



# **Hansard**

## **LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL**

**60th Parliament**

**Wednesday 21 February 2024**



# Members of the Legislative Council

## 60th Parliament

### President

Shaun Leane

### Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

### Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

### Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Lizzie Blandthorn

### Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Georgie Crozier

### Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Evan Mulholland (from 31 August 2023)

Matthew Bach (to 31 August 2023)

Member	Region	Party	Member	Region	Party
Bach, Matthew <sup>1</sup>	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Luu, Trung	Western Metropolitan	Lib
Batchelor, Ryan	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	Mansfield, Sarah	Western Victoria	Greens
Bath, Melina	Eastern Victoria	Nat	McArthur, Bev	Western Victoria	Lib
Berger, John	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	McCracken, Joe	Western Victoria	Lib
Blandthorn, Lizzie	Western Metropolitan	ALP	McGowan, Nick	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib
Bourman, Jeff	Eastern Victoria	SFFP	McIntosh, Tom	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Broad, Gaele	Northern Victoria	Nat	Mulholland, Evan	Northern Metropolitan	Lib
Copsey, Katherine	Southern Metropolitan	Greens	Payne, Rachel	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LCV
Crozier, Georgie	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Puglielli, Aiv	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Greens
Davis, David	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Purcell, Georgie	Northern Victoria	AJP
Deeming, Moira <sup>2</sup>	Western Metropolitan	IndLib	Ratnam, Samantha <sup>5</sup>	Northern Metropolitan	Greens
Erdogan, Enver	Northern Metropolitan	ALP	Shing, Harriet	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Ermacora, Jacinta	Western Victoria	ALP	Somyurek, Adem	Northern Metropolitan	DLP
Ettershank, David	Western Metropolitan	LCV	Stitt, Ingrid	Western Metropolitan	ALP
Galea, Michael	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Symes, Jaclyn	Northern Victoria	ALP
Gray-Barberio, Anasina <sup>3</sup>	Northern Metropolitan	Greens	Tarlamis, Lee	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Heath, Renee	Eastern Victoria	Lib	Terpstra, Sonja	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Hermans, Ann-Marie	South-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Tierney, Gayle	Western Victoria	ALP
Leane, Shaun	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Tyrrell, Rikkie-Lee	Northern Victoria	PHON
Limbrick, David <sup>4</sup>	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Watt, Sheena	Northern Metropolitan	ALP
Lovell, Wendy	Northern Victoria	Lib	Welch, Richard <sup>6</sup>	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib

<sup>1</sup> Resigned 7 December 2023

<sup>2</sup> Lib until 27 March 2023

<sup>3</sup> Appointed 14 November 2024

<sup>4</sup> LDP until 26 July 2023

<sup>5</sup> Resigned 8 November 2024

<sup>6</sup> Appointed 7 February 2024

### Party abbreviations

AJP – Animal Justice Party; ALP – Australian Labor Party; DLP – Democratic Labour Party;

Greens – Australian Greens; IndLib – Independent Liberal; LCV – Legalise Cannabis Victoria;

LDP – Liberal Democratic Party; Lib – Liberal Party of Australia; LP – Libertarian Party;

Nat – National Party of Australia; PHON – Pauline Hanson's One Nation; SFFP – Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party



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**Wednesday 21 February 2024**

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

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

Statutory Rules under the following Acts of Parliament –

Bail Act 1977 – No. 8.

Co-operatives National Law Application Act 2013 – No. 9.

Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 – No. 10.

Rail Safety National Law Application Act 2013 – No. 11.

Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal Act 1998 – No. 7.

***Business of the house*****Notices**

**Notices of motion given.**

***Members statements*****Red Hot Summer Tour**

**Sonja TERPSTRA** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:41): Recently I attended the Red Hot Summer music festival in the beautiful Yarra Valley at Rochford Wines, just outside of my electorate. I know that there were many, many people who attended that fantastic outdoor music festival. Of course what I want to talk about is that while there were some fantastic international acts there, such as Simple Minds, there were also some amazing Australian bands such as Noiseworks and Icehouse. This festival is a great example of the investment that the Allan Labor government has into not only our music but our artist scene. Under the Allan Labor government there are continued opportunities for local artists to seek grants ranging from \$5000 to \$20,000 to assist with financial aspects that go to the planning for music concerts as well as various other events, exhibitions and other various creative arts. Whilst it was incredibly hot, there were plenty of people there who were willing to brave the sun and partake in all manner of things that I cannot mention here.

**First Peoples First**

**Sonja TERPSTRA** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:42): The Allan Labor government has supported additional festivals, such as the First Peoples First event at the St Kilda foreshore, which took place last Saturday. The event was made free to the public and greatly helped to promote the Australian Indigenous cultural arts sector.

**National Gallery of Victoria**

**Sonja TERPSTRA** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:43): Also the ongoing NGV Triennial exhibition, which features 100 different projects, has been on display since December of last year and will continue until April of this year. The exhibition features a range of different artistic styles. It is also free for the public, which will undoubtedly serve as an incentive for any Victorian to discover more about our creative arts sector.

**Little Lane Early Learning**

**John BERGER** (Southern Metropolitan) (09:43): I have two different matters today. The first regards Little Lane Early Learning centre. Last week I had the privilege to visit their centre in my

community of Hawthorn – a community which I know dearly misses their former hardworking member of Parliament John Kennedy, an educator who knew what mattered to the people of Hawthorn. At Little Lane I had the opportunity to meet with Mike and Shan, pioneers of early learning spaces. They are parents of five young girls and decided to combine their skills to create Little Lane. They now have locations across the country, including a facility opening soon in my community of Glen Iris at 1597 Malvern Road. I am looking forward to joining them at the opening and seeing what they have to achieve there. Thanks also to centre manager Christian for taking the time out of your busy day to have a chat.

#### **Samantha's Child Care Centre**

**John BERGER** (Southern Metropolitan) (09:44): On the other matter, I also had the opportunity to meet with Samantha's kindergarten in Camberwell. I spoke to centre manager Eva Connern and general manager Catherine Harrison about the opportunities they provide for good, secure and fulfilling employment in early childhood care. Thanks to the Labor government we have made it free to get a cert III in early childhood education and care, and I would encourage anyone in my community to get in contact with my office if you want a career educating our next generation.

#### **Land tax**

**David LIMBRICK** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:44): The people of my electorate who work in manufacturing are amazing. As the South East Melbourne Manufacturers Alliance points out, they make everything from yoghurt to trains, from buses to bolts, and 300 of these companies export goods overseas. But thousands of jobs in the manufacturing sector are now under threat. They are at risk because of yet another over-the-top government response to the pandemic.

Manufacturers are in shock after being sent ridiculous land tax bills now amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars and multiples higher than previous bills. We have heard a lot of posturing lately from politicians who claim to be worried about the cost of living and price gouging by supermarkets, but the draconian tax hike amounts to price gouging that is far worse than ever envisaged by the greediest capitalist. This is a dreadful assault on the most valuable people we have, the people who use their ingenuity to create wealth. Not only does this price gouging threaten current enterprises, it will discourage new ones. Why would you begin a manufacturing business in this state? The Libertarian Party wholeheartedly condemns the increase in land tax.

#### **Western Victoria fires**

**Jacinta ERMACORA** (Western Victoria) (09:46): I want to thank emergency services workers and volunteers who responded to the needs of our community on Tuesday 13 February and indeed are still responding across our state. I refer to the Grampians fires in my electorate at Pomonal and Halls Gap as well as in the northern part of the Grampians National Park near Dadswells Bridge and Ledcourt. On Wednesday I visited an incident control centre as well as the Ararat and Stawell emergency relief centres. I want to thank local CFA members, Forest Fire Management Victoria staff, Fire Rescue Victoria, SES groups, police and local councils.

I met with representatives of the Northern Grampians shire at the Stawell emergency relief centre, where Pomonal residents had gathered to stay safe and receive support during the fire. There is only one thing worse than not knowing if your home has burnt down, and that must be to find out that it has. My thoughts are with those who have lost so much, and I know that in small communities these experiences can be traumatic for the whole community. As we move into the recovery phase, I want to express my pride in the care and resilience of the Halls Gap, Pomonal and Stawell communities.

#### **Manh Nguyen**

**Moir DEEMING** (Western Metropolitan) (09:47): This past week I went to celebrate the Year of the Dragon, and I just want to say a big thankyou to the Vietnamese Community in Australia – Victoria Chapter and the Footscray Asian Business Association for putting on a great Tết festival.



I also had the privilege to stand there with a young boy, who has now become a man, that became like a son to us, Manh Nguyen. He came to live with our family. He was an asylum seeker from Vietnam. When he lived with us, we got him enrolled in the local Catholic school, and then he became ill and got cancer. It is just a really happy story, because Victoria really turned up for him. He was able to get all the treatment that he needed. He recovered to full health. He is now a father, and he is contributing to his community again. It was a really beautiful closing of that circle to have him stand up there on that stage with me and to translate for me at that festival. So I just wanted to give a big shout-out to Manh, who we in our family call Mike. We are so proud of you for everything that you have done. Keep up the good work.

### **Mornington Peninsula sporting facilities**

**Tom McINTOSH** (Eastern Victoria) (09:48): It was great to be at Olympic Park reserve in Rosebud earlier this week, where we celebrated 10 new reserves around the peninsula getting upgraded lighting facilities. We had Rosebud Football Netball Club, the junior club, the soccer club and the cricket club all benefiting from the upgrades there at the reserve. Indeed clubs right across the Mornington Peninsula are benefiting, and it is great. We are getting people active; we are getting physical activity happening. We are getting people together, that community, and looking after people's mental health and wellbeing on that side. I am delighted the state government could make this investment with the Mornington Peninsula shire – it is nearly \$2 million – to see all these lights installed across ovals across the peninsula. It is going to see thousands of locals playing and training to be the best they can be in their sporting endeavours.

There are a lot of clubs that are benefiting from this, but I just want to name a few. I already mentioned the Rosebud clubs. There are also Hastings Football Netball Club, Hastings Cricket Club, Red Hill Football Netball Club, Red Hill Cricket Club, Dromana Junior Football Netball Club, Dromana Cricket Club, Somerville Eagles Soccer Club, Somerville Football Netball Club, Somerville Cricket Club and Mornington Peninsula Athletic Club. Congratulations to all, and I hope the new lights are supporting your club and all players.

### **Wyndham Multicultural Lunar Festival**

**David ETTERS HANK** (Western Metropolitan) (09:50): On Sunday I had a hoot as the Point Cook cultural community hosted the Wyndham Multicultural Lunar Festival. Fun fact: the 2021 census found that Point Cook is the most multicultural suburb in Australia, with people born in 146 countries calling it home. Nearby Tarneit and Werribee came second and third respectively. Over 10 hours there were more than 80 performances on the central stage, with such a diversity of cultures on display and everyone just having a good time enjoying with their neighbours this extraordinary spectacle. I am hard-pressed to imagine a more perfect example of our multicultural society in action. The west is testimony to the fact that diversity and inclusion are Australia. We should be proud of what we have built, and we should continue to strive for ever greater unity, from our First Australians through to our newest Australians. How sad it is then to hear voices in this place and others that would seek to sow division and racism. Whether it is the old, hackneyed refugee tropes or whipping up fears over reconciliation with our First Nations people, to those who imagine that electoral success can be built on the back of division and fearmongering the people of Western Melbourne simply say, 'Tell 'em they're dreaming!'

### **Middle East conflict**

**Sarah MANSFIELD** (Western Victoria) (09:51): Last week I attended an event where Palestinian health workers shared stories about what their friends, families and health colleagues are experiencing in Gaza. Their stories were harrowing. They echoed the reports that we hear daily from health workers in Gaza, heroes who are risking their lives to continue to provide care in the most dire of circumstances imaginable: tens of thousands of innocent civilians being killed and traumatically injured without access to health facilities because these have been bombed, raided, disconnected from electricity and water and lack basic supplies. Who could possibly be unaffected by the idea of people, including

children, having to undergo surgery without anaesthetic? Many thousands lack shelter, warmth, food and clean water, which is driving even more to sickness and death. Only a small number of Palestinians have managed to escape from Gaza, and some have been allowed to seek refuge in Australia. A small number of them are in Victoria, where they have found safety. However, we are aware that they have limited access to basic material aid like food and medicine. We are fortunate here. We can offer that, and I would urge the state government to heed the calls of local community organisations and provide these refugees with the material support that they and countless others are unable to access at home.

### *Bills*

#### **Bail Amendment (Indictable Offences Whilst on Bail) Bill 2024**

##### *Statement of compatibility*

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (09:53): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

In accordance with section 28 of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (the Charter), I make this statement of compatibility with respect to the Bail Amendment (Indictable Offences Whilst on Bail) Bill 2024 (the Bill).

It is my opinion that, the Bill, as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with the human rights contained within the Charter.

This Bill seeks to retain an existing provision of the Bail Act 1977, specifically the crime of committing an indictable offence whilst on bail, which was inserted into the Bail Act 1977 by an amending Act in 2013.

The Bill seeks to prevent the repeal of this offence provision which would otherwise occur pursuant to the Bail Amendment Act 2023 upon its proclamation.

In the event that the offence provision is repealed, the Bill seeks to re-insert it into the Bail Act 1977.

To the extent that the 2013 creation of the offence of committing an indictable offence whilst on bail was compatible with the Charter, this Bill is similarly compatible with the Charter given it seeks to preserve or reimpose the exact same provision.

Based on the foregoing, it is my view that the Bill is compatible with the Charter, as the human rights implications of the effective provisions of the Bill have previously been considered by the Parliament as reasonable and in accordance with Charter obligations.

**Evan Mulholland MLC**  
**Member for Northern Metropolitan Region**

##### *Second reading*

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (09:53): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

This bill introduces amendments to the Bail Amendment Act 2023 so that section 30B of the Bail Act 1977 – the offence of committing an indictable offence whilst on bail – is not repealed.

Alternatively, if by the time this bill passes the section 30B offence has already been repealed, this bill will re-create that offence.

The bail offence contained in section 30B is an important part of Victoria's bail laws and contributes to community safety. Repealing this measure is a backwards step that will needlessly put Victorians at risk by making it easier for repeat offenders to secure bail.

Nevertheless, repealing section 30B is what the Allan Labor government has done through the Bail Amendment Act 2023.

However, while the Bail Amendment Act 2023 has passed the Parliament and received royal assent, it has not yet been proclaimed. Proclamation will occur by default on 25 March 2024 if the government does not do so earlier.

The Parliament therefore has the opportunity to correct this error before it takes effect and weakens Victoria's bail laws to the detriment of community safety.

The section 30B offence was inserted into the Bail Act in 2013 at the initiative of the then Liberal and Nationals government.

Its effect is twofold.

First, it provides that committing an indictable offence whilst on bail is in and of itself an offence. This reflects the fact that bail is a form of licence for an accused person to remain free in the community pending a court determining the charge or charges against them.

Inherent in bail is the concept that a person accused of a crime is permitted by a bail decision maker to remain in the community until trial under condition that they do not offend.

A person who commits an indictable offence whilst on bail has breached that covenant and it is therefore appropriate that they suffer a penalty under criminal law. Under section 30B the maximum penalty is three months imprisonment or a fine of 30 penalty units.

Second – and more importantly – a breach of section 30B automatically elevates the test for bail that applies to a person charged with an indictable offence.

So, if a person on bail commits an offence that would otherwise attract the 'unacceptable risk' test (the lowest test), section 30B means that the 'show compelling reason' test (the middle test) will apply instead.

Or if a person on bail commits an offence that would otherwise attract the 'show compelling reason' test (the middle test), section 30B means that the 'show exceptional circumstances' test (the highest test) will apply instead.

Where a person is charged with an indictable offence that already attracts the highest test for bail (for example, murder) there is no further elevation of the test for bail.

By elevating the test for bail for a bailee who has committed an indictable offence, the Parliament made clear that repeat offenders who breach the community's trust by committing a serious offence whilst on bail will be dealt with firmly.

A person who has broken their bail covenant by offending should face a higher test to receive bail again.

By abolishing section 30B the Labor government is sending a message that people on bail can offend time and again while facing the same test for bail that they met for the first offence.

Make no mistake – without section 30B, repeat serious offenders in Victoria will find it easier to get bail. This puts the community at risk.

Liberals and Nationals MPs strongly opposed abolishing this offence at the time and indeed tried to pass amendments to prevent this change. The Labor government did not support those amendments.

Now, when serious crime is rising and police stations are closing across Victoria, it is time for the Labor government to admit that it got it wrong.

This bill is the Labor government's opportunity to fix its mistake and again strengthen bail laws before they are weakened to the detriment of Victorians.

It is acknowledged that to have someone accused of a crime remanded in custody prior to their day in court is, to some extent, a contradiction of the principle of the presumption of innocence.

But it is essential to balance that principle with the safety of the community.

In this instance the government has not got that balance right.

At a time when Crime Statistics Agency data records a 33 per cent increase in residential aggravated burglaries over the 12 months to September 2023 and, under the Labor government, 43 police stations have had their opening hours slashed, it is exactly the wrong time to be weakening bail laws.

I know my colleague Ms Crozier has had some personal events happen to do with aggravated burglaries and has told her story. I know in particular in my electorate we have had police stations like in Epping and Reservoir close. It was only in 2021 or 2020 that there was a \$15 million investment in the Reservoir police station, a brand new 24-hour police station. The government even compulsorily acquired three homes to do so. Lisa Neville went there for a big, flashy opening. It was going to be great for the community to have a 24-hour police station. What did they do just a few years later? They made it an 8-hour shopfront. Really, talk about a waste of taxpayers money: make a \$15 million investment in the Reservoir police station in order to have a 24-hour police station with all the supports and functions that that police station needed to operate 24 hours, compulsorily acquire three homes and then make it an 8-hour shopfront. Seriously, what a waste of money. They announced it back then, and then with a whimper on a Friday afternoon late last year they announced that a whole bunch of police stations are going to be turned into basically shopfronts. I know the Police Association Victoria are upset about this, and so is any Victoria Police member you speak to.

