease in the capital improved values of the same properties? In fact even for my own premises there has been a \$200,000 reduction in the value of my house but a \$400,000 increase in the value of the land. There are some houses in my shire now valued at less than \$90,000. You cannot rebuild half the houses in the Colac Otway shire. My question to the Treasurer is quite simple: is he aware of this strange anomaly that has occurred in the Colac Otway shire?

Bass electorate

Jordan CRUGNALE (Bass) (14:46): (511) My question is for the Minister for Government Services. What measures is our government taking to ensure that in the wake of last week's devastating extreme weather events the federal government telecommunication carriers are taking actions to ensure that resilience is embedded within the telecommunications network? My community members have been out and about in their streets and towns and on roads, helping out in schools and in local businesses to not just clean up and fix up and clear but also to support the many affected and still

affected community members today. On the telecommunications front, they certainly need reassurance that this is going to be fixed. We see as a priority the need for better regulation of telcos. It is critical infrastructure and areas like ours need better resilience so that they work every time regardless of the catastrophic events. We know that recovery efforts take a long time, but programs like Connecting Victoria are making a tangible difference in the everyday lives of my community and during times of crisis.

Gippsland South electorate

Danny O'BRIEN (Gippsland South) (14:47): (512) My question is to the Premier, and I ask on behalf of my constituents in Mirboo North: as part of the recovery from the recent storm event in Mirboo North, will the government fund a new Mirboo North fire station, the long-awaited stadium at the Mirboo North secondary and primary schools and the rehabilitation of the swimming pool, which was also raised by the Leader of the Opposition yesterday?

Kim Wells interjected.

Danny O'BRIEN: Wells Road does need a fair bit of work, member for Rowville. The fire station I have been campaigning on for years. The Premier just talked about how she proudly handed over keys to a new truck. Mirboo North, among a number of other stations in my electorate, cannot get new trucks because their stations are old and too small to accommodate the size of the new trucks. Both the fire station and the stadium are critical projects for this community and would be very, very welcome as part of a recovery from the storm events last week.

Monbulk electorate

Daniela DE MARTINO (Monbulk) (14:48): (513) My constituency question is for the Minister for Energy and Resources. Before I pose my question, I would like to take a moment to thank the minister for her dedication to my constituents this past week, as we continue to navigate through the aftermath of the storms, through her visits to hear firsthand from those affected by power outages. My question for the minister is: what undertakings has AusNet made in the wake of this disaster to improve their emergency response and coordination? It is vitally important that the energy sector considers how elements of its response to such situations can be improved. In my electorate of Monbulk, where AusNet is the energy distributor, we saw a complete failure of the Outage Tracker website and incorrect restoration time information being sent via SMS, which meant that thousands and thousands without power across the Dandenong Ranges had no line of sight on when their power would be restored or were given information which did not match reality, and this had an adverse impact on their ability to plan for relocation, food storage and even life support contingency plans.

Rowville electorate

Kim WELLS (Rowville) (14:49): (514) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. When will the minister make a commitment to make Wellington Road in Rowville safer for the residents in my electorate in light of the recent fatality? I am grateful for the time the minister has made available to discuss this dreadful situation. I have written to the minister urging that on the section of Wellington Road near Wellington Village the speed be dropped to 60 kilometres an hour and to follow this up with a speed camera with proper warning signage to ensure that the trucks that frequent the road and frequently skirt the speed limit and skip through the traffic lights are held to account. We also need an urgent upgrade to Wellington Road and better patrolling by Victoria Police. Furthermore, we need to ensure that trucks travel in the left-hand lane. The condition of our roads is by far the number one issue in Rowville, and I hope that this minister will fix the dangerous stretch of road as a high priority.

Wendouree electorate

Juliana ADDISON (Wendouree) (14:50): (515) My constituency question is for the Minister for Housing in the other place regarding our government's Big Housing Build in my electorate of

Wendouree. Ballarat needs more social and affordable housing, and I am very proud of our government's investments across the City of Ballarat. One project that I am particularly proud of is the \$50 million transformation of the Leawarra neighbourhood in Delacombe. Minister, what progress is being made to deliver the Leawarra neighbourhood housing project in Delacombe? The majority of the 147 homes in the Leawarra estate were built in the 1970s, and some are no longer fit for purpose. The open spaces are poorly utilised, and residents have told us that they feel unsafe in Leawarra park. The roads through the estate have poor connections to Delacombe Primary and Doug Dean Reserve. I know that this investment will change lives, and I look forward to the minister's response.

Ovens Valley electorate

Tim McCURDY (Ovens Valley) (14:51): (516) My question is to the Minister for Health, and I ask: is there an administration waiting list before you actually get on the surgery waiting list? Peter Sedgwick of Wangaratta was posted on the elective surgery waiting list at the Royal Melbourne Hospital in November 2022 as a category 2 patient for a stent. Mr Sedgwick filled out and returned both the questionnaire and the consent form in November 2022. Having not heard anything from the hospital in over a year, Mr Sedgwick called in December 2023, a year later, to find out that his questionnaire and consent form had only arrived on 10 December 2023 to them, over 380 days since he first returned them. Peter, who submitted his paperwork only two days after being placed on the 90-day waiting list, was stuck in limbo waiting for crucial surgery, and hence I ask: is there an administration waiting list before you actually get on the surgery waiting list?

Bellarine electorate

Alison MARCHANT (Bellarine) (14:52): (517) My constituency question is for the Minister for Women. Minister, how is the Allan Labor government supporting women and girls in my electorate of the Bellarine? I am excited to see a new round of the Change Our Game Community Activation Grants program open for submission this month. This program is a fantastic opportunity to be provided to our community sports and active recreation clubs to assist extending opportunities for women and girls from all backgrounds and experiences to get involved in the sport that they love, but I am sure my electorate of Bellarine would be interested to hear further about how our government is taking action to improve the lives and wellbeing of girls and women in our community.

Warrandyte electorate

Nicole WERNER (Warrandyte) (14:53): (518) My constituency question is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport. Why is there such a lack of bus services on Tindals Road in Warrandyte? I raise this on behalf of a courageous constituent in my electorate Mrs Kim Coulson, who wrote to me saying she has three children and no choice but to drive them everywhere as there is no bus anywhere near them at the Harris Gully end of Tindals Road. Not only that, the road for her children to walk to an existing bus 50 minutes away on Warrandyte Road has no footpath at all and has a 70-kilometre limit, much of which runs out and requires walking on the road itself, which is very unsafe for her children. In 2019 Kim was in a serious car accident which rendered her unable to drive her kids to school. Because of the state of the roads and bus services, her kids could not go to school because she was unable to take them. To quote Kim, they have been left for dead, and it needs to change urgently.

Eureka electorate

Michaela SETTLE (Eureka) (14:54): (519) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. The next stage of the Safer Local Roads and Streets program was recently announced, and I am delighted to see that Moorabool Shire Council was one of the 11 councils to receive funding to improve road safety infrastructure. The \$210 million program is working with every Victorian council to deliver upgrades on the highest risk local roads, intersections and precincts by 2027. My question for the minister is: what is the timing for working with Moorabool Shire Council to identify and fund these vital projects?

*Bills***Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill
2024***Second reading***Debate resumed.**

Gary MAAS (Narre Warren South) (14:55): Allow me to take our listeners back to a time before lunch when on this bill I was about to talk about the extraordinary work that our early childhood education and care workers do. They really are extraordinary, and while we may see this work that they do in terms of the everyday – stuff like training on the miniature bathrooms that they have in the classrooms – having in a previous role occupied a building with a childcare centre in it I was able to see just how extraordinary these educators are at being able to think of something like a fire drill, for instance, in a building and think that you are looking after children who may be six months old up to the age of six years old. When that fire alarm goes off, to see all those carers just swing into action and to be able to get those kids out in time safely and knowing that there would be a fair level of anxiety while that is occurring is just something to behold and believe me it is something to see.

Childhood educators are the backbone of our society. They educate our children – their development – through skill attainment and learning and play; they are all the things they need to do for a good future. They make it possible so that parents can go to work and can continue to be able to build a life in society. Without them our society in Victoria truly could not function. And a quick shout-out to the United Workers Union as well, because I know that together with those early childhood education care workers they have been the driving force to indeed secure professional pay, dignity, respect and recognition for those workers. They are hard jobs, and they do deserve respect. I am very happy to see they are deserving of direct employment as well, and that will be a feature of these 50 new government owned and operated early learning centres.

The bill will empower the Secretary of 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 payment of fees by parents of children enrolled in those centres. It is a 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 that affordable child care, kindergarten and pre-prep. All of the centres will open between 2025 and 2028, and the 50 centres will be located where they are needed most, particularly in areas of significant childcare shortage and higher rates of disadvantage. Where possible – and this really is a fantastic thing that this government has been gratefully doing over the years – the centres will be co-located and integrated with schools, hospitals and TAFEs or other community services. This will increase parents' and carers' access to early learning and child care and subsequently increase workforce participation.

I was very happy to see as well that in the very near future in 2026 a primary school in my local community – well, actually the member for Narre Warren North's community, but hey, what is 500 metres and a primary school between friends, a level crossing removal between friends? I am very happy to see that Hallam Primary School, which is just outside of my electorate, will be getting one of these 50 government-owned childcare centres as well. That really is an incredible thing for our community where there is a shortage –

Belinda Wilson interjected.

Gary MAAS: Share and share alike. Correct, member for Narre Warren North. But there is some shortage there, and there is a need for this. There is a higher rate of disadvantage in the community too. The co-location will be a really fantastic thing to help support those children and to get them out of early learning. It will support their transition to school, and it will make it easier for families to access early learning programs and to avoid that double drop-off. These early learning centres will also provide additional infrastructure capacity in support of the rollout of three-year-old kindergarten

and pre-prep. Co-location provides many benefits for families, including easier access to early learning programs; as I have already mentioned, simpler and more convenient drop-off times; and smoother transition between early learning programs and school for children.

This reform is a reform which builds on so many other early childhood education reforms that this government has made. We can just rattle them off here, but in particular we have got free kinder. It is well known that our government has made kinder free. The Victorian government's \$270 million free kinder initiative is available to all three- and four-year-olds enrolled in participating funded kindergarten programs. It saves families some \$2500 in fees per child per year, which is much needed at this time when cost of living is much talked about. It also provides much-needed relief for family budgets and gives more women the opportunity to return to the workforce should they decide to.

Pre-prep is another initiative, and we continue to lead the nation in early childhood education and care by establishing pre-prep over the next decade, a new universal 30-hour-a-week program of play-based learning for four-year-old children. Again, it is part of that \$14 billion Best Start, Best Life reform. In 2025 pre-prep is going to be commencing in quite a few regional areas throughout the state. It is really very, very important for our children's development, and as I said at the beginning of this contribution, building a foundation for our children, our youngest Victorians, is in fact building a foundation for a very, very solid Education State here in Victoria. For these reasons, I commend the bill to the house.

Bridget VALLENCE (Evelyn) (15:03): I also rise today to contribute to the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024. What this bill seeks to do is to introduce 50 new childcare centres in areas where they are needed most, and of course childcare centres are absolutely required. These are places where our young ones get to learn, socialise, interact, play and get their first take on education. They are also places where parents are able to take their children to give them the opportunity to get back into the workforce. As a mum of two children, I had my children in early learning centres for many, many years. They absolutely loved it, and it meant that I was able, as a mum, to get back into the workforce, to contribute to my household income and to help build a better future for my kids and for our family. It also meant that they had the opportunity to make many social connections and start their learning journeys.

Early learning centres are an absolutely critical part of our education system, but the reality is that we have childcare deserts in many parts of the state. It is probably a little late, but finally the government is looking at meeting that challenge and introducing childcare centres in parts of the state where it has been very hard to get childcare centres up and running. However, I do note that of all of the 50 centres that the government has outlined they are targeting, there is not one earmarked for the electorate of Evelyn. So I just want to put on record that that is disappointing. However, we do have a number of wonderful childcare centres already operating in the electorate of Evelyn, and I pay tribute to all of the early childhood workers in our community for the work that they do looking after our precious children and giving them the best start in life.

There were not any allocated for Evelyn, but there was one allocated nearby to Evelyn, in Woori Yallock. That perplexes me, and we did ask questions about this in the briefing from the minister's department, because Woori Yallock already has a great early learning centre operating, a not-for-profit early learning centre. Woori Yallock would not be classed as a growth area, and so it raises some questions. If the government seeks to introduce, as they have on the list, another early learning centre in Woori Yallock, what will that mean for the existing not-for-profit early learning centre? So we do have some serious questions about the modelling that the government has used in order to identify the list of 50, because I would hate to think for the community of Woori Yallock that the government will come in and set up a government-run childcare centre that would take staff and resources away from the existing not-for-profit one, and then the Woori Yallock community would have a net gain of zero when it comes to childcare centres. I hope that that is not going to be the outcome, but I think it is important to put on record the sort of modelling the government is doing when it identifies its lists for childcare centres.

But of course having early learning centres is so crucial for so many parts of our community. There is a desert when it comes to those in rural and regional Victoria. It is a challenge to get these up and running, and what we would like to see from the government is some more detail, some more meat on the bones. They are putting this legislation forward about early learning centres and in order to employ early learning centre staff, but they have provided no detail as to how they will actually meet the skilled workforce requirement to fulfil the obligations that they are setting forth in this legislation. This legislation is seeking to employ early learning centre and kindergarten staff, some 1200 we understand, to run these early learning centres, but the government has demonstrated zero information about how they will actually get that workforce in place. We have skills shortages right across every industry sector, but particularly in education and early childhood education. There is a skills shortage at the moment with the existing early learning centre framework that we have, so the government wants to introduce 1200 new workers, an admirable effort. However, it has demonstrated no plan on how it is going to reach that.

In the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee inquiry into the 2023–24 budget estimates, we did ask about skills shortages and in particular in education. Unfortunately we do not have a breakdown down to early childhood, but in education and training, there is a shortage of 41,000 workers in Victoria – by 2025 we will have a shortage of 41,000 workers in the education and training sector. You can only imagine, with the early childhood aspect of that, that that will be quite a significant number. In fact we understand from the Australian Childcare Alliance, which surveyed 600 childcare centres, that over two-thirds of them stated they had actually capped enrolments precisely because they were unable to recruit workers now, and that there are some 16,000 childcare places offline because there are not enough workers. Now, it is great to be able to open new childcare centres, but you have to have them staffed. They will not operate if there is no staff. You need the staff in place in order to get the childcare centres operating and the kids in there so that the parents can get to their places of work.

The qualifications to become an early childhood educator take four years of tertiary study. So given the fact we have a shortage now, even if there was any incentive program to get people into learning to become an early childhood educator, that is still going to take another four years. A lot of work would have to be happening right now to get those enrolments in place and those students to complete those courses to become early childhood educators to fill the gaps. I am quite concerned – and I hope this does not happen, but I am concerned – that this program of introducing new government childcare centres might cannibalise some of the existing workforce and it is not really going to address the skills shortage that we have in early childhood.

Another thing that was concerning about this bill – lest there be any doubt, we support the introduction of more early childhood learning centres into Victoria – was the fact that with this government it is all headline and no delivery. They have introduced this legislation to employ people into the early childhood learning space; however, they have not allocated a single cent to employing people. As we stand here today there is not a single cent allocated in any of the state government budgets to employ a single person. So this bill is about employing workers in this space, 1200, but there is not any money allocated. I mean on basic estimates that is probably going to be \$100 million annually of operating costs to employ these staff, yet this budget is silent on that. There is not a cent in the budget when it comes to employing these staff. We do have a budget coming up in May and perhaps the government might start scrambling and make sure there is an entry in there, but we do know that under the Allan Labor government Victoria is broke. They are struggling to pay their existing public sector workforce now with a public sector wages bill at some \$38 billion. It makes you wonder how they are actually going to afford to deliver on this commitment.

I would love to see more early childhood centres open, operating, full of staff and full of children so that mums like me can get back into the workforce, but if they cannot get the workforce, they have outlined no plan to get that workforce and they have not allocated any money in the budget to pay that

workforce, some serious questions have to be answered by the Allan Labor government because they are scant on the detail when it comes to that.

Just in the very short time remaining, we have wonderful early childhood centres in the Evelyn electorate, but I want to pay particular tribute to the fairly new Coldstream early years kinder, which was set up next to Coldstream Primary School. It is doing really well and servicing many families in my community.

Paul HAMER (Box Hill) (15:13): I too rise to contribute on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024, which will amend the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 to provide for the employment of persons at government early learning centres. It always is a great pleasure to speak about the early childhood policy in this state because the Allan government and the Andrews government before that have made huge contributions to the early childhood education sector. As members from both sides have said, it is so essential for the development of our youngest Victorians to be able to have access to education from such a young age. There is a lot of evidentiary proof to show that the educational outcomes and the outcomes for those who have gone through early education are far improved. That is not to discount also all the other social impacts that early childhood education has, particularly for parents who otherwise would not be able to get back into the workforce.

These are far-reaching policies, and I am really proud to have been a member of a government that has introduced such a comprehensive range of policies. I hope to go into some of the details of those policies later in my contribution, but I do want to focus on the context of the bill, which is about providing the framework for the employment of staff and the conditions of that employment for people who are employed in government early learning centres. It has previously been announced by the government that we will be introducing 50 new early learning centres as part of the Best Start, Best Life reforms. We do not have any of these early childhood centres in the Box Hill electorate because they have been targeted in areas where the demand is the greatest, both in terms of supply and access but also in terms of where the economic need is greatest. We are really blessed in the Box Hill electorate to have some amazing early childhood centres. We have a very large workforce population where both parents work, and having these childcare services is really essential for the working families of Box Hill in addition to providing that much-needed start to the education journey for the children.

There are many early childhood centres to single out in Box Hill, but I particularly want to acknowledge the Box Hill North Primary School Kindergarten. This is a kindergarten that was started almost 30 years ago. It was one of the first, if not the first, in the state to see the benefits of co-locating a kinder on a school site. These reforms and the sites that have already been identified and selected for some of these new programs are exactly that – they are co-located generally with primary schools but sometimes on other school sites, not only because that is the availability of government land but also because the kinder program is three-year-old kinder and four-year-old kinder. Many parents will have more than one child, and once that child finishes kinder they will progress into primary school. Being able to have a primary school co-located with a kindergarten just makes that trip to school and trip to kinder that much easier for parents. Under the current leadership of the kindergarten director at Box Hill North Primary School kinder, Charlotte Tay, and the school principal, David Pelosi, they have created a very inclusive environment that combines the kinder program with the school program. It really integrates those two facilities. The kindergarten is right in the centre of the school. It is not separate – it is not considered apart from the school – it is actually a central component of the school. It is a key attractor for why parents will actually send their children to the primary school and send their children to the kinder, because they know they have got that continuity of service.

A couple of recent incidents come to mind. I was at the school a couple of weeks ago. They had their first assembly for the year, and they took the opportunity to have a Chinese Lunar New Year celebration at the school. It was the whole school assembly and also the kinder children. The kinder children came out and watched from the steps of the kinder. They were admittedly a little bit frightened

by the lion dance. It was a little bit too noisy for them, but it was great to see that they are already taking part in the broader education and the broader school culture that exists there. This also extends to their language program. For many, many years Box Hill North Primary School has taught Japanese as a second language. A few years ago, as part of our early childhood language program, another initiative of this Labor government, that Japanese language program was actually extended to the four-year-old kinder class. So now children at that school and kinder are starting to learn a foreign language one year earlier, from their four-year-old kinder program, and if they continue at the school then they can continue that learning experience. As I mentioned earlier, there is very strong evidence to suggest that the earlier the learning of language and general education and learning experience starts, the better the educational outcomes are at the end of that education journey. So that is really an excellent example of how this system works and what we are striving to achieve across the state with some of our Best Start, Best Life reforms.

The member for Evelyn talked about the allocation of funding, and I want to remind those members opposite that this is part of a major funding package – \$14 billion in our Best Start, Best Life reforms. This component that we are debating and discussing today is about necessary legislative reform that will enable these reforms to happen. This funding has been committed and will be rolled out over a period of years as the services are delivered. For example, if we look at the pre-prep announcement, working to provide up to 30 hours of a pre-prep year for four-year-old students, in 2025 – so it will not be until next year – the first pre-prep classes will start and that will be starting in selected regional areas. That will not roll out to metropolitan Melbourne for another few years, so you would not expect to see it in last year's budget, but the funding was committed to as part of this overall funding package and it will be delivered, along with other reforms and other legislative reform that are required to ensure that these education initiatives take place. There is really so much to say and to like about the early childhood education reforms that we are making, and I commend the bill to the house.

Jade BENHAM (Mildura) (15:23): I always jump at the chance to speak on early childhood education, and in particular the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024. One of the 50 new government-owned early learning centres that we are talking about here is in Mildura. Mildura is a very, very large area, and was classified as a childcare desert in the Mitchell report that I have heard many members in this place speak about. There are many centres, both for-profit and non-profit, and places like Murray Valley Aboriginal Co-op that are run by those cooperative organisations, which are fantastic, and I will talk about MVAC a little bit later on. But when we say that there is one of these government-owned centres for Mildura, fantastic, but a little bit of guidance is needed on where it might be. Red Cliffs at the moment does not have a childcare centre at all. We talk about 52 per cent of regional Australians living in areas which are considered childcare deserts, so we are not unique in that situation, but that child care and early childhood education really enables greater workforce participation, particularly with women, as we know. But when we are also facing workforce issues right across the sector and in every sector in regional Australia, not to have one in Red Cliffs, where we were hoping that that centre would go, poses such an issue, particularly with a teacher shortage.

There are a number of schools in Red Cliffs, including Red Cliffs Secondary College, and it is 20 minutes away from Mildura, so you can see where it is problematic if there are families that need to backtrack 20 minutes – depending on traffic it could be a 1-hour round trip – to take their children to child care for the day and then go to work. It is quite problematic, and it is just one of those commonsense solutions. The council have done a power of work around kindergarten and early childhood and day care in Red Cliffs, so that is one of those. Even though the entire electorate of Mildura has been identified as a childcare desert, Red Cliffs is particularly problematic for families and the workforce in that area. It is such a great little town. It is celebrating its centenary this year, which is fantastic, and there are all sorts of things going on, but the fact that there is not one childcare centre out there is quite alarming.