The government does not seem to care. They do not seem to have a view. It has really got a shameful record that we need to reverse. Community safety is important. I have spoken about criminal justice reform quite a bit. The social licence for criminal justice reform only comes when you put community safety first, when that is the rolled-gold principle of criminal justice reform, and this government does not have that balance right.

This bill reflects a simple principle: if you abuse the privilege of bail by committing further offences, you should face a tougher test to get bail again.

It would be difficult to find many Victorians who would disagree with that proposition.

I urge the Labor government and other members to support this bill and thereby remedy an error which will otherwise weaken Victoria's bail laws and put the community at risk.

I commend the bill to the house.

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (10:01): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for two weeks.

**Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for two weeks.**

### *Production of documents*

#### **Melbourne medically supervised injecting facility**

**David ETTERSHANK** (Western Metropolitan) (10:02): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes the failure of the Victorian government to release any report of the expert advisory panel led by former police commissioner Mr Ken Lay into a second medically supervised injecting room in Melbourne's CBD;
- (2) requires the Leader of the Government, in accordance with standing order 10.01, to table in the Council:
  - (a) by Wednesday 6 March 2024 a copy of Mr Lay's final report into a second medically supervised injecting room handed to the office of the former Minister for Mental Health in the week beginning 29 May 2023;
  - (b) by Monday 18 March 2024 copies of:
    - (i) all drafts of Mr Lay's report into a second medically supervised injecting room handed to the office of the current and each former minister for mental health and minister for health since October 2020;

- (ii) all communications between the Department of Health and Mr Lay regarding the report and any related documents between January and September 2023; and
- (iii) all briefings to the Minister for Mental Health and the Minister for Health regarding options for a second medically supervised injecting room in Melbourne's CBD, since May 2020.

In 2020 the government committed to opening Victoria's second supervised injecting room, honouring the recommendations of the Hamilton report and acknowledging the clear evidence that an overdose prevention service in the CBD will save lives. In 2020 the government established an expert advisory panel led by former police commissioner Ken Lay to write a report examining the effectiveness of medically supervised injecting rooms and the prospect of a supervised injecting room in the CBD. The panel undertook a rigorous process of examination and consultation, culminating in Mr Lay's final report being given to the Minister for Mental Health in May 2023. But tragically this report has not been released publicly.

Let us put this in some context. The City of Melbourne has the highest number of heroin overdoses of any local government area in Victoria, with community health service Cohealth estimating an average of two people die every month from heroin overdoses. Heroin-related ambulance call-outs in the CBD are increasing, with 390 related call-outs in 2022, an increase of 28 per cent on the previous year. Nearly 12 per cent of all ambulance call-outs in the City of Melbourne are heroin related. We know, and the government knows from the North Richmond experience, that medically supervised injecting rooms not only save lives but provide a wraparound suite of services that provide addicted people with a road back to health, a road to security, a road back to life itself.

Last September, 20 of Victoria's peak medical bodies and unions called on the government to urgently open a supervised injecting room in Melbourne's CBD. This included the AMA, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, the Victorian Healthcare Association, the Health and Community Services Union and the Victorian Ambulance Union.

Premier Allan has committed this government to greater transparency, and that is to be applauded – genuinely applauded. Consistent with that commitment, this motion provides the government with the opportunity to walk the talk. Release the Lay report and related documents, and take the community into your trust. Lives literally depend upon it. I commend the motion to the Council.

**Ryan BATCHELOR** (Southern Metropolitan) (10:05): I am happy to rise and speak in this debate on Mr Ettershank's documents motion. It is seeking a range of documents, but principally the Ken Lay report in relation to medically supervised injecting facilities. I have made contributions to this chamber in the year that I have been here, as have others, on just how important this issue is, how seriously the government takes the question of supporting injecting drug users and their health, because fundamentally this issue is about saving lives – improving health outcomes, supporting those with addiction and saving their lives.

I think what we have seen in the last few years since the first medically supervised injecting facility was opened in North Richmond is exactly that, and I will come back to that in just a second in the short contribution that I have got to make. I do note Mr Ettershank in his contribution and previously in other fora has shown a genuine concern about this issue, exhibits genuine compassion, which is in contrast occasionally to some of the contributions we have had from others in this debate who seek to resort to more political opportunism and scaremongering rather than focusing on the fundamental question and the fundamental issue, which is that serious issue about how to help some of the most vulnerable in our community with addiction and health concerns. They are serious issues, and they demand both serious attention and due consideration. They are not ones the government takes lightly or flippantly. They are not something you can just dip into lightly; you have got to seriously consider all of the issues. They demand thorough consideration. I think if you look at what we have been doing as a government over the last few years in relation to this issue, you will see how thorough and methodical we have been.

The first medically supervised injecting facility, in North Richmond, was established on a trial basis to see how it would go – so we could test the water and see this new form of treatment and harm reduction service for Victoria. There has obviously been something operating in New South Wales for a long time, but it was a new service in Victoria on a trial basis to see how it would go. The trial showed us it was incredibly successful. Some of the stats we have had: more than 7500 overdoses successfully and safely managed in the facility, 63 lives saved in North Richmond. More than that, and Mr Ettershank touched on this, it is not just preventing overdose, it is also the referral pathways that the service in North Richmond has been able to put people on. There have been 5500 referrals out of that service: GPs, dentists, housing, opioid replacement therapies, bloodborne treatments – that is what the benefit has been beyond just preventing overdose. It has been about getting people into the services that they need. That is incredibly important. It has worked well.

It has also had an effect on health services in the broader community by reducing ambulance call-outs and taking pressure off local hospitals. The trial was successful, so the government brought legislation into the Parliament, passed legislation in the Parliament, to make that first facility permanent, and did so in a considered and thoughtful way. It is the kind of approach we have taken in North Richmond – thinking about and considering the issues carefully and making sure we get it right is the approach the government is taking. The report that Mr Lay has prepared for us is, obviously, with the minister for consideration. In the form and manner in which the government normally considers motions like this from this Parliament requesting documents, I am sure the minister will carefully consider today's motion as she continues to work hard on this incredibly important issue.

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (10:10): I am very pleased to speak on this motion today by Mr Ettershank. I would like to thank him for the discussions we have had on this motion and the way that we have collaboratively worked together across the chamber on this motion in order to get this motion right, because I think it is really important.

We are now running quickly up to about four years since the government commissioned this report. It is becoming a bit of a joke. We have heard several stories about drafts being handed back and rewritten. I think the Victorian public deserve to know what is in the report, what was in those drafts and the briefings the minister has had on it – or the several ministers for mental health have had on this. I would like to thank Mr Ettershank, because although we might disagree around the sides, in principle we are allies in our support for a medically supervised injecting room and the principle of medically supervised injecting rooms. We are indeed allies a whole bunch of issues. But the principle is the right one. While we might disagree on locations, I think getting this right, reading the report and getting the government to give up the report are really important.

I note with interest Mr Batchelor's comments as well that the minister might take up this motion. I put a very similar motion last year, which the government furiously talked out and voted against, for documents for this. I think it is really, really important we see the briefings and we see the Lay report. I think it is important for the social licence for these kinds of injecting centres that the government is transparent with people. The perception is the government has got something to hide.

This is an area which is my electorate, and I speak to businesses all the time, I speak to locals all the time. I speak to Ha Nguyen, head of the Victoria Street Business Association – and I would just like to take a moment to acknowledge how great the Lunar New Year Festival was on Victoria Street the other day. If there is anything I can do in my time in Parliament, one of them is to make Victoria Street a place people drive to and travel to again, not just through, and I think a lot more can be done in terms of community safety and support for businesses surrounding the injecting room there. They have made it permanent there, sure, but we can definitely do better in supporting those businesses that are doing it really tough.

In terms of the CBD location, there are a number of people I have spoken to – countless businesses. Wayne Gatt, the Police Association Victoria secretary, said the top of Bourke Street and the CBD is in general the wrong place to put an injecting room and warned the injecting room could stretch police

resources to an unsustainable level, impacting the safety of the area. I would be keen to read the report, because I think there are a number of options that we could go through. I in principle am not opposed to somewhere around the St Vincent's district, perhaps where the previous sobering-up centre was, which would put it in a place that would be appropriate with the health supports. There is already an addiction clinic there. There are wraparound health services there.

I would be keen to see what Mr Lay has put forward – perhaps what Mr Lay has put forward and got told to rewrite. I would be very much interested in that, but also my constituents would be very much interested in that. I listen to them all the time. I have organised forums in Richmond right near the injecting room and have spoken to residents with completely different views. They know my view, that I am supportive of injecting rooms. I am not supportive of the Richmond location, but I am supportive of injecting rooms. Some of them disagree with me on that, but that is their right. Of course there are a lot of people that are very concerned about it being next to a school, obviously, and very concerned about antisocial behaviour. But in principle we should support this documents motion, and I again thank Mr Ettershank for putting it forward.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:15): I rise on behalf of my Greens colleagues in support of this short-form documents motion. This moment is very pressing. The Ken Lay report and the process that created this report are years overdue. This was a promise made under the former Premier that is yet to be fulfilled – that is, the delivery of a Melbourne supervised injecting facility. We have seen the data from the North Richmond site. We have seen a series of reviews that have indicated very strongly the benefit that supervised injecting offers to the broader community but particularly to those in the community who do use injectable drugs.

We need the latest data to have an informed conversation about this issue. What has happened up until now is that without the data that would be provided in this report there is speculation, there is fearmongering and there is an increasing stigma that has come to many in the community, particularly those who are quite vulnerable and who would benefit from the wraparound services that supervised injecting facilities provide. We know that based on data that is provided to everyone in this place, not just government, we need to have that informed conversation so that rooms are placed where they are needed. We know that in reality there are people in the Melbourne CBD who are using injectable drugs, are overdosing and are dying every month that we do not have access to this service. We know it is desperately needed. The community have been asking for this for so long.

There is a conversation about certainty for local business and amenity. That is part of the conversation, but the crucial thing here is this is severe. Lives are at risk every month that goes by without this service, and the years of delay – I shudder at the data on how many people have come to harm without access to supervised injecting in the City of Melbourne. We know that right across this state this is a conversation that we need to be having, and until we arrive at finally delivering that unfulfilled promise of a Melbourne supervised room we will not be able to progress that conversation. We desperately need to.

This issue, the issue of harm reduction when it comes to drug use, and we will get to this later with the subject of pill testing, should be above politics, because what will happen if we do not get this right is far too severe – that is, that people lose their lives and families are destroyed. The ripple effect that this has multigenerationally through the community is truly shocking. We need to be moving on this as a matter of priority.

We know that there was the courage of establishing the North Richmond room in years gone by. How many years have passed since then? The community has looked at the data from that and seen that this has worked; it is effective. We need to be having an informed conversation. We need to be moving forward, not sitting idly by. To be honest, I think what has happened – I have no doubt there are things going on behind the scenes – up until now is, at least in my opinion, in order to avoid a fear campaign, the data has been withheld until government can come forward with a decision. I can see the logic there; however, what we have seen in the absence of this data is a fear campaign, speculation and

stigma to those in the community who are using injectable drugs and those who would seek to support them. We need to move forward with this. All parties in this chamber should have access to the best data so that we can have a proper debate about this issue to get it right. The Ken Lay report is so long overdue. I commend this motion to the house.

**Michael GALEA** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:18): I also rise to share a few comments today on motion 311, which has been brought to us today by Mr Ettershank, and I thank him for doing so. I, like others, wish to briefly acknowledge his sincere passion on this issue and longstanding advocacy and indeed that of his party as well. The Ken Lay report is absolutely a very significant report that the government is rightly considering, and I acknowledge the extensive work that Minister Stitt is doing right now in engaging with that report and making sure that the government response that will be prepared for that report is as robust and as thorough as possible and actually answers to what that report calls for too.

As every member who has spoken has said, this is a very significant issue. I have spoken before about North Richmond. It was of course this Labor government that introduced the North Richmond medically supervised injecting centre – firstly, on a trial basis, and secondly, enshrined in legislation. In my previous career as a union organiser I did have the opportunity, having looked after stores in and around the Victoria Street precinct, to visit that centre and also to see the various other support services that are being offered in what for the workers, whether they are in the restaurants along Victoria Street or they are in stores that are adjacent to it, can present some very difficult challenges as well. It is why it is so good to see that medically supervised injecting room delivering genuine outcomes. Mr Batchelor I believe referred to the 63 lives that have been saved. That is phenomenal, 63 lives, and more than 7600 overdoses attended to just in that centre. This government has spoken very strongly in support of that program and in support of doing what we can to, obviously, expand this as well, but we need to do it right, and that is why we are taking the time to do this in a thorough and considered way.

I note, Mr Mulholland, it is very good to have at least in-principle support for the responsible expansion of medically supervised injecting rooms as well. I do have to say that when you were talking about quibbling over various locations I was wondering if I was going to hear the words ‘not in my backyard’ come out of your mouth. I felt like they were about to jump out at us all. It would have been one for the books if you had said that, Mr Mulholland. It did sound like distinct nimbyism both around North Richmond and prospective CBD sites that you referenced, but I do appreciate that from your side of the house too we do at least have in-principle support for responsible expansion of these medically supervised injecting rooms. I hope you will talk to your perhaps wayward colleagues, such as Mr McGowan, who has spoken out against this life-saving program. I hope you will be able to convince your colleagues to back you in that as well.

This, as I say, is a hugely significant issue, and as Mr Batchelor said, 63 lives have been saved, and that is something that we really, really do need to actually stop and consider and say how profound this is. I note Mr Puglielli’s passion as well on this and appreciate your comments. I would just say it is so important, for the reasons that you have said, that we do get this right, and that is why I know that the minister is looking at this most attentively.

**Motion agreed to.**

### *Motions*

#### **Supermarket prices**

**Aiv PUGLIELLI** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:22): I move:

That this house notes that:

- (1) Victorians are struggling to afford food and other essentials due to the high prices set by supermarkets;
- (2) the supermarket duopoly of Coles and Woolworths are increasing their profits;



- (3) section 4 of the Essential Services Commission Act 2001 gives the government the power to declare an industry to be a regulated industry;

and calls on the Victorian government to declare groceries a regulated industry to prevent supermarkets from price gouging.

We need to make food more affordable, and we need to stop Coles and Woolies from price gouging. This Labor government has the power to do this by regulating supermarkets and stopping them from charging unfair prices. So far they have chosen not to use it. We all know people are really struggling right now. They are skipping meals. They are going without fresh food, and they are having to make awful decisions between putting food on the table and buying medication or paying their bills. This should not be happening in our state. It is unacceptable, and it is time that Labor in government step up and take action.

At the same time as so many people are under immense financial strain Coles and Woolworths are jacking their prices up and they are reporting billions of dollars in profits. It is obscene. The Labor government needs to step in to stop supermarket price gouging so that everyone can afford fresh, healthy food at their supermarket. We know that supermarkets will not stop this behaviour on their own. They will keep ripping everyone off for as long as they can get away with it. Labor has the power to declare supermarkets as a regulated industry and to rein in those two big juggernauts.

Let us be clear on what the government have the power to do and what we are calling on them to do. Section 4 of the Essential Services Commission Act 2001 clearly states:

... the Governor in Council may by Order declare an industry to be a regulated industry after having regard to ...

It goes on to point out that:

The Order may declare –

- (a) which prices are to be prescribed prices in respect of a regulated industry;
- (b) which goods and services are to be prescribed goods and services in respect of a regulated industry ...

With this power the Essential Services Commission could monitor and report on grocery prices and, if necessary, stop supermarkets from price gouging.

We need to keep food and other essential items at affordable rates for Victorians. Currently those big two, Coles and Woolies, are controlling the market and they are keeping prices high. We want to stop unfair price hikes while also making sure that farmers and other suppliers get paid a fair price. We saw on *Four Corners* earlier this week a third-generation cherry farmer who had been pushed to his limit. He had had crops turned away for questionable reasons, and he was at the mercy of the prices offered by Coles. He was leaving the industry, as he just could not survive on the margins offered by that supermarket.

We have all I think noticed the prices on the shelves rising higher and higher on everyday items when we go to Coles or Woolies. It feels like every week things cost a little more, while they are also a little smaller in size, and money generally does not stretch as far. This comes at the same time as so many people are under all sorts of financial pressure. From rent increases to interest rate rises creating mortgage stress, from higher petrol prices to increasing Myki fares, from rising power bills to school expenses, many are feeling the squeeze from every angle. It is not like people can just stop eating, right? Food is essential, and it should be treated as such. Having access to sufficient, healthy, fresh food is critical to wellbeing, our physical and mental health. It is a basic human right. It impacts on our quality of life and our ability to thrive in our communities. However, huge numbers of people just cannot afford to stock their cupboards. Over a quarter of a million Victorian households are accessing food relief every month. Foodbank reported that over 365,000 children lived in households that were severely food insecure in the year up until their 2023 report, and we know that things have not improved since then. It is beholden on this Labor government and this Parliament to get involved. We

cannot sit idly by while so many people, so many children, are hungry and going without meals. It is time to take on those big supermarkets and to rein them in.

Woolies and Coles have the market cornered. The vast majority of the community shop there – about two-thirds of us – and they seem to behave like they can treat us all with contempt. They charge whatever they want. They try to blame inflation while jacking their prices way beyond those levels and still posting megaprofits. They are whining about an increase in shoplifting while failing to acknowledge that people are stealing their food because they are hungry and they are desperate. But instead of dropping their prices in response, supermarkets are installing security gates and more cameras to watch our literal every move. Their workers have rallied for better pay and conditions, which is understandable given what we have heard about the treatment of staff in dark stores being pushed to pack at unrelenting rates in sometimes scorching hot conditions. Farmers are speaking up about their shrinking margins. But Coles and Woolies are holding all the cards, and the power imbalance is huge. The only real winners at the moment are the shareholders of those two big supermarkets.

What we need to do is to stop supermarket greed, to hold Coles and Woolies to account and make sure that they are charging fair prices for their groceries, and this can be done by regulating them. There are precedents for taking action to stop out-of-control price rises on groceries, from Labor governments, both occurring right here in Victoria. Back in the Cain years – some of you might remember that far back; I am afraid I was not around at the time – they had a bill in Parliament. It was called the Prices Bill 1989, which replaced the Grocery Prices Act 1987. I will just read you a bit of the second-reading speech of that Prices Bill 1989. It is quite telling:

The government has been fearless in highlighting companies engaged in unfair or excessive pricing and brought them to task publicly. This in itself has a significant impact, although without the support of legislation many companies are prepared to ignore such exposure and continue their practices.

I think it is a very different tone from what we hear now from the current Labor government, who hoot and holler every time the Greens mention taking on the greedy supermarkets. We are often told instead that it is the ACCC's responsibility to address unfair prices or that it is a federal matter, but in fact when it comes to this kind of regulation the feds cannot do anything about it. That has actually been decided twice constitutionally with a referendum. If we again look back to years long gone, before my time, those golden Whitlam years, Gough sought these powers at the federal level and he failed, and instead it remains completely legal for supermarkets to charge as much as they like.

Some will say that we just need to name and shame those supermarkets, Coles and Woolies – I think we saw a bit of that with *Four Corners* this week – so that then they will be embarrassed by their actions and they will spontaneously stop their out-of-control price rises and start charging people a fair amount for groceries and other essential items. But let us be real. The only allegiance Coles and Woolies hold is to their shareholders, and their mission is to maximise their profits. We need to see people prioritised over those profits, and this is going to require action from the Labor government to regulate these supermarkets and to pull them into line.

Too many people are cutting back on fresh fruit and fresh vegetables. They are skipping meals. They are facing empty cupboards, and they are having to access food aid. *Four Corners* this week further highlighted and exposed the very, very dark side of Coles and Woolies, who are using ruthless and frankly dishonest tactics to make sure that they always win, at the loss of everyone else. This is simply not good enough, and this state government needs to step in and fix it. We cannot live without food, it is as simple as that. Labor, you need to regulate the supermarkets to stop them from charging too much.

What can I say? Pressure works. People have scoffed at and scorned the calls for supermarkets to be hauled into line, and what we have seen in the course of a week, or less than that, is the CEO of Woolies stand aside after, frankly, quite a shocking interview in that *Four Corners* exposé. We need to see this pressure continue. This moment is a beginning. We need our state governments to pull in

their fair share of this conversation to tackle the greedy supermarkets and make sure that Victorians, everyday people, are put first over profits. I commend this motion to the house.

**Ryan BATCHELOR** (Southern Metropolitan) (10:32): I am pleased to rise and speak on Mr Puglielli's motion in relation to the regulation of grocery prices in the state. I think we need to start the debate and the contributions today with very clear acknowledgement that there is absolutely a cost-of-living crunch underway in Victoria and in Australia. It is absolutely clear from the people we go and speak to in the community and what we see ourselves when we go to the shops and when we talk to our constituents that everyone feels like they are paying more – and they are – for the things that they rely on. That is absolutely undeniable.

We see it too in the official data in the Australian Bureau of Statistics monthly surveys of consumer prices. When you look at the more reliable quarterly index, you see that prices absolutely are rising in the economy and they have been doing so for a number of years. I think the one silver lining from the last set of quarterly data the ABS published is that the rate of growth that we have seen over the last couple of years is moderating, and I think if that trend continues it will be absolutely welcome news for consumers. In Melbourne in particular – and you can break down capital city data out of the quarterly ABS stats – the rate of growth for prices in the last 12 months was around half of what it was in the 12 months prior; it was around 4 per cent in the last 12 months in Melbourne, and it was around 8 per cent in the 12 months to the end of 2022. I think what we are hopefully seeing is a moderation of the peak of inflation, and that is good news. I did want to start by injecting some facts into this debate, because I am worried that they are not always evident.

The other thing that is quite clear is that governments are acting on this problem. The state government has been acting in areas where we are best competent to act, and the federal government has been acting in areas that it is best competent to act. Principally the Commonwealth, as the level of government responsible for corporations and competition policy, has been taking pretty significant action in respect of particularly the supermarket duopoly that Mr Puglielli is so concerned with, and rightly so. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has the powers, has been asked to do investigations into supermarket prices. The federal government – the federal Treasurer – has just appointed former trade minister Dr Craig Emerson to lead a review of the grocery code of conduct. As someone who knows Craig and who used to work with him, he is going to be absolutely forensic in this task of finding out how we best deal with the range of supply chain issues that we have seen with the supermarket duopoly and both the monopoly and the monopsonies that exist on both a consumer and supplier level. That is where action needs to happen.

What we have seen here and recently from the Greens on this topic is not a policy formulation designed to fix the problem, it is a political campaign designed to get clicks on social media and do data harvesting of signatures on petitions. The Greens have been preying on people's vulnerabilities to gain attention for themselves on social media and to collect names, addresses and email addresses of people in the community so that they can add them to their mailing lists. That is exactly what this entire campaign has been about. Instead of being concerned about taking action, they have tried to exploit people's vulnerabilities. If they were serious about taking action, they would not be calling on a state government to use some power that they think could apply to supermarkets and saying, 'This is going to solve all of the problems.' I will come to that in just a moment.

I have said what the federal government is doing now, and I will get to what the state government is doing in a minute. But the question of whether we should regulate prices in the economy is not a new question. It is a question that has been debated over the course of post-Federation history here in Australia, and it has been something that in the past the Labor Party has had very strong views about – such strong views in fact that we took a referendum to the Australian people to give the Commonwealth the power to do this very thing not once but twice. In 1948 Ben Chifley, suffering quite horrendous post-war inflation in the national economy, sought to take a piece of legislation to regulate prices in the economy. It was rejected by the Australian people at a referendum. Gough Whitlam in 1973, post oil shock, similarly wanted to control oil prices in the economy and did not

succeed again. Twice Labor has taken a proposition like this to the Australian people at a federal level, and twice it has been defeated.

So what is the approach we are taking now? Instead of trying to re prosecute agendas which have not had success in the past, we are now trying to figure out how to actually do something about it in the here and now. We see the attempts to look at the way that the food and grocery code can be strengthened and the way the ACCC can use anti-competition laws to eliminate anti-competitive behaviour and conduct in the course of the supermarket industry, and I hope those will be successful.

We also know that this kind of approach is fraught with complexity – complexity that is absolutely absent from the campaign the Greens have been running. My question to them in the course of this debate, which I hope some of their other speakers, if they want to speak on this debate, will come up and articulate, is: how will this work? Give us the next sentence and the sentence after that, after you say that the state has the power to regulate prices. Which supermarkets will it apply to? What products is this going to apply to? Are we just talking about Coles and Woolworths, or are we also talking about Aldi or IGA or 7-Eleven or the corner store? And which products – is it milk, is it bread, is it Vegemite, is it fresh fruit? What are the products that you propose to regulate the price of, and in which outlets? You have talked about the profits of the largest two supermarkets. They have a significant amount of market power in this country, and that needs to be addressed.

But my question is: what about the profits of the milk bar at the corner, whose price of bread and milk you should be regulating or you might be regulating? And if you are not going to be regulating them but you are going to be forcing supermarkets to have lower prices on their shelves, won't you be driving consumers away from fruit and veg markets? Won't you be driving consumers away from shopping at independent retailers who are not subject to your price controls? Because by taking this course of action you will unleash a wave of disruption across the entire way that this economy works that will result in more people shopping at large supermarkets, where you have regulated prices, and fewer people shopping at their local shops, at their local stores, eliminating competition in the market.

We do absolutely need to do something about the supermarket duopoly here in Australia. The federal government is taking action using the powers of the ACCC to do that, but governments at a state and federal level are also taking action on the cost of living, and that is where I want to end my contribution. This state government does believe, does understand, that there are cost-of-living pressures in the community. That is why we have done so many rounds of the power saving bonus to help people with their electricity prices. That is why regional train fares are now lower than they were and the same as they are in metro. That is why we have got free kinder. That is why we have got free TAFE. That is why we are providing free pads and tampons in public places and free registration for apprentices. We have continued the baby bundle and the veterans card. We have got free dental care going into our schools, and those kids are also getting free school breakfasts in breakfast club. Mr Puglielli mentioned medicine. The federal government has reduced the cost of medicine, and we have got a round of tax cuts coming on 1 July – and I am not sure whether the Greens are supporting those or not. We are acting on the cost of living; they are not.

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (10:42): I rise to speak on this motion by my colleague Mr Puglielli. Just a couple of things: I heard a member for North-Eastern Metro speaking about the billions in profits of the big supermarkets. You would have seen the recent news that a company just recorded a \$781 million loss. They had about a 2.5 per cent margin in their annual report. And I will agree with Mr Batchelor that there is no detail on what they would actually do. How much would you regulate and control prices by? If you control prices by too much, Woolies is going to go bankrupt. So I am starting to think that the Greens might be for, not a duopoly, a monopoly and just having Coles be the one brand everywhere. That is not going to send prices down, down; that is going to send prices up, up. I do not think that is what you want.

I have got no love for Woolies and Coles, right? The Greens were probably cheering on their Australia Day stunt. Maybe Greens shareholders in Woolies forced that position on Australia Day, forced the

CEO, maybe in a Woolworths shareholder AGM – which seems to me these days more like a Greens party caucus, the shareholder meeting – and forced that position. And how embarrassing that the Woolworths CEO had to come out only a week later and say, ‘Oh, we still love Australia Day. Everyone, please buy our food, please buy our food.’ They obviously saw the data, saw the public reaction, and backtracked and thought, ‘Oh, gee, a lot of people do actually have barbecues on Australia Day. We might be missing out on a pretty big market here.’

But what I would say just on a principles point – my family used to shop at Woolies, right? We used to. We do not anymore because, again, I have got no love for them lately. I see what they are doing to farmers. They are consistently cutting costs for farmers, for producers across the state. And the price does add up. I know myself it is much more difficult for my constituents than for me, but with two kids the grocery shop does add up. We have actually switched to Victorian Farmers Direct, which pays farmers fairly. You can order directly from farmers in western Victoria and farmers in eastern Victoria, in Gippsland. It actually does not undercut them and it does not keep reducing their prices, and it delivers directly to your door. It ends up about the same price. If you can take practical steps yourself, I highly recommend it. It is a great service, very good customer service, on that front. We should be supporting our farmers, but I fear that the Greens policy of regulating prices will undercut farmers’ margins even more. That is what we have seen everywhere else where price controls have been introduced.

The Greens have identified a valid issue: Victorians are struggling to afford food and essentials and everything else. I acknowledge my colleague Richard Welch, who spoke very powerfully on this last night. We know the power of private enterprise and the free market, and we know that price regulation does not work. If the Greens were successful in this motion, not only would we see Victorians struggling to afford the basics; they would be lining up for bread and essentials, just like in Venezuela or the Soviet Union. Again, it is a very populist motion, but the detail is not quite right. It is not quite there. Again, we do not know what types of food they are looking to control.

You have to look at the basic realities on costs and the cost-of-living crisis under this Labor government. According to ABS data, in the period between June 2022 and December 2023 food costs rose by 9 per cent, electricity prices increased by 25 per cent and gas by 27 per cent. Insurance also increased by 22 per cent in the same period. These price increases do not just void into a black hole. It is a similar ideological fantasy to rent freezes – that someone will just magically swallow them up and they do not get passed on. I know these costs get passed on, because I speak to businesses in my electorate that are suffering from the increased land tax.

Energy plays a big role in the cost of food, and government decisions play a big role. If the price of gas increases by 27 per cent, that cost is passed on to consumers. If you try to ban gas, as this government is trying to do, that cost will be passed on to consumers. Our manufacturers and our food producers rely on gas to keep our food and our goods affordable, but this government does not seem to care. They want to ban gas. They want to restrict the supply of gas to households. This is what they are doing, and this is the effect this government has had. We saw the ABS data today where more businesses are fleeing Victoria than anywhere else, and you have to wonder why. Why – increased taxes, increased regulation and increased cost of energy. These are ultimately what businesses and investors look at when deciding to start new businesses.

The same goes for supermarkets: those costs get cut on. You can talk about the big profits for the big supermarkets. You have just heard about the massive loss that Woolworths is facing. Again, does this motion only apply to Coles and Woolworths, or will we see local milk bars and local IGAs having to deal with price controls – local family businesses like even the IGA in Glenroy, who are very concerned about energy prices? Are they going to be covered by the Greens motion? Or is it just going to be Woolworths and Coles? If you try to ban gas, as the government is trying to do – well, Lily calls it fossil gas; I mean, how pathetic – the increased prices will be felt at the check-out.

Since this government has been in power, the cost of housing has increased by 76 per cent and rents by 55 per cent, and the most recent increase in fuel took place, increasing from 48.8 cents to 49.6 cents. These are factors that have a real impact on prices, and we are seeing the impact. We have seen the recent ports war also result in additional costs on groceries, about \$4 weekly at the check-out. I did not hear the Greens have anything to say about the ports dispute, about the \$4 weekly at the check-out you are adding to the grocery bill of every single Victorian. I did not hear a whimper. These are the very real and material issues that we have to deal with when we are talking about grocery prices.

There are several reviews underway, particularly at the federal level. We need more competition. This does nothing to hamper competition. As I said, there are several innovative players in the market. Victorian Farmers Direct, which I use, is one of them. But there are several in the market that are now undercutting Woolies and Coles and providing a greater choice to consumers and also the people with a moral and ethical stand to support our farmers, which one would think the Greens would do. Maybe they would like to take out shares in some of these businesses instead of Woolworths; that would be nice. We can make moral choices ourselves. We need more competition in the market. We will not be supporting this motion.

**David LIMBRICK** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:52): I also rise to speak on this motion by the Greens about regulating supermarkets. I would like to start by saying I am relieved to hear that the government has learned from past mistakes on price regulation and is rejecting outright the idea of price controls. I am very happy to hear that. But as we all know, inflation is a real problem that is hurting Victorians, hurting all Australians and in fact is hurting many people around the world at the moment. But supermarkets, and not just supermarkets but other businesses where these prices surface, are not the root cause of inflation. The root cause of inflation primarily is a monetary phenomenon.

Let us look at some of these causes of inflation: firstly, the pandemic. Governments borrowed – state and federal – ridiculous amounts of money, printed ridiculous amounts of money and pumped that into the economy. What does that do? It pushes up prices across the board. Eventually it feeds out into the economy, the government itself goes into competition with the private sector in chasing goods and services and we end up with inflation. Another thing, as my colleague Mr Mulholland pointed out, is that fuel prices are very expensive. I did not hear the Greens oppose all of this borrowing and spending that happened during the pandemic, which caused inflation.

I also have not heard the Greens oppose fuel tax excise. This feeds into everything that you buy at the supermarket. Everything goes there on trucks that run on diesel. That is taxed at an astronomical amount at the moment. It has just gone up again. Also farmers use a lot of diesel. I have heard many times the Greens talk about diesel fuel excise rebate as a fossil fuel subsidy. What that really means is that if they wanted to get rid of that diesel fuel tax excise rebate they would be forcing farmers to pay that tax on the farm machinery that they use, like tractors et cetera, which would push up their costs. Again the Greens are supporting something that pushes up inflation. On top of this, energy feeds into everything. Those refrigerators at the supermarket run on electricity. The lights run on electricity. I do not see the Greens pushing for a freer market in energy. In fact they are pushing for all sorts of interventions in the market, which will again push up prices. Land tax – I have not seen the Greens oppose that. That is a factor that actually was cited by Costco in their decision to move out of Docklands. Again, I do not see any calls for that. Payroll tax – another cost: I do not see the Greens opposing that either. Restrictions on planning controls, which is one of the major factors causing concentration of supermarket power at the moment – I do not see the Greens want to free up planning controls either. So if the Greens are worried about inflation and worried about who to blame, maybe they should look in the mirror.

On to the actual motion and what would happen if Victorians lost their freaking minds and voted and swept away the Labor Party and the Greens became the government: we would end up with our new commissar over price controls ordering companies like Woolworths to reduce prices by, let us say, 10 per cent. As Mr Mulholland pointed out, Woolies just this morning announced a loss of \$781 million, so there are no profits already. But even if we looked in the past at their last annual

report, the net margin on that was 2.5 per cent. That means if our new commissar over price controls ordered Woolies to reduce prices by 2.5 per cent, they would be basically pushing them to a break-even point. 2.5 per cent – \$2.50 in \$100: this is a very, very tiny amount. So let us say our new commissar orders a 10 per cent cut. They cannot operate on that sort of basis. They will have to go back and make some serious, hard decisions. They will go back to their suppliers. They will try to screw their suppliers. Their suppliers are farmers, a lot of them, for fresh produce, and, as we know, farmers are doing it tough. When they go back and try and screw their suppliers to get the prices down, the farmers will say, 'I cannot do that.' And you know what the response of the supermarkets will be – they will not sell their products anymore. That entire supply chain will be destroyed. This is the type of thing that they are talking about, as we have seen in countries that have price controls.