When we talk about staff, though – and again, we have seen this, and I have spoken about this plenty of times in this place as well – we had in 2019 the former Premier promising to build a childcare centre. That was done, but it has sat empty for 2½ years in a town called Charlton, a small town on the Calder Highway. It has sat empty because of a lack of workforce and because of a failure of the market. Their local government are trying to get out of the space. They do not have the resources to manage it. The private sector did not want to enter the market, so it was really 2½ years of trying to get an operator and then to find the workforce. That was the main issue, there was just no workforce. We can say that this bill will allow the government to employ 1200 staff, but where do they come from?

There are obvious needs, obvious commonsense requirements, for a different approach to how early childhood education is delivered in regional areas. I know often ‘regional’ will be considered as outer suburban areas of Melbourne perhaps. Then let us talk about rural. Let us talk about the north-west of the state along the border, where it is really difficult to get staff, to train them on the job. Their access to training can sometimes be difficult. But there have been great advances. Like I mentioned before, and as I have mentioned many times in this place, the Murray Valley Aboriginal Co-operative is where my two children attended day care from the time they were 12 months old. My youngest finished kindergarten there last year. I have quite consistent contact with the CEO and obviously the staff, and while I am speaking about it I should send a shout-out to the staff, without whom I would not have been able to work or do what I did while my kids were very, very young. The continuity of care is really important. Chelsea took care of my eldest when he went into day care and was still taking care of my youngest when he left. Staff members like Rhoda, like Chelsea, like Gabie and like Cara have really helped me raise my kids essentially and have helped our family operate in a really functional way. We have to thank them because they are amazing people, and what is great about that centre is that there are little nuances that allow on-the-job training because of the rural setting.

That centre was extended a couple of years ago. It is pretty much ‘You build it and they will come’, and they certainly do in droves, because the extension came and the kindergarten and the day care centre are now co-located. But because of the need there is a waiting list now of 18 months. At any time there are 15 to 20 children on that waiting list, and as soon as you extend or expand the facilities, they fill up. As much as we thank these amazing staff – and they are truly amazing – half the time they are not getting to take a lunchbreak because of the quotas that they have to meet, which are no different in regional centres, as they should not be. I am not in the sector, so I am not going to comment on the science around the safety. It is my children that are at stake, so we do not want to put them at any risk. But because of the quotas there is difficulty in getting staff to relieve them when there is someone off sick, and this can happen really suddenly.

In true form, I will tell you a little story. It was the end of last year and I was busy in the electorate. In fact I was 3 hours away, because from the top of my electorate to the bottom is about 4 hours. I was 3 hours away in Wycheproof on this particular day when the diploma-qualified staff at the kindergarten fell ill, and you need someone onsite with a diploma. She fell ill, so the entire facility had to close down. I was 3 hours away. My husband was in South Australia because he works over there three days a week. I got a phone call saying, ‘We’re closing. The centre is closing because of illness. All children need to be picked up in the next half an hour.’ I was 3 hours away, so that was a problem. I started to panic. There is no real provision or flexibility in regional areas to cover things like that. Could those children have gone into the day care centre, the older child care centre? It would have been a great solution, because I was 3 hours away panicking. I was asking, ‘What do I do? I’ve got no-one that’s able to come and pick him up at lunchtime.’ So that was really problematic. This is where I talk about real reforms for rural areas and regional areas that allow that flexibility. In the city it is fine because you can grab staff from other centres and move people around, and that is great. When we are hours away from anywhere in really isolated areas it is a real problem.

But I commend the staff at all childcare centres in Mildura – I cannot mention Red Cliffs because there is not one there – in Robinvale and in Charlton, which is finally open, and all those teachers. In particular Abby Mulquiny has been a fierce advocate for that childcare centre and getting providers

in, because she was desperate. As a teacher, she was so desperate to go back to work, and thankfully her gorgeous little Dulcie now has child care, and Abby is able to go back to teaching, which is fantastic all round. It is a great outcome. It just took too long.

So while we support, obviously, any expansion of early child care, because it does create amazing outcomes for our children going from early childhood into kindergarten and into school with that wonderful transition, there needs to be real reform for rural areas, because at the moment there are so many holes, and it just causes real anxiety with mothers like me that get caught out when technicalities in regulation become a real problem because of geography. It just should not matter. Postcodes should not matter. If we cannot get the same level of early childhood education, then our kids cannot either. Thanks to MVAC and thanks to childcare centres across the region. We thank you.

Anthony CIANFLONE (Pascoe Vale) (15:33): I rise to speak in support of the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024. In my inaugural speech to Parliament, which was just over year ago now, I spoke about the ongoing commitment of the Victorian Labor government and my pledge as the local member for Pascoe Vale, Coburg and Brunswick West to work to continue lifting and improving access and outcomes for local children through early childhood education centres, and that is why I really am so proud to be part of the Allan Labor government, whose very first priority and task was to assemble a refreshed whole-of-government approach to supporting children and families through the creation of a new Minister for Children portfolio. This refreshed approach places children's wellbeing, welfare and future life chances at the very heart of government decision-making and seeks to bring together the Victorian Labor government's nation-leading investments and reforms under a central coordinating portfolio, which since 2014 has included of course quite a number of measures.

We have invested \$14 billion to expand kindergarten programs across the state under Best Start, Best Life. We have invested to upgrade local kinders, including in my community of Merri-bek, and worked to establish 50 government owned and operated early childhood learning centres to address childcare shortages in areas of need across the state, including in Moomba Park in Fawkner, just north of my electorate, in the member for Broadmeadows's seat. Where possible, we are seeking to co-locate new learning centres with schools to avoid the dreaded double drop-off for parents.

We have also been rolling out the game-changing \$270 million free kinder initiative, which is now available to all three- and four-year-olds participating in eligible funded kinder programs. This groundbreaking initiative is providing a 15-hour-per-week program for four-year-old children and a minimum 5-hour-per-week program for three-year-old children who are attending participating kinders. Along with the educational, social and wellbeing dividends that free kinder is providing for three- and four-year-olds across the state, it is also playing a major role, as we know, in alleviating cost-of-living pressures for families. Free kinder is providing parents, carers and families up to \$2500 off in fees per child, per year, providing much-needed relief for household budgets during this time. Free kinder is also acting as a women's economic reform initiative, particularly for young mums, by encouraging women to re-enter the workforce through increased provision of early childhood education. I will touch on some local organisations that were trailblazers in this space quite soon.

As we continue to lead the nation in early childhood education and care, we will also establish pre-prep over the coming decade, which will be a new universal 30-hour-per-week play-based program for four-year-old children. These are all vitally important initiatives which will help play key roles in setting the foundations for a better life for young children. However, all these reforms would not be possible without our diligent, hardworking early childhood and kinder educators and workers, which this bill is all about today.

In Merri-bek I have got 10,378 residents – that is 11.7 per cent of our municipality's workers – who are employed in the education and training sector, and a significant portion of those are employed as local early childhood educators and daycare workers. This bill will be of interest to a lot of them and hopefully more future teachers, who we are seeking to attract.

The bill will provide the state with the necessary legislative powers to operate government-owned early learning centres in Victoria, including, as I said, Moomba Park in Fawkner, just north of my electorate, whose catchment will be of interest to and support people to the north of my electoral boundary. The early childhood professionals who will teach, care and manage operations in these centres will be critical to their success. We know the biggest influence on quality early learning is our workforce and our valued early childhood teachers, educators and education leaders. These professionals really do hold some of the most important and sensitive jobs when it comes to 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.

The bill specifically seeks to do a number of things, including empowering the Secretary of the Department of Education to employ staff at government early learning centres to deliver the support and learning programs they need. It will enable fees to be fixed and charged to parents of children enrolled at government early learning centres, and it will also enable the minister to make orders setting out the fees to be paid for attendance at government early learning centres and the employment conditions for the government early learning centre workforce. The bill also does establish a modern, broad employment power for the secretary to employ persons across centres through a number of other measures that pertain to their employment contracts and ongoing management.

The bill builds on the government's ongoing investments and commitments to continue supporting and growing the early childhood workforce, as set out in the Victorian government's kinder workforce strategy. We have a dedicated strategy to attract and sustain the kinder workforce – unlike what those opposite are accusing us of – which is striving to strengthen the existing workforce and attract those new educators by working collectively with employers, unions, training organisations and local communities. Some of the key initiatives through this strategy have included \$370 million being invested to attract high-quality teachers and educators to the sector and to support existing professionals. Since then we have attracted more than 4000 new teachers or new people enrolled in scholarships who have joined the kinder workforce through government-funded scholarships since October 2018. 1700 educators are also currently being supported to upskill. We are continuing to work to do more; we have to do more in this space too. We are expanding high-quality pathways to the sector through free TAFE courses, including a certificate III in early childhood education. We are supporting educators to upskill. We are supporting leadership to improve workforce wellbeing. We are focusing on training quality throughout the duration of one's career, and we are trying to shift perceptions as well about a career in early childhood, including through campaigns such as Big Roles in Little Lives.

Finally, we are strengthening sector partnerships to improve place-based workforce strategies and innovation. It is this last point I would like to turn to in the context of the local organisations in my community who have long been doing tremendous work in leading the way and being trailblazers, like I said, when it comes to growing early childhood as a sector and its workforce. VICSEG New Futures is a not-for-profit community organisation that was first started to support new and recently settled migrants in 1981. In developing and implementing a range of programs over those years to provide direct support, assistance, advice and training to culturally and linguistically diverse communities living across the northern and western suburbs of Melbourne, VICSEG has gone on to successfully establish itself as an extremely successful registered training organisation that has delivered outstanding learning and employment pathway outcomes for migrant communities, particularly in the early childhood space.

With VICSEG New Futures head office and key training camp situated on Munro Street in the heart of central Coburg, in my electorate, VICSEG's campuses and services now also extend to Braybrook, Epping, Craigieburn and Werribee, all of which collectively train over 3000 students annually. In doing so, VICSEG also operates four early learning centres for students to leave their children while they train, and to learn in, along with running 25 multicultural playgroups. VICSEG's completion rate

for training is well above the Victorian average for all community programs, and their training continues to remain very high in demand, with several of their programs having significant waiting lists. With a strong staff base, which now numbers 170 hardworking, diligent, committed staff, VICSEG is genuinely a one-of-a-kind, leading organisation that is absolutely dedicated to supporting newly arrived CALD communities through the provision of learning pathways, which are predominantly for women, supported by access to early childhood services, so they can learn to ascertain the skills and qualifications they need to build a new future for their families here in Australia.

I had the absolute pleasure of attending a VICSEG graduation ceremony on 23 November 2023 to celebrate the latest batch of multicultural women who had successfully graduated and will go on to work in health, aged care, disability support and early childhood roles, all of whom came from non-English-speaking backgrounds and many of whom arrived here as either refugees or asylum seekers. It was a very emotional ceremony indeed. I commend VICSEG executive director Maree Raftis, general manager Caspar Zika and all of the 170 staff and thousands of students for the work that they do to support and contribute towards growing the sector.

Prior to VICSEG, we had the Anne Sgro kindergarten and childcare centre. Situated at 45–47 May Street in Coburg, the centre was founded by its namesake Anne Sgro, who was actually my first Italian teacher at Coburg West Primary School as well. In the mid-1970s Anne Sgro co-founded the Women's Group of the Italian Federation of Migrant Workers and their Families. Anne has volunteered with the Union of Australian Women, joining in a campaign for women's equality. More recently Anne of course served as a member on the Ministerial Advisory Council for Senior Victorians. The Anne Sgro Children Centre was created through the efforts of the women's group, who value the ability of local working women to be given access to trusted local child care. What is so special about the centre is that Anne Sgro Children's Centre was Victoria's first work-related, whole-day childcare centre that involved workers, unions, community and government. A key to the original goals of the centre was to establish a work-related, reliable childcare resource for women, many of whom did work in the then surrounding textile factories and millineries. For the women working in the manufacturing precinct of North Coburg, many of whom were Italian migrants, child care was a much-needed service for the community. Many women could not rely on traditional family networks for the caretaker roles during their working day because many of their extended family had not migrated out at the time. The centre provided a crucial link and was opened in 1985, and Anne has done an absolutely tremendous job to this very day to support those opportunities.

I would like to conclude and commend this bill to the house by touching on the record \$10.7 million that our government has invested into upgrading up to 11 local kinders across Merri-bek to create 329 new kinder places, a record expansion of local kinder places to support our growing population of young families and parents who are moving to the area. In that context, I genuinely commend the bill to the house and look forward to its implementation over coming months.

Kim O'KEEFFE (Shepparton) (15:43): I rise today to speak and make a contribution on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024. The bill is for an act to amend the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 to provide for the employment of persons at, or for the purposes of operating, government early learning centres and to consequently amend the Long Service Leave Act 2018 and for other purposes. The bill gives effect to the government commitment to open 50 new government-owned early learning centres by employing staff and setting charges and fees for parents. The bill comes off the back of the Victorian government's Best Start, Best Life reforms, where the government has committed to building 50 new government owned and operated early learning centres across the state to deliver child care, kindergarten and pre-prep. The Education and Training Reform Act 2006 will enable fees to be fixed and charged to parents of children enrolled in early childhood education and care in government early learning centres. Division 2 of part 2A.2 of the bill sets out fees for services and other matters of government learning centres.

Every family has a right to quality education and care services. It is important for every child and their parents, carers and communities to have the support they need. We know that the first few years of a child's life play a significant and critical role in their learning development. That is when the foundations for the future are laid. The lack of centres, available places and staffing shortages is having a significant impact on communities and those seeking child care. Regional communities are being disadvantaged. As the member for Euroa passionately pointed out, there is a significant shortage in regional Victoria. A major concern is the fees: 50 hours of centre-based day care in Victoria is around \$626 a week. This is the highest cost of any state in the nation, and for many this is beyond their ability to afford. In addition, out-of-pocket childcare costs for Victorian parents for centre-based day care after subsidies were the equal highest in the nation across all but one income level. Victorian families and constituents right across my electorate know that the costs of child care are continuing to grow and becoming a significant barrier to accessing this critical service. We also have a significant waiting list.

With the significant increases in the cost of living, rising interest rates and households trying to make ends meet, affordable and accessible child care is becoming harder. Children deserve to have the best start in life, and we need to support parents' return to the workforce in a way that they can afford and that works for them and the needs of their families. We must have a process in place that gives choice for parents in quality and affordable child care and education for all Victorian children.

Strong foundational skills in early years are vital to every child's future and education. As a former business owner and a working mother when I was raising my two daughters, the availability and cost of child care played a significant role in the opportunity for me to go back to work. However, even back then there was still a significant out-of-pocket cost which impacted significantly on our income. I know families who are struggling to cover the cost of child care or cannot get a place at a centre. I know a young mother who makes very little after paying her part-time child care, but she wants to stay active in her current workplace. She enjoys the interaction outside of the home and she also wants her only child to mix with other children in a positive environment. There are many who cannot access child care. Lack of access to child care takes almost 27,000 women entirely out of the workforce in Victoria and costs our economy about \$1.5 billion per year in lost earnings.

The early learning and childcare sector is plagued by a severe workforce shortage. In 2023 the Australian Childcare Alliance surveyed over 600 childcare centres, and over two-thirds of them said that they had capped enrolments because they were unable to recruit enough workers. They estimate they will need some 700 educators and over 100 teachers, not to mention the dozens of centre directors, admin support and in-house staff that will be required. The government has no plan to increase workforce capacity to support the new government-run early learning centres without taking away from existing centres.

Under Labor, childcare and school costs are rising, with Victorian childcare centres now the most expensive in Australia. Child care is a very low-paid industry. I have a friend who works in child care, and she sees firsthand the battle to get trained staff and then to retain them. Families with a child starting in 2024 will pay more than \$108,000 for 13 years in Victorian state schools. This is 17 per cent higher than the national capital city average and more expensive than in Sydney. In addition, the total cost of government education in regional and rural Victoria will be close to \$80,000 over 13 years. Furthermore, schools right across state are experiencing teaching shortages, as we know, with many schools without teachers, an issue that is having a significant impact on the learning outcomes of students and causing significant disruption in Victorian classrooms, especially in regional and rural schools across the state. Nine in 10 government school principals have declared teacher shortages across the state.

The bill discusses how the Secretary of the Department of Education may employ persons in the government early learning centre workforce. The secretary may employ any persons that are necessary to operate government early learning centres, and in addition the secretary, on behalf of the Crown, has all the rights, powers, authorities and duties of an employer in respect to employees in the

government early learning centre workforce. The minister may declare the terms and conditions of employment in the government early learning centre workforce, including salaries, wages and allowances; position classifications and duties of persons employed in the government early learning centre workforce; eligibility and suitability criteria for employment in the government early learning centre workforce; qualifications or experience necessary for appointment, transfer or promotion to any position, class or grade in the government early learning centre workforce; the processes of the recruitment and selection of persons employed in the government early learning centre workforce; conduct requirements and processes for the discipline and management of unsatisfactory performances of persons employed in the government early learning centre workforce; grounds for a termination of employment in the government early learning centre workforce; and any other matter necessary to provide for the employment of persons in the government early learning centre workforce.

The Allan government must address the ever-increasing costs of early childhood. Affordable and accessible child care supports parents to return to the workforce in a way that works for them. It is wrong that this should cost parents more in Victoria than it does anywhere else in the country. Victorians already know the costs will continue to grow, and they are becoming a significant barrier to accessing this critical service. The government needs to do more and needs to act now to support families in Victoria. The coalition supports measures to increase supply of childcare and early learning places, but it is vital any moves in this space are carefully considered and precisely implemented to ensure they do not distort the market. I thank the member for Kew as the lead speaker, and I support the reasoned amendment.

Paul EDBROOKE (Frankston) (15:50): It is fantastic to be here and to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024. I note we have got some champions up in the gallery today too, who are probably from a local school. We have heard from other people in the chamber today who support this bill without amendment, and they have spoken about the fact that this bill is really the next step in the delivery of the 50 government owned and operated early learning centres, which was a commitment from the 2022 election.

I must confess that, like some other members on this side of the house, I do have a teaching background. I miss teaching a lot. I loved working with kids. They probably taught me more than I taught them at times, but I had a lot of fun.

A member: You're working with kids now.

Paul EDBROOKE: Well, that is a fact. But today I think we can actually show and role model good behaviours in Parliament for the people that are up in the gallery as well, which is very, very important.

Part of the reason I was very excited about this announcement probably has not been spoken about too much today. The bill is about providing the state Department of Education and the secretary with the necessary legal powers to operate the 50 government owned and operated early learning centres by making some amendments to the Education and Training Reform Act 2006. We have all heard about that. But from my perspective as a qualified primary school teacher, secondary school teacher and specialist school teacher, I am all about talking about early diagnosis. We have heard many people talk about how kids' minds are sponges and the earlier you can get them into education, the better outcomes there will be. In the same frame, we have got to think about the fact that there are many things that impede a child's learning – they might be social, they might be economic, they might be health related. Early diagnosis of any issues about how a child learns and how we need to change the way we teach is very, very important. Some of those things that might impede a child's learning if not diagnosed early are ADHD, the autism spectrum and dyslexia – the four types of dyslexia that I am aware of. With these things – and I have witnessed it myself – it is a lightbulb moment when a child receives a diagnosis, their family acts on that and they receive adequate treatment or therapy for that diagnosis.

It could be as easy as a program like Glasses for Kids in schools, which this government obviously funded. Seeing a child who is positioned up the front of the classroom and who still cannot read the writing on a board or a smartboard or a TV suddenly get diagnosed with an eye condition where there is a simple solution – they get free glasses through the former Andrews and now Allan government; it is still running – all of a sudden that child's learning, whether it be in mathematics or any other subject, just skyrockets because we have seen and diagnosed this problem very early. We are seeing the same on the autism spectrum, especially with young women. Young women are often not identified as quickly as boys with autism, and the older they get, the harder it is to actually diagnose and see some of those symptoms that people with autism might display, if you would use the word symptom – behaviours maybe. The studies from especially the United States show that the earlier you can treat some of those symptoms and behaviours, the more successful that child will be in school, in social settings and in their whole adult life.

We can extrapolate this out to say that one of the most important things that is not really being talked about but is a huge benefit of this legislation, which enables us to deliver these 50 government owned and operated early learning centres, is actually something that I think is very obvious but not talked about that much. That is probably the number one issue I think we have in this nation. Certainly Professor Bessel van der Kolk in the US says it is their number one issue, and that is child abuse. We can all sit here and say we know a child that has been through that or families who might have been through that or kids that have been to school with our kids that have been through that, but again it is something that we can identify early and intervene in early with the right kinds of interventions. Treating traumatic stress or preventing traumatic stress is really the number one influencer or predictor of the future of a child and the adult they will become. The more thoroughly we can do that in an early learning setting, the better. That even goes to things like intergenerational trauma as well. Today we have heard a lot of people talking about the education part of this, but there is a pastoral part of this. There is another part of it that is about community and social welfare as well.

I heard the member for Mordialloc say something when I was in the chair the other day and I thought, 'That is something I agree with wholeheartedly.' It seems very strange to me, very peculiar, that you might come into this house and say that you actually support a bill but you put an amendment forward. To me that means you are not supporting the bill. That people might not support the establishment of 50 new early learning sites across Victoria I find very frustrating. It makes me angry actually, because what you are really doing is putting a speed bump in our community members' lives and putting a speed bump ahead of families as well. Those people at Eaglehawk North Primary School, Moomba Park Primary School, Murtoa College, Clunes Primary School, Hallam Primary School, Harrisfield Primary School, Kings Park Primary School and the other locations to be delivered across 2027 and 2028, including Alexandra, Avoca, Bendigo South, Casterton, Churchill – which is where I grew up – Cohuna, Craigieburn, Cranbourne, Dandenong, Drouin, Foster, Rochester, Reservoir, Portarlington, Nicholson and district, Newborough, Mildura, Mickleham, Melton West and Melton South will be very disappointed to hear that people are not actually in support of this.

I will just reiterate once again, if you have not read the book by Bessel van der Kolk *The Body Keeps the Score*, it is a hell of an education into the way that maybe we have been treating early learning and the way that we have been diagnosing children through a certain lens in medicine when the problems can be a lot bigger. The problems can be seen not through just a medical lens but a wider health lens as well, and I think this will be a strength.