I can give you a very good example. I have an acquaintance who is Argentinian. He moved to Melbourne, ironically, to escape the price-control hell of Argentina in their socialist hellscape, which the Greens seem to like. He was taking photos of supermarkets in Victoria and sending them back to his friends in Argentina, and they were absolutely amazed by these pictures of tomatoes, of all things. I will tell you why they were amazed – because in Argentina, under price controls, there is one type of tomato that you get. You do not get a range of tomatoes. Go into any supermarket or grocer in Victoria, you can get 10, maybe more, types of tomatoes – all sorts of varieties. Under price controls what would happen is these supermarkets or grocers in desperation – if they are still operational under price controls, which in many cases they would not be – would go and try and find the lowest price, poorest quality product and something that they can get in under the price regulations and sell that. In Argentina, before we had the wonderful situation where President Milei was elected, you could buy one type of tomato. It was very poor quality, and that was all you could get. I think the Argentinians got off light; they could still buy tomatoes. But in Victoria maybe these price controls will lower the cost of living. Maybe all we will be able to buy is potatoes and onions. I do not know how we are going to get our protein, because they will probably want to ban meat as well.

What the Greens are proposing is for us to head down a tried and tested path that, as was pointed out even by the government, has been rejected by the Australian people in their good sense, and even the Labor Party, which in the past has supported these sorts of things, acknowledges the power of markets. If we want to reduce prices and the cost of living for people, we need to increase competition.

And I tell you what, if Victoria introduces price controls, who is going to set up a new competitor in the Victorian market? Can we name these mysterious international or local players that are going to set up in competition in a state that has just introduced price controls? We will not get more competition by doing this. It will reduce competition. Players will exit the market, and it will be an absolute economic disaster. We will reduce the variety of goods available to Victorians. We will potentially end up in shortages. As everyone knows – it is the iron law of economics – price caps equal shortages, and this is what we are talking about. There will be bread lines. There will be people queueing up for onions and potatoes, just like we have seen in every other country that has had these strict price controls. I condemn this motion.

**Jacinta ERMACORA** (Western Victoria) (11:00): I rise to speak on this motion. Thank you for bringing it forward. We do know that a significant number of Victorians are struggling with cost of living at the moment, with high interest rates and higher shopping bills, so there is no doubt this is a challenging cost-of-living environment. I have absolutely enjoyed this debate already. In fact I must confess to feeling a bit discombobulated; I am completely disconcerted. I feel like the entire chamber has taken a huge step to the left. Everybody has gone in a different direction. We have got inner-city yuppies over here purchasing food in an ethical way, which is awesome, which is fantastic, and then we have got a communist or a socialist approach to food here. I must admit that I believe in the free market.

**Samantha Ratnam:** You mean a step to the right.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** No, I think we have all gone around this way. Anyway, I do clarify my commitment to free market economics. I believe in the free market where the market provides a reasonable distribution of resources – sound familiar? – equitably across the community where we have got essential services and products. Where we have market failure, where something is not available – let us take health: people generally cannot afford to purchase health services or a range of other services like perhaps NDIS support. Do not get me started on my philosophies. I do not want to go off the topic too much. That is where government's role is – where there is market failure.

When it comes to groceries and when it comes to supermarkets, I absolutely agree that we have got some challenges in this country when it comes to food distribution, but suggesting a simplistic solution that will make the problem even worse is definitely not the way to go. I must admit I share Mr Batchelor's cynicism around the clickiness of capping grocery prices. It sounds good and certainly is attractive in a social media environment, but I think that really we do need to call the Greens to account for the actual implications of what is proposed. Definitely we will not be supporting the motion. There has been plenty of research done around this sort of space that really talks about – and I endorse Mr Limbrick's contribution – the impact of regulating or capping supermarket prices of groceries. I remember going to I cannot remember the country now, but it was just coming out of a socialist environment. The supermarket had mink coats and laundry detergent and a full range of empty shelves. That is what you get when you have got control, so I totally agree with what you are saying in that space.

The other issue is the jurisdiction here. There is absolutely no doubt that this territory is the space of the federal government, and I will mention in a few minutes what the federal government are doing about this. The Allan Labor government were elected to deliver results in Victoria under Victorian legislation, and that is exactly what we are doing. Research has previously been conducted into this very matter. It showed that price controls on food simply do not work. What it showed was suppliers began providing subpar goods or services just to get the prices under the price cap. This causes negative impacts for everybody. It does not increase supply; as Mr Limbrick said, it reduces supply. I think it was a great example, the tomatoes. It is virtually a motion to ban diversity amongst tomatoes. I really agree with that point. We are going to end up with only one type of tomato. We know that only having one type of tomato is not going to give us a rich life, and it excludes all the other tomatoes.

At a time when so many Victorians are struggling with the cost of living, this motion would really make life more challenging for Victorians. We would see grocery shopping become a free-for-all, a lottery – first in, best dressed. You would be queueing up. It truly would be like an old communist country, and that would make it more and more difficult for Victorians when it comes to cost of living.

The University of Adelaide economics professor Ralph-Christopher Bayer in general terms said that this very idea is likely to lead to rationing of food due to capped prices, leading to more demand than supply. Do we really want less food? Do we want a poorer quality of food in our supermarkets and even black market scenarios? We know that most economists, most policymakers and most experts in this space have already proved that this is not a strategy, and that is what makes me a little bit cynical about the motivation for this motion. It is simplistic. Even basic economics teaches us that what brings down prices is competition – and I am not saying that I am obsessed about competition, because competition where there is not a competing marketplace can end up being discriminatory, can end up being exclusive and can end up leaving sections of communities out, and sometimes that happens in outer regional Victoria. Just pretending that there is competition when it is not there is not the answer.

We all eat; this is universal. We all eat, no matter where we live. In the United Kingdom they have already looked at these very issues. As the Institute of Economic Affairs economics fellow Julian Jessop said in May 2023:

Caps on food prices are at best a pointless gimmick –

I rest my case –



and, at worst, harmful to the very people they are supposed to help.

Just before I close, there are a range of other problems in the food sector in this country, and capping prices is the simplest of tiny little solutions – it is not even a solution – and does not address the bigger issues. I know the business rumour mill in Warrnambool a few years ago was running pretty wild about a company from Germany – not Aldi; we have got two Aldis in Warrnambool – wanting to buy in to the city, and they missed out to JB Hi-Fi and Officeworks. We know who owns those two companies. There are a range of other strategies going on that influence the cost of groceries in this country.

Whilst this motion is well intended and definitely tries to address that cost-of-living issue, really land banking, supplier payments, the way specials are structured, blocking new entrants to the market, insecure work in warehousing, phantom branding – we heard all about that on Monday night on *Four Corners* – are a broad set of complex issues that will not be addressed by simply a clickbait motion.

In closing, I want to say I really thank you for bringing up the issue, but I very, very strongly disagree with this strategy. If there is any appreciation for market theory and how marketplaces work, there is a need for a much more complex approach, and definitely that complex approach is going to be addressed by an inquiry conducted by the federal government; I am sure my colleagues might refer to that as well. That is the space that this issue needs to be addressed in.

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (11:10): I am pleased to put the Nationals position – or my position of the Nationals position – on the record today on Mr Puglielli's motion 307 on the notice paper. This will be a rarity, but I agree with my colleague who has just spoken, Ms Ermacora, on many of the issues – not all of them – and one thing I am on a unity ticket for is the opposition to this particular motion. As a Nationals MP I cannot stand up here without taking the opportunity to highlight the very important work that our agricultural sector does, from the structure of our communities in rural and regional Victoria to the financial and economic drivers that our agricultural sector provides within our state. Over 21,000 farms are the primary businesses and the places where we make our food and fibre in country Victoria. And not only that, but there are the supply chains and the various logistics and manufacturing businesses and the almost 70,000 associated jobs. There is \$17.5 billion in production, and food and fibre exports are in that vicinity.

Victoria makes up over a quarter of national food and fibre exports. We are the food bowl, if you consider the landmass of Australia. I just want to put on record that we are the number one producer of table grapes and dried grapes: 70 per cent of Australia's production. I know my dear colleague in the north in the form of Jade Benham has a great passion for, love of and interest in this and certainly represents the people up there in the dried and table grape region. Milk production: I am the daughter of a dairy farmer and I know how to milk a cow any way you shape it. The importance of milk production for our nation – 64 per cent of the national product. Sheep, fruit and nuts and vegetables – and I will take up the comment around the grape grower in a minute, because I think there are some points that need to be developed on that.

What I do find quite disingenuous about the Greens is that on one level we are concerned about farmers, we are concerned about the cherry farmer – as I am very much concerned about farmers and their right to earn a fair day's wage for their product and concerned about what is happening in our larger supermarkets. But what I find really disingenuous is that they say they care: 'I care about our farming communities.' Yet they oppose protections in this house that better protect farmers – one only last sitting week. We saw the Greens oppose amendments to the BLAIR bill, the Biosecurity Legislation Amendment (Incident Response) Bill 2023 that the government brought in, which actually adopted a Liberals and Nationals position to increase the penalties for people breaking biosecurity. I think if we went back and had a look at some of the contributions from the Greens, they want to support these extremists that feel it is actually the extremist's right to trespass on farms, to go on and I think the term they often use is 'protest' – well, there is a significant difference between a protest and an extremist form of entering, trespassing and breaching biosecurity. This is what the Greens feel is

justified, but then they can flip over and feel concern for farmers. Well, I feel concern for farmers in terms of not only their workplace and the protections they have in their workplace but also that they should get a fair and reasonable outcome for their world-class product.

I will go to the point that we saw on the *Four Corners* documentary that the supermarkets are price gouging. We do see that the federal Labor government has been aware of this for the last year and three-quarters. Since 2022 the government has been aware of this. We do see that the supermarkets are taking advantage of shoppers when they can least afford it, and I will go to that point in a moment. There was an example where a cherry farmer was about to quit the industry because of the result of this supermarket price gouging that Mr Puglielli put on the record. There are concerns that this produce of very good quality is being turned away without valid justification, and there are significant concerns that as a result of this undercutting of farmers 34 per cent of vegetable growers may have an intention to leave the industry within 12 months.

What we also know is that the federal government has been very tardy, very lazy, about investigating this meat and fresh produce price disparity and the difference between the farmgate and check-out prices. We see that the government should have pulled the levers further. It should have gone to the Australian competition commission, the ACCC, and instigated this inquiry as soon as it became aware.

I note Mr Batchelor's comments, moving on. He talks about the cost-of-living crunch in Victoria. This government, the Andrews, now Allan, Labor government, has been the architect of and has written the rulebook on 53 new or increased taxes. When you talk about cost-of-living pressures on small businesses, on farmers, these are some of the impacts that are making those cost-of-living pressures. We know that people are doing it tough. We absolutely know people are doing it tough. Where Mr Batchelor departed from the conversation that I want to have is: they seem to exonerate the state's position on this. They exonerated the fact that the now Allan government has been part of this problem.

This particular motion discusses the Essential Services Commission and talks about regulated industry, but the key thing that came out recently from the Essential Services Commission is that the default offer on electricity prices, the 2023–24 Victorian default offer, represented an annual increase of 25 per cent: \$350 for residential customers and nearly \$800 for small business customers – again, taxes, electricity prices. We saw the minister for the SEC, or whatever she is now, the honourable member in the other place, Minister D'Ambrosio, in Parliament say prices are going down, down, down, to quote a very good supermarket that I often shop at in my local town, the local Michael's IGA. Down, down, down – well, I am sorry, the stats actually show that they are going up, up, up.

We also know that the Essential Services Commission spoke about the result of the wholesale prices in the energy market going up because of energy market volatility. When we talk about energy market volatility, we saw that case only last week when the infrastructure, the network system, went down due to some major windstorms, and I have spoken very much about my beautiful home area in Eastern Victoria Region getting smashed by that and the wonderful people that are trying to rebuild from that and recover. But one of the key things that we see is that the Andrews government, now Allan government, is botching up the transition to renewables. What we also see with the Greens is that they would have shut us down. They would have shut coal-fired power stations down come the start of this year. That is the motion that they had for debate on a Wednesday, which was sensibly defeated.

We have got the Greens, who are ideologically driving costs up. We see the Greens would have phased out coal by now. Now, it is on a trajectory; it is going to phase out. We note Yallourn is going to close potentially by 2028 – it is slated for closure; it is chugging along there – and we know Loy Yang A by 2032. But this government, along with the Greens support, is botching up the transmission lines and transition to renewables. We see also that the government is picking winners and then its federal Parliament is choosing losers in the Hastings renewable space at the terminal there.

I cannot stress highly enough: putting on caps, putting on over-regulation, will not solve this. It will not support the family person walking in that door trying to fill enough of the trolley to feed the family

for the week. It will not solve that. The government certainly needs to do a backflip on its support not only for farmers and their protections but on a sensible renewable movement. The Nationals certainly oppose this motion today.

**Rachel PAYNE** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:20): I rise to speak to motion 307 brought on by Mr Aiv Puglielli. This motion recognises that Victorians are struggling to afford food and other essentials due to the high prices set by supermarkets. The supermarket duopoly of Coles and Woolworths are increasing their profits. People are doing it tough. The costs of everything are increasing, and many things, like food, we simply cannot go without. There is increasing concern that supermarkets are extorting the cost-of-living crisis and increasing their profits, and the evidence of this continues to pile up.

Just earlier this week we saw *Four Corners* reporting on how the supermarket industry profits off rising prices. It found they solicit pay-offs from suppliers so that they can increase the prices you pay for products, and they often seek rebates from suppliers when hiking prices. The only thing down, down, down these days is any semblance of trust we had. On that note, have you walked inside one of these supermarkets recently? It is dystopian. Talk about a lack of trust. There is clear understaffing. The number of checkouts that are not self-serve keep getting less and less, and when you are at a self-serve you are filmed by 50 different cameras on 50 different angles. 'Are you sure you scanned that right? Would you like to try that again?' 'Here, let me show a video of your face in close-up from the overhead.' 'Oh, you want to leave the store? No, you can't do that. There are some automatic gates there to stop your shopping pleasure.' Seriously – all this for someone just trying to buy food that they need to live.

This motion also notes that section 4 of the Essential Services Commission Act 2001 gives the government the power to declare an industry to be a regulated industry and calls on the Victorian government to declare groceries a regulated industry to prevent supermarkets from price gouging. It is our position that the commission is not suited to fulfilling this kind of significant regulatory role. It lacks the funding, staff and other resources. Additionally, the commission's wheelhouse is single-product monopolies. Yes, this commission does have some attractive mechanisms available to it – meaning reporting, price determinations, compliance, enforcements, auditing and dealing with new market entrants – but we think there are different ways to better do this intervention, which I will circle back to later.

First, I want to address the idea of price controls, as they are by far the most controversial element of this motion and there is no shortage of economic professors who will come out to dissuade you. In talking you out of price controls you will hear them use terms like 'supply and demand'. They will tell you that capping prices will create shortages, the price of other items will go up, an illicit market will thrive, productivity will lower and it will instead have an inflationary effect. They will also tell you about how important prices are for signalling to consumers and producers how to change their purchasing and selling habits. All of these things are not necessarily untrue.

The UK did try and dip their toes into price caps to slow price increase. Ironically, three-quarters of their public were in support and three-quarters of economists were in opposition. But this never got off the ground. Zimbabwe tried with little success. Consumer panic caused shortages. Manufacturers stopped supplying, and retailers could not make a profit. But as we have mentioned, we have this wonderful thing here in Australia where these supermarkets have great big profit margins. Surely that gives us a bit of wiggle room.

If you want to talk about economics, let us talk about it – specifically elastic versus inelastic demand. Inelastic demand means that the demand of a product does not change proportionately with the rise and fall in its price. A good that we cannot live without – for instance food – is price inelastic. This means that significant increases in cost do not result in significant decreases in demand, because of course people cannot go without food. Colesworths knows this, and they are taking full advantage of it.

Another argument we have heard here is that we should target the cause, not the symptom. Let us fight inflation – great. But where the symptom is price gouging, controlling prices, perhaps we could do both. I have to say, looking at Coles posting a \$1.1 billion profit, a 4.8 per cent rise, and Woolworths posting \$1.62 billion, a 4.6 per cent rise, you can understand why we believe that maybe there is some wiggle room. We do not believe that price increases are being evenly spread across the supply chain. They are accumulating at the point at which people are buying their groceries. Suppliers are losing, consumers are losing and the supermarkets are winning. Woolworths now enjoys the double margins of peers like UK chain Sainsbury's. Woolworths' operating margin spiked by 5.3 per cent to 6 per cent during the last financial year for its Australian food division. This is not consistent growth, this is growth inflated out of pockets of consumers. If you want to talk about market manipulation and toying with supply and demand, maybe this government should walk up to the door of these grocery chains' CEOs for a bit of a chat. I am certain they would love to talk about how they pass on the costs of inflation so that they can eat the cake at both ends, giving the supplier and the consumer a bad deal. I am sure the CEO of a major grocery chain would not try and walk away from the conversation out of fear of any sort of accountability; that has never been done before.

I do not pretend to be an economist, but I was so tickled by the ideas in some of the material sent to my office – in particular that if the market is left to its own devices, prices will eventually return to normal, consistent with historical prices. How exciting! I do not know about you, but I do not really trust these supermarkets. I do not trust the supermarket duopoly with meaningfully reducing prices when costs start to reduce. Why would they undercut their own profit margins like that, especially when they are not in a particularly competitive market? If we get this wrong, a major market intervention like this will cause people to go without, and we cannot risk that. Although we do encourage ambition and innovation, we want it to be thoughtfully done and backed with robust policy. If we are to suggest that this government undertake some of the most significant market interventions of this decade, they cannot be half-baked.