I know people in Frankston are certainly excited about this reform. It might seem obvious, but it is especially since what we have done is match a lot of these proposed centres up with primary schools, which means you have one drop-off point, one pick-up point. This is very, very important to people, especially – as I hear – in the outer west, where things can be very busy on the roads at times and two drop-offs could mean an hour out of your day or more. If you can drop your kids off and pick them up at one point, that would be much better for those people. Indeed, even in Frankston it is certainly something that we appreciate.

Again, I think one thing that we really have not spoken about enough, but it is just an amazing part of this reform, is the chance to conduct early diagnostics on children who might not be learning or might not be on the curve that we see them on usually. We can actually act on those diagnostics and do more to ensure that we lift these kids up and do not just have them in the corner. With that, Speaker, I think you can see that as a former teacher I am very, very passionate about this. I am happy to stand here and talk for another 20 minutes if it takes that, but I am sure you are going to interrupt me soon.

Business interrupted under sessional orders.

Matters of public importance

Emergency services

The SPEAKER (16:01): I have accepted a statement from the member for Hawthorn proposing the following matter of public importance for discussion:

That this house, despite the tireless commitment of emergency service workers and volunteers during the recent severe weather event, expresses deep concern at the Labor government's inability to manage Victoria's emergency services, including failure to ensure power supply across the state, failure to rapidly respond to Victorians calling 000 for emergency assistance, and failure to financially support affected businesses and households.

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn – Leader of the Opposition) (16:01): This is a great pleasure to be able to speak on this matter of public importance today, given the devastation that so many hundreds of thousands of Victorians wrestled with last week, and so many thousands of whom continue to wrestle with today. The storms last week on a number of measures were the worst we have seen in living memory. I know that for the people of Pomonal who lost 45 homes, with one at Dadswells Bridge, our hearts go out to those communities, and I want to acknowledge the member for Lowan, who I know has worked incredibly hard with that community as it wrestles with the future before it. I want to acknowledge also the great work of our emergency services workers, principal among them our CFA and other firefighters who put themselves in harm's way for our benefit.

Following the fires and pretty much at the same time, we know that Victoria was hit by very severe storms. They were not unexpected. We knew something was coming. We had been told about it the day before, but nevertheless, for those who have been affected, again, our hearts go out to them, and on behalf of the opposition I want to formally acknowledge our thoughts and best wishes for all of those families, households and businesses. Indeed I had the pleasure of speaking to many of them.

On Thursday I met with the member for Berwick in this place and visited a number of businesses in Upper Beaconsfield. We met Pramod and his family. Pramod runs the FoodWorks in Upper Beaconsfield, and it was heart-wrenching to walk around the supermarket as we did, my colleague and I, talking to Pramod about all of the produce he was going to have to throw out. These are real consequences for real people.

We then later visited Rachel and James, who run Blanc Bakery, a young couple who have the world before them and who have suffered enormous financial losses, not to mention the stresses of working their way throughout damaging power outages which saw them lose a lot of produce and suffer a great deal of financial impacts as well. Residents were affected throughout the area. It was also important and moving to speak to so many who were wrestling with this, many of whom have been affected previously by floods and other natural disasters.

On Friday I had the great pleasure of joining the member for Gippsland South and members Renee Heath and Melina Bath in the other place to visit the good people of Mirboo North. Driving and walking through Mirboo North was like walking through a post-apocalyptic movie. I do not think anybody could imagine just how destructive the winds were. I have said elsewhere and I will say here that to see trees larger than you have ever seen ripped out of the ground like matchsticks and thrown on houses and on cars – as Rick Nugent, our emergency services commissioner, said today – it is

something of a miracle that no more life was lost than was lost, and we know tragically we lost one life in Mirboo North.

But again, it was important to get to meet with real people – people like Damien and Jasmine and their daughter Rosie, who were clearly distressed by the damage to their property. We spoke to Brad and his colleagues, who were going from house to house, sawing logs into small pieces so they could be taken away. We spoke to Rowan and Lesley. Rowan told me that the damage on their large property – which I observed directly, along with my colleagues, to be a scene of debris and devastation, with massive trees just lying across the yard – would cost something like \$60,000 just to clear. While I was at that property I met with a worker from Saputo. I asked him what he was doing there, and he said he had taken two days leave, at his expense, to help out with the clean-up. If that does not say what it means to be an Australian, what it means to be a Victorian, I do not know what else does.

We met with Libby, Peter and Paul. The interesting thing I remember about that was their stoicism and their resilience. As we were talking to them they seemed so upbeat for the devastation around them, and I remember thinking, ‘We are standing talking to these three people affected by these storms and there is a massive tree sitting on their house.’ It is a miracle they were not killed. We met with Mary Baker, a pioneer and campaigner for the people of Mirboo North, who worked for many years to get the Mirboo North pool up and running; she did that. To see her heartbroken at the damage to the pool and the surrounds was very moving, but I assured her that, working with the government, we are going to make sure that that pool is reinstated.

I have spent some time talking about these people because they are real, they are the face of the devastation we saw last week. They are us; they are who we would like to be if we had the great misfortune of going through what they have been through – stoic, resilient and determined to come through this crisis. I also mentioned them specifically, and I want their names on the record as I have put, because they are owed more by their government and their agencies and their leaders across this state. They are owed emergency services that are properly funded. They are owed emergency services with the assets necessary to ensure that when fires occur like those last week, we will have adequately resourced brigades, with volunteers in particular who know we have their back. I think they have every reason to wonder whether we do have their back.

We have raised an issue today about a broken promise by this government. In 2020 this government promised 48 new heavy CFA tankers. The government promised that those tankers would be in place by the end of last year. Only 20 have been delivered. That is a broken promise, but it is not just a broken promise on the face of it, it is a failure to back up the people we need to protect us, and that is not fair to them. We know, because we raised it in question time today, that there are 130 emergency services vehicles that are over 30 years old and 193 – that is nearly 200 – that are nearly over 30 years old. Now, are we backing our CFA volunteers and our SES volunteers when we are supplying them with outdated equipment? This is equipment we are talking about – new equipment that is equipped with electronic monitoring, simple things like electronic rewinding of hose reels and other GPS and satellite technology that helps them protect us – and we fail them when we do not act on the promises we make to them. That is not fair to them, and it is not fair to the people I mentioned earlier and indeed all Victorians who depend on our emergency services.

But more than that, we know that last week, because of the failure to invest in our energy system, our transmission network and our distribution networks were too vulnerable to things that we knew we could make that system withstand. We know that the government has had at least four reports in the last four years – from AusNet, from Energy Safe Victoria and from the government’s own expert panel in 2022. The government has been told what it needs to do to make our transmission network more resilient. The towers that collapsed last week were towers that could and should have been repaired or replaced. We know that 12 per cent of the 13,000 transmission towers are rusty. We know that. That is not a guess. That has been assessed and determined, and the government could fix it, and it could fix it by either directly investing in it or making sure the transmission network providers do it themselves. It is the government’s responsibility to do that. How many warnings does the government

need? In the last six years 1.9 million households and businesses have suffered from blackouts. That is just in the last six years. We know that last week's blackouts, which continue for so many thousands today, were the worst in over a decade, and that is not fair to them. What has the government done about it? We know that the government has commissioned report after report, but what sort of real investment is there? Having heard the Premier in question time today, let us talk about real investments. The government has only put \$7.5 million into resilience investment in our transmission and distribution network. That frankly is pathetic, and that is letting down the people of this state.

We often say on this side of the house that it is important first of all as a government to manage the finance of our state in a prudent and responsible way, and that is no better demonstrated than when we look at whether governments have the capacity to invest in the primary things people need. People need power, they need decent roads, they need decent hospitals, they need decent schools and they need decent services, and they are not getting it. So when we say Victoria is broke, Labor cannot manage money and Victorians are paying the price, look to emergency services. When we say this state is broke, Labor cannot manage money and Victorians are paying the price, look at its failure to invest in our transmission network. When we say Victoria is broke, Labor cannot manage money and Victorians are paying the price, look at the debacle that is Victoria's energy policy under the minister at the table, the Minister for Energy and Resources. I will come to that in a moment.

We have called, in light of last week's devastating events, for an independent inquiry. The people of Victoria deserve it. Let us have the tough questions asked about what needs to happen in terms of transmission lines, how they are structured and where they are placed to best futureproof the system against storms. But what has this government done? True to form this government wants to implement a sham inquiry – a sham inquiry run by its mates with a predetermined outcome to pretend that the truth has been unearthed. Well, it will not have been. And although the government might well have its way on its inquiry, I want the Victorian people to know that they deserve better. They deserve the truth. Remember this is only the tip of the iceberg. Our transmission system, as I have said, and our distribution networks are in a state of disrepair. They are vulnerable to future storms, and Victorians will continue to pay the price.

But the government's broader approach to energy is a debacle, as I have said. Its offshore wind policy is a mess. They knew years ago that they would have difficulty seeking federal approval for the Ramsar wetlands at the Port of Hastings. They ignored them. The Premier did not even know that the Minister for Planning had initiated an environment effects review of that very project. Mr Dimopoulos in this place did not even know that federal minister Plibersek had issued detailed reasons for the decision. Offshore wind – a mess. And what is going to happen because of this government's incompetence? I will tell you what is going to happen. A lot of the global capital, and it is mostly global capital, will start going up the eastern seaboard and throughout Asia because we have not done our homework. That is what is going to happen.

This government has a plan that power stations like Yallourn will come offline in 2028, Loy Yang A in 2035 and probably Loy Yang B at the same time. What are they going to replace them with? They do not have a plan. They have banned gas. Victorians know that they, the government, banned gas. They are banning it all. They are banning it everywhere, and I will tell you why. Not only are they banning it in new homes, but by doing so they are telling markets that there is no point investing in gas. Do not just take our word for it, because we are not alone. AEMO, the ACCC – everybody is saying we will need gas going into the future, not just as a transition fuel but as a peaking fuel, a feeding stock for industry. Does the government even have any idea how many households and businesses were able to survive through last week because they had access to gas? Let us have a commonsense approach to gas that is not driven by these ideological preoccupations. Let us make sure that the transition to more renewables is done in an orderly way and that we actually have a plan for what is going to happen.

In terms of onshore wind, we do not know what the government's plan is for transmission networks, whether it is VNI West or the Western Renewables Link. Whatever it is, this government does not

seem to have any idea how to deliver, whether it is its own targets or its glossy brochures talking about the transition to renewables. We support it, but only on this side do we know how you can do that in an orderly way, because at the end of the day you need an orderly approach that protects all Victorian households and businesses.

As for their SEC, let me just put this on the record: this mob over there thought it was a good idea to spend \$245 million of taxpayer money on a project that had already passed final investment decision. Yes, the battery project in Melton. You know what we got for it? A 38 per cent share, so not even a controlling interest. But what did they do? This government used taxpayer dollars to effectively underwrite a project that was already going ahead, and they did it for free. Think about that.

This government does not have a plan for our energy future. Victorian families and households will continue to suffer. That is because this state is broke. This Labor government does not know how to manage money, and Victorians are paying the price.

Lily D'AMBROSIO (Mill Park – Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (16:16): I am very keen to rise to make a contribution to this matter of public importance. I will say that there were a number of hysterical claims and assertions that were made at a very hysterical level by the Leader of the Opposition on a whole range of things. I suppose you can say things hysterically and you can say hysterical things, but it does not mean that they are any truer just because you say them in a hysterical way.

I want to reflect on the devastation that last Tuesday's catastrophic weather event and storms wreaked on Victorians. I want to acknowledge and pay my respect to communities who suffered greatly from the bushfires that impacted Pomonal and surrounds. We know that more than 46 homes were destroyed, and certainly we know that people are still in recovery mode. Our government, our emergency services, our first responders and our recovery teams are at maximum level out there in the community, on the ground, providing whatever support is needed for those communities. I do want to say that they are very much our heroes.

The more extreme weather events that we are seeing because of climate change, the harder the challenges become. We are in a situation where one extreme weather event causes floods, bushfires or indeed massive storms and we recover and then within a matter of months we are in another catastrophic event or extreme weather event and again there is damage. Resilience is a really important factor in all of this.

We saw at the height of the massive power outages that occurred last Tuesday 530,000 homes and businesses lost power, and we know that that was a historic figure. The damage caused to our poles and wires, our electricity network, was also at historic levels. It was one of the largest single outage events in the state's history, even surpassing the one that we saw in the October 2021 storm event, and that event itself was a historic event in terms of the number of people that lost supply because of the physical destruction of the poles and wires that take electricity from where it is made to where it is needed.

Certainly we can say that last Tuesday's event was not because there was an insufficient amount of electricity supply. In fact there was ample electricity supply. The problem is of course that the poles and wires and transmission lines that need to take it from where it is produced to where it is needed failed, and that is what we are contending with. But the heroes – the first responders, the crews, the energy crews and a whole range of other emergency services – responded very, very quickly, and within four days 95 per cent of all of the outages were restored. Currently we have about 99.7 per cent of people that lost power that Tuesday back on power, but we know of course we still have, as of this morning, 1269 homes without power. Those maintenance crews remain onsite, working around the clock to get those remaining people back on supply. That is where our focus ought to be and that is where the focus has been.

We need to consider that even amongst these remaining 1269 homes and businesses that are still without power the energy crews that are getting in still need to contend with remoteness, partial trees that have been uprooted and some vulnerability of existing trees that may still be there. Where they can of course they have been removing those trees and clearing them, but we also know that we have got another significant event that is coming through parts of our state tomorrow. That is what we need to always remember here – what the facts are and what we are doing to support people immediately and beyond that. Certainly I do want to commend all of those people that have done a wonderful job in very, very trying situations, often with their own homes off power and some having lost their own homes in fires, stepping in and stepping up to assist others in need.

Just in terms of the scale of the damage, whilst two transmission lines were brought down for about an hour at the most, a number of people were off supply. AEMO, and do I thank them, were able to reroute those transmission lines so that the disruption from those towers that collapsed under that very extreme rare weather event, or wind pattern, was able to be rerouted within an hour. But the reality is the rest of the storm event and all of the mini tornadoes – tornado-like conditions – took down tens of thousands of kilometres of powerlines down people's streets. The low-voltage distribution poles and wires were brought down, and that is what we need to remember here. It is about those poles and wires – thousands of kilometres – that came down.

What is really important here is that no time was wasted for the Premier, the Minister for Emergency Services, the Minister for Education, me and other ministers and other members of Parliament, some of whom were personally affected by these storm events and bushfires. And I do acknowledge those on the opposite side that were also in very challenging circumstances. Being on the ground was so vital to provide the support, to listen, to hear and to absorb the sheer anxiety and frustration and to do something with that, because that is what communities expect of us. Lots of questions have been asked by communities of all of us, and it is our obligation to take those questions and get the answers so that we can mitigate and ensure that in the event of future catastrophic events we can do better – and we will do better. That is what they deserve – no less than that – and that is our commitment.

Certainly we need to contend with the reality that – with such a catastrophic event – we are going to see these coming through more frequently and with greater devastating impacts. We need to be ready for that in terms of the operational arrangements of the energy companies. With respect to the areas of my ministerial responsibility, we established an independent expert-led panel when we had the first two major extreme events back in 2021 and of course established a supplementary review so we could look into the issues that were with us from last Tuesday and subsequent to that.

What communities have said to us on response times is they have got questions about that in terms of the energy companies – the promptness of communication, the failure of SMS messages and links and websites crashing – and we need to interrogate and give those communities who have asked those questions the answers that they are seeking. The independent expert panel that will undertake this review will not have a bunch of politicians on it, because we know what they think, don't we? We really do know what they think, and I do not think we would get to the bottom of the questions or get the answers that those community members want. We would get a whole bunch of other things coming from that.

This review will have a similar approach to what occurred as a result of the 2021 outages, and in particular it will examine the operational arrangements and preparedness of these electricity powerline companies and their response to that event. That will include the individual operating models of the powerline companies and the timely and effective restoration of power. It will investigate if there were any other material opportunities that could have enabled a more rapid reconnection of customers, such as the availability or indeed the redeployment of field crews and technical expertise through the use of mutual aid agreements and resource sharing within Victoria or from interstate resources. This is really critical, because we know that Victorians could certainly have had a better immediate response from the services that these essential service energy businesses should have provided. That is why this expert panel will be able to request information and assistance from the Australian Energy Regulator,

the Australian Energy Market Operator and Energy Safe Victoria. Each one of them I have spoken with, and they are absolutely ready and willing to participate and provide whatever information and assistance they can to the expert panel. Of course some of these agencies are already undertaking their own independent reviews, so together, collectively, we will have a very strong picture and the answers that communities want from us. That is our endeavour and our commitment.

I want to talk about a number of really more important issues than the ones that those opposite would rather talk about, because they really miss the whole point of what is before us right now – that is, the facts. The facts do matter. The facts do matter about what happened. The facts do matter about the reality of people's lives, which have been impacted. It did not take long, sadly. Whilst we were still at the height of the fallout from last Tuesday's event, they were already going on *Sky News* and making a whole bunch of assertions about what caused this. What caused this? Remember the experts that wanted to have their own inquiry – the experts that said, 'Absolutely, nuclear is the solution'? Goodness me! Go ahead, build nuclear. If you have got a powerline that cannot carry the power, fat lot of good it will do you.

Members interjecting.

Lily D'AMBROSIO: That's going to fix it, is it?

Members interjecting.

Lily D'AMBROSIO: Oh, jeez, you are such a clever person! Offering a technology that is decades away, if ever it will be available, that is a solution for today or tomorrow? It is the most expensive form of new energy that you can create. That will do people well with their energy bills, won't it? That will do really well. And by the way, that is the frolic, because they know they will never deliver that. It is a distraction. It is purposely designed through *Sky News* and dealing with their mates in Canberra who are still talking about nuclear. They have got their mates wanting to use uranium and the rest of that. I am wondering where the donations are coming from sometimes, but I will not go there.

But this is the reality: we have got to deal with the facts. We have got to offer real solutions to Victorians, and that is what we are doing. For example, the last time they were in government and the Hazelwood mine caught fire, the energy minister took a week to find his way to Morwell – a week. I did not say that. The minister was nowhere to be seen. Under their last term of government the *Latrobe Valley Express* ran a headline 'Energy minister, where have you been?' Indeed. I will tell you what, it takes a Labor government to introduce prolonged power outage payments, because you never did any of that when you were last in government. We are providing support to the most vulnerable in our community. I want you to go and tell those community members who are going to receive that payment that you would not have done it, because you never did it in the past.

The SPEAKER: Order! Through the Chair.

Lily D'AMBROSIO: We are about making the system better, not worse. Not once did they invest in any transmission infrastructure. By the way, they sold it off to their mates, making \$20 billion of profit since, but they still want government to put money into it. That is what they are saying. Not one new transmission line did they build. Not one new renewable energy project did they build – not one. All they did was have a backward look in the mirror to say, 'Oh, there's a coal generator over there. We're going to rely on that until it goes kaput.' Eventually it will reach its end of engineering life with nothing to replace it. That was their approach. Those opposite can say a whole lot of things, but frankly this is what Mr Pesutto said – that we cannot afford to rule out nuclear energy: 'We're certainly open to it.' That was his response when he was appeared on *Sky News* on 14 February, at the height of the catastrophic incident that happened last week. *(Time expired)*

Emma KEALY (Lowan) (16:32): I am greatly appreciative that I can acknowledge and run through the events that took place last week after the catastrophic fire day and the horrific fires which impacted on my electorate of Lowan, in the west of the state. The day before we had alerts right across

the news that it was going to be a catastrophic fire day. As part of that half of the schools were closed in Horsham and half of them were still open. There was a feeling in the community of, 'Well, what's this all about? Why are we shut down? It doesn't feel that different.'

As the weather picked up, we had a thunderstorm roll through where two lightning strikes ignited fires in the Grampians National Park. One was near Mount Stapylton, which would eventually burn towards the community of Dadswells Bridge, which was fortunately saved. I believe Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) did an enormous amount of work to try and avoid that fire going through the community. A lightning strike near Bellfield, up on the ridge near Mount William, was caught by the wind and took out the majority of the community of Pomonal. It was a horrific day, absolutely horrific.

Many people have not yet seen the impact of the fires on the community of Pomonal, and I would ask people to pay attention to that part of the state. It is a small, very tight-knit community of people who live there. Forty-five homes have been lost, but there is not one single person who has not been impacted by the trauma on their community. That is because for many, many reasons this has been a drawn-out response. But it was necessary, and I do respect that.

Just give some insight into how the weather conditions turned on that day, at 2:29 in the afternoon I sent a text message to friends of mine who have a house in Pomonal. I said I hoped everything was okay with the fires at Pomonal and told them to look after themselves. At 7:08 that evening I got a sombre text message saying, 'Hello Emma, sadly our house is lost.' I am not sure many people in this place can understand what it feels like to get notice that within a couple of hours – 5 hours – you have gone from feeling positive and safe to knowing that you have lost absolutely everything. I went into the emergency recovery centre at Stawell the following day, on the Wednesday. To speak to people who have just lost their homes is very, very difficult. To speak to people who did not know if their homes were lost or not was difficult, but then there were little pieces of joy that came with guilt.

When I was there, Marc Sleeman, who heads up Grampians Tourism, got some photos through that showed that his house had survived, but you could see how close the fire had got to impacting his home; the boat was burnt out, and the shed next to the home was burnt out. It just shows how close a call that this actually was for him. But it is so hard for that community. I will not mention any names, because I think the community still desperately want privacy through this period of time, but for somebody who has got a burnt home on one side of their property and a burnt home on the other side of their property and then to have their house still standing for no apparent reason between the two, their question was: 'Why? Why me? Why wasn't my house taken? Mine is just a little old shack. Why didn't that burn?' The guilt that people are carrying because they have retained their property is absolutely immense.