The Greens did raise the important point that it was the Cain Labor government in the mid-1980s who intervened to tackle excessive price rises by introducing price control legislation, an office for prices and a prices minister. This included price monitoring, investigations, promoting competition, supporting price action groups and submissions to inquiries. So for this government to throw their hands up and say there is not much they can do and their federal buddies are working on it is, we find, deeply disappointing. This is not to say that there is an absence of regulatory framework occurring at the federal level. The appointment of Dr Craig Emerson as an independent reviewer of the Food and Grocery Code of Conduct and the ACCC's inquiry into the supermarket sector are both good things.

We need supermarket practices examined on a national level, but we need to work at a state level too. Maybe it could be relaxed planning laws to lower barriers to entry for competitors. But maybe, given the current level of distrust in the grocery industry, market deregulation is not a great idea. As such Legalise Cannabis Victoria will not be supporting the motion. If we do this wrong, the consequences are that people could go without food, and we cannot risk that. But we remain committed to working across party lines to find cost-of-living relief for those who are doing it tough, including market interventions if needed. This motion is not the right way forward, but we do believe there is way more the government could be doing. There is never a time when ambition is more needed than a time of crisis. One cannot help but feel like this is one of those times. The government needs to avoid economic orthodoxy and come to the table with inventive solutions.

**John BERGER** (Southern Metropolitan) (11:30): I rise to speak against the motion at hand, which calls for the state government to declare supermarkets a regulated industry. In doing so I would like to first acknowledge that there are indeed enormous cost-of-living pressures facing many Victorians, especially when they get to the supermarket to buy this week's groceries. Now, the Allan Labor government recognises these cost-of-living pressures, and across multiple industries we have worked tirelessly to assist struggling Victorians through initiatives such as the power saving bonus, short-term vehicle registration, free three- and four-year-old kindergarten and the veterans card, not to mention

the revival of the State Electricity Commission, bringing down power bills through government-owned renewable energy. These are real solutions to the problems facing Victorians, and I am proud of the work our government has done to support the Victorian people over what has been an exceptionally difficult period both through and post COVID. Yet the Victorian Greens are now attempting to shove through this poorly considered motion, which would decimate supply and increase costs for essential supermarket goods.

At both state and federal levels of government we have held major supermarkets such as Coles, Woolworths, Aldi and Metcash Food & Grocery, who own IGA, to account. All four have been signatories to the Food and Grocery Code of Conduct, enshrined into law through the Competition and Consumer Act 2010, since 2015. This code of conduct has worked to increase commercial transparency, impose minimum standards on business practices and provide equitable dispute resolution, improving the bargaining power of suppliers and overall standards of business practices. On top of this the Commonwealth government is moving to tackle the issues head-on, with the federal Treasurer Jim Chalmers directing the ACCC to investigate supermarket prices and appoint economist and former Minister for Trade Dr Craig Emerson to review the code of conduct. These are both excellent measures undertaken by the federal government.

The best way to lower the prices for Victorians will be through competition. More competition leaves us better off, with lower prices, more variety, more supply, more choices and so forth. Now, competition is again a matter for the federal government. As stated just now, the Commonwealth is already acting on these matters, and I think it would be inappropriate to presume their outcomes. I find it ridiculous that time and time again the Greens try and pass on state responsibilities to the federal scene and Commonwealth issues to the state government. Perhaps if they spent more time reading up on economic theory and the Australian constitution and less time making cringey TikTok videos, we might finally be getting somewhere.

Mr Puglielli in his motion raises the fact that section 4 of the Essential Services Commission Act 2001 gives the government power to declare that this industry be regulated, yet he does not state whether, as it states in section 4(1)(b), the existence of the regulatory benefits would exceed the administration and compliance costs of becoming a regulated industry. To put it in more simple terms, the motion before us has not stated whether or not these new regulatory controls will cost Victorian consumers more. This really matters to Victorians, who might be burdened with the increased cost of regulations in their weekly grocery shopping trip. The motion talks big about the cost-of-living pressures Victorians face then calls for action that may very well raise the cost of groceries.

Declaring supermarkets and groceries to be government-regulated industries will ultimately do more harm than good. First and foremost, any decision taken by the state government will contradict the policies in existence of the federal government, such as the aforementioned Competition and Consumer Act. It is patently ridiculous for this matter to be brought to the Victorian Legislative Council, with the potential to conflict with the activities of the federal government and to risk an endless line of bureaucratic disputes and delays that leave Victorian consumers without access to affordable, essential goods.

The motion seems to admit the reality that the administrative and compliance costs of regulating these large corporations will be passed on to consumers in the form of staff and auditing costs, changes in marketing and pricing, application approval delays and more, in accordance with the Australian government's regulatory burden measurement framework. This would negate any perceived potential cost reduction that this poorly considered motion implies and demonstrates a clear lack of understanding of economics and regulatory processes. We would lose job opportunities for young people entering the workforce for the first time through a dramatic loss in business profits, denying them crucial opportunities for experience and access to markets that are crucial for stepping into adulthood, such as housing and rent.

Furthermore, by regulating the prices of goods we will reduce profits for Australian suppliers. Farmers and manufacturers are integral for the Victorian economy. Without them there would simply be nothing to buy at the supermarkets. Something that may have passed over their heads is that some of the farmers and manufacturers in this state are experiencing the same cost-of-living and inflationary pressures as ordinary Victorians. Regulating supermarket prices through government intervention simply passes the costs on to them. Farmers and other workers who work tirelessly to provide for all of us are not some greedy, profit-hungry class, they are ordinary, decent people making an honest living in this state, and this motion in all its ignorance wants to impose higher costs on them, ultimately decimating the supply of goods available for Victorians.

Another matter present that has not been taken into consideration further down the supply chain is transport. If you want to pass on additional costs to the transport industry, that will lead to more deaths on the road than are currently happening as the Transport Workers' Union continue their fight against unsafe roads in the national jurisdictions.

The cost-of-living pressures are also worsened by the difficult conditions that our state has been subject to over the past few years, such as natural disasters, seasonal issues, pandemic recovery and more. Producer supply is often impacted by bushfires, droughts and floods, leaving supermarkets without a market for locally produced goods. These situations inevitably impact supply, which leads to unexpected costs to supermarket providers through no fault of their own.

This motion again makes the blanket statement that corporations are increasing their profits with no nuance. By regulating supermarket prices without consideration for these extenuating circumstances, we will be throwing businesses, suppliers and consumers all under the bus. Our farmers and manufacturers are an integral part of our state and economy and deserve to see reasonable returns for their work, and this motion would risk creating a shortage of products available by reducing the incentive to sell or invest in the market. It is a basic question of supply and demand that will lead to increased costs for Victorian consumers, rather contrary to the stated aims of Mr Puglielli's motion. No matter what the Victorian Greens may think, the iron laws of economics reign true in this state, as they do everywhere. The imposition of further controls on prices is not going to lead to what Mr Puglielli believes. There are consequences to unreasonable and harsh controls on any industry, but let us not go through what happens there.

We already know from consideration of this poor motion that there is going to be an increased cost for supermarkets from regulation. No business is going to just cop the cost on the chin and keep going. Maybe the Victorian Greens live in an alternative reality to me, but I have seen what always happens: the cost will be offloaded to consumers and suppliers, farmers will be paying more and more to supply their goods and consumers will be hit with higher and higher prices at the check-out – and this is supposedly going to help Victorians. I do not believe ordinary people should cop it on top of an already steep weekly grocery bill just to feed the Victorian Greens' insatiable yearning for more and more regulation. This is nothing more than a bland Greens ideological piece that wants more government intervention for the sake of intervention rather than corrective measures. I know what the Victorian Greens will say – that we would use the regulations to control prices – but newsflash: price controls do not work. We know all too well that it leads to empty shelves and first come, first served as suppliers can no longer afford to supply at the same rate with artificially low prices. It is economics 101, with major economists and policymakers all united against this ridiculous over-the-top measure.

I would also like to note the Australian Council of Trade Unions in the final report of their inquiry into price gouging, published this month – a highly comprehensive detailing of the factors in supermarket cost increases – explicitly do not make recommendations towards price control or regulation. Nor do expert economics experts or research institutes such as the Grattan Institute, who advocate for exactly what the Allan Labor government is doing – direct support for Victorians who are struggling, increasing JobSeeker and offering provision for subsidies such as free kinder and the power bonus.

I am unsure as to why the Victorian Greens would propose a motion against the recommendation of union leaders, economists and industry experts. We know everyone with expertise in this area is opposed to the idea of price controls and such heavy-handed, blunt regulatory crackdowns, and we know that doing so will jack up the cost-of-living pressures on working families and suppliers. There is no scenario in which the motion leads to better outcomes. It leads to consumers taking a hit to their wallets, farmers having less cash in their pockets, less jobs and empty shelves. It is not the role of the state to intervene in business practices, except as a last resort, due to the risks that will come along with this, and I urge strong opposition to this motion.

**Samantha RATNAM** (Northern Metropolitan) (11:40): I am very pleased to speak to this motion moved by Mr Puglielli on behalf of the Greens today. It has been quite an extraordinary debate already, and it has been extraordinary on a number of fronts. Firstly, it has been extraordinary to see the lengths that the duopoly in this place will go to to protect the duopoly out there, which is squeezing the necks of Victorians, who cannot put food on the table. We have seen all the classic high school debating tactics being used: selective use of data, gross exaggerations of hypothetical scenarios far out into the future, scaremongering and, let us not forget the old classic, attacking the opponent to undermine their credibility, all in an attempt to avoid talking about what is at the heart of this debate. At the heart of this debate is the ability of Victorians to afford and access food, an essential for life.

There were some in this place who paid lip-service to the everyday reality of Victorians struggling with the cost of living, but that very quickly gave way to trying to duck and weave, not taking any responsibility – ‘It’s not our problem; pass it on.’ God forbid someone in this place actually talks to and cares about the community. It is almost like that is such a foreign concept to you all that you have to believe that anyone who wants to care about Victorians and provide some cost-of-living relief must be driven only by self-interest. Maybe that reflects more about how you think about the world than about us. But we do care, and we are going to continue caring.

There was also the classic case of buck-passing, state and federal Labor governments passing the buck between themselves while the community suffers. That is what is happening at the moment: the community is suffering. If anyone dared to actually speak to the community, they too would hear what we are hearing from the community every single day. When it comes to the crunch, federal governments, including Labor, have failed to implement ACCC recommendations, because they are beholden to the supermarkets. Well, you ignore the cares of the Victorian community at your peril, because the reality is Victorians are being hit hard by the skyrocketing cost of living, and the two big supermarkets have seen this as an opportunity for price gouging and profit. It is apparent now to anyone who has been paying attention that the supermarket giants cannot be trusted to be fair and to regulate themselves. The government must act now to regulate supermarkets to stop them from price gouging.

Coles and Woolworths have a vice grip on the supermarket industry, with the vast majority of consumers dependent on their stores, and they have consistently used this market dominance to put up the price of food and essentials, making the cost of living untenable for so many Victorians. For months now supermarkets have justified their prices by hiding behind excuses about supply chain disruptions and inflation, but the sinister truth is becoming more and more apparent with every inquiry, every investigation and every whistleblower. These companies have been price gouging Victorians, and they are increasing inflation as they do it. Not only that but, as many Australians would have seen on *Four Corners* this week, Coles and Woolworths are also engaging in anti-competitive tactics, land banking and bullying farmers and producers into lowering profit margins. None of you wanted to talk about that today, did you?

The Greens are not going to stop fiercely campaigning to regulate the big supermarkets. Let me say the public support for regulating the supermarket industry is strong, and it is growing. Ignore it at your peril. The people we have spoken to are very alive to the issue of supermarket price gouging, and they are frustrated and angry. People feel beholden to the whims of these two giant companies, which can charge whatever they want for the basic items people need to survive. It is a system that cannot be left

to continue as it is, because business as usual for Coles and Woolworths is about profiteering at the expense of consumers and producers. Today we have heard the political duopoly say, 'Leave it to the market. It'll sort itself out.' When have we heard that before – trying to afford a home, anyone?

The federal government has finally woken up to this issue thanks to the pressure of my Greens colleagues in the federal Parliament, but the Victorian government is continuing to shirk its responsibility, aided and abetted by its duopoly mates. We are told repeatedly by Victorian Labor that the responsibility for easing cost-of-living pressures lies with their federal counterparts, but this simply is untrue. As my colleague has told this chamber, this government has significant powers under the Essential Services Commission to act to regulate the supermarket industry and to set prices fairly. Labor governments have regulated unruly supermarkets in the past, and they should have the guts to do it now, because that is what Victorians need. If you ever wanted to witness a protection racket for the profiteering corporations, all you needed to do was tune in to the debate today. Well, we are here to hold you to account. We are not going anywhere. We are going to come in here day after day to fight for the needs of everyday Victorians because quite clearly both of you in the duopoly have forgotten them.

**Moira DEEMING** (Western Metropolitan) (11:46): Price regulations are popular in periods of economic stress. When people feel vulnerable to economic forces that are outside their control they understandably want to know who to blame, and then inevitably socialists and communists pop up to frame the problem as a class war between the evil, greedy owners and the poor and oppressed workers. Then just as inevitably their solution to the problem is to hand over total control to the most elite class of all, the one to which they themselves belong and which they curiously neglect to mention, and that is of course the political class – the government. But as basic economics and history have shown us over and over again, prices are not set arbitrarily. They reflect the underlying reality that socialist economics just does not work. The reality is that everything costs more in Victoria because we have absurdly high taxes, self-defeating energy policies and out-of-control debt. As Thomas Sowell reminds us, reality is just not optional, and we need to deal with it.

Price controls will not fix any of the underlying problems that have caused these increases in prices. So what are the other options that have been put forward? Well, there have been many, including a peak body to collect aggregated farmer price data, collating retailers' weekly shelf prices and publishing the price differences and retailers' gross margins by product and region; a grocery industry ombudsman with better powers to investigate complaints in a way that does not put suppliers at risk of retribution; changes to merger laws, which would make it harder for the major chains to create and maintain monopolies and duopolies; or unfair practice laws to open up the market by banning exclusive supply agreements, which hinder newcomers and prevent new players from acquiring sites. The political class does not need more power. The political class, which is all of us here, just needs to do its job, make sure that our markets are free and fair and stop gouging our taxpayers through taxes, debt and inflation.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:48): It has been a pretty lively debate, this one, I will say that. To summarise, this is what we have heard from the major parties today, and to those watching at home it would have been quite an experience. We began, as noted by my colleague Dr Ratnam, with the brief acknowledgement from most if not all speakers that people are struggling in the community, but then there was no follow-through of action. We have a scenario where the state has the powers to regulate this industry – to regulate Coles and Woolies, take action, step up, step in and not allow these two profiteering corporations to hurt so many in the community. No, instead we heard the acknowledgement of the pain but not the follow-through.

In fact it was quite incredible that many speakers, particularly from the government, I will note, regard the use of social media to engage with the people who are reaching out to us who are moving this motion in the Greens as ridiculous. Really this is a contempt for young people. It is quite incredible that every opportunity is used to shirk that entire way of communicating with the electorate. How



terrible that we would be hearing from hundreds and thousands of Victorians commenting on our social media feeds, telling us just how hard it is right now.

The disconnect in this place is profound, and as noted by my colleague Dr Ratnam, it feels like there is a duopoly in here mirroring that which we are seeing in the major supermarkets out in the community. We saw classic buck-passing with reference to the federal laws around competition that do exist. Yes, there are laws in all different jurisdictions to address this crisis, but we need to take every opportunity that we have. The state has significant powers. It was noted by the very first speaker from the government, Mr Batchelor, that we have had two federal constitutional referendums that have decided that states have the power to take this on, that that is where the power sits, and so the action must be taken by this state Labor government.

We then pushed off into the distance about which products, which supermarkets and where it would apply. It literally is a case for the Essential Services Commission; that is the point of the motion. I would not, to be honest, trust a lot of people in here to be choosing which products. We have an Essential Services Commission that would act for this purpose on a regulated industry, being groceries. We heard about the fear of market failure. We heard about the fear of an attack on the tomatoes. To be honest, what on earth? Market failure, this idea that we would be concerned about market failure, is not what we are seeing right now. People being unable to afford groceries, people skipping meals, people unable to provide for their families, people skipping medication because they cannot afford their food and people going into debt because they cannot afford essential groceries – how ridiculous. Is this not already market failure? At what point would we need to see further change for this government to step up and actually act? The time to do this is now. We have just seen the exposé this week. It could not be more glaringly obvious that the duopoly is roting everyday Victorians.

There has overall been quite a theme of absolution of responsibility from those in this place – that we actually have a responsibility to do our part to take this on rather than just buck-passing to the federal Parliament. It is honestly as if many here have forgotten what it is like to care about the community. It must simply be self-interest that we would be moving this motion. How ridiculous. Shame on all who would use that argument.

We need to do everything that we can to haul Coles and Woolies before us, hold them to account and make sure that everyday Victorians can afford the food that they need – food, essential to life. The community expects more from this place, so I commend this motion to the house, and shame on all who do not support it.

**Council divided on motion:**

*Ayes (5):* Katherine Copsey, Sarah Mansfield, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Samantha Ratnam

*Noes (32):* Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Gaele Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Evan Mulholland, Rachel Payne, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

**Motion negatived.**

**Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.**

*Questions without notice and ministers statements*

**Workplace safety**

**David ETTERSANK** (Western Metropolitan) (12:01): (422) My question is for the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC, represented by the Leader of the Government, Minister Symes. It has long been established that psychological workplace hazards are no less harmful to employees than physical

hazards. In 2021 the Victorian government announced that new psychological health regulations for Victorian employees were being developed and were expected to be released in that same year. According to the Victorian Government Solicitor's Office, following the completion of public consultation the government has since been 'considering options for the development' of regulations. I ask the minister: what is the status of these considerations?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:02): I thank Mr Ettershank for his question for Minister Pearson in the WorkSafe–TAC capacity. As you know, that is an area where there is a lot of work going on. I would like to thank members from this chamber that have been involved in parliamentary committees considering similar topics, and I am sure that Minister Pearson's office will prepare a thorough answer to Mr Ettershank's question.

**David ETTERS HANK** (Western Metropolitan) (12:03): I thank the Attorney for her assistance in this matter. By way of supplementary, Victoria was the first state in Australia to announce the development of psychosocial regulations for the workplace, but it is now the only state in Australia yet to implement those vital reforms. So my question is: when can we expect to see these regulations released?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:03): I will add Mr Ettershank's second question to the first for Minister Pearson.

**The PRESIDENT:** Before I call the next question, I would like to acknowledge in the gallery today we have a delegation from the State Legislative Assembly of Sabah, from Malaysia, led by the honourable Speaker, the two honourable Deputy Speakers, assistant ministers and members of the Assembly. On behalf of the Council we welcome you to the Parliament, and we hope when you leave you judge our question time kindly.

### Western Victoria fires

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:04): (423) My question is to the Minister for Mental Health. Minister, much-needed mental health support has been delayed for the devastated community of Pomonal because the government has not adequately funded support services. Yesterday in question time in the other place the Premier said she would:

... immediately ask both the Minister for Emergency Services ... and the mental health minister to understand what has happened here.

Minister, what advice have you provided to the Premier?

**Ingrid STITT** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:04): I thank Ms Crozier for her question. It is an important one. Can I first acknowledge the significant impacts of the fires on the Pomonal community and the Grampians community more broadly and acknowledge that these events have the capacity to have devastating impacts on people's mental health and wellbeing. It is something that the government is very committed to addressing. There have been mental health services in place since the events occurred. There are a range of mental health supports available to residents of Pomonal, something that I have spoken to the member for Lowan about as early as this morning. My office has also been in contact with her about these issues.

We have the Northern Grampians region covered by a range of different options for people in the community. Whenever there is an emergency situation like the one that we have seen in the Grampians, we do get immediate psychosocial and first aid provided by the Red Cross and the Victorian Council of Churches, who are in place now and have been since those events. We also have the Horsham mental health and wellbeing hub, which offers free walk-in and telehealth support, which can support residents who have been impacted by the fires. As was noted yesterday in the Assembly, Grampians Community Health are also providing support to community members on the ground. I would like to thank them for their support for the local community during what has been an incredibly

difficult time. The Department of Health is currently in discussions with Grampians Community Health to ensure that they can continue to provide that on-ground support that has been there since day one. It is really important that those supports are available for the local community. Those active conversations between the department and Grampians Community Health are ongoing to ensure that there is that support there at the time that we need it as we move from immediate relief to the recovery phase of this emergency.

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:07): You did not answer the question, but thank you for the information nevertheless. Minister, it is well known that the longer you leave mental health support after trauma, the more likely it is to lead to post-traumatic stress disorder, with higher rates of family violence and alcohol and other drug misuse. Eight days after the event, how long will the community have to wait before you provide this urgent funding that has been requested time and time again?

**Ingrid STITT** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:07): Well, I do not know that Ms Crozier has listened to my answer. There have been significant supports in place since these terrible events unfolded. Nothing is more important than providing that immediate support to the community, and a number of us have been working hard on those issues since day one. The reality is that the conversations that are happening between the Department of Health and Grampians Community Health have no bearing on the fact that there are going to continue to be services available on the ground. I would also make the point that there are a number of additional services available to the community across the Grampians because of the reforms that our government is pursuing, including local services, which have not been available up until quite recently. There will be people impacted by the emergency, but there will also be people who have pre-existing mental health issues, and they will continue to – *(Time expired)*

#### Ministers statements: Green Links grants

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:08): I rise today in my capacity as Minister for Water to update the chamber with the recent announcement of a \$10 million investment program to improve habitat and water quality and to provide cool, green spaces for communities around our urban creeks, rivers and waterways. Twenty-three projects have been recipients of the first round of this \$10 million fund. This includes support for local councils, traditional owners, not-for-profit, community or environmental groups, catchment management authorities and water corporations, with five large-scale catchment projects receiving grants and 18 successful local-scale community projects.

Members will no doubt be delighted all around this chamber and indeed across the Parliament to hear of the wide variety of waterways that will benefit, including the Birrarung, Maribyrnong, KooyongKoot, Kororoit, Little River, Glen Iris wetlands, Werribee River, Yering billabong, Barwon and Moorabool rivers, Edgars Creek, Merri Creek, Yarrowee River, Moonee Ponds Creek, Steele Creek, Blackburn Lake, Stony Creek and Edwardes Lake. We are investing just over \$6 million in total in this first round of projects, with a further \$4 million for future rounds to come.

We have estimated that we will be able to revegetate around 200 hectares of land around our critical urban waterways. I am really delighted to confirm, however, that this first round of grants alone is expected to revegetate over 300 hectares across Melbourne, Geelong and Ballarat. These areas are such an important part of the fabric of our urban environments. Making sure we have good landscapes for social, recreational, economic and environmental use is crucial, particularly in improving the health of rivers and creeks while we enjoy them, walk along them and treasure them in our every day. These have more than 1800 species of native plants and 600 species of native animals. Congratulations to all successful applicants – *(Time expired)*

### **Greyhound racing**

**Georgie PURCELL** (Northern Victoria) (12:11): (424) My question is for the Minister for Racing in the other place. A Victorian greyhound recently died after having their barking muzzle left on in the scorching heat. The death is presumed to have occurred from either asphyxiation or dehydration. Greyhound Racing Victoria allegedly told the Kilmore-based trainer to take a photo and just drop the dog off at the vet for disposal. I only know of this death from whistleblowers, not from the industry being transparent. Can the minister confirm the details of this death and if an autopsy was undertaken?

**Enver ERDOGAN** (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:11): I thank Ms Purcell for her question and her interest in the greyhound racing sector. I know we have had an opportunity to visit one of the facilities where we have a partnership – a greyhound program. I know you have been out there as well, and I thank you for your long-term passion and interest in these matters. I will pass that on to the Minister for Racing in the other place, and I am sure he will be able to respond to those questions as appropriate.

**Georgie PURCELL** (Northern Victoria) (12:12): Thank you, Minister, for referring that on. Victoria is already second in the country for on-track greyhound deaths, and almost 400 greyhounds have been injured on Victorian racetracks since the beginning of this year. While we know Victoria is leading in serious on-track greyhound injuries and deaths, little is truly known about incidents off the track like this one. Can the minister advise how many dogs have been reported dead due to natural causes, accidents, so-called ‘misadventure’ or any other reason in the last year and how many underwent autopsies to determine the cause of their death?

**Enver ERDOGAN** (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:12): I thank Ms Purcell for her supplementary question and her interest in the greyhound industry. I will pass that on to the Minister for Racing in the other place, and I will seek a response in line with the standing orders.

### **Bushfire preparedness**

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:13): (425) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, Tuesday last week was the first catastrophic fire danger day declared since the 2019–20 Black Summer fires, and people in affected communities were advised to leave their homes on Monday night. I ask: what additional firefighting aircraft were repositioned into the Wimmera region to deal with this catastrophic fire day?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:13): I thank Mr Davis for his question. I have a preprepared answer in relation to aerial firefighting because it comes up a lot in here, so I wanted to make sure that I had accurate information. We were very well protected and prepared with our firefighting aircraft on Tuesday. Obviously, they are a support to the on-the-ground efforts when we are dealing with fire incidents. Sixty-two fire-bombing and other aviation assets were made available ahead of the catastrophic fire day on Tuesday. They were repositioned across the state based on risk. In response to the fires in the Grampians 27 aircraft were dispatched over 13 and 14 February, including 17 water-bombing and fire-retardant aircraft. Again – I think I say this regularly – I do not deploy the assets; the experts deploy the assets. They are strategic decisions made by emergency response experts, and that is exactly how it should be. As I have indicated before, the aerial fleet is a great asset, but it is there to support the on-the-ground efforts, because there are instances where it is dangerous to fly and therefore there was a lot of aerial deployment both during the fires and after. In Pomonal – I was there on Thursday and could see the aerial response in terms of suppression of that fire with dropping retardant. There was a lot of the pink stuff floating around to ensure that that community was protected from any sparks that could happen after the main fire had been suppressed. Mr Davis, hopefully that answers your question in relation to the deployment of our aerial fleet.

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:15): I thank the minister for her response, but actually it did not quite answer the question. I have a further point. Minister, given the extreme risk and the inaccessible terrain of much of the Wimmera region, why did Victoria only rely on smaller and mid-size aircraft instead of requesting large air tankers from interstate?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:16): Mr Davis, again, we keep drawing into this conversation where you expect me as Minister for Emergency Services to be the person who makes operational decisions about which aircraft are where. As I said, 62 fire-bombing and other aviation assets were made available on the day.

*Members interjecting.*

**Jaclyn SYMES**: I saw them myself. They were flying in the air, I can assure you. They were dropping wet stuff on the hot stuff, and it certainly helped with the suppression and the protection of those communities.

**David Davis**: On a point of order, President, it is a very, very specific question about why Victoria relied on smaller and mid-sized aircraft instead of requesting large air tankers from interstate. The minister has actually not responded to that at all.

**The PRESIDENT**: Mr Davis, the minister has been relevant to the question that she has been asked.

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:17): Not to the air tanker. I move:

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

**Motion agreed to.**

#### **Ministers statements: fire and storm events**

**Gayle TIERNEY** (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:17): Today I rise to commend the resilience and community spirit of our regional Victorian communities. I have seen firsthand how regional Victorians are supporting each other following the horrific storm event and fires on 13 February. Last weekend I had the opportunity to visit Pomonal, where a significant number of homes have been lost to bushfires. The Pomonal general store, where I was able to meet with local community leaders, has become a rallying point for the town. I have got to say one of the first questions I asked of community members was: 'Are the mental health services in place? Are they available?' They assured me they were and in fact had been accessed. I was able to thank the brave Pomonal CFA volunteers, seven of whom had lost their own homes while fighting to save the homes of others. I would like to acknowledge all first responders who are still working on recovery and clean-up efforts.

I also met the mayor and the CEO of the South Gippsland Shire Council, who are leading very significant clean-up jobs in Mirboo North and surrounds. Again, the amazing work of council staff and community volunteers is shining through.

Enormous effort is required as we transition from frontline response to the recovery phase. I have also been deeply impressed by the optimism of impacted communities and the many practical ideas to support recovery, including directly from residents like Pomonal business owner Damon and his partner Tash. As Minister for Regional Development, I want to make it clear that we recognise the importance of community-led responses. Your ideas are being taken back to government. My focus is on listening to these communities to determine the best way that place-based support can be provided to build resilience and to build stronger regions.

#### **Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria**

**David LIMBRICK** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:19): (426) My question is for the minister representing the Minister for Government Services and is related to births, deaths and marriages

services, and I can almost hear the collective sigh from my colleagues around the chamber. This is not the first time I have raised issues with this service, and I am not the only member of this chamber to raise them. When I raised this matter in August last year requesting that the office be reopened and services be restored to adequate levels, I also questioned whether it was permanently closed and whether rent was being paid on an empty office. The minister did not state this in his response, but it does seem that the office has indeed been permanently closed. I have not heard any announcements, but there is no longer an address listed on their website. My question for the minister is: why has the births, deaths and marriages office closed?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:20): I will ensure that Minister Williams provides a response to Mr Limbrick.

**David LIMBRICK** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:20): I thank the Attorney-General for passing that on for me. If this is simply part of the streamlining and cost-cutting measures that the government is implementing to pay for the largesse of the COVID spending era, then fair enough. I am hardly one to oppose savings measures. However, this is hardly a grant for some new weird art installation but a critical service that people need in order to engage with a lot of other services. When I last spoke about this issue, the rating on Google for births, deaths and marriages was 1.7 out of 5. Remarkably it has fallen, despite assurances from the minister that they were focusing on improving service delivery. At 1.6 stars, the stories reflect the same things, such as people paying three times for a simple document, not receiving it and not receiving a reply to emails. Another person explained that it took 4½ months for the complaint to get to the Ombudsman to get a birth certificate. I ask the minister: what is being done to ensure adequate service delivery for people trying to access or alter these critical documents?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:21): Mr Limbrick, I will add your second question to your first.

### **Bushfire preparedness**

**Joe McCRACKEN** (Western Victoria) (12:22): (427) My question is also to the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, two small lightning strikes and a lack of suitable air-response resources last Tuesday let fires grow and caused huge losses in Western Victoria, which is my electorate. My question is: what additional firefighting aircraft are allocated to the extreme risk regions ahead of tomorrow's predicted dangerous conditions?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:22): Mr McCracken, I do not purport to be a person that can determine what you have alleged to believe is the cause of fires or the spread of fires in your region, so to make an assertion that aerial fleet deployment is something that you think was wrong is not something that I think you are qualified to assert. Having said that, I have responded to the incidents of 13 and 14 February in relation to deployment around the state. I have not received advice about where planes and choppers are ahead of tomorrow, because I trust that the experts are making those decisions today. The assets are not all at one place permanently anyway – they are at Ballarat, they are at Avalon, they are at Stawell, they are at Moorabbin. There are different homes for them, and they get strategically moved around the state, responding to risk.

Tomorrow's weather is looking extreme for the Wimmera and for parts of the central and south-west regions, which is where the experts will be focused on tomorrow, making sure that our brigades are ready, making sure that all of the support is available for those communities where we know there will be a high risk. Off the back of last week's weather, we know that there is further drying of particularly grasslands, so grassfires are a particular focus for our agencies tomorrow. Aerial fleet are a very good asset to respond to grassfires because they move very quickly. Air attacks are a great way to attack those fires because it is a bit more difficult for some of our vehicles to be able to keep up with those, so it is an additional asset that I am sure will be deployed by the experts to the areas of risk.

**Joe McCracken** (Western Victoria) (12:25): Thank you for that response, Minister. Will you provide the house with a copy of the air operations plan before the close of business today – yes or no?

**Jaclyn Symes** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:25): Mr McCracken, you are seeking an answer outside of the standing orders. However, I do not have a problem with providing information about the amazing work that our emergency services do in relation to preparing for and responding to high-risk weather incidents, and I am more than happy to come back to you and provide you with as much information as I possibly can in relation to the preparedness for tomorrow.

*Members interjecting.*

**Jaclyn Symes**: The air operations plan is not a static document. It might change in the morning depending on what the bureau tell us.

*Members interjecting.*

**Jaclyn Symes**: If you want a career change and to become an aerial expert, then perhaps go and do that. I am not the aerial expert. I rely on the information that I get from –

*Members interjecting.*

**Jaclyn Symes**: I can assure the community that the communities are safe. We have an asset range that go from the ground to the air, which will be – *(Time expired)*

#### Ministers statements: child protection

**Lizzie Blandthorn** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:26): I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is encouraging Victorians from all walks of life to consider a career in child protection. I have spoken many times in this house about the work we have undertaken to strengthen the child protection workforce, through funding 1180 additional child protection practitioners to promoting their vital work through the Go Where You're Needed campaign. But today I want to focus on the child protection vacation employment program. Most recently funded through the 2022–23 budget, this \$5.4 million program provides a paid rotation-based employment program that equips Victorian-based students studying a social work, psychology, welfare or related qualification with the experience and skills necessary for entry-level child protection practitioner roles.

Last year I attended the graduation of 56 participants of this program. On that day I was particularly struck by the story of one of the previous participants. For the benefit of the house I will highlight their story, and to protect their identity I will refer to them as Jill. Jill began her tertiary studies with the intention of working in criminology and the Australian Federal Police. However, the pandemic delayed her fitness tests that were required for her to join the AFP. During the pandemic she could not sit still, and her passion for learning led her to consider free TAFE. Before she knew it she had started a diploma of community services. Working as a disability support worker gave her exposure to advocating for those most at risk in our community.

As part of her placement requirements she applied for the child protection vacation employment program and put her career in disability on hold to try something new. In early 2022 she was able to experience and learn more than she could ever imagine. She saw the work and the efforts of child protection in areas such as intake, investigation and case management and witnessed practitioners' advocacy for children. She saw the difference child protection can make in a child's life just by taking an interest in what they had to say and making them feel safe. By the time she had finished the program she had accepted a position in child protection intake. The team were so welcoming, knowledgeable and supportive that she knew it would be the perfect environment for her. Jill was a very impressive

young woman, and this is just one example of how our investments are making a real difference –  
(Time expired)

### Water policy

**Sarah MANSFIELD** (Western Victoria) (12:28): (428) My question is for the Minister for Water. The Victorian Labor government has banked heavily on nine flood plain restoration projects proposed to achieve its environmental water targets under the Murray–Darling Basin plan. In January your own government’s planning minister Sonya Kilkenny rejected the Burra flood plains restoration project on environmental grounds. She found that the project posed an unacceptable environmental risk due to loss of native vegetation. There are similar environmental concerns at the other planned flood plain restoration project sites. Minister, in light of the planning minister’s decision, will you reconsider the pursuit of these projects?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:29): Thank you, Dr Mansfield, for again enabling the opportunity for me to talk about the VMFRP and these exceptionally important projects, which are about returning environmental benefit to parts of our flood plain where water will not reach unless we have catastrophic floods the likes of which we saw in October 2022. We make absolutely no apology for using proven technology in pumps and in regulators to get water to parts of the landscape that need it, to build a measure of climate resilience and to make sure that we can get water to 14,000 pristine and crucially precious landscaped areas, including a number which are the subject of consideration and protection under the Ramsar convention. We know that these are parts of the state where the flood plain has attracted hundreds of native species of flora and fauna. We know also that when we can mimic natural flows using this established and proven technology, pumps and regulators – there is nothing new in this; you would do well to acquaint yourself with the way that it works – not only can we save vast amounts of water but we can also make sure that watering takes place to realise those long-term environmental objectives.