There was a real delay sometimes in families knowing whether their home had burnt down or not, and often it was the local CFA volunteers who had been on the ground who were too timid to tell someone whether their house was still standing or not. I spoke to Russ Kellett, who is a good volunteer down that way and a very good advocate for the local men's shed as well. He said, 'Emma, I knew it was standing the night before, but I wasn't game enough to tell them because the fires keep on picking up and I didn't want to disappoint them because we've been out there the next morning and the house has burnt to the ground.' It was incredibly hard in that initial response. Everyone did their very best. There was an intent that when the community finally was able to come back into the town, the counsellors would be placed at Pomonal hall. But of course the first thing that people wanted to do was go and just check, 'Is my house standing or not?' The counsellors were not allowed to leave the hall to accompany people to their property. It was fixed relatively quickly, but it is those sort of initial mental health responses that can help to alleviate trauma down the track.

The police barriers are still in place. I think the police have done an amazing job in keeping those in place. I am going to mention in a very negative way Channel 7's *Sunrise*. They tried to break through the police lines at 3 in the morning on the Wednesday to get the first photos of burnt homes. I think

that is disgraceful. Public interest never comes before someone's private interest and respect. They deserve to know if their home has burnt down before everybody else learns that.

I would like to thank an enormous number of people who have worked together. It has been said so many times by different people within emergency management: this has to be the most positive community that they have ever worked with, but also from the other side it has been the most supportive team of people around them. I will go through this relatively quickly, and no doubt I will get caught up in some of them. Firstly, Mark Gunning, who was the incident controller – from the time that he stepped in to take control of these two fires and have it out of one centre, everything worked like clockwork. Thank you so much, Gunners. You are a good man, and thank you for all the work that you and your team did. The CFA volunteers: I have got to mention Matt Venn in Pomonal and of course Jacko – Peter Jackman – at Dadswells Bridge. They both did not an amazing job. They just keep a cool head and get out there and do their job and coordinate the crews so exceptionally well. I will mention that at the Dadswells Bridge fire there was one home lost, hundreds of kilometres of fence line and about 200 head of stock, and the stories that are coming out of there are absolutely phenomenal as well. They are very fortunate in that they did not have the significant loss of residential infrastructure they had at Pomonal.

I would also like to acknowledge that – and I do not think people understand this – of the 45 homes that were lost in Pomonal, seven of the homes lost were residences of CFA volunteers. Seven CFA volunteers who were on trucks fighting the fires lost their homes in this fire. We need to support them. It is going to be very difficult and challenging time for them going forward. As I said, FFMV were fabulous. I will mention the CFA volunteers from right across my region, because they were coming from far and wide to my electorate to help support the fire effort, and they have continued to be there over the recent days. There were also all the private appliances that turned out, and Victoria Police, who have been fabulous. They have been very good at keeping people out of the Pomonal community as they get their heads around what has happened to their community.

There were also: SES, Ambulance Victoria, Agriculture Victoria, and of course the vet crews which go out to help deal with the wildlife and the impact on the livestock. It is not an easy job; in fact it is an incredibly difficult job, but they do an amazing job. There is Parks Victoria and Powercor. Richard at Powercor did an amazing job getting his crews to reconnect powerlines as quickly as he possibly could. Mark Williams at Grampians Wimmera Mallee Water got a water tanker there for drinking water asap. Steve Tinker at Telstra – they immediately put out the disaster relief package. I think this was mentioned this morning on 3AW – we knew that the wi-fi mobile device would be taken out earlier this week. He got Starlink into Pomonal yesterday and Dadswells Bridge today. Thank you so much. We got additional data as well through Optus.

At Grampians Community Health there were the only two people who have been providing counselling down there. For goodness sake, government, can you please provide the funding for extra mental health support for this community? It is \$120,000 times eight for eight counsellors for a year. Find the money and give them this support. Every day these people do not get supported is another day that PTSD is more likely, which increases the risk of family violence and alcohol and other drug misuse. It is not a lot of money. Put your hand in your pocket and support the mental health of these people.

I thank Ararat Rural City Council, Northern Grampians Shire Council, Horsham Rural City Council, the CEOs and the mayors. Nadya Miller at Pomonal store, you are a superstar, and I am never hugging you again, Nadya, because you will just make me cry. Colin and Susie Macaffer at Barney's, you are superstars and so generous. I thank Jill Miller, who is formerly of Grampians Community Health, who has been an amazing support for that community; Jocelyn and the rest of the team at the Pomonal resilience group; and at Pomonal Primary School, Belinda and the parents who have worked so hard to get that school ready to reopen for Monday. Let us hope we get the kids back into their normal routines as soon as we can. People who shared their stories about their homes that have been lost, thank you for entrusting that with me and sharing your experience. I thank people who have donated

housing, fuel, food, clothing vouchers, pharmacy vouchers, hardware, cash – thousands of dollars have been donated to this from people who you would least expect – and so many businesses in Stawell too. Alli Roberts, you are a superstar. I thank Simon Risson, Morrow motors and the Animal Rescue Cooperative of South Australia, who contacted us to donate pet food. We even had counsellors offer their time. There is still a lot to do to rebuild Pomonal and Dadswells Bridge. I really hope that the government step up with the counselling support in particular. But please, whatever you can do, support these communities in their recovery.

Matt FREGON (Ashwood) (16:42): I thank the member for Hawthorn for raising this. Whilst I may not agree with the words in all of the matter of importance, there is no doubt that what happened last week for a lot of our communities is probably the most important thing we may discuss this week. I also thank the member for Lowan for her contribution and the member for Gippsland South here as well. Obviously your communities have been devastated by the tragedies of last week. And I place on record the loss of Bruce Manintveld as well. I will make most of my contribution about my local area, but I obviously want to register the heartfelt seriousness of how this is affecting all of our communities.

In my community, I had a meeting at home with a builder to talk about renovations in the afternoon. So I came home from work, Bec and I met the builder, and just as that finished Bec went to pick up Sammy from school. It was blue skies – it was not really that bad outside – and all of a sudden it hit. Many others have said and our SES said it was tornado-like. I do not think I have ever seen anything that short and sharp in my life that I can remember. And it hit.

I need to give thanks to someone whose surname I do not know – I would happily say it if I did. So Bec went off to go to school and pick up Sammy, and everything hit the fan, and I was at home and was going to go to work but I thought driving in that was probably not a good idea, so I was waiting. Then I got a call from an unknown number. I think a lot of us in this chamber if we get a call from an unknown number probably do not answer it in a hurry, so I did not answer it. So then there was another call from the same number, and I thought, ‘Oh, well, hello. Here we go.’ Then I got a text message straight after, and the text message – I cannot find it – basically said, ‘Hi. It’s Clare. Sam’s with me. He’s scared and crying.’ Now, I thought that was strange. So basically what had happened is Sam had got out of school at 3:30 when the bell rings, and because there will be days where I pick him up and I might not necessarily be on time – naughty Dad – he goes to where I usually stand to pick up him up, and then he runs down to the car park to see if I am there. If I am not there, he then runs to the phone booth and calls me and goes, ‘Dad, where are you?’ Now, on this day he did not see Bec, so he runs out – wind is howling, rain is going sideways – he does not see Bec, and he gets missed. I want to put a thanks on the record to Clare, not just because this is my son and this is his story, but it was school pick-up time when this happened. The bell had gone. Some of the teachers were keeping kids in because they could see it happening. The bell had gone and they had left; the kids were already out. They did an amazing job. Sam was fine.

The event was unexpected, even though we knew the weather was going to be bad. We had been told the weather was going to be bad; we knew things were not going to be great. But the weather itself surprised me and surprised everyone. In my patch at Monash our SES had the highest number of calls, as we said in the house yesterday – 1015 calls to the SES Monash guys. A huge shout-out to George Haitidis and his team down there, who do a fantastic job. They worked from the moment it happened. I think they got down to zero calls when we were there with the Premier on Sunday. They worked basically nonstop. The member for Glen Waverley and I took them some chockies for Valentine’s Day, which was the day after, to tell them how much we love them. I think we all love our SES. They were not alone, though. When I got down to see them, Fire Rescue Victoria were there with them. The Monash council stood up. In this place we like to have a bit of a whack at our councils now and then, but my hat is off to Monash council for their response. They are still working. The sides of the streets in Mount Waverley, Ashwood, Chadstone and a little bit of Ashburton are littered with the chopped-up trees. They are working around the clock to get rid of them. I think when we saw it on Sunday the pile of woodchips was about 3 metres high, which they are slowly going through. I thank the minister

for waiving the green fees, because that has made it easier for councils to do their work. That was just our little area, and the work is still going on.

We lost power, like many. We have powerlines in the air, and when a tree comes down, the power is going to stop. We got a message that night – that was Tuesday night – that said the power would come back on Thursday at 1 pm. I thought, ‘This is going to be a great week. Okay.’ Luckily and amazingly, our power came on at 5 o’clock the next morning, and pretty well by that Thursday, apart from some very isolated cases in our area – I am sure the member for Monbulk, if she is going to make a contribution, will tell us about a lot more than isolated cases in her area – all the power was back on. When I think about the half-hour or so, probably only half an hour, that we had that tornado rip through us, we had over half a million homes without power, and I think within two days we were down to 120,000 or something like that. Now it is 2000 – do not quote me – or thereabouts.

Amongst all the other rhetoric, I think we should be very appreciative – and I am sure members of this house are – of not only our councils, our SES, our police, our ambos and everyone but of our linesmen, who have worked tirelessly to get that power up and running. So while I am at it, a shout-out to Troy and the good fellows down at the Electrical Trades Union who just did their job, and in those circumstances it was a pretty useful job that they did for us.

Going forward, the other thing that was mentioned obviously is about mobile phone reception. I am mindful that Telstra in our situation managed to keep running to some semblance until pretty late in the night. I reckon the uninterruptible power supplies were running out; the diesel does not push the towers as far as in the normal situation. Sue and Kev across the road – they are with Optus – lost theirs immediately, so I think there is work to do with our federal government, with our telcos. Look, if Telstra could at least keep one tower up until 9 o’clock at night, surely Optus can do the same thing. I am not trying to make their lives harder, but – you know. Also, do we need to think about diesel switching systems in especially remote areas? There is obviously work to be done.

I look forward to the review that is done by experts, that as our minister has aptly said is done without us, because we can get in our own way sometimes in this place. I look forward to that review. I look forward to the government adopting any and all responses from that that will ensure our supplies go forward, but when acts of God happen, which basically it was, we are not infallible. And I just go back to thanking every man and woman in our patch who worked so hard to bring us back. Luckily we did not lose more lives, and hopefully next time we are a little better prepared.

Richard RIORDAN (Polwarth) (16:52): I rise to contribute to today’s matter of public importance, and the key message in today’s matter of public importance from the opposition is to really express deep concern at this Labor government’s inability to manage Victoria’s emergency services. We can make those comments today because last week, tragically, literally thousands of people around Victoria lost homes, lost livelihoods and probably suffered damage to lifetimes of memories. So I would first like to just put for the record my respect and my acknowledgement of the heartache that is ongoing, as we speak, for those at Dadswells Bridge and Pomonal and Mirboo North in particular and my acknowledgement of the many people in eastern Victoria, particularly in the far eastern suburbs of Melbourne, that are still inconvenienced by the collapse in the Victorian power network.

But what we learned last week was it was the first catastrophic day that Victoria had had for some four years, and we have heard a lot about the preparedness of this state to manage emergencies and crisis at a time. There has not been a time when Victoria has not faced massive bushfires and massive wallops from Mother Nature from time to time. You go back to the earliest European settlement here, and fire in the landscape and floods have been key parts of what we have to deal with here in Victoria. We are in fact renowned as being one of the most bushfire-prone areas in the whole world, equal with Portugal and California. It is an issue that all governments have and an absolute obligation to make sure that we are at the cutting edge of how we deal with these crises. And what did we learn from last week?

We were put to the test for the first time in four years. The government has brought to this Parliament new legislation around 000. This government has embarked on a reckless budget regime that has seen significant cuts and a lack of focus on our emergency services. In fact only just in the last few months we have had the FRV annual report brought down on the FRV's first two years of operation. This is the agency that has been tasked with keeping metropolitan and country Victorians safe at the most critical times in our calendar year, when fire can just wreak so much havoc. And what have we learned in recent weeks? We have learned that in the first three years this new government agency has run at a \$300 million loss, and that \$300 million loss is coming from somewhere. It is coming from taxpayers, and the concern that many are beginning to have is those funds to prop up inefficient management and inefficient operations are coming at the expense of desperately needed equipment and support for communities right around Victoria.

What do we mean by that? One example was laid bare in recent weeks. This government promised back in 2020 – that is now some four years ago – 48 new heavy-duty tankers to keep regional Victorians, country Victorians, safe. What do these tankers do? They allow for the maximum amount of water with the maximum amount of safety to fight fires and events like we saw last Tuesday. After four years the government has delivered just 15 of these units, and they still are not prepared to put a date on the rest. They have now pushed out their third expected delivery date, and even that is still an expected date. Victorians know only too well what an expected delivery date for a promise from this government looks like. Particularly from western Victoria, we have all experienced the West Gate Tunnel. It was being delivered in 2022. It is now 2024, and I do not think it is any closer now to delivery than what it was in 2022.

We have seen this government promise to fix up the 000 crisis, so much so that they brought in an act of Parliament to give it a new name, to call it Triple Zero Victoria instead of ESTA. What did we see last Tuesday on the first catastrophic day they had to plan for in some four years? We saw a call centre go again into crisis. This government is slow to learn. It does not manage those essential items. We can ask why they do not manage those essential items. One reason is the state is going broke, and the result is it leads to a broken emergency services system. A broken emergency services system delivers statistics like when desperate Victorians, at the height of an emergency, want to ring the SES, they want to ring the police, they want to ring the fire. This government has made a promise of answering those critical calls in 5 seconds and 10 seconds. But what are we delivering at the height, when the pressure is on? When the pressure is on, as we saw last Tuesday, 5½ minutes for police calls, with some 35 calls in the queue. The SES – 22½-minute waits, 133 calls logged. This is simply not good enough. There was 24 hours notice. We know that at the height of the crisis, in the mid-afternoon last Tuesday, ESTA – Triple Zero – management were sending out texts to call takers to come in and be rostered on. That is simply not good enough. We need a system. Victorians want a system that they know they can rely on when they need it. They do not want to be sitting hanging on a phone.

As we have learned all too well in this past week, this government has failed to fundamentally ensure that our telecommunications system in our rural and remote areas that are really fire prone, that at times like this really need the communication network, have the backup. I mean, you do not need to have let your phone run flat for very long to realise that 8 hours keeping a mobile phone communication tower running is simply not good enough in this day and age. We cannot possibly have an emergency management system that relies on our Emergency Management Victoria apps on our phone – that is the government's preferred method to disseminate safety information and critical updates – when whole networks go down in the very areas that are relying on this technology. It is simply not good enough, and it has highlighted that this government has had more than enough time to get its act together, to get the infrastructure and to secure the infrastructure in place so that Victorians can feel safe at the time of an emergency.

We talked earlier about the lack of ability to deliver on new trucks and equipment for the CFA – 48 trucks, some four years and we have only delivered 15. It is a very poor performance for emergency management. But that is not all. We know, for example, there are some 200 vehicles in the CFA fleet

that are now well over 30 years old, and the current funding from this government will see a replacement time frame of around 40 years to turn over the CFA truck stock. That is simply not good enough in a community and a state that is so heavily fire prone. Victoria's safety depends so much on volunteer services from our CFA, from our SES and just the goodwill and knowledge of our local communities, and yet all those communities want is a government that will have their back, that will back them, that will provide them with the resources they need to keep themselves safe, their families safe, their communities safe, that will protect their aged care facilities, their local hospitals, their local schools – this important state infrastructure that cannot be looked after if we are not going to back those communities and keep them safe.

We heard from the member for Lowan, and I know the member for Lowan has similar circumstances to what I have in my own electorate. It is so dire, the support for CFA and emergency services in country Victoria, that many of the emergency service vehicles, the fire trucks that are keeping our communities safe, cannot even be stored in the local brigade sheds. Too many brigade sheds are now out of date and not in keeping with the equipment that we need in a modern firefighting world. We find that often new trucks are left at farms in hay sheds not close by to where the brigade shed is because there is not the resourcing, the backing and the support for that local CFA to keep their own fire trucks in their own communities. It is simply not good enough, and it demonstrates how little regard this government has for the needs of emergency services out where it counts in the communities in our fire-prone areas. It might seem okay that we are storing a spare truck in some farmer's shed around the corner, but every minute delayed to a fire will cost property, potentially cost lives and exacerbate the trauma and the damage on a day of high fire danger.

We also talked about and experienced last week the mismanagement of our energy system. In conclusion, I will just say that managing that level of infrastructure around the state of Victoria, managing it well and managing it in a modern and efficient way is vital to keeping Victoria safe, because if we do not manage our electrical infrastructure safely we cannot organise our communications effectively and we lose contact with each other. But most importantly, 85 per cent of all fires and property losses are attributable to the collapse or breakdown in our energy network.

Daniela DE MARTINO (Monbulk) (17:02): From the outset I would like to acknowledge the member for Gippsland South's community and express my sincere condolences to the family of Bruce Manintveld, who lost his life in the storms. There are several members in this place, including the member for Lowan, whose communities are suffering to one degree or another. The town of Pomonal's devastating loss of homes and businesses from bushfires is felt keenly across our state, and to the members in this place for Ashwood, Pakenham, Bass, Ripon, Oakleigh, Glen Waverley and Berwick, whose communities were also affected by the severe wind event resulting in prolonged power outages from last Tuesday, and to all their communities I offer support and empathy from the people of Monbulk. Whilst my electorate was fortunate enough that we did not lose any lives, we were hard hit once again by storms. It is getting tiring. At the latest update, there are still over 575 homes without power. Hopefully by the end of today it will come down to around 360. I have met with, I have talked to and I have corresponded with dozens and dozens and dozens of constituents. My electorate office staff deserve a huge shout-out for the amount of time that they have spent supporting our community. To the ministers and their officers, their advisers, everyone who has handled all the inquiries coming through, huge gratitude and thanks – and the Premier's staff as well.

Now I turn my attention to the matter of public importance which has been offered here today by the opposition, and I have to express my deep concern with the premise of the MPI, not because the subject matter is unimportant, but because it is so very important and so grave, yet the opposition – and no less its leader – are trying to make political capital out of last week's storms. People are genuinely suffering. This is not hyperbole. We know that, and I think it is understood as a truth in this chamber. They are dealing with their homes being destroyed and long-term power outages. There are traumatised children and adults who are terrified of the wind. In response, the opposition is trying to foment anger at the state government instead of saying, 'What can we do to assist?' It lobbs bombs and

sometimes obfuscates the truth. And that is not individual, but there is a theme coming through. It is a shame that that is occurring, because we must not muddy the waters of information. We should be laying blame where the blame by and large truly lies – with the huge profit-making, privatised companies that provide utilities, in particular –

Members interjecting.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Fully privatised. I would like in my contribution today –

Members interjecting.

Daniela DE MARTINO: I am actually talking about Telstra. I am talking here about telecommunications. I find the silence on telecommunications deafening from those opposite. I have travelled from one side of my electorate to the other. I went to Gembrook CFA when I could not call through to see how they were going. I had to drive. There were a good 30 hours when I did not have any phone communication until I spent 25 minutes in my car to get off the mountain to put a call through. The entire ranges were knocked out of telecommunication range. People could not dial 000. My daughter did not want to stay at home on her own –

Members interjecting.

Daniela DE MARTINO: No, no, this is not about the call takers. This is absolutely about the fact that there was no mobile service and no NBN connectivity because these profit-making businesses have not deemed fit to ensure that they have mitigation strategies to deal with power outages. The lines get hit by trees; it is a fact. As the wind blows, the trees will knock them down, especially in areas where there is a high density of trees. But it is not hard for the telecommunications companies to install generators which can switch on automatically. I know households who have invested in that technology. They themselves have put generators on which automatically kick in when their power goes out. That is how they have hardened their homes to deal with constant power outages, depending on where they are.

I have spoken with CFA captains and the unit controller of Emerald SES, and they have all said to me clearly, unequivocally, that the number one concern was no mobile connectivity. Power outages are an annoyance. They are terrible for some. For those most vulnerable, they are difficult –

Members interjecting.

Daniela DE MARTINO: No, no, no. For some it is an annoyance, but they have hardened their resilience. For others it is terrible. For the most vulnerable out there –

Members interjecting.

Daniela DE MARTINO: It is a spectrum of experience, and there is nuance in this. Unfortunately, so many times only black-and-white terms are used in debate, and that diminishes the debate. There is nuance here. The number one concern coming through loud and clear was that there were no mobile communications and no NBN conductivity. Wi-fi died. The VicEmergency app, which is actually an excellent app, does not work if you have got no wi-fi and you have no mobile connectivity.

It is high time that all of us around the chamber, no matter what colour we wear – be it red, be it blue, be it green – call on the mobile telecommunications companies to step up and develop resilience in their networks, because it is incumbent upon them. It is a matter of life and death. When people cannot put a call through, when they have to drive with children to find reception, it is beyond frightening. I cannot understand why this is not being taken up more. We are not talking about it.

The call takers at Triple Zero did an amazing job. They were flooded, inundated. It was a devastating event which covered the state. They are amazing. They were surged and they were ready for it. The problem was once there was a little bit of backup generator power on some of those towers. For my husband, who is on Optus, his phone died at about 8 o'clock at night. I am on Telstra. There must be

a little bit more juice in the battery for the mobile tower for Telstra; mine died at 9:30. After that point, if anyone had had a medical emergency in our home, there is no way anyone could have put a call through, because it all stopped.

There was no resilience in that network, and the problem is they knew about this in 2021. They heard in 2021. Telcos are a federal responsibility. They have not been held to account for the 10 years of the coalition government. They were not held to account. We are suffering the consequences, and not just in this state but in other states. In Queensland they have had this issue; it is a problem everywhere. The power outages were terrible. I still have people suffering from it, as well. Some can get by with their generators. Others cannot. There have been people across the hills lending their generators to strangers because that is what we do: we take care of each other as a community, and I am proud to be a member of that community. But none of us can go and lend a generator to the mobile phone tower. We cannot turn that on. It is incumbent upon Telstra and Optus to do that. They must lift their game, and I would call on everyone here in representing their communities to demand no less of them.