Dr Mansfield, it would be foolhardy in the extreme to say that because one project has not received approval that every other project should not therefore be pursued. In fact to do so would be I would suggest anathema to the Greens’ own objectives of making sure that environments in Victoria receive the benefit of innovation, and the remaining projects that we have will enable us to stop the deterioration of landscapes by offsetting more than 70 gigalitres of water that will otherwise need to be found through the Commonwealth’s ill-considered program to restore water to the environment through the blunt instrument of buybacks.

So we are committed to the VMFRP. We are committed to making sure that we restore the health of these flood plains across these sites, including the national parks estate, without the need to flood towns. When we do talk about managing these balances, when we do talk about bringing water onto these flood plains, it is with a view to making sure that as we experience hotter and drier climatic conditions, as we experience less water in the environment, we have those measures in place to bring that water onto flood plains to mimic natural flows to ensure that we have migratory bird and other species returning to, breeding in and ensuring the health of these landscapes. These rigorous assessment processes have found that we have overall benefits across sites at Hattah Lakes North, Belsar–Yungera, Nyah and Vinifera, and we do want to make sure that this work continues. I look forward to you getting on board to see these benefits realised.

**Sarah MANSFIELD** (Western Victoria) (12:32): Thank you, Minister, for your response. I will take that as a yes, you do intend to pursue these projects. However, your government’s failure to sign the new Murray–Darling Basin agreement federally means that Victoria will get no Commonwealth funding to support these flood plain projects, should they ever get past your own planning minister, and you have failed to answer previous questions I have asked regarding how you intend to fund these incredibly expensive projects. Minister, given Victoria’s achievement of environmental water targets depends on these flood plain restoration projects being operational, and they appear to be unable to



get funding or planning approval, how do you intend to meet your environmental water targets under the Murray–Darling Basin plan?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (12:33): Thank you very much. What a shame I only have a minute. It is tempting to ask for additional time to address what you have posed in your supplementary question. Dr Mansfield, the objectives of delivering the VMFRP projects are entirely aligned – entirely aligned – with the Commonwealth’s legislation as it passed last year. In fact for the Commonwealth to not fund these projects would be for it to abandon the principles which underpin the legislation that it championed last year. In fact to not fund these projects would be anathema to the objectives of what the federal minister referred to as restoring our rivers. We are in a position to return – with additional time, which I have pushed for and which my predecessor pushed for – 95 per cent of our targets under the plan –

**Sarah Mansfield**: On a point of order, President, I appreciate that the minister is sort of addressing parts of the question, but she is not actually answering my question, which was: how will you meet the environmental water targets?

**The PRESIDENT**: I believe the minister has been relevant to the question, and I think she was rejecting the premise that there will not be any Commonwealth funding. Once again, I should not paraphrase – I might get myself into trouble.

**Harriet SHING**: The legislation requires in fact that the Commonwealth does fund projects, including those under the VMFRP. I am looking forward to seeing the Commonwealth deliver on its promises to do exactly that.

#### Western Victoria fires

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (12:34): (429) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, last Tuesday was the first declared catastrophic fire danger day since the 2019–20 Black Summer fires, and people in affected communities were advised to leave their homes on Monday night. What coordination took place for strike teams to be in place in the affected areas?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:35): I thank Mr Mulholland for his question, but I think the way he characterised his question – we were well prepared. We knew that it was going to be a catastrophic day. Communities were warned, the State Control Centre was activated accordingly and strike teams were in place. I am not sure what you are concerned about in relation to the state’s preparedness. I am very confident in the State Control Centre and their ability to keep Victorians safe.

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (12:35): Minister, will there be a review into the failings that occurred in fighting the fires in western Victoria on 13 February, and when will it be released?

*Members interjecting.*

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:36): I think some of the interjections probably are consistent with my gut response to that question. The volunteers, the paid personnel and the communities responded incredibly to a catastrophic day. They saved lives, they saved properties and I thank them for that effort. I would not characterise it as a review into failings. I commend everyone who responded on the day and thank them for their efforts. Yes, we always look at every emergency. We have a review that commences before the emergency is even completed. We will always look for continual improvements, absolutely. I am on record as saying that no response is ever perfect; it never will be. We will always learn from every emergency, but I will not attack those that responded last Tuesday.

**Written responses**

**The PRESIDENT** (12:38): Today Minister Symes will get Mr Limbrick an answer from the Minister for Government Services, both the supplementary and the substantive; Minister Erdogan for Ms Purcell from the Minister for Racing, on both the questions; and Minister Symes also from the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC for both the questions from Mr Ettershank.

**David Davis:** On a point of order, President, I respectfully point out that the minister did not respond to my supplementary directly about the requesting of large air tankers from interstate, and I perhaps invite you to listen to the response.

*Members interjecting.*

**The PRESIDENT:** Order! Mr Davis, I believe that the minister was relevant to your supplementary question, and from my notes I think that she was very relevant and gave you an answer insofar as leaving decisions like that to experts. She actually was very relevant to your question.

**Rachel Payne:** On a point of order, President, if I may request it, I have some overdue responses to questions: firstly, an adjournment was asked on 8 March 2023, number 88, on reproductive leave, of the Minister for Women, represented in this place by the Minister for Children; and a question to the Attorney-General was asked on 2 August 2023, number 1043, for the Victorian Office of Public Prosecutions annual report from 2021–22.

**Lizzie Blandthorn:** On the point of order, President, we will take that on notice and follow them up for you.

**Constituency questions**

**Southern Metropolitan Region**

**Ryan BATCHELOR** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:40): (675) My question is to the Treasurer. Can the Treasurer please outline how the Labor government is working to support households in Southern Metro with cost-of-living pressures? Obviously, we know many in the community are struggling with rising prices and with costs, and it is something that the government takes extremely seriously. Our last budget built on the enormous support that we have been providing over many years to support households with cost-of-living pressures. We had another round of the power saving bonus. We have introduced free school breakfast programs. There is expanded eligibility for free TAFE. There is free registration for apprentices. We have got the rollout of the free kinder programs. We are slashing regional train fares for those of us in the metro area who want to go into regional Victoria. We have expanded the Smile Squad free dental care to independent schools. And we are doing things like bringing back the SEC to promote renewables and make the structural changes in our grid to make sure that we have cheaper power into the future.

**South-Eastern Metropolitan Region**

**Ann-Marie HERMANS** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:41): (676) My question is to the Minister for Planning. Minister, will the government commit to extending the liquidated builders customer support payment scheme, which closed on 29 January 2024, to reimburse the 63 homebuyers in the Casey South region who have lost their deposits due to Montego Homes going into liquidation? The domestic building insurance noncompliance laws have not been adequately audited by the government, which allowed Montego Homes to continue taking deposits without having appropriate insurance in place for deposit-holders. I happen to know from meeting some of those that came out last sitting week to actually protest on the steps of Parliament that one of these ladies who had purchased in my local area had only just paid her deposit in the middle of January this year. So we do want to know the answer to that question.

**South-Eastern Metropolitan Region**

**David LIMBRICK** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:42): (677) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety in the other place. We have all experienced a situation where you drive down a road at a crawling speed because of roadworks but look around and there appears to be nobody working. A constituent called my office because he and thousands of other commuters on the Mornington Peninsula Freeway have had this experience for months. He said that there is always a massive bottleneck near the Patterson Lakes turn-off due to roadworks and nobody working there. My question is this: why does it appear to drivers that no work is going on near the Patterson Lakes turn-off of the Mornington Peninsula Freeway, and is it really necessary to cause traffic jams for these commuters every day?

**South-Eastern Metropolitan Region**

**Michael GALEA** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:43): (678) My constituency question today is for Minister Suleyman in her capacity as the Minister for Small Business. The south-eastern suburbs are home to many fantastic diverse small businesses. These businesses are at the heart of our communities, providing local jobs, opportunities and economic activity. On Sunday I had the privilege of attending the opening of the 18th Agha Juice store when they opened their new outlet in Frankston – their 18th store nationwide and their 16th store in Victoria. I would like to give a particular shout-out to Kimya and Fateemeh, the new franchisees of this new store, which will serve juice, ice cream, coffee and of course faloodas to the local Frankston community. I am looking forward to seeing their business prosper and grow. I would also like to thank Agha Juice for inviting me to open their store, and I would like to commend the minister for the work that she has done to support small business in my region. I ask: what supports are available to small businesses in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region?

**Northern Victoria Region**

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (12:44): (679) My question is to the Minister for Skills and TAFE. I would like to know why the state government continues to refer to and advertise free TAFE courses when in fact they are not free at all. My constituent Stephanie recently tried to enrol in a TAFE course in the belief that it would be free, as advertised by the government. She was very upset to find out before her enrolment would be accepted she had to pay an administration fee and also buy books for the course. She did not have the funds on hand to pay these amounts. She wrote to me and said that no government or TAFE should state courses are free when the purchase of textbooks is compulsory for tuition, and she believes that the government should stop deceiving the public. Stephanie was feeling angry, humiliated and frustrated when she tried to begin a course that would qualify her for important work in the counselling field. These so-called free TAFE courses are in fact subsidised courses. As my colleague Mr McCracken says, free TAFE ain't free. On behalf of my local constituent, the government should rename the free TAFE program 'subsidised TAFE' in the interest of truth and accuracy.

**The PRESIDENT:** I am assuming, Mrs Broad, the constituent tried to enrol in a TAFE that falls in your electorate.

**Gaelle Broad:** Yes.

**South-Eastern Metropolitan Region**

**Rachel PAYNE** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:45): (680) My constituency question is for the Minister for Crime Prevention. My constituent is a resident of Seaford. Like many in our community, my constituent enjoys heading down to the beach for a weekend swim. Unfortunately, on a recent visit my constituent witnessed a violent altercation between two groups, with beer bottles being thrown and one offender threatening to use a beer bottle to glass another. It was clear that a least one of these groups had consumed a significant amount of alcohol while at the beach. Understandably, my constituent was very distressed and concerned for their personal safety and the safety of other

beachgoers. Following the unprovoked fatal attack on Cameron Smith in November 2022, my constituent is concerned that not enough is being done to prevent further crimes. So my constituent asks: what is the minister doing to ensure public safety on our beaches in the south-east region?

### Northern Metropolitan Region

**Sheena WATT** (Northern Metropolitan) (12:46): (681) My question is for the Minister for Energy and Resources in the other place. Henry, a constituent of the Northern Metropolitan Region, is a home owner along with his partner Lucy. They own and occupy a unit, having moved in in June of last year. They, along with other residents and the owners corporation, see many of their neighbours with solar on their rooftops and think that the time is right for them to join the solar revolution and the transition to renewables. But Henry and his neighbours also report to me that they want some cost-of-living relief, especially with some reduced power bills. So, Minister, my question is: with Labor's recently announced solar for apartments scheme, how much is Henry likely to save on his ongoing energy costs?

### Southern Metropolitan Region

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:47): (682) My constituency question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. I have raised this issue on numerous occasions, and it is in relation to graffiti on public transport assets. I was quite disturbed last week when I was in High Street, Malvern, to see a bus shelter having quite graphic political messaging around the dispute in the Middle East, and this is really concerning for many members of the Jewish community in my electorate of Southern Metropolitan Region. I was again driving along Alexandra Avenue, and the political messaging is all over the rail pass that goes to South Yarra station. And this is ongoing – these messages are everywhere. They are very disturbing for large numbers of the community. I understand there are two sides to the argument, but I would urge the minister to get their teams out and to clean this very disturbing and appalling messaging off public transport assets.

### Southern Metropolitan Region

**Katherine COPSEY** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:48): (683) My constituency question is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. The *Fishermans Bend Framework* gave a commitment by the state government to providing both tram and rail connections to the precinct of 160,000 people living and working in my electorate of Southern Metropolitan in Fishermans Bend. This framework was released by the then Andrews government in October 2018, and it states the government will build a tramline connecting to the CBD to both the residential and employment districts of Fishermans Bend by 2025. Recent media reports suggest the government will not meet this deadline and reveal the University of Melbourne has been forced to abandon the tram as a short-term priority for its new Fishermans Bend campus. Without delivering the necessary climate-friendly transport connections for the community Victorian Labor is putting its own vision for this precinct at risk. I ask the minister: when can we expect to see the tram to service Fishermans Bend employees and residents funded and delivered?

### Northern Victoria Region

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (12:49): (684) My question is for the Minister for Environment. Doolans Bend at Browns Plains is in a disgraceful condition. You need a monster truck to drive down the rutted roads, and the place is overgrown with weeds. Richardsons Bend has not been reopened since the 2022 floods. It is closed with a padlock and no explanation why. These were once iconic, family-friendly camping spots. Today they appear to have been completely forgotten. Early last year my colleague the member for Benambra sought and was given assurances that these prime Crown land camping spots would be cleaned up by Easter, but Easter came and went, and the camping grounds were not cleaned up or ready for the public. As another Easter fast approaches, we need to know if they will be ready this year for families who want to go camping. Minister, when will Parks

Victoria undertake the urgently required general maintenance to fix the neglected public camping grounds along the Murray River in the Benambra district?

### Eastern Victoria Region

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (12:50): (685) My constituency question is for the Minister for Emergency Services. Sitting within the federal government's National Emergency Management Agency is the volunteer organisation Disaster Relief Australia. Volunteers work with purpose and are largely drawn from former ADF – Australian Defence Force – personnel. They have expertise and credentials to work in conjunction with the state government's still-to-be-announced clean-up program to assist larger contractors and/or the local volunteer workforce in Mirboo North and the environs, the other communities around. One of my constituents has raised this with me and requested that I contact the minister, and the key thing is that the DRA must be activated by a request from the state emergency services minister. So, Minister, will you activate the request for additional and skilled DRA workforce members to help with the clean-up of this disastrous storm that smashed through my beloved South Gippsland?

### Eastern Victoria Region

**Renee HEATH** (Eastern Victoria) (12:51): (686) Pakenham has experienced a population boom over the past decade, but it has not received the infrastructure funding to sustain that growth. McGregor Road is an extremely congested area, and several constituents have told me how difficult it is to turn right onto Henty and Rogers streets. In peak times the only way motorists can make a right-hand turn is when the boom gates at the level crossing are activated – this provides a break in the traffic. In effect the boom gates work as traffic lights. McGregor Road level crossing is being removed, which is fantastic. However, locals are worried about how this will worsen congestion at this intersection. For those roads to be functional there needs to be a roundabout or traffic lights where the level crossing is currently placed. My question for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety is: what is your plan for this intersection?

### North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

**Richard WELCH** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:52): (687) My question is for the Minister for Health Infrastructure in the other place. Back in 2016 one of the minister's several predecessors Jill Hennessy announced that the state Labor government would rebuild Epping ambulance station. Almost eight years later locals are still crying out for that dedicated ambulance station to help cater for the explosive growth in the region. My constituents in Mill Park and in Epping are desperate for proper health care across the north, and if it was a genuine need then, it is a genuine need now. My question is: is the 2025 delivery date for the ambulance station on track and in line with the government's original estimates and will the government expedite works to ensure locals in Epping, South Morang and Mill Park get the ambulance coverage they deserve?

### Western Victoria Region

**Joe McCRACKEN** (Western Victoria) (12:53): (688) My constituency matter is for the attention of the Treasurer, and I ask him to review land tax arrangements. I had one of my constituents write to me from Lovely Banks. She said that she works in the public service and her husband is a tradie. In her email she said, 'To my shock this morning I opened my land tax bills from the government.' And yes, she had heard about increases. She went on to say that nothing shocked her more than to find that for four rental properties that they own in working-class suburbs they have been slugged \$9780 in land tax. That is a \$6000 increase. Now, she has borrowed money – quite a lot of money – to get these properties online, but they are worried that they might have to do something with them, perhaps even sell them, because they just cannot afford to maintain them. And she says in her closing line:

For the joy of living in the most locked down place in the world I received a \$6,000 hike in land tax ... Wow.

Well, she is one of many.

**Sitting suspended 12:54 pm until 2:02 pm.**

*Bills*

**Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pill Testing Pilot for Drug Harm Reduction) Bill 2023**

*Second reading*

**Debate resumed on motion of Aiv Puglielli:**

That the bill be now read a second time.

**Sheena WATT** (Northern Metropolitan) (14:03): I would like to start my comments today by sharing my sympathy with the friends and family of people who have lost their lives due to drug overdoses. Nothing that anyone in this place says today can make up for your loss. When we talk broadly about the social cost of drug and alcohol harms in our community we can lose sight of the personal tragedies – the tragedy of drug-related deaths and the tragedy of lives and families devastated by drug addiction. Again this festival season we have seen people dying of overdoses, so first and foremost, to those affected I am so sorry for your loss.

As an Aboriginal person I have seen how addiction to drugs, legal and illegal, can cause damage at an intergenerational level in my community. I will possibly have some remarks that I will make on that as time goes on in my contribution this afternoon. Also, I have spoken about in this place my background in health policy and advocacy for a range of community organisations. I am constantly encouraged by the efforts of the Allan Labor government, formerly the Andrews Labor government, to take a health-led approach to harm minimisation. I have no hesitation at all in endorsing our current policies as the best in the nation, and I will expand on those policies in a minute because they are worthy of acknowledgement and they deserve recognition.

As someone who has worked right across our country in health and wellbeing, I am very assured when I say that. It is a testament to our whole Labor team that a long-serving government like ours is still actively pursuing solutions to these kinds of hard-to-solve problems. Unlike others, we treat drugs and alcohol as a public health issue, and really we make no apology for that. The policies we advance are and must always be health-led and best practice, and at the moment we have no plans to trial drug checking in our state. The expression ‘health-led’ really is key here.