There are so many amazing people who have done incredible things – my CFA brigades like Gembrook, who turned up and cleared the trees and spent 24 hours doing it. They worked so hard. I mentioned them before. They opened their own CFA as a relief centre. Emerald SES and everyone there, Monbulk CFA – these are incredible human beings doing their work and they all said to me: ‘Please, the hardest part was not being able to make phone calls.’ We need our telecommunications companies, but in particular Telstra and Optus, to actually make a commitment that they consider our lives worthy of being protected by having our communications continued, especially when we need them most, in emergencies.

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (17:12): I have an important contribution to make here today with the matter of public importance, which focuses first and foremost on the emergency services workers and volunteers who do so much and who were really put to the test in the most recent weather events. We have got emergency services workers across a variety of areas. Some of them are paid and a lot of them are volunteers, and if you are in an electorate like mine, it is pretty well all volunteers. It is very easy for us to say they put their lives at risk, but they do. I see this time and time again. I see it when they go out to some not so challenging situations and when they go out to exceptionally challenging situations. I find it really quite sad when I hear people say to the SES, who hike into national parks at night to rescue somebody who has fallen, ‘That’s okay, you’re on overtime.’ No, they are not on overtime. They are people who live in the community who are out in the dark having to hike in for an hour or so to protect and look after members of the community. We see this sort of attitude from our volunteers time and time again when they will do that. They will be in tricky situations, and they will have to work out what they need to do and how to do it. What is so important is that our government supports, respects and really acknowledges the work that the emergency services do and particularly volunteers, which at times really gets forgotten about.

We have had many severe events in recent years and natural disasters. We have had fires. We have had floods. We have had storms. I have had all those in my electorate in very recent times. Black Saturday in 2009 – 173 lives were lost at that time, devastating communities for years. And I go to the member for Lowan and what is happening in her communities. She has implored the government to support people now and provide the mental health services that they need, because this is not a quick fix. The quicker they get this service, the better it is for those people. We are 15 years out from Black Saturday and the services in the ranges and at Kinglake still tell me they are seeing people for the first time. Some of the children now who are finishing secondary school are having all sorts of issues, and it is across a wide number of schools. This still impacts them greatly. I remember several principals telling me at one time that among the preps at all different schools the number of bed wetters was incredible. These kids were one and two during the fires. These matters persist through families and through communities, and there is nothing more important than for the government to support communities and get the mental health services that they need there at the time they are needed, quickly.

So we have had just in this last week devastating storms across the state – in metropolitan areas and in country areas. We have had fires, and I want to acknowledge the stresses and the distress really of the communities of Pomonal, Dadswells Bridge, Mirboo North – and there was life lost there – and the Dandenongs, which have been hit again. They had devastating storms a few years ago, and they have been hit again. And these are hot on the tails of some of the anniversaries of devastating events. We have just marked, on 16 February, 41 years since Ash Wednesday, and that saw the loss of 12 CFA lives. My community of Panton Hill still have a memorial service on that day together with those from the Narre Warren CFA who also lost brigade members at the time. And I can tell you the people that lived it and the people who made decisions go over in their mind year after year the decisions they made and what happened. We have just had 15 years since Black Saturday, and we have had the Mallecoota fires and fires in East Gippsland; we have had many fires. We had floods in my town just very recently and again in January, hot on the tails of what had happened in October 2022. This time we saw over half a million businesses, families and houses across the state without power.

That is just not good enough, and the government have to have a look at what they can do, rather than just blame everybody else. Yes, we have got nature – forces of nature are forces of their own, and you cannot always predict what is going to happen with mini tornadoes. We heard the commissioner Rick Nugent tell us today that trying to work out where a tornado is going to hit is really impossible. These things whip themselves up and cause enormous damage, and we are probably lucky that in Mirboo North we did not have more fatalities when you look at the extent and the size of the trees that were ripped out of the ground. But the government need to have a look at what they should be doing and what they could be doing rather than just saying, 'Oh, this is all a force of nature. It's all somebody else's fault. It's the telecommunications. This is a problem. That's a problem.' Well, there are things that they can be doing, and I think with regard to power infrastructure there have been four reports that we know of – Energy Safe Victoria, AusNet. They have had expert panels as recently as 2022 advising them of what they should be doing and how to do it with regard to increasing the resilience of the infrastructure and communities. We have got 12 per cent of towers that are unsafe, that are rusty. That means the likelihood of them coming down is increased significantly. That is just not good enough. This is something that the government need to be monitoring and regulating and making sure that these are addressed. We cannot just have towers pop over.

Reports, though, can delay getting things done, and we have got to hit the ground running and we have got to learn from our mistakes and events. One of those things that we need to learn from is what I mentioned with Black Saturday, with the PTSD and mental health, and I cannot endorse the comments from the member for Lowan more wholeheartedly as she called for those services to be initiated straightaway rather than 'We've got to assess this, we've got to look at that, we've got to take time.' All of that time that delays it has a detrimental effect.

We have got to learn about the dissemination of information. Too often I heard, as parts of my electorate were without power for days as well, that people's default was, 'Oh, we'd better put that on the internet or Facebook or social media.' When the power is out, you do not have these. I know Yarra Ranges worked very hard to look at alternative ways to get the message to people because they know that phones are flat; they know that you are not going to see something on social media if you do not have a signal or if you do not have the power to keep things charged. So we need to have a look at that. We need to have learned the lessons that happened from Black Saturday. We have seen with 000 not so long ago that there were 33 deaths which were linked to delays with 000. These are things that the government can do something about. We know that you cannot dial 000 when your phone is flat. But this is what we need to do: we need to support our CFA brigades and our SES units. The government is good on announcements but lousy on implementation and delivery. They were going to have 48 state-of-the-art CFA tankers delivered by December. When this question was asked in the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, 15 out of 48 tankers had been delivered on time, and 33 per cent is a fail in anyone's book.

I was at Buxton CFA just a couple of weeks ago. They showed me their trucks where they still have to sit on the outside – there is not enough room in the cabin for all of the people that are on the truck. You cannot hear, and you do not know what is happening. With the wind whistling, you cannot easily hear what instructions are being given from the cabin, and if there is an ember attack or ashes, you are at risk there. These trucks need to be replaced. As I said, I was at Buxton watching them do some breathing apparatus training. It was particularly good to witness a couple of the members doing that, but these are the things that must be done.

I saw the SES during the floods. They cannot go into water. They could see someone only a few metres away and know they could go into the water to help them but they are unable to because of the regulations around the SES. I was looking at the floods in Yea just recently. Yea had water on every road leading in. Kinglake SES could not get in there, and Alexandra could not get in there. SES controller Peter Weeks deserves the biggest medal ever. They had to make a call – ‘Is that water deep enough? Is it safe for the SES units to go through?’ – because they needed to do rescue operations and support the township of Yea as it was being flooded and the waters were rising very quickly. There are lessons that we can learn, and the government, I am afraid, is just not learning them. They sit on their hands too often, waiting for report after report. It is not good enough.

Martha HAYLETT (Ripon) (17:22): I rise to speak on the matter of public importance (MPI) submitted by the member for Hawthorn today. Before I do so, I want to applaud the contribution of the member for Monbulk. I know how hard she has been working in her electorate, driving around groceries to people and giving generators to single parents. She has done a phenomenal job, and I sincerely want to thank her. She is a fantastic member for Monbulk. I also want to thank the member for Lowan. We are neighbours and have different stripes, but again I know how hard she has been working on the ground. I have heard really great feedback from people saying just how much she is doing. Fantastic work by the member for Lowan.

On this MPI specifically today, I truly consider the assertion by those opposite that our state’s emergency services are badly run a total slap in the face to the thousands of volunteers who work tirelessly day in, day out to protect our properties, our livestock and our lives across Victoria. Our emergency services members and volunteers are the best trained in the nation. They go up to Queensland to train up the Queensland fire brigade members. We have the best volunteers in the nation right here in Victoria. They are at the top of their game, and to suggest otherwise is just shameful.

What we saw last week during the catastrophic weather events was nothing short of remarkable. We saw an emergency services system that swung into gear and put Victorians at the centre of everything that they did. Incident control centres were stood up instantly. Members of the CFA, SES, Forest Fire Management Victoria, Victoria Police, Ambulance Victoria, Parks Victoria, Emergency Management Victoria, Agriculture Victoria and local councils all worked hand in hand. Relief centres were set up within hours, including in Ararat and Haddon in my electorate. Our CFA volunteers banded together as one big family, backing each other with local strike teams deployed to wherever they were needed. This was extremely evident in the Ripon electorate, where almost every brigade from districts 15 and 16 supported each other and sent volunteers to Stockyard Hill, Pomonal, Dadswells Bridge, Newtown and the Ross Creek state forest. Brigades from Lexton, Barkly, Beaufort, Glenorchy, Snake Valley, Burnbank, Redbank, Amphitheatre, Ararat, Avoca, Smythesdale, Ross Creek, Haddon, Napoleons and beyond did not waste a minute in responding. They were aided by hardworking CFA leaders in the region, including Brett Boatman, Fire Rescue Victoria members, firefighting aircraft from the Ballarat Airport and incident control centre staff, who helped coordinate crews and logistics.

Our firefighters work nonstop around the clock to protect our communities, and to suggest that they are poorly managed is frankly offensive. It is so offensive. Our government has backed our emergency services members and volunteers with countless amounts of money and support since 2014, while those opposite have only stood to fearmonger and politicise them. It is laughable for those opposite to come in here and try and act like the heroes of Triple Zero and ambulance services when all they ever did when they had the chance was go to war with our paramedics. We all remember those days, and

they were grim days. They were extremely grim. On this side of the chamber we have backed our paramedics and given additional supports to Triple Zero Victoria. On Tuesday and Wednesday last week we rostered extra Triple Zero and SES call centre staff, with over 250 people taking calls. There were an extra 50 people put on. Claims that we did not adequately resource Triple Zero Victoria are simply incorrect, and it is insulting to those amazing staff who turned up in huge numbers to work longer shifts that day.

We also worked hard to reconnect communities whose phone lines were down, and as the member for Monbulk very articulately said earlier, we will be fighting for telco providers to do more to support communities in the future. The Minister for Government Services shared with us yesterday and today that she will be meeting with her federal colleagues about these issues, and our government is calling on the Commonwealth to better regulate our telecommunications industry, as it is primarily a federal responsibility.

More broadly across Victoria we have also boosted our paramedic workforce, including developing the next generation of paramedic practitioners, who will graduate in 2026 and be deployed to rural and regional Victoria. Since 2014 our Labor government has invested more than \$2 billion to recruit more than 2200 additional paramedics. We have delivered 35 new or upgraded ambulance stations with construction on another 16 underway. We have upgraded the Ararat ambulance station in my own electorate. We have built brand new stations in St Arnaud and Inglewood. We are also building a new ambulance station in Avoca as we speak, and I am working closely with other communities across Ripon to advocate for more upgrades into the future. This is all in stark contrast to the gloomy Kennett–Baillieu–Naphthine years, when those opposite did next to nothing to deliver for our emergency services.

I find the member for Hawthorn's point about power supply very rich too, coming from a mob who sold off Victoria's energy supply to private multinationals. Those same private multinationals increased the prices, and they sacked the workers, and we are still left with the damage decades later. The member for Bulleen has said in the past that the privatisation of energy was good for consumers and that Victoria did very well out of it. It was fantastic to privatise our energy market, wasn't it, even though those decisions sent \$23 billion of profit to private companies. Those opposite cannot now feign outrage, as they are now, that our private energy providers did not fix things quickly enough after last week's catastrophic events.

Our government is working hard to fix the miserable legacy of those opposite and the mess that they left our energy network in by bringing back the State Electricity Commission. We have already invested an initial \$1 billion towards 4.5 gigawatts of new power, and this will increase over the coming years to help power our public hospitals, schools, police stations and government buildings. Bringing back the SEC will reduce power bills and create 59,000 jobs. That is right: 59,000 jobs, including at least 6000 apprenticeships. We have also announced an independent review into the energy distribution system's response to last week's storms. It will be led by a panel of independent experts, not a panel of politicians. It will focus on the preparedness of energy companies to respond to these extreme weather events, including those who manage transmission lines.

Another important point to make about last week's extreme storms is that our government is supporting impacted Victorians. The Australian and Victorian governments will provide a prolonged power outage payment, with eligible households to receive \$1920 per week for up to three weeks. It will help families buy basic items and find alternative accommodation. Generators are also being distributed, with priority to go to the most vulnerable who are in homes with prolonged power outages. And the waste levy – as you, Deputy Speaker, were talking about earlier – has been waived for storm-impacted residents across 21 local government areas until 30 April so that locals can take their waste to the local tip free of charge, which is fantastic.

We are working hard to ensure families get the support they need to recover as quickly as possible – and it would be nice if those opposite took a leaf out of the member for Lowan's book and actually

helped with practical solutions and support on the ground rather than just throwing cheap jabs for political points. In moments of crisis we see people's true colours and people's real leadership or lack thereof. The Premier was a leader last week, visiting communities and pulling up her sleeves to help wherever she could. We did not see the Leader of the Opposition in Ripon, in Lowan, in Monbulk, in so many electorates that were impacted. Our Premier made us all proud, and our rural and regional communities felt supported with her by their side. Meanwhile those opposite were focused on their donor-funded legal defence and not on Victorians in need.

I want to thank our emergency service members and our volunteers again from the bottom of my heart for their tireless work, and my thoughts are with them for tomorrow's total fire ban, especially in the Wimmera. Our volunteers are the best of us.

Danny O'BRIEN (Gippsland South) (17:32): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on the matter of public importance with respect particularly to the words 'tireless commitment of emergency service workers and volunteers', which is the area that I particularly want to focus on as the member for Gippsland South and therefore representing the beautiful community of Mirboo North, which has been through an event. Last Tuesday, just as the storm hit Sale actually, I got a call from the CEO of South Gippsland shire to say she had just driven through Mirboo North; it looked like a war zone. She sent me some photos which, whilst they were dramatic, with some trees down and things, did not look that bad. I have to confess I thought, 'Oh, she's over-dramatising a little bit' – until I got there the next day. And to this day – and people in Mirboo North are saying this as well repeatedly – you do not understand how severe and dramatic the event was in Mirboo North until you have seen it. The pictures do not tell the story. The vision does not tell the story. You actually have to go there and see it – more so for the community and anyone who has ever been to Mirboo North, knowing what it used to look like compared to what it now looks like – because what happened there was a very severe storm.

As we know, it went right across the state – a cell of some sort, a supercell, a microburst, a tornado, a mini-cyclone; lots of names are being given to it. But it hit the community probably in about a 2-kilometre stretch, and quite bizarrely and remarkably it has left virtually half the town untouched – well, not untouched, because they still had the storm, so there were trees down. But this stretch of about 2 kilometres, which you can see running through quite a wide area probably for about 5 or 10 kilometres, has just ripped up everything in its path. Trees have been stripped of bark, stripped of leaves, snapped off. There were the two goalposts; both goalposts on the footy ground were bent over about 2 metres from the bottom at 90-degree angles. Bizarrely the point posts are completely untouched. There is a concrete power pole that is snapped in half, and you can actually see the reo in that power pole. The community has been through something that is pretty hard to comprehend, to be honest.

When I came in at about 10 o'clock the next morning to Mirboo North I was astonished. There were trees down everywhere. There were roofs of houses and sheds in different parts. One unfortunate gentleman lost the roof of his shed, but it ended up in the next street, directly in front of his girlfriend's house. Thankfully, he had his girlfriend there, because her home was unaffected and he has been able to move in there with her in the short term. It was just an unbelievable event. I have seen videos and posted videos that were provided to me by members of the community, and the force of the wind was just something to be believed. The hail, everything that happened – talking to the people in the pub today, they mentioned the wind, the leaves and the debris literally going sideways.

It has led to an extraordinary response in Mirboo North in particular. Mirboo North is a wonderful community. I said yesterday that you love all your communities like you love your children, very much equally, but Mirboo North has always had a get-up-and-go attitude. It does not sit back on its laurels and wait for government to give it handouts; it actually gets proactive. It has got a fantastic community foundation, which it was lucky enough to establish a number of years ago when its old bush nursing hospital was sold as aged care. It raised a million dollars for the reconstruction of the pool. The Mirboo North pool is not just a pool, it is part of the community and it is also part of Gippsland. As a kid growing up in Traralgon, when we had a hot day we would often go to the Mirboo

North pool, because it is in this beautiful little valley surrounded by bush. We have just spent \$6 million on that pool – as I said, a million dollars of that raised by the local community – and it has now been decimated. The scenes of the bush around there, including the trees that are now down and virtually in the pool, have to be seen to be believed. What we have seen as a result in Mirboo North is just an extraordinary community response – people looking after each other, people looking after neighbours and people looking after friends, family and everybody in the community. People who do not know each other at all are putting on meals and putting cards in peoples' letterboxes to say thank you.

I should extend that to all of Gippsland, because on the morning when I got there I was talking to one gentleman who actually lives directly across from the pool. I said to him that I could see the trees on the ground already sawn. I said, 'Who's done this?' This had only happened a few hours ago, virtually. He said, 'Oh, a uteload of blokes from Thorpdale appeared this morning with chainsaws and they just started doing it.' And that has been happening all week. Businesses from out of town – Pizza Boyz in Traralgon came last Sunday night with hundreds of pizzas and just fed everyone – community members and community businesses in Mirboo North are doing similar things every night. There was a breakfast on this morning.

The Mirboo North RSL has become somewhat of a community volunteer hub, a great credit to Jess Graffe and Dan Smith. Dan is the president there, but Jess has done a hell of a lot of the work in coordinating volunteers. There are so many people coming in wanting to help and so many people coming to them to say they need help with this or that. My colleague in the other place Melina Bath called me from there on Friday, I think it was, and said they needed PPE for some of these volunteers coming in. Well, I went there today and there are boxes of gloves and earmuffs and helmets and everything, which have just been donated by businesses from around the area. It has just been fantastic.

Sadly, we lost a life there in Bruce Manintveld, a dairy farmer down the road who was trying to get his cattle in to protect them from the storm. Unfortunately, the shed roof blew off, it seems, and he was killed pretty much instantly, along with a number of his cows as well. It is just an absolute tragedy. My condolences to his family and friends, the wider community and the wider dairy industry, which Bruce was very well respected in.

It is a miracle – and all of us keep saying this as we hear the stories – that no-one else was killed or even injured. This story is about the second property I visited. It had a ute in the front, and the owner of the house said this guy had stopped when the storm was hitting. The ute was shaking, and then it actually started to lift, so the driver thought, 'This is not good. I've got to get out.' He got out and hid under an apple tree, and about 30 seconds later a branch went straight through the front windscreen. I have got some pictures of the ute here.

It was a hot day, as people will remember. Kids were at the pool. They closed the pool at about 4 or 4:30 and said, 'You need to go home.' One kid set off through the bush behind the pool as the storm hit, and when you see the bush now, how he was not injured or killed – he did apparently get a branch across the back of his neck – is just amazing. There are so many stories of people avoiding shattered glass in their homes. There was one where a mother went in and picked up a three-month-old baby out of the cot, and as she pulled the door shut behind her to get into the centre of the house the window shattered and shards of glass went straight through the cot mattress.

There was just an extraordinary series of events and an extraordinary response from a beautiful people. I have only got a short amount of time, so I will not be able to thank everyone or every organisation. I am sure I will miss someone, so I apologise in advance. Particularly I thank the CFA, who were the first responders. Mirboo North does not have an SES, but they were in from Leongatha and other places in the next day or so. The CFA in particular did so much. I thank South Gippsland Shire Council. Councils cop a lot of flak a lot of the time, but South Gippsland I think has been there and doing a lot – probably a lot that the community does not realise it is doing. I thank Forest Fire Management Victoria for getting out and clearing roads in particular on our behalf – I might add, with

the support of a lot of timber contractors or former timber contractors doing their jobs. I thank VicRoads and their contractors; the businesses I mentioned for providing food and equipment, donating things; and the ladies from the Italian Festa committee, which only happened on the Sunday before, and thank God it happened the Sunday before. There were 20,000-odd people in Mirboo North on the Sunday before. If it had hit at the same time, it would have been horrendous. They put on a lunch to support everybody.

I have mentioned Jess and Dan at the Mirboo North RSL. I thank the Red Cross, the Victorian Council of Churches for providing counselling and particularly AusNet. AusNet has probably had a pretty ordinary week, but look at what they have done in getting people back on. The township areas worst hit today were starting to get put back on. There are a lot of issues to work through, and not everything was perfect by AusNet, but the contractors doing that have done a great job – likewise with Telstra, Optus and NBN. I would like to also thank the Premier and many of her ministers who have helped, but I particularly thank the people of Mirboo North for being so resilient.

Jordan CRUGNALE (Bass) (17:42): I would like to begin by offering my sincerest condolences to the family, friends and all who cherished Bruce Manintveld from the Mirboo North area, who lost his life during the storms, as the member for Gippsland South was saying. It is an absolute tragedy that has rocked their local community, and reading all the comments and commentary as well he was a highly regarded, very respected gentleman and dairy farmer.

When I look through my electorate as well – it was around Pioneer Bay, Grantville and the Gurdies, and it then went on through to Mirboo North – it is a miracle that there was not a massive loss of life. It was quite incongruous, with the member for Gippsland South talking about the Italian Festa that was on the Sunday, then it was on the Tuesday. And it was the committee that put together the Italian festival who put their hands up as well to help out the communities of Mirboo North.

I also want to acknowledge the communities in the district of Lowan who have lost their homes to fire. It was a very sincere, genuine and heartfelt contribution from the member for Lowan, who is on the ground supporting her community at every turn, and I note also the contributions from the members for Monbulk and Ripon as well.

We have been out in our communities. Where I was, we did not have power or phones for over 24 hours. I did not have fuel in the car either, which was a bit annoying, so I will remember to always have fuel in the car. We kind of got on our bikes and just checked in with all the elderly around our town to make sure that they were okay, because no-one could communicate, and I want to concur with the member for Monbulk too around the telecommunications aspect. From the number of calls we have since made and places we have visited, whether they were schools, CFAs, SESs, community centres or local businesses, the issue was the phone aspect – not being able to, one, ring 000 but also not having internet and phones as well. We are a resilient, kind, amazing community, and we have seen that right across the state with affected communities but also in my electorate of Bass. We have had people just running a generator over to the corner store and hooking them up to make sure that their local community still had daily supplies. This was down in Corinella before council were able to activate a generator. We have had people like Dan in Pioneer Bay, who, probably in shorts and a T-shirt and thongs, went out on the Bass Highway, which is pretty messy and also has all the big panels sloped on an angle. But in his community people were running around with the sound of chainsaws, putting other people's needs in front of their own needs – helping community, neighbours and people in their street start the clear up and clean-out.

Our emergency services have been remarkable, as always. Our CFAs, our SESs – Phillip Island, San Remo and Inverloch all formed part of strike teams and units to go out and help people in the Pioneer Bay, Gurdies and Grantville area. We had the CFAs right across the Bass district as well. Even in the Cardinia and Casey area our CFAs did a remarkable job, even getting water out to livestock, as they did in Bayles and Koo Wee Rup. Also, the Clyde CFA were out putting water in troughs to make sure that the livestock had something to drink.

There is a big, long list of people. I struggle with the matter of public importance (MPI) itself in that, yes, I totally agree with commending our emergency services and agencies and hospitals and everyone that really activated to help at that time, but ‘the failure this’ and ‘the failure that’ I take a bit of umbrage at. It is the language that is used, given that we are on the cusp of potentially another emergency this week, with fire bans enacted already for tomorrow in a lot of areas that are already affected from last week’s catastrophic storms and fires. We are still in the throes of a massive clean-up, and many are still without power. Everyone is heightened with anxiety and in the thick of experiencing the trauma of it all, and it is not actually what we need right now. What we need here is everyone to be there, active and on the ground. Many of the members who have spoken in their contributions today have been very visible and active on the ground with supports, working across governments and across parties, making sure that people have what they need for today and attending with urgency to what is required in the recovery and rebuild as well.

Our emergency personnel during times of crisis become really everyday heroes, and we have heard that word a bit in today’s MPI. They say goodbye to their families, and they run to the job at hand. Sometimes their own places, as we have heard as well, have been affected or struck by fires. It is worth acknowledging as often as we can the impact of their efforts and the commitment to community that they make every day. They all play an important role in disaster response and crisis recovery and in the mitigation and preparedness phases as well: Fire Rescue Victoria, Forest Fire Management Victoria, our Parks Victoria team, everyone at the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action and the incident control centres that were set up. There is a lot to do. There are certainly a lot of learnings, and there is a lot of information on the ground from community members who have just been through the last week. We are certainly taking a lot of notes down about how we can do better and also, I guess, have a crack at the telcos on a few fronts.

To our SES units and CFA brigades, who have been out there supporting affected communities in a myriad of ways, as mentioned – clearing the roads, paths and properties, running community barbecues as well, knocking on doors and being that conduit of information and support – I just want to say a big thankyou. Also, they attended to a couple of house fires that we had. When the power came back on, there were two properties with a power surge that the Phillip Island CFA and also the Corinella CFA attended, so a big shout-out to them.

I also want to mention our health services. So the power is out and phone lines are out and our Bass Coast Health and also the Kooweerup Regional Health Service pretty much went to their building and set up a team. People came running and then literally nurses, team members and a lot of staff just went out to start checking on their vulnerable clients and patients in the community, whether they were in Hospital in the Home care with oxygen or home dialysis, whatever it was. They went out to make sure that they were okay and were offering a place also to come to because they did have power with generators of course. It is a remarkable community at the Kooweerup health service and also Bass Coast Health, who are also doing a lot of meals and sending them out to community centres as well.

Our councils have been remarkable – Casey, Cardinia and Bass Coast – in all activating their emergency plans, but also being out and about in the community setting up relief centres and charging stations, driving buses to showers at pools nearby, providing food relief and messaging out as best they can all the supports and services available.

I want to also just quickly talk about one of the community centres. I am going to talk about Corinella. I have got 42 seconds, so I will not have much time at all. Corinella and District Community Centre as well as the Venus Bay Community Centre had battery, they had solar and they actually became like a community hub for information, cups of tea and charging. I just want to give a shout-out to Kerry Ladell the manager there and the extraordinary volunteers through all our community centres that have just been remarkable during this time and will continue to support our community as well. Our pharmacies, our Red Cross – I have got six seconds; I am going to make it. I have got four seconds. A big thankyou to everyone.

Brad BATTIN (Berwick) (17:52): I rise to support the Leader of Opposition's matter of public importance. It was put by the member for Hawthorn in relation to obviously the recent events that have happened here in Victoria. As I start, I would like to just clarify a couple of points made by those opposite that I think it is really important that we do get on record. First of all, to the member for Monbulk: when we are talking about power outages, to say that for those people that lost their power, it is just an annoyance. If you are putting it to compare it to others, I think that does a disservice to those that lost their power, that have lost thousands of dollars worth of stock. In my electorate alone I will go through some of the stock that was lost from some of the places up through Upper Beaconsfield. I know for a fact that we have been out and about – not just us, members of the government as well – visiting businesses and homes that have lost so much. I think it was disrespectful for the member for Monbulk to come into this place when her electorate was impacted so much and say losing your power was just an annoyance. She cannot say that. She cannot put that out there. It is an absolute disgrace and disrespectful to her community. At the same time, I will continue to say –

Kathleen Matthews-Ward: On a point of order, Deputy Speaker, what the member was saying is incorrect.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The point of order is?

Kathleen Matthews-Ward: Relevance.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: It is not a point of order.

Brad BATTIN: And then the member for Monbulk went on to talk about Telstra and blame Telstra for everything. Just today this government came in here and wanted to brag about their better mobile connectivity for the south-east.

Members interjecting.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member for Tarneit is not in his seat. Warned.

Brad BATTIN: If they want to have better connectivity, why didn't they do it in the black spot zones that are at highest risk from Black Saturday? If you are going to be spending money on black spot places, why wouldn't you have put it in the areas that most desperately need it instead of coming in here and then blaming Telstra for what Telstra have supposedly done?

Let me assure this government that they regulate the power here in the state. You cannot then go and blame everybody else when the privatisation of the power in this state began with your government. It began with your government. In *Hansard*, in here, prior to the Kennett government, on record already were steps to start the process to privatise the power here in Victoria. It is so important that we get all these facts on the record of what has happened.

Then to add to that, the member for Ripon came in here and said that they put an extra 50 callers on that day to put 250 callers in place for 000. There were 63 callers; there were not 250 callers. You cannot just read something that you have been given by a minister that is absolutely factually incorrect and not expect it to be corrected when communities have suffered because they could not get their phone calls answered at 000. People were waiting. We used to hear from this government that every second counts. Now when it is 6 minutes, they seem to go silent and it is not their fault. It is about time you actually put in place some of the recommendations that have come forward. After 30 people died whilst they were waiting on calls to 000 here in this state, the government has only changed the name of the organisation. That is all you have done: you have changed the name of the organisation. That has not saved or helped one person here in this state. It is so important that that gets on record. Members of the government want to come in here and big-note themselves about the things that they have not done and try to blame others. You are in government. You been in government for nearly 20 years in this state; start taking responsibility for some of the things you have not delivered. Eventually, you have got to start taking responsibility.

When I went out through my community I went up to the general store in Upper Beaconsfield and I spoke to JD and Steph. Now, JD and Steph have so little faith in this government when it comes to power through Upper Beaconsfield that they actually went out and spent \$20,000 to put a generator on their property – \$20,000. They also got a second generator they could use to run their second business across the road. Of course, having two businesses, I am sure those on the other side would like to write them off now as those rich people that can take care of themselves. But they are the best community people, and what they have done up there to support that community has been absolutely outstanding. They have made sure that there is a hub to go to, with power, with food and with everything else that can be supplied for the area.

But then I walked around the corner, and I went to FoodWorks and I spoke to Pramod. When we walked in there, not only was his roof damaged from the rain and the storm, he was in the middle of emptying his fridges of milk, ice cream, chocolates, meats and some of the most expensive items that they had. Pramod and his parents are small business people, and the impact of this will be over \$20,000. It is a massive impact on that small business. Pramod's parents at that time were away. It was the first holiday they have happened to have in 30 years. They are not getting any support because they do not fall within that seven days as they got their power back on Friday. Thankfully, they did get their power back on Friday, and the member for Pakenham will agree. It is such an important day in Upper Beaconsfield when we get together as a community, which happens there every year. It is a community event that started around Black Saturday to build on that community strength, and it is events like this that highlight how important it is.

I went down into Berwick, and there are few places in Berwick that also struggled. Rachel and James at Blanc Bakery were mentioned by the Leader of the Opposition today. We went down there, and I can speak from experience as a former baker. When you lose a day's stock, particularly with sourdoughs, you do not just have a sourdough culture ready to go the next day. Some of them are years in the making, so it has affected and impacted their business greatly. I know that they are the two hardest-working people and took a huge risk with the bakery they have got there in Berwick. They will not come out and ask for support. I wish they could get some support, but they will not be coming out to ask for it, because they are the sorts of people that will just get on with the job, keep doing what they are going to do and work their way forward. But there are other businesses. Leroy at Bodega – for anyone who has been into Berwick lately, Bodega is a new business having a real crack. They have an amazing turnover with what they have been doing, building up this amazing business they have got. On the day they had to go out and hire a temporary fridge to put out the back. Fortunately, their power came back on fairly soon, but they had moved a lot of their product from their main fridge. It was around about when the last box went into the external fridge that the power came back on, so his next job was to bring it all back in again. But it did impact with the day of trade. You have got to pay your staff and you do lose some of the stock in there.

Stephen down at the butchers lost a lot, and we know the price of meat these days. They lost a lot of stock down there that was so important to them and to the impact of what would happen in their business. But again, another great local business – they are not asking for support. They know they will get insurance et cetera, but they do understand the impact to the wholesale side of it for people that could not get support from there.

The other part of this matter of public importance is around our emergency service workers. It does not matter whether you are paid or not, it is any person who goes out there and helps out. I know the SES units; I have always had a great relationship with Ben Owen up in Emerald. I know they would have been out and about doing their job. Narre Warren and Pakenham would have come out. The CFAs would have been out there, and the volunteers.

But can I make one special shout-out, and it is to Shane and Jarryd Miller, who I have known for a long period of time, at Clematis CFA. Whilst they were out they had a tree fall on their property. There is a fair bit of damage. The house is still habitable, but there is going to be a fair bit of a rebuild on it. For Shane I have to get this on record. Shane was unlucky, and not just in having a tree go through his

house. He had just finished painting the outside decking, and he could have got that done with insurance if he had have waited just one more week, because he does not like painting. Those two have done so much for their community, but they have highlighted the people who they did not necessarily know in their local community who came down and offered them food, who offered them support, a chainsaw or a bit of extra help around the place, and that is what rebuilding the community is all about.

I know I started with this, where we have to get these things on record, but I think it is really important in this MPI that we do emphasise the fact we all live in communities where there are some amazing, wonderful people that volunteer and get behind each other and support each other. It is really important that we continue to back those groups. When we have events in our local communities that are about building community strength, it is really important that we as members of Parliament get behind them.

Bills

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

Second reading

Debate resumed.

Natalie HUTCHINS (Sydenham – Minister for Jobs and Industry, Minister for Treaty and First Peoples, Minister for Women) (18:01): I move:

That the debate be now adjourned.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned.

Ordered that debate be adjourned until later this day.

Motions

Apology for past care leavers

Natalie HUTCHINS (Sydenham – Minister for Jobs and Industry, Minister for Treaty and First Peoples, Minister for Women) (18:02): I move:

That this house takes note of the parliamentary apology to Victorians who experienced historical abuse and neglect as children in institutional care.

I would like to open my comments on this apology with a quote:

There is no way to describe what these boys and girls went through, other than to say that they entered the gates of hell.

These are the words of my late husband Senator Steve Hutchins, who in 2004 chaired the Community Affairs References Committee in the Commonwealth Senate, which explored the pain and suffering of children who were entrusted into state care, not just here in Victoria but in every state and territory. This report was colloquially known as the inquiry into forgotten Australians. Here we are 20 years later, and I stand here and acknowledge the progress that we have made in just recent weeks.

I thank the Premier for her heartfelt apology on behalf of the Parliament to those who suffered unimaginable harm at the hands of the state, an apology that was long overdue. The people whose stories were told in that report experienced evil, absolute evil, at the hands of the state, and many could not share their stories or even be here on the day of the apology. They should never have suffered. They should never have been forgotten, and their pain should not have been ignored for so long.

To those Victorians who suffered at the hands of the state, I too am sorry. A lot of pain and suffering took place between 1928 and 1990. More than 90,000 children were placed in institutional care here in Victoria, where many of them during this period experienced harm at the hands of the people they should have trusted, and it was allowed to continue for 62 years. Children were experiencing abuse,

neglect and mistreatment at a time many of us in this room were starting our professional careers. A blind eye was turned. Thousands of children who were entrusted to the state have waited a long time to have their pain recognised and acknowledged.

My late husband Steve referred to the inquiry as the most harrowing experience of his life, a very sad and painful inquiry. I remember him over the summer 20 years ago reading the submissions that had come in to that inquiry and having a box of tissues on hand. Many tried to understand what had happened, but it was not until that federal inquiry that we actually heard so many stories, so much evidence, of young children growing up in state care and being abused. A home just does not define where you live, it is where you feel most comfortable, where you should feel loved and safe. These so-called homes that children were placed in were anything but that. Home should not be a place characterised by brutality or a place to be feared. These children should not have been deprived of their education or access to basic health care. They did not deserve the neglect. They did not deserve the abuse.

I saw the impact these hearings had on so many people that I met through that federal inquiry and of course through the relationship that I have built up with the Care Leavers Australasia Network. To many those memories are now nightmares that they live with every day – memories which have left both physical and emotional scars, pain and shame. This shame should not be carried by the victims and victim-survivors but instead by adults who perpetrated this abuse and neglect and the people and institutions that allowed it to happen. Just as our Premier said, the shame is not yours to bear, it is ours. It was the state's responsibility to protect you, and we failed. Childhoods were taken in our care, on our watch, and an apology is not enough, but it is a start. It is what the Care Leavers Australasia Network have been calling for for many years. When I was Minister for Victim Support I heard directly from CLAN, including from the formidable Leonie Sheedy, who has always advocated staunchly for care leavers and their rights.

Your stories should not be forgotten, and they will not be. We must continue to right the wrongs inflicted on care leavers, so how do we move forward? Well, we must continue to listen to those who have been brave enough to speak. We must continue to take guidance from organisations such as CLAN, Open Place, the Alliance for Forgotten Australians, Child Migrants Trust, Connecting Home and more, who offer supports to victims and advocate for their ongoing needs. These atrocities are unforgivable, and we must do everything we can to ensure Victorians who have been affected have access to the resources and support they need.

We had a family friend who battled with mental ill health and alcoholism for many years and quite often was uninvited to events with the broader family. It took me some time to understand what his history was, and of course he had been in state care in New South Wales and had had some of the most horrific experiences with sexual abuse as a five- and six-year-old when he first went into care. It took such courage for him to be able to walk away from that and build a career, but the scars clearly remained in his life as he battled with alcoholism and with his mental ill health. There are so many stories like this. There are so many people that many of us in this place may know struggle with these sorts of addictions and mental health challenges but may not know that this is the cause. We may know people's parents that have suffered from that. We may even have family members ourselves. As I said, these atrocities are unforgivable, and we need to make sure that we acknowledge this pain and hurt and how much it has been inflicted on families.

Just as my late husband Steve said in his last speech to Parliament, I hope we never let the suffering of these children be forgotten, and I am really pleased that in this place today we are doing exactly that. We are making sure that they are not forgotten, and we are making the change and the apology that is needed to start the healing.

Wayne FARNHAM (Narracan) (18:09): I am very pleased to rise today to talk on the take-note for the Victorians who experienced historical abuse and neglect as children in institutional care. I am not going to even pretend to imagine what those people went through. I do not think any of us could –

I really do not – but I am very pleased that both sides of this Parliament apologised. We had the Premier, the Leader of the Opposition and the Greens as well. I think it is very important to the people who suffered this historical abuse to hear that apology from community leaders – basically this Parliament. As said previously, the apology is a step – I hope it is a step in the right direction – for the people that have suffered this abuse. I hope it is a step in the right direction that they know that we have acknowledged what they have been through, and hopefully it is a step in the right direction for them to start to heal. I think that is the important part of this apology, to help these victims of this historical systemic abuse by Victoria in these institutions – that it gives them that opportunity, through the acknowledgement that this Parliament has made, to help them heal. That is the hardest part.

I heard what the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Greens said. When I talk to people that have suffered abuse of any type I always think I could never imagine what they are going through, because that has not happened to me personally. I always feel great empathy. When you talk to these people and you listen to them you feel possibly maybe a bit of guilt, because although you have great sympathy and empathy for that person, sometimes words may seem hollow, like ‘Are you okay?’ and these types of things. But I think what this Parliament has done by having this apology hopefully fills that void a little bit for these people.

I worked out at the Kew Cottages, which had some horrific stories of abuse. It was quite interesting when I went out there as it was a very, very eerie feeling there. The empty buildings there were like everybody got told ‘Leave now’ and everyone went out. You walked into those buildings and there were still teething cups; there were all their personal effects. It was just like a ghost town, like everyone had disappeared. Knowing the history of the Kew Cottages and what they used to do out there, it was a very, very uncomfortable feeling going through there. Unfortunately this state historically has failed to look after our most vulnerable, and especially in this actual institutional care.

I am extremely humbled to be able to talk on this, and I will not go on for too much longer, because I just really wanted to say that I hope that the apology that we have done as this Parliament, while I know it will not fill the void, can put them on a path to healing.

Ella GEORGE (Lara) (18:13): It is an honour to make a contribution on the motion before the house today on the apology to those Victorians who experienced historical abuse and neglect as children in institutional care. I think the Premier summed up best the importance of this historic apology that took place in this house on 8 February 2024 when she said:

Today we acknowledge a shameful chapter in our history, and the experiences of a group of Victorians who have fought for a long time to be heard.

This apology was the Victorian Parliament’s opportunity to formally recognise and apologise for wrongs committed against children during a dark, dark part of this state’s history. I begin by acknowledging those children who were placed in institutional care as wards of the state and who suffered so much. We cannot change the past, but we must own up to it. We must not diminish it or say they were different times. We must fully recognise the hurt and horror inflicted on innocent children and move forward with this apology and a redress scheme.

I acknowledge the tireless work of so many. Without their advocacy and fierce assistance, we would not be here today. I acknowledge and thank the Care Leavers Australasia Network, Open Place, the Alliance for Forgotten Australians, Child Migrants Trust, Connecting Home and everyone who has demanded recognition for Victorians who experienced abuse and neglect while they were in care. I also want to thank the Premier for her leadership in delivering this historic apology.

In my short time in this place I have been honoured to work closely with the Care Leavers Australasia Network and the remarkable Leonie Sheedy. CLAN supports countless Australians who grew up in orphanages and children’s homes. More recently CLAN have opened the Australian Orphanage Museum in Geelong. The museum does a remarkable job documenting and exhibiting authentic social

histories about the experiences of growing up in orphanages, children's homes, missions and other institutions, including foster care, in Australia. I encourage all members to visit.

The museum was established so that this part of our history is visible to all Australians. The collection contains hundreds if not thousands of items, and every single item has a story to tell, from children's toys like dolls and teddy bears to cups and saucers and teaspoons and of course religious books – Bibles, prayer books, holy communion books. There is even a brick from an orphanage in Western Australia, and it has a story too – a story of a boy who lost his life.

Right now in the museum there is a remarkable exhibition that tells the story of Geelong care leavers accessing their records for the first time. Records are important to care leavers because for so long they were denied. Imagine not being able to access your own birth certificate or school reports. And these records do not speak the full truth or tell the full story. As Leonie told me, 'There are too many redactions in our state ward files. They love redacting information.' In the time I have today I would like to share some of the stories from this exhibition.

Keith spent time as a ward of the state in Glastonbury. He remembers running away as he wanted to go to Melbourne and that the police were waiting for him at the train station. Keith said:

After you ran away, you got a baldy. They'd shave your head in the playground in front of everyone. You were someone if you had a bald head. The Superintendent was Pop Dawson. Usually it was the boys who ran away, because the girls were locked in at night.

Keith spoke about his records:

I applied for my records 2–3 years ago, when I was applying for redress. I wasn't interested before.

My records were more or less non-existent. They had my name, my sisters' names. There was stuff-all in em. I found out why I was in care. My parents split, and my grandfather sent us to a home. I wasn't a ward of state. You get more records if you're a ward. I was in care for thirteen years.

In the records, they wouldn't tell you that they belted you. The superintendents, Dawes and Jones, I wonder where their records are? I was the 'best boy', the best boy in the orphanage. I remember it. It wasn't in the records. I remember the trophy, I had to put my own name on it. I have it somewhere, it broke in half. That night, the Superintendent whacked me. Edgar Jones. He whacked me with a horse harness. They won't put the truth in your records.

Keith's story is hard to hear. So is Heather's. Heather was born in Geelong and spent time at St Catherine's. She left when she turned 16. In an act of defiance when she left she stole the bell from the refectory. Heather said:

... it's the only thing I ever stole in my life! What did it represent? I don't know. It controlled my life. When I stole it, it was like, I'm in control.

We heard about Heather and her sister Evelyn in the Premier's speech. Heather spoke about wanting to access her records because it would tell her more about what happened to her sister Evelyn, and what is in her records is harrowing. Heather said:

I wanted to know about Evelyn, how did she die? The Department wrote to my mum, saying they didn't have her address, they blamed her for that. My mum's friend heard on the radio on 3GL and told my mum. On the radio they said it was Faye who had died, not Evelyn.

The Department couldn't even get her name right. That's how much interest they showed. They wrote the wrong name on her headstone.

Eight-year-old Evelyn died of rheumatic fever despite her siblings pleading with staff at St Catherine's to treat her.

I would like to thank the care leavers who have generously shared their stories with me personally. To Billy, Pat, Janet, Terry, John, Frank and Leonie, I sincerely thank you.

I would like to share two more stories with the house – firstly, Terry's. Terry told me that he was stolen from his parents at two months old. He grew up in St Augustine's in Geelong and St Joseph's in Surrey

Hills. Terry's parents fought hard to get him back, including writing to their local MP. After 16 years in care Terry was transferred to a hostel and left to look after himself. What I think is really special about Terry and his story is that despite his horrific experiences he is committed to helping other care leavers. He has shared his story widely to raise awareness about the horrors of what it was like for so many growing up in orphanages. He gives back to CLAN every single week, showing up every Tuesday without fail to mow the lawns at the Australian Orphanage Museum in Geelong.