Policies relating to dangerous substances must stand the test of the long arc of history. We see radium, asbestos, silica and the drug thalidomide; we see vulnerable people have borne the brunt of corporate and government negligence over history. These were all legal substances. I should add that in most cases it has been the labour movement that has driven the public campaigns for safety, and as a former safety official in a union myself and a former workplace health and safety rep I have read more than most on some of these issues, perhaps barring of course my colleague here the former Minister for Workplace Safety.

Only yesterday we spoke in this place about the damage of well-intentioned government policies on care leavers. You see, many people talk about the precautionary principle when it comes to the environment. When we make policy here in this place, we need to take every precaution possible when it comes to people and their lives. We must have an abundance of care in the arrangements we put in place and how we advance these conversations. The last thing we want to do here is make the situation for vulnerable people in bad situations even worse, because there is many a private hell that has been paved with the good intentions of people sitting here in this place. Pathways out of addiction to care are rightly at the centre of our policies and practice, and that must always be the case.

The Premier and the Minister for Mental Health have sought further advice from the Department of Health, I understand, about the opportunities to improve safety at festivals and evidence around additional harm reduction approaches. Whatever the best levers are that we have available to us, we will find and apply them, and I would like to take a moment to pay particular tribute to the great work

of event medical teams, paramedics, first aid volunteers and everyone else who is working hard to keep Victorian festivalgoers safe. To that end I thought it was worthy of me taking some time to understand more about what life is like at our festivals, and I would like to take a moment to acknowledge Mitch Wilson and his work with the Australian Festivals Association (AFA). He invited me to tour recently the operations at Laneway Festival, held in the Northern Metropolitan Region at Flemington Racecourse. Thank you very much, Mitch, because from that I was able to see very much firsthand the operation of so many of our first responders there at the festivals. I understand that a great number of members of Parliament were invited to join that day and undertake that tour, but it was something that I thought was particularly important, knowing of course that this bill was going to be before us very shortly. I would say that I learned a lot, having never really seen the back-end operations of festivals before, and at Laneway Festival Melbourne an organisation called Eventiv provided crowd care services or peer harm reduction services.

The thing is that peer harm reduction services like DanceWize Victoria are onsite at festivals to provide a more approachable space for young people to talk to other people their age about drug use. They also provide some chill-out spaces and things like water, lollipops, earplugs, bandaids and sometimes just a bit of space for a timeout. I am going to talk more about DanceWize, because they are, well, quite a gem. These are another layer of services that help the festival ensure everyone is having a good time. They have the space to go if they are not feeling well or feeling their best and particularly if they are worried about getting into trouble if they have taken a drug. These services reassure them and also get them the medical attention they need if required. These situations at festivals provide a more approachable service for young people to talk to other people their age about drug use. They also provide chill-out spaces and things like, like I said, the water, the lollipops and the bandaids, but you know what, in festival season they are also supplying some frozen snacks, some Hydralyte and some cold packs, particularly when surprise 40-degree days coincide with an outdoor festival.

There are other considerations to do with managing risk and safety, as well as the national and international law enforcement environment that we operate in. Victoria Police are proactive in this space. They are committed to a harm minimisation strategy. I would like to just discuss the 2020 drug strategy VicPol established. In that they established a music festival forum, co-hosted by Commander Sharon McKinnon from western region of Victoria Police with Mitch Wilson, who I mentioned, the managing director of the festivals association. The forum has been held four times so far, twice online, twice in person, and in May last year VicPol launched a new drug awareness hub on the VicPol intranet for their employees. In June the third annual Vic Police music festival forum was held and a multiday music festival guide was delivered to police officers.

The forum has been an opportunity for both industry and government to come together and discuss ways we can improve the relationship between both parties but also find ways to improve harm reduction services onsite at festivals. There have been briefings on illicit drug trends and the testing of those substances confiscated by police. We know that the drug market is constantly changing, and the impacts on recreational drug users are still being revealed as they emerge in the market. This forum ensures that collaboration is occurring, and both industry and government are committed to delivering safer festivals.

Mitch Wilson from the AFA tells me the festival industry's relationship with our state's police is the best in the country. He told me that it is the type of collaborative approach that they wish other police services took. To say this is a complex issue is an understatement, but hearing remarks like that is a very good thing indeed. Nevertheless as a government our commitment to health-led harm minimisation is clear. All advice we receive will be considered carefully on its merits and within the context of our absolute commitment to minimising drug harms.

I would like to emphasise, to those seeking to advance this bill, Labor's nation-leading record of investing in policies to reduce drug harms in our state. Our record truly speaks for itself and is really one that we can be proud of. In nine budgets since 2014 we have invested more than \$2 billion in alcohol and other drug treatment, support and harm minimisation initiatives. The \$370 million

investment in the most recent budget is more than double what was provided before we came into government. Then there are the legislative reform steps we have taken, from the passing of legislation to make naloxone more accessible to our recent decriminalisation of public drunkenness. I would say to you, if you look honestly and objectively at the facts, Labor does not just talk about drug and alcohol reform and support, we get on with the job and we most certainly deliver.

There are more than 40,000 Victorians each year who access help from government-funded alcohol and drug treatment and support services. Harm Reduction Victoria's DanceWize program, which I spoke about earlier, as you will recall, is Australia's gold standard in the field, delivering peer care and support services for music events and festivals across our state. DanceWize has been supporting the minimisation of drug harm since 1999, when it started as a grassroots group known as RaveSafe, and this Victorian program's success saw its model adopted by our northern neighbours in New South Wales in 2017. It is part of a national network which is able to support the emergence of similar programs in other parts of the country. Really the genius of the DanceWize program is its use of peer-based care and support services. Peer educators attend festivals, they host the chill-out spaces, they discuss safer drug use and they hand out some health resources. If I could just take a moment or so to shout out to these incredibly extraordinary people, who give their time to talk to their peers about harm minimisation. I had the good fortune of meeting some at Laneway Festival. They provide access to vital health resources and keep our festival and live music scene as safe as possible. We know that peer education programs are highly effective for communicating health promotion and harm reduction messages to specific population groups like young people, people who use drugs and others.

As I already mentioned earlier, community members are trained and supported to educate their peers on safer ways to use drugs and reduce the negative consequences of their drug use and facilitate access to appropriate support services. You see, people are much more receptive to receiving harm reduction education from their peers and are more likely to take that advice on board, so thank you to those that shared that story with me just the other week. Peer education programs are also particularly effective in getting harm reduction messages to people who are not ordinarily engaged in mainstream health or social services.

Can I just talk with regard to the medical response and safety arrangements. I think it is really important to highlight the responsibilities of the event organisers and the providers of licensed first aid services for these events. It was this government which passed legislation in 2021 to enable the regulation of the first aid sector in Victoria, which had previously been unregulated. While it is a big step to regulate an unregulated sector, given the range of services provided to the community by commercial first aid providers, setting a minimum level of safeguards really was critical. For music festivals it is expected that only advanced licence-holders will be providing this service. The capability of advanced services extends to providing care for patients who experience serious injury or illness that requires intervention and that are likely to be referred to another health service or ambulance service. They may involve invasive procedures and the use of scheduled medicines, and they are staffed by registered health practitioners – I am talking about doctors, paramedics and nurses. The clinical scope of practice is set by a first aid service and approved by the Department of Health's clinical practice protocol assessment committee. It is without doubt making sure that Victorians at a range of events, including music festivals and other live music events, are safer in the event of adverse outcomes associated with drug use.

I have known from my own health and policy experience that education truly is essential, and I will acknowledge some folks that have stepped up into that space off the back of their own lived experience. I am thinking very much of some peer educators/survivors that I have met in my time.

We also know that early intelligence on emerging drug dangers is critical. The Victorian government has a robust protocol in collaboration with the Victorian Poisons Information Centre to monitor and respond to high-risk drug monitoring signals. The Department of Health continues to actively monitor emerging drugs through the health system and will continue to issue drug alerts and advisories when they become aware of particularly hazardous or unexpected substances circulating in our state. That



is why we have funding in this year's budget to support initiatives like the Rapid and Precise Intelligence on Drugs program, which produces statewide intelligence about emerging drugs and allows essential public health information to be circulated through the department's drug alerts and advisories.

We also have the clinical toxicology reviews of severe drugs that help us collect and share drug harm data with other jurisdictions. These are all part of the extensive suite of harm reduction and drug and alcohol services funded by this government. Acting President Berger, you will know that I was proud and continue to be proud to be part of a government that decriminalised public intoxication. I have spoken about that at every opportunity when it has come before this place, frankly, and to see it now in place is a point of great pride for the family and loved ones of Aunty Tanya Day. Can I just commend them for their incredibly powerful advocacy over the last little while.

Our health-led responses have literally helped thousands of Victorians across the state. I was incredibly proud too of the way these public intoxication reforms were made in response to the tireless advocacy of First Nations communities. I talked about the families and those affected – about Aunty Tanya Day – but also there are other organisations I am thinking about – the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service and the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) and many of the health organisations right across the state – that joined in that advocacy effort. It was an incredibly powerful piece of work and one that I know they reflect on with great pride. I was proud of the way the reforms responded to the key recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and of course coroners' reports to make them health-led best practice and unapologetically focused on vulnerable people. That is very much where we are at.

Across some of the busiest months on Melbourne's events and social calendar we have seen care delivered to thousands of Victorians via outreach teams and at sobering centres. It has reaffirmed that a health-led response is proportionate and appropriate for the vast majority of people who may find themselves intoxicated in public. That is more than 3100 Victorians, from November until the end of the year, who have been supported across the state, with more than 230 of those being provided a service at the dedicated sobering-up centres. We know that a police cell is not the place for someone who is simply intoxicated to recover, but this new approach includes outreach services to support people with transport to a safer place if needed. For most people this will be their own home or that of a family member, and that is what it has been – that of a friend, that of a carer. For others it may be a staffed place of safety or a sobering centre. The health-led model prioritises services for First Nations Victorians in acknowledgement of the disproportionate impact public intoxication laws and police interactions have had on the Aboriginal community. While police and paramedics continue to play an important role where there is an acute health need or community safety risk, additional dedicated services are supporting people who are publicly intoxicated and just require additional support.

Dedicated services are available in the areas of the state where the data tells us there is the greatest need and are centrally coordinated by a statewide advice, referral and dispatch function. In metro Melbourne these services are available to the general population and to Aboriginal Victorians, while Aboriginal Victorians have access to dedicated services in eight regional locations and two outer suburban locations. Those dedicated services are through an Aboriginal community controlled health organisation, and I know that that was a key recommendation from the Aboriginal community. Service providers in regional Victoria have begun their service offering with a dedicated outreach service, with one initial place of safety operating in Shepparton. As these services become more embedded, regional services will complement their outreach offerings by progressively bringing on line places of safety. It is happening over the next few months. This nation-leading reform is another example of the government listening to and carefully considering the advice of experts on complex matters to deliver a reform which will ensure the most appropriate response to people in need.

The government's record of taking a health-led response to drug and alcohol harms does not end there. I will take this opportunity to talk about the government's recently launched take-home naloxone program. Following nationwide supply shortages, some of which have been discussed here in this

place, our take-home naloxone program launched on 30 November last year, making sure that this life-saving drug gets into the hands of the people who need it most. Naloxone is proven to save lives and will no doubt save many more through increased access. It reverses the effects of overdose for opioid drugs like heroin, morphine and fentanyl. It can be easily administered by a nasal spray, does not affect someone who has not used opioids and has no potential for misuse. Thanks to legislative changes that this government passed in 2020, naloxone can be more readily available to those at risk of experiencing an overdose, giving more Victorians the chance to recover and sparing more families the heartache of losing a loved one. Previously community members could only access naloxone with their prescription or over the counter from a pharmacy, but the Victorian take-home naloxone program allows eligible workers in select needle and syringe program sites and the medically supervised injecting room to supply free naloxone to people who are at risk of an opioid overdose and the carers, families or friends of people who use opioids. Community members who collect naloxone from an approved organisation will also be permitted to give that naloxone to others at risk.

There is certainly no other jurisdiction in Australia that has this kind of health-led, compassionate policy and practice. The aim of these changes is to reduce opioid overdose related morbidity and mortality by removing barriers to access that are being experienced by people in the community who may have limited engagement with health services. This important program complements efforts we are already taking to strengthen and expand pharmacotherapy in our state. We see opioid pharmacotherapy as an important part of the toolkit for the treatment of addiction. It enables people to break the cycle of drug use and re-engage with education, employment and the community. While most pharmacotherapy patients receive their treatment from private GPs, who are funded by the Commonwealth government's Medicare benefits schedule – MBS, as it is known – more than 40,000 patients already receive treatment, including pharmacotherapy, at state-funded specialist addiction medicine clinics and from prescribers in community health services.

We know that there are gaps in our current system. That is why we are investing a further \$10 million in the Victorian pharmacotherapy system through the 2023–24 state budget to deliver pharmacotherapy surge capacity to address prescriber shortages, providing funding to boost the capacity of nine specialist pharmacotherapy clinics operating across Victoria, delivering additional staffing and allowing 360 more patients a year to receive care. We also have workforce initiatives that include new clinical placements for general practitioners; clinical supervision, education and mentoring right across the state; and expanded case management, coordination and liaison. We are also increasing the number of nurse practitioner prescribers. On top of that we have also established an advisory committee to support the development of a medium- to long-term strategy for the sustainability of opioid dependence treatment services in our state. Pharmacotherapy is a critical health service and Victoria will continue to seek a national approach to enhance accessibility to this life-saving treatment and improve GP capacity to support Australians with an addiction.

We could speak about Labor's achievements in the areas of drug and alcohol harm all day. In the interests of time I am going to mention just a couple more, if you do not mind. Labor is also investing \$32 million in six emergency department mental health, alcohol and other drug (AOD) hubs across the state to better support Victorians experiencing urgent mental health, alcohol and drug issues. This important investment responds directly to the increasing number of people with mental health, drug and alcohol problems who seek assistance in our emergency departments, often when they are in crisis. The new hubs will mean that people presenting in our EDs with these often co-occurring conditions can be fast-tracked to a specialist, dedicated care team, providing them with the right support sooner and easing pressure on existing resources. The new emergency department hubs will be located at Barwon Health, Monash Health's Monash Medical Centre, Peninsula Health's Frankston Hospital, St Vincent's Hospital, the Royal Melbourne Hospital and Western Health's Sunshine Hospital. Importantly, these initiatives build on the 74 recommendations of the Victorian Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System to transform mental health support and care to make it more accessible, flexible and responsive.

This fantastic \$5.3 million AOD hub at the Royal Melbourne Hospital – in my own patch – was completed in the middle of last year and is now operational. The hub is located within the existing ED and is treating people needing immediate, specialised crisis care for mental health and AOD issues. Featuring six mental health beds and six behavioural assessment cubicles, the new facility is working to free up the general ED so it can focus on caring for other patients. Patients will be assessed by a team of psychiatrists, mental health nurses and social workers before being referred to other services as required, providing them with the right support sooner. We are also investing a further \$10 million to deliver this innovative service to more parts of Victoria, with hubs being planned for Traralgon, Ballarat, Bendigo and Shepparton.

The Allan Labor government is also increasing access to vital alcohol and drug treatment supports by doubling the number of residential rehab beds and increasing withdrawal beds, investing \$36 million for a new drug and alcohol residential withdrawal and rehab facility in Mildura, the first of its kind in the region. Based on the successful new residential rehab facilities in Corio, Traralgon and Wangaratta, the new facility is part of the Labor government's commitment to ensuring all Victorians get the care and treatment they need closer to home, and I do know from my time at VACCHO that there is some demand there for withdrawal and rehab beds, so this is certainly going to be very welcome indeed.

These places are designed to create a welcoming and healing space for individuals and their loved ones. The new 30-bed adult residential withdrawal and rehab facility will provide a therapeutic and homelike environment where people experiencing addiction can get the help they need to overcome alcohol and other drug use. The facility will support members of the community going through withdrawal or detox and provide 24-hour care and support for people who have gone through withdrawal or stabilisation and need to continue their treatment. It will also include consulting staff and support areas, several shared spaces, including kitchen, dining, lounge and activity areas, an extensive outdoor deck and landscaped areas for outdoor program activities. Having visited a rehabilitation centre in regional Victoria, in Shepp, run by Aboriginal community controlled organisations, I can tell you just how critically important these services are, and that there are going to be more on board right across our state close to home where people need them will just be so very critical, knowing of course that being away from family and your kids can be very tough. So this is very welcome indeed.

I mention this variety of initiatives, from education and harm reduction to acute care, to make it abundantly clear to those in this chamber that the Allan Labor government is deeply committed to improving health and social outcomes for Victorians through investment in evidence-based and innovative approaches to prevent, reduce and address alcohol and drug-related harm in our state.

Can I just say I know that there are potentially a great number of speakers on this private members bill before us, so before I do hand over, can I take a moment to thank those members who brought this before us but also say that I too am looking forward to hearing some contributions by fellow members of our chamber on this, knowing that this is an area of interest that affects so very, very many. So thank you again for the opportunity to make a contribution on the private members bill before us, and having followed it from the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee to its discussion here today, it will be one that I follow with great interest. I thank you very much for the opportunity.

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (14:33): I am pleased to rise and speak to this bill, the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pill Testing Pilot for Drug Harm Reduction) Bill 2023. It is an important bill that has been brought by a number of parties in this chamber, and we have seriously considered it. We do have concerns about it. Let me be clear at the start: we understand what the movers of the bill are seeking to achieve, and we understand that there is a problem; nobody is indicating that there is no problem with drug taking and poor-quality drugs and issues