I will conclude my contribution today by speaking about Pat. Pat is 79, and yesterday she found out who her father is. For Pat it was a mixture of sadness and joy, finally knowing her dad's name. Now she has photos of her father and his war service records. Pat's own records never recorded who her father was. CLAN have helped Pat and other care leavers find their parents. Pat's father was tracked down through DNA testing and connecting with younger family members.

Leonie Sheedy helped Pat with this process and has helped countless other care leavers find their parents, their brothers and their sisters. Leonie told me what she said to Pat yesterday. She said, 'You've got family now, Pat, and they want to know you.' Pat is an elegant, softly spoken woman. She is as sharp as a tack, but when she was a ward of the state she was constantly told that she was mentally retarded. Pat told me that when she was old enough to leave the orphanage she went to go and work in another one because the world outside institutional care had been hidden from her.

Pat's story is incredibly moving. Her life and the lives of so many others were irreparably damaged by a state that should have been caring for these children and their families but failed to do so. The churches and the charities who ran these homes, child welfare services, police and the justice system all let these children and their families down considerably. The stories of children in care and the impact it has had on their lives should be amplified in the Parliament today and for future generations who may one day seek to understand the impact of this dark part of Victorian history.

On 8 February 2024 we said that we were sorry. We said sorry with the knowledge that the past cannot be erased and that our words will not put right all the wrongs of the past. But in saying sorry we recognise that Victorian children were abused in institutional care. We recognise their pain and suffering and the hurt that they carry with them today. We commit to a redress scheme that truly listens to those who experienced abuse. I commend this motion to the house.

Chris CREWITHER (Mornington) (18:22): I rise today to speak on this take-note motion:

That this house takes note of the parliamentary apology to Victorians who experienced historical abuse and neglect as children in institutional care.

I have only a few short words to say on this today, and I would like to acknowledge the words of the member for Lara, the member for Narracan and others who have spoken today and in the previous sitting fortnight, particularly the words that were given by both the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition at the time. It is important for those who have been through this historical abuse and neglect or indeed who are in such situations even to this day to be listened to and to be believed. We must have two ears and one mouth when we listen to and hear the stories and indeed what has happened in the lives of these people.

I would like to note a personal situation that occurred within my own family. My father Barry was born in Mildura in the north-west of Victoria. Unfortunately his mother died when he was just three years old, at the age of 23. He did also have a younger sister, who was about one year old at the time that their mother passed away. He was sent off to live with various aunts and uncles and eventually was able to move back to live with his own father when he remarried, in his teenage years, before he was then sent off to the army apprentice scheme in Mount Martha, which is in my electorate today. But his sister Glenda was sent off to Kew Cottages. We know that the stories of people in Kew Cottages are not often very good at all and that sometimes the care that they received, if you can call it care, was not great. Indeed it goes beyond just situations where they received poor care; some were

utterly neglected and some were totally mistreated as well. Unfortunately due to the 'care' that she received at Kew Cottages, unfortunately my father's sister Glenda died when she was 14 years of age.

That is a situation that I know still haunts my father to this day and it is something that he does not talk about very much, and I know that he would like to find out more about what happened at that time. I know that my grandmother, who is in Clyde North and who is about to turn 90 – my grandfather had remarried – would also of course like to know more as she was the stepmum of this girl at the time. It was a terrible incident at the time, but there were many incidents that occurred at Kew Cottages and in other government institutional care.

I would like also to note a story of a local gentleman – he is not in my electorate, but he lives nearby in Frankston – by the name of Robert Jones. Robert is a person I helped when I was the member for Dunkley between 2016 and 2019, but I continued to meet with him and speak with him and listen to and believe in him even after I was a member of Parliament between 2019 and 2022. I have continued to work with him since I became a member at the state level in 2022. While this goes beyond Victoria – he was abused by a chaplain within the defence forces – I know that when he first approached me in my office he had been through many situations where people in the Department of Veterans' Affairs and others simply had not listened to him. They had not believed his story, and sometimes when people do not believe your story you can sound more and more crazy over time because you are trying to tell your story to people and people are just not believing you. They are not listening to you. That can create a spiral where the more it happens, the more people do not believe you. So when he came to my office I sat down with him and I believed him and I advocated for him, and that is why we established a friendship that goes beyond him having just been a constituent at the time. I continue to advocate for him today because these are things that occur and have occurred in institutional care and should no longer occur in Australia or indeed anywhere around the world.

When you look at family and other care, obviously the first and best situation is to have family care. The next would be kinship care and then foster care. The last situation we should have people in is orphanages or other forms of institutional care. That is why we have moved down a path in Australia of no longer having orphanages, but I know that this situation does continue with child residential institutions in our region in the Asia-Pacific and beyond and with orphanages more generally. I do believe that Australia and indeed Victoria can do more in this area as well. We are looking at institutional care in Victoria and in Australia at the moment, but Victorians as well can look to what they can do when they are looking to volunteer or donate to those who are engaged in orphanages or child residential institutions overseas. The facts show that more than 80 per cent of people in orphanages overseas have a parent or both parents who are still alive. There are human traffickers and people who engage in orphanage trafficking who will traffic people into this situation, and often these kids end up in sexual slavery and abuse, paedophile rings, child labour and so forth.

When I was a federal member of Parliament, I chaired the foreign affairs and aid subcommittee. We led the modern slavery inquiry, and we had a whole chapter looking at orphanage trafficking. One of our recommendations was that we should have a list – whether it is an Australian list or indeed it can be a Victorian list as well – of genuine overseas institutions where Victorians or Australians can volunteer at or donate to. That would ensure that people are volunteering for or donating to the legitimate ones. It will help to defund those who are doing the wrong thing while concentrating donations and volunteer efforts into those doing the right thing. We could look in the long run as well to not just having a list but also making it illegal for Victorians or Australians to engage in volunteerism or donations to any institutions that are not on that list. Yes, we need to look at what is happening in Australia, but we also need to look at what Victorians and Australians can do to stop abuse and neglect of children in institutional care within the Asia-Pacific and in a global world as well. We know that of course family care is the best. When you have that opportunity for family care it is amazing, but not all people have that family care, and some people even in a family situation are abused as well, so we need to do all that we can to help resolve the situation.

I would like to acknowledge the government and the opposition as well, and all the other parties in this Parliament in the Assembly and the Council, for the efforts – bipartisanship or multipartisanship – that have gone into tackling these issues and bringing forward this apology to Victorians who experienced historical abuse and neglect as children in institutional care. May we continue to do as much as we can in Victoria, Australia and around the world to tackle these very important issues.

Chris COUZENS (Geelong) (18:30): I want to start by giving a warning for those who are online or who may be reading this in *Hansard* at any point that much of my speech and probably those that follow me will be talking about things that may trigger people who have experienced institutional violence and abuse. I just want to make sure that people are aware now and as *Hansard* is recorded that this content could be triggering.

I also want to start by acknowledging the survivors, those people from institutional care, and by saying sorry. I say sorry on behalf of me and my electorate of Geelong. I also want to acknowledge those who died without any recognition of or justice for what happened to them. It is tragic that they were not heard. Sadly, I have spoken to a number of people who have now passed and heard their stories, and I can only imagine what they would be thinking now that they have actually had an official apology and acknowledgement for what they experienced.

The Premier's recent emotional apology in this place was a significant step forward, allowing this state to say sorry for what happened to these children, that they are now believed and that it was wrong. So many from that institutional care came to the Parliament to hear the apology and watch it online. I am sure that took enormous courage for them to do that. I would like to give a shout-out to Colleen, who watched online and contacted my office afterwards. I will not go into any detail about Colleen, because I do not want to identify her, but the fact that she felt that she was able to contact my office was really significant for her.

I do want to acknowledge the fierce advocacy of Leonie Sheedy, her team at CLAN and the work that they have done. They have never given up. They were persistent and focused on getting their voices heard. To the former member for Lara, John Eren, I want to say thank you for all your work and everything that you did, supporting CLAN and the museum over a very long period of time and sitting down having conversations with ministers, with advisers and with me and a number of MPs all involved in that. That was a long journey. Enormous credit to John for the work that he did, and I am fairly confident that many of those care leavers are very grateful to him for that persistence. Otherwise, we would not be here today.

Geelong sadly has a history of, I think, probably the most orphanages in the state. Vulnerable children were left at the hands of horrific abusers that impacted their lives completely. I have heard from CLAN members, forgotten Australians and those who refer to themselves as someone who has lived experience in an institution as a child. They have told me of their experiences at the hands of brutal people who were supposed to be caring for them. Many have talked about how it has ruined their life, and they did not have good experiences as adults with their own families. Many talked about family breakdown, abuse, drug and alcohol problems, mental health issues and all those unresolved issues that they experienced, and the impact that it has had on them has been horrendous.

I have read the document *A Terrible Way to Grow Up*. It is the findings from the CLAN survey undertaken in 2006–07, and it is about the experience of institutional care and its outcomes on care leavers in Australia. I recommend people take the time to read it. It is tough reading because the data in this report shows the shocking level of abuse. The survey shows respondents identified things like physical abuse and being deprived of food, being deprived of visits, being locked in cupboards, being force fed, being forced to eat their own vomit, being denied treats, sexual abuse and being forced to do long hours of chores and unpaid work. It is sickening to hear and to read this – and this is just a modified version, I have to say. I think we should all be looking at that document to get a greater understanding of what those children experienced. This happened to them in the care of this state –

vulnerable, innocent children in the so-called care of orphanages, missions, children's homes and foster care. The experiences shared by those in institutional care are absolutely horrific.

I also recommend those who have not already to visit the museum in Geelong. The member for Lara has also mentioned this, and it is very confronting, but it is also very important as a reminder to all of us about the shocking part of this history. When you walk through the museum – and as I said, it is confronting – you see toys, books, clothing, shoes and photos. There are actually photos of all those members of Parliament that have been involved in the work of CLAN and the messages of support that accompany them. There are letters, there are photographs – we cannot imagine what those children were experiencing when those photos were taken.

I know an apology cannot take away or change what happened, but I hope it can give some recognition of those who experienced abuse, and that it is a clear message that it will not happen again.

I know during my time at secondary school – and I will reflect now on this – there were quite a number of children living in orphanages in Geelong who were attending the same school as I was, and those children, everyone knew who they were, and they were always identified as being naughty or bad children. They were always running away from school, there were always issues, and when I reflect on that now, I understand completely why that was happening. But I have to say that the education system did not really support them either, because they had branded them as naughty and bad children instead of offering some support and perhaps even identifying some of the abuse that they were experiencing. I would like to think that that would never happen now we have mandatory reporting and a whole lot of systems in place, but when I think back to that time, it is really sad to know that those children were experiencing that sort of abuse. I know definitely some of them were, because I have spoken to them now as adults whose lives have been ruined by what they experienced in institutional care.

So I think it is really important that this apology is happening, that we move towards the redress scheme and that people that have experienced abuse in institutional care can at least get some comfort in the fact that we are now saying we believe what happened to them, we believe that they did not deserve to be treated like that and that they are good people who are now experiencing some pretty horrific effects of what they experienced as children. So I do again apologise for what happened to them. I know that all of us on both sides of the chamber have expressed our sincere apologies for what happened to them, and I commend the motion to the house.

Nina TAYLOR (Albert Park) (18:39): I too would like, individually but also as part of the collective apology, to apologise for the more than 90,000 Victorian children who were placed in care between 1928 and 1990, with many of them subsequently physically and emotionally abused and neglected. Also I would like to acknowledge the survivors, and I did have the honour of meeting a number of survivors on the day that the Premier made a formal apology on behalf of the government. I certainly would like to echo the sentiments that were shared on that day as well. It is staggering when you think of the sheer number of Victorian children whose lives were changed forever, and obviously not in a positive way.

I would like to pick up on that word, 'care'. I actually googled the word, because inevitably when we think of the word 'care' we think it must have a net positive – at a minimum it must involve a good intention. But we can see from the reflections and the heartfelt stories of so many who have been so dreadfully treated in orphanages, missions, children's homes and foster care that I should be very cautious using that word because of the care that they did not receive. Customarily we assume it should have been something that was overwhelmingly supporting their welfare in the best sense – looking at their health and wellbeing and making sure that they got an education. Even hearing that there were those who did not get an education is beyond belief. Hearing some of the stories shared in the chamber today, again I cannot fathom what possessed those who purported to be looking after these very vulnerable children. What were they thinking? I mean, what possessed them? It was some sort of

misguided moralising and judging of children who in many circumstances were put into these situations because of poverty. It was inherently inequitable, to say the least.

With a different mindset and with a view to service – because I would like to think that churches, charities, orphanages and the like should have been focused on doing the right thing and giving true service to children and hoping to go a long way, which they did not do – they could have been doing their best to fulfil some of what we would consider basic parenting requirements, like making sure they were fed properly, that they got the required sleep and obviously that they were not physically, sexually or emotionally abused.

Imagine if the authorities had stepped in and actually helped and supported in many instances mothers who simply just did not have enough money at the time for whatever reason or whatever circumstances they were having to endure to get through those tough times. Instead we saw this horrible, horrendous and inexcusable cycle of abuse and of course the many ramifications that have unfolded up until this day. If we think that this was happening right up until 1990, that also is just really hard to understand.

It makes me even more grateful for the love and care that I received as a child. I cannot imagine how confusing it was and the incredible disappointment, the hurt, the fear and the suffering – the absolute suffering – that these Victorian children endured. As I say, I think it was probably in direct contrast to what one would consider any religion or otherwise should be claiming to enable or to inspire in others in terms of taking good care, giving service and showing kindness. Where was the kindness? It seems like it was completely withdrawn from the presence of these children. Of course we know that if you are kind to others, you are far more likely to receive kindness in return. There was nothing to be gained from this horrendous judgement of these children simply, in essence, because they were born, because they existed. None of them, not one of them, deserved the horrendous conditions, treatment or otherwise that they were exposed to.

I heard before somebody mention the term ‘Kew Cottages’. When you think of a cottage, it sounds like it should be quaint and it should be a lovely environment, a supportive environment, and of course we can see from the stories that have been shared that unfortunately it was something to the contrary in many instances, which is just simply inexcusable. I am not seeking to isolate that particular institution or organisation of course. I am just giving an example of the sheer contrast between what a particular organisation was meant to deliver and what they actually did to these children.

Of course it goes without saying the hurt cannot be undone. In saying sorry, nobody here can undo the harm. We cannot, and I do not think anyone would seek in any way to try and prove that somehow by saying sorry it will undo harm that has been done. On the contrary, I think it is about acknowledging the preciousness of each and every one of those children and those who have survived, honouring the memory of those who have not or who may have passed on and acknowledging that they deserved so much more. They deserved a normal loving and supported existence with appropriate education, just as every other Victorian child does.

I certainly hope that with the true collectiveness in terms of the apology for what has happened to these 90,000 Victorian children it will go some way to helping healing to begin, and of course every individual person who went through some of these horrific circumstances will have their own way of being able to process what they went through. I would not pretend to anticipate what is needed obviously for each and every one of those survivors, because that is their individual journey pursuant to each and every one of their needs. But at a very minimum we say this must never happen again, and this is I think another really important element of saying sorry. Of course we absolutely mean it, and I certainly mean it on a very personal level as well. But also at a minimum the aspiration would be that by saying sorry we are acknowledging that what happened never should have happened and should never happen again, and so therefore it takes a collective good on the part of everyone to make sure that is so. Hence this is why we need to be continually vigilant to make sure that into the future every Victorian child is treated with the love and respect that they deserve and that we do what we can for those survivors to help them heal from what is nothing less than an absolute travesty. But I am at the

same time hopeful that through saying sorry we are doing something that can help the healing into the future. On that note I commend this motion to the house.

Melissa HORNE (Williamstown – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Local Government, Minister for Ports and Freight, Minister for Roads and Road Safety) (18:49): I move:

That the debate be now adjourned.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned.

Ordered that debate be adjourned until later this day.

Bills

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

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Ben Carroll:

That this bill be now read a second time.

And Jess Wilson's amendment:

That all the words after 'That' be omitted and replaced with the words 'this house refuses to read this bill a second time until the government:

- (1) provides a preliminary or draft fee structure for the early learning centres (ELCs) scheduled to open in 2025 and 2026;
- (2) seeks written feedback from any childcare centre, kindergarten or preschool within a 15-kilometre radius of the proposed government ELC sites regarding the likely impact of a government ELC on their workforce capacity and enrolments, and provides their feedback to the house;
- (3) conducts an analysis on the childcare workforce implications of the new government ELC sites, including:
 - (a) establishing the workforce vacancy rates around the locations of the new sites; and
 - (b) providing the house with a comprehensive plan on how the government will ensure existing childcare centres and kindergartens are not disadvantaged in their ability to recruit and retain staff in their existing programs; and
- (4) provides an estimate of the budget impact of the operating costs for the government ELCs scheduled to open in 2025 and 2026.'

Brad ROWSWELL (Sandringham) (18:49): I rise to address the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024. In doing so I commend my colleague the member for Kew, the Shadow Minister for Early Childhood and Education, for her preparation on behalf of the coalition for the consideration of this bill in this place. I also commend her for the reasoned amendment which she has submitted to the chamber, which I wholeheartedly support. It actually draws attention to a number of concerns we have with the bill, and in short it puts the government on notice to say we will be watching as the rollout of these new childcare centres takes place.

The reality is this bill will pass this chamber. This bill will pass Victoria's upper house and it will become law. In one respect that is a good thing because your postcode should not actually determine or dictate your access to basic essential services. That includes child care, that includes health and that includes education more broadly. At the moment that is a significant concern for many, many Victorians, where around this state, I am sad to say, there are childcare deserts. We know that having child care accessibility and availability is the best thing that we can do to help female participation in the workforce. We know that when people are in work it gives them independence. It helps build resilience. It gives them a greater purpose in life to help themselves, help their families, help their

communities, and to contribute, give back and feel the dignity of work – to actually know and understand what that means. For too long access to child care has been a real issue.

I look around the chamber and I especially look at the blokes in the chamber, those on my side and those on the government side, and I say to the gentlemen in the chamber today, you included, Deputy Speaker: the men in this place have perhaps a larger responsibility to advocate for greater access to child care than women do. For too long the burden of child care and resolving those matters has been placed at the feet of women and has been placed on the shoulders of mothers. The best thing that I can do, not just as a member of this Parliament but as a father of two children myself, is to advocate wholeheartedly for greater access to child care. I am sure that this bill will deliver upon that.

One of the concerns we do have, which I think is a legitimate concern, is how the government will in fact find the 1200 new educators to staff, for example, the 35 new early learning centres. I do not think it is beyond reasonable to ask for a government plan to be assured that will happen. The other concern that we have, and I will conclude my comments very soon, is that where these new childcare centres are located is disproportionately in favour of current Labor-held seats. It would be great to understand the thinking behind that, it would be great to understand the reasoning behind that and I trust there are no political reasons behind that.

I will finish on this. It is the responsibility of everyone in this place to ensure that those services that Victorians rely upon are delivered to them. Child care and access to child care should not be determined by your postcode, and it is up to everyone to ensure that that is the case.

Juliana ADDISON (Wendouree) (18:53): I want to acknowledge the member for Sandringham for sharing the time with me, and I will just make a contribution until the close of business tonight before we move to the adjournment. So thank you very much, member for Sandringham.

Importantly, I want to state on the record that I am a huge fan of early childhood education and child care because of the many benefits that it delivers not only for Victoria's littlest ones but also for their families, particularly their working parents. Our daughters attended Lake Gardens Children's Centre in my electorate of Wendouree, and Mike and I are so grateful for the care that they put into our girls, helping them build their life skills, their independence and their confidence. I would really like to thank Lake Gardens in my electorate for the great work they do.

Importantly, being able to access quality child care allowed me to return to work after both of our girls were born. I was working at the time at Ballarat Clarendon College at the boarding house, and I had a 7 o'clock start. I had to get the boarders out of bed, and that meant that I had the girls at child care at 6:30 in the morning. My teaching role then often required me to be at school meetings out of hours and coaching sports teams, and the fact that the childcare centre was open until 6 meant that I could do my job, that I could contribute to the family and that we could pay the mortgage. That is why child care is so important to me. It was the spread of hours at a trusted childcare centre close to home that made all the difference to my family. It kept us financially afloat. The mortgage got paid and there was even some money left over for a few non-essentials – not many, but a couple. I want this for parents across the 50 communities where our government is delivering these much-needed early learning centres, 17 of which are in regional Victoria, and plenty of them are not in Labor-held seats, just to respond to the accusation made by the member for Sandringham.

I am so pleased to contribute to the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Early Childhood Employment Powers) Bill 2024, which sets up the legislative basis for the 50 government owned and operated early learning centres that we will be delivering across the next four years. Yes, it will be four years to ensure that we have time to address the workforce demands – the issues that have been raised by the member for Euroa, the member for South-West Coast and now the member for Sandringham. Yes, we do have a plan and, yes, we do have a solution, because we are going to make sure that we have the 11,000 new early childhood teachers and educators to deliver Best Start, Best Life. We are investing almost \$370 million. How did you miss this? How did the opposition miss this, through the

Chair? It is \$370 million to attract high-quality teachers and educators to the sector and to support the upskilling of existing professionals. We are going to offer opportunities to people to become teachers and educators through supportive programs as a part of our early childhood tertiary partnership program. We are offering free TAFE places. We are offering early childhood scholarships. We are offering financial support of up to \$7000 for current educators to go from the certificate III to the diploma. We are offering employment incentives and relocation support to bring people to these rural and regional areas where we have had members of the Nationals talk about how hard it is to attract people. That is why we are going to give people incentives – move to regional Victoria, move to rural Victoria, look after our littlest ones. Whilst on the other side they seem to have missed the point, we have a plan. We are investing in the plan. We have \$370 million to develop our plan, and we are getting on with it.

I really just want to make a quick comment about the member for Kew's contribution, because I really did listen. I was really interested in what they had to say. I even sought clarification and I said, 'You're not opposing it but are you supporting it?' She said, 'No.' On the *Hansard*, she said, 'No, we are not supporting this.' It is certainly not the case with their reasoned amendment. So let me be really clear: the Liberals and the Nationals are not supporting us getting on with the job of delivering 50 childcare centres, early learning centres –

Bridget Vallence: On a point of order, Deputy Speaker, I do not think that this is an opportunity to attack the opposition, because actually I think the member is incorrectly reflecting our position on this bill.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: That is not a point of order.

Juliana ADDISON: Why is this the case? Why is it that the lead speaker for the Liberal Party made this statement? It is because of neoliberal ideology and not wanting to distort the free market. I promise you I am not making this up. Which market do you say? It is the childcare market, that important free, captains of industry market, the childcare market. What we say is that we believe there is a place for government to provide services. We believe in the public sector. We believe in employees who work in the public sector. That is why we are intervening – because there are demand issues that are not being met by the free market. I can only come to the conclusion that the member for Kew is not on the side of Victorian families but she is on the side of corporations, whereas we know where we stand. We know where our bread is buttered – it is with Victorian families, families in regional and rural Victoria and in our growing outer suburbs. We believe that their sons and daughters deserve quality child care, and that is why we are establishing the 50 government owned and operated early learning centres – because there is demand, demand not being met by the public providers.

I must admit that when I had the two children – two girls under two – I was not being kept awake by free market economics, I was worried about how I was going to get to work the next morning with very little sleep. What I want to do is say that we are on the side of these people. That is why we commend this bill to the house. I am so pleased to have had the opportunity to contribute. I know where we stand – we stand with Victorian families.

Business interrupted under sessional orders.

Adjournment

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The question is:

That the house now adjourns.

Templestowe Bowling Club

Matthew GUY (Bulleen) (19:00): (531) I raise a matter tonight for the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events, the member for Oakleigh, and I am seeking support for upgrades to the Templestowe Bowling Club. Located just down from Templestowe shops, the bowling club is a very important part of the local Templestowe community. It is an all-round facility. It has off-street parking.

It has beautiful greens. They have tournaments. It is a function facility. But of course the facility is ageing. The membership of the club are doing their best to fundraise to upgrade the facility. Manningham council is happy to provide some support in upgrading the facility, and it is not a lot of money that is being sought to upgrade the Templestowe bowls facility – about \$100,000 or so.

The club was established in 1948. It was the first lawn bowls club within Manningham council. It has had its 75th anniversary. There was a big celebration down there to mark the success of the club as a community facility and of course to look at the works that need to be done, including guttering and including some slight upgrades to the clubrooms and facilities but mainly to the bowling green. As Manningham city's oldest bowling club, they are simply looking for \$100,000 for support – \$20,000 from themselves, \$30,000 or so from the council, and I am asking tonight the minister for sport if he can action a \$50,000 grant of support from within his department or various agencies to support the Templestowe Bowling Club to continue to provide a magnificent service to the people of Templestowe and to the dozens of members who love the club and call it their second home.

Tyabb–Somerville recycled water scheme

Paul MERCURIO (Hastings) (19:01): (532) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Water, and the action I seek is to invite the minister down to my electorate to meet with Hastings locals to discuss the amazing recycled water opportunities we have in my electorate. Currently the Eastern Treatment Plant discharges about 370 million litres per day of high-quality recycled water at Gunnamatta. This is the equivalent of filling the MCG every four days via a large pipeline running the length of the peninsula. I do not have to tell anyone what a terrible waste this is. This volume is anticipated to increase 30 per cent by 2050 to 474 million litres per day.

Across the Mornington Peninsula agriculture contributes \$225 million in gross value and represents 11 per cent of the local economy, providing over 5000 jobs or 12.5 per cent of total employment. Tyabb, Somerville and Baxter are a significant part of this. Access to recycled water will grow the economic potential of the local agricultural sector. The Tyabb–Somerville–Baxter region is critical to supplying Melbourne with vegetables and nursery plants. The benefits extend beyond farms. Infrastructure investment will supply water to community sporting and recreational grounds that require water throughout the year, supply our emergency services with water across a bushfire-prone area and even recycle water in developments for watering gardens and flushing toilets. Tapping into that recycled water would greatly increase our resilience to climate change by droughtproofing sustainable food production and growing the local nursery and garden industry. I look forward to the minister coming down to my electorate to meet and talk with locals and stakeholders and see the opportunities that the Tyabb–Somerville recycled water scheme offers not just our community but the whole of Victoria.

Euroa electorate roads

Annabelle CLEELAND (Euroa) (19:03): (533) My adjournment today is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the action I seek is a review of contracts for maintenance of roads in the Euroa electorate to ensure they are delivering quality roads and value for money for Victorian taxpayers. We saw 174 lives lost on regional roads in 2023. Shockingly, 50 of those lives were lost in the Goulburn Valley region alone. Twenty-eight lives were lost in Murrindindi shire, six in Strathbogie shire, 13 in Moira shire and four in Mitchell shire. As things stand, questions remain of the effectiveness, quality control, lack of competition and conflicts of interest relating to road maintenance contracts, raised with me by drivers and people who work in this space.

The failure to initially maintain or fix our regional roads has allegedly led to successful one-off lucrative windfalls for the same company that failed to repair the roads in the first place. This cannot continue. These contractors must be evaluated to ensure our roads and therefore our residents are being looked after with the level of care that is required. Our roadworthy cars need carworthy roads.

I have heard estimations that up to 70 per cent of the roads repaired during the October 2022 floods were damaged once again during more recent flooding in parts of the electorate. These roads are causing problems for commuters, the transport industry and visitors to our regional towns. High rainfall or consistent rainfall areas should not be a barrier to roads functioning well and being long lasting, provided that the road pavement design is fit for purpose.

Sadly, the Allan Labor government has diverted money away from regional communities and is ignoring critical responsibilities like the condition of our roads. We already know that investment is desperately needed back into our roads budget, particularly for the betterment of these damaged roads rather than patch-up maintenance that continues to wash away every time we have floods or heavy traffic. At a time when Labor has cut the road maintenance budget by 45 per cent since 2022, including a 25 per cent cut in last year's budget, the safety of our drivers is paramount. The sheer number of lives lost has been devastating, but we must never forget that these are not just numbers but people whose families, friends and communities will mourn their loss for years to come. With the roads worse than ever, a rise in lives lost and insurance claims through the roof, it is imperative that all avenues to repairing our roads are investigated, including the essential reassessment of road contracts in my region.

I want to thank everyone that has brought attention to the road issue in my community. Just in the past month, I have heard from Neil Harris, Alison Phillips, Ashleigh Hume, David Willis, Steve O'Shea, Peter Robinson, Tracey Burge, Emma Hunt, Ronnie Mason, Bill Winters, Peter Gillespie, Brian Lauder, Phil Searle, Ray Turley, Krystal Mackay, Rachel Spencer, Cheryl Wright, Bree Jeffery, Kyra Seach, Paul Yonger, Matt Bothington, Jonathan Tofts, Shannon Roach and Caitlyn Mary, who are all fighting, with me, for improved roads from Benalla to Kilmore and everywhere in between. The state government must deliver the step change in understanding.

Kangan Institute, Broadmeadows

Kathleen MATTHEWS-WARD (Broadmeadows) (19:07): (534) My adjournment matter is directed to the Minister for Skills and TAFE, and the action I seek is for her to join me in a visit to the Kangan Institute in Broadmeadows to see the incredible progress on our \$60 million Health and Community Centre of Excellence, currently under construction. Ahead of time and on budget, I love seeing the cranes in the air and the progress on this landmark building week after week. I was at the wonderful Kangan Institute for the Broadmeadows Revitalisation Board meeting just last Wednesday, and this week the windows are being added.

All day today in this house we have heard about the importance of the workforce for the rollout of our nation-leading and life-changing free kinder and Labor's record investment in early education and care. This centre will be critical in skilling up locals to take on these very rewarding jobs. We already know that we are going to need more health, allied aged care and disability workers now and into the future, and with free kinder more locals will have the option to enter training and join these rewarding and in-demand careers. This huge investment will deliver state-of-the-art laboratories and high-quality flexible learning spaces. It is the pride and joy of Broadmeadows. I thank all members of the revitalisation board, including Sally, Gina, Don, Sheena, Naim, Joseph, Jeroam, Gregory and Robert for their advocacy on this project.

It is also great to see plans shaping up for the new tech school in Broadmeadows, also to be delivered by Kangan Institute, another local election commitment being delivered by a Labor government that values skills, training and education and wants to ensure our people have the skills we need for the jobs of the future.

Seville Primary School

Bridget VALLENCE (Evelyn) (19:08): (535) Nearly a decade ago the Labor Party promised for 'all Victorian government schools to be asbestos free by 2020'. That is the quote in Labor's media release dated 26 November 2014 titled 'No more asbestos in Victorian schools under Labor'. But after

nearly a decade in power, this tired Labor government has completely failed this promise. Just look at Seville Primary School in my local electorate, a wonderful local school with fabulous teachers delivering quality education to bright young students. However, Seville Primary School is still waiting on the government to do the right thing and remove the asbestos that is posing a health and safety risk.

The matter I raise is for the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC. On behalf of the Seville Primary School community, the action I seek is for the minister to take all necessary steps to ensure the Victorian Asbestos Eradication Agency eradicates all the asbestos at Seville Primary School as a matter of priority, being that they are government-owned buildings. The minister will know the purpose of the Victorian Asbestos Eradication Agency, a state government body, as outlined on its website, is to:

... eradicate asbestos from Victorian Government buildings ...

and:

... prevent asbestos exposure, reduce the risk of asbestos-related diseases and make Victorian workplaces and communities safer.

But this is not happening at Seville Primary School, a government-owned building. Teachers and students are having to work and learn in an environment riddled with asbestos. I have seen it firsthand. The school community is calling for the asbestos to be fully removed, which would be best achieved by rebuilding these government schools with new, modern and safe school buildings, which the teachers and students deserve.

This truly has become a WorkSafe matter and I hope it will be taken seriously, because unfortunately the Labor government's Department of Education and its Victorian school asbestos removal program have completely ignored Seville Primary School for asbestos removal. That is despite the Victorian School Building Authority's own division 5 asbestos-containing materials assessment report for Seville Primary School, dated September 2020, revealing the significant amount of asbestos existing in the school. The VSBA's report outlined that its asbestos assessor covered all main learning environments for students and teachers from prep to grade 6 – block A, block B, block C, block D, the portable classroom and the toilets. The report outlined hundreds of square metres of walls, ceilings, window frames et cetera with asbestos. Classrooms, the first-aid room, the staffroom, the canteen and toilets are detailed in the report as having action classifications that require this asbestos to be removed in the short or medium term. This report was conducted 3½ years ago, which is why the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC needs to take this action.

Monbulk electorate telecommunications

Daniela DE MARTINO (Monbulk) (19:11): (536) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Government Services, and the action I seek is for the minister to visit my community of Monbulk to speak to locals about the impact of the recent power outage and subsequent telecommunications issues that left many without the ability to make 000 calls. Telecommunications are an essential and critical service. When a catastrophic weather event occurs it becomes life or death, so it is incumbent upon telecommunication providers to keep essential infrastructure running when disaster strikes. The Dandenong Ranges simply cannot be put in this position every time a storm occurs, especially when we saw some telco providers posting billion-dollar profits while on the same day vast sections of my electorate were isolated after the storms tore down powerlines, disconnecting mobile towers from power and completely cutting my constituents off from communication. I know that the minister is seeking a meeting with the federal minister about this matter, and I strongly lend my voice to her advocacy.

Even on a good day in the hills black spots are a regular occurrence. I am pleased that we have stepped in with our Connecting Victoria program to fund telecommunications infrastructure across the state to address this. Dozens of telecommunications projects were announced for the Dandenong Ranges in 2022 through our Connecting Victoria program, a \$540 million program to improve mobile and

broadband connectivity across the state. This includes NBN broadband upgrades in Monbulk and new mobile towers in various townships. It would be fantastic for the minister to visit one of these telecommunications towers, which the Allan Labor government is delivering through Connecting Victoria in my community, on this visit. I look forward to working closely with the minister on this matter over the coming months and very much look forward to her visit.

Energy security

Martin CAMERON (Morwell) (19:13): (537) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Energy and Resources, and the action I seek from the minister is on what the state government is doing to strengthen Victoria's power supply and network. Last year Victoria's energy watchdog warned the Labor government that its failure to maintain transmission lines was a major concern for both safety and power reliability. In November Energy Safe Victoria identified 50 instances of neglect on powerlines. One structure which was identified as a major safety concern in the report contributed to the outage last week that impacted half a million Victorians. Last year the Australian Energy Market Operator also confirmed that Victoria was the worst state in Australia for energy security. It has also predicted that Labor's accelerated closure of Yallourn will exacerbate the problem – that shutting down our coal-fired power stations and ripping this state off gas without a plan to keep the lights on is a recipe for disaster.

The SEC will not deliver enough renewable energy to meet the demand in time for Labor's accelerated planned closure of coal-fired power stations. Nearly 18 months since the government announced it would revive the SEC, it has done nothing to shore up our energy supply. It has invested in one single project, as a minority shareholder, when the private sector was already doing the work without taxpayer funds. For almost a decade now Labor has mismanaged the grid and failed to ensure the resilience of the network, and Victorians are literally paying the price, with many now living in energy poverty. The minister for energy proudly but very incorrectly stood in this place two weeks ago and claimed power prices were going down, down, down. I take this opportunity to remind the minister that power prices have soared 25 per cent in the last year. At one stage during the initial outage on 13 February, when all four units of Loy Yang A went offline, wholesale power prices soared to a whopping \$16,600 per megawatt hour. In comparison, prices were just \$60 in Queensland and \$300 in New South Wales. We are paying more than ever for a power supply that is increasingly unreliable because of this government's mismanagement. Minister, how can Victorians be assured that the lights will stay on when the Labor government is doing nothing to bring prices down and strengthen our fragile energy supply?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Morwell, could you just rephrase your question to provide an action for the minister?

Martin CAMERON: The action I seek from the minister is what the state government is doing to strengthen Victoria's power supply and network.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: You would like an update?

Martin CAMERON: Provide an update.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: There you go. Thank you very much.

Connecting Victoria

Martha HAYLETT (Ripon) (19:16): (538) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for Government Services. The action I seek is for the minister to join me in my electorate to talk to communities about our Labor government's incredible Connecting Victoria program. So many rural communities across Ripon are waiting with bated breath for the new and improved mobile towers that this \$540 million program will bring. Poor mobile reception and black spots are the bane of so many people's existence in rural and regional Victoria, but now, after waiting

forever for the useless federal Liberal government to do anything about improving the issue, our state government has stepped in to deliver where they did not.

The Connecting Victoria program will fast-track improvements to mobile and broadband connectivity through more than 1200 mobile projects and more than 180 broadband projects across Victoria. In Ripon we are set to receive four new mobile towers in Ararat, two in Blowhard, two in Cardigan, one near Newbridge, Crowlands, Invermay, Napoleons, Mount Bolton, Ross Creek, Arnold, Bridgewater, Eddington and Learmonth, three near Sulky, one in Miners Rest, one in Talbot and six near Lucas, just to name a few. We will also benefit from improved broadband connections, including in Barkly, Landsborough, Lexton and beyond. I would welcome the chance for the minister to visit my electorate and discuss this fantastic project with the communities that will benefit from it.

The Briars, Mount Martha

Chris CREWITHER (Mornington) (19:18): (539) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Environment. The action I seek is for the minister to take steps to ensure that the Briars wildlife sanctuary in Mount Martha in my electorate and other similar wildlife sanctuaries are better protected from decisions such as that made last year by Mornington Peninsula shire to hold a Harry Potter sound and light show within the fenced sanctuary. In August last year the Mornington Peninsula shire decided in a closed meeting to host a Warner Brothers Harry Potter sound and light show within the fenced wildlife sanctuary of the Briars. This was revealed to the public in late December last year, with much of the community being blindsided by this decision and with much condemnation then flowing and snowballing from there.

Soon a petition was launched, which I signed and promoted at the end of December. I also put out a public statement saying the event itself was right, but the location of the event was wrong given its impact on flora and fauna, including nocturnal and diurnal animals – even including a pair of nesting vulnerable powerful owls, rescued wallabies and more. I also at the time wrote to the shire CEO and to all Briars ward councillors at the end of December and the start of January calling on the event to be moved and suggesting the community Mornington Rotary forest in the Briars as an alternative location, as suggested to me by local and former councillor Anne Shaw. This suggestion was unfortunately rebuffed at the time, but then the online petition garnered over 22,000 signatures calling for the event's relocation. Media also publicised the issue, with it making local, Victorian, Australian and even international newspapers; social media; TV, including news and current affairs programs; and radio. Locals, environmental groups and so many others banded together, with the Save the Briars group set up and a community meeting organised in Mornington that attracted over 200 people and which so many passionate locals spoke at.

In the end there was a win for grassroots community advocacy. I am very happy to say that the Mornington Peninsula shire, with Warner Bros, decided to relocate the event to the Mornington Rotary community forest in the Briars, as originally suggested. This is a win-win, as the Harry Potter event can go ahead in a suitable location, not in a fenced wildlife sanctuary. It was an absolutely dogged campaign that saw the community unite to protect the only fenced sanctuary on the Mornington Peninsula, and I was proud to be a part of this campaign and see the community stand up. The event would have had a devastating and tangible effect on local wildlife and disrupted already fragile ecosystems. In particular people like Louise Page, Anne Shaw, Peter Rawlings and so many others should be acknowledged. I acknowledge a couple of the 11 shire councillors who opposed this event to begin with but also other councillors who were able to change their minds after the further evidence was given and following the community advocacy. But this decision should never have been made in the first place, and I hope that the minister can look at what can be done to further protect such sanctuaries into the future.

Chelsea Primary School

Tim RICHARDSON (Mordialloc) (19:21): (540) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Education, and the action I seek is an update on the progress of Chelsea Primary School's build as

part of stage 1 of their master plan redevelopment. It was the then Andrews government that committed funds in the budget towards Chelsea Primary School, a wonderful school of more than 110 years significance for our communities. To see the great transformation that is taking place, literally coming out of the ground, to build their multipurpose facilities has been truly extraordinary. Some \$3.9 million has been invested in Chelsea Primary School. Under the leadership of Taylor Irish, the school goes from strength from strength. It is one of many examples of the upgrades and building improvements we are doing around the area.

On the weekend we had a massive celebration – I reckon half of Victoria turned out to Mordialloc College. It was absolutely heaving as we celebrated the centenary of this magnificent secondary college. One hundred years is extraordinary to reflect on: the mechanics institute where Mordialloc College was established, and then at Attenborough Park and along the Mordialloc Creek. Of course for First Nations people the Mordialloc Creek was a place of learning for generations. For thousands of years it has sustained life and community, and it now is the home of education facilities there. A 100-year celebration for Mordialloc College, and we have done three stages of works and improvements there.

We have seen upgrades at Chelsea Heights, Yarrabah School and Edithvale Primary School. We have upgraded Aspendale Primary School, Parkdale Primary, Parktone Primary, Mentone Park Primary, Parkdale Secondary College, Kilbreda College in the independent school sector, St Joey's in Chelsea, St John Vianney's, St Brigid's primary school and St Louis de Montfort's Primary School. It is all happening in our patch. The message is clear: when it comes to education and investing in our kids, the Andrews and Allan Labor governments have led not only Victoria but the nation in capital investment in our schools to make sure the first-class education that happens in our community is matched by first-class facilities.

I would love to get an update on the progress of one of our latest builds, Chelsea Primary School. I will not ask two questions, but if the minister would love to come down there as well, we would not be opposed to that. But I know he is very busy, so we will ask for an update on the Chelsea Primary School redevelopment.

Responses

Colin BROOKS (Bundoora – Minister for Development Victoria, Minister for Precincts, Minister for Creative Industries) (19:23): The member for Bulleen raised a matter for the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events. He was looking for an upgrade to the Templestowe Bowling Club, which would cost approximately \$100,000. He mentioned that the bowling club has recently celebrated 175 years, so we wish that bowling club well. The member for Hastings, a hardworking member of Parliament, invited the Minister for Water down to his electorate to meet with Hastings locals to discuss a recycled water proposal down there based on the Tyabb–Somerville scheme. I am sure the minister will be keen to come down and visit the member for Hastings. The member for Euroa raised a matter for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety asking for a review of road maintenance contracts in the Euroa electorate, and she named quite a number of individuals from her local community who had raised and worked with her on that issue.

The member for Broadmeadows talked about the Broadmeadows revitalisation taskforce and in raising a matter for the Minister for Skills and TAFE asked for the minister to join her for a visit to Kangan Institute. She also talked about the wonderful tech school in her community. The member for Evelyn raised a matter for the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC in relation to taking all necessary steps to eradicate asbestos at several state primary schools. The member for Monbulk – again, an incredibly hardworking local member of Parliament – raised a matter for the Minister for Government Services asking the minister to visit Monbulk to talk to locals about the impact of recent storms on telecommunications. As a local member of Parliament who has been so active in supporting her local community, I am sure she wants to see the minister there to listen to locals.

The member for Morwell eventually raised a matter for the Minister for Energy and Resources to provide an update on strengthening Victoria's energy supply network, and I am sure the minister will do that. The member for Ripon raised a matter for the Minister for Government Services asking that the minister join her in the electorate to talk to communities about Labor's incredible Connecting Victoria program, a \$540 million program. That is a massive rollout of telecommunication upgrades. The member for Mornington raised a matter for the Minister for Environment. The request was that the minister take steps to ensure wildlife at the Briars wildlife sanctuary is better protected into the future, and I am sure that the minister will respond to the member.

The member for Mordialloc – it is very hard to follow in the footsteps of the member for Mordialloc when he is on his feet, because he just rattled off the school upgrades in his electorate – raised a matter for the Minister for Education and talked about the great progress of the Chelsea Primary School upgrade. I know that he has spoken about that and has advocated very strongly for that, a \$3.9 million upgrade, so a significant upgrade to that school. Adjournments only allow for one action to be raised, but he did slip in at the end there that he would not mind if the minister visited the school as well. I am sure that the minister will respond to that matter.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The house stands adjourned until tomorrow morning. Nanu nanu.

House adjourned 7:26 pm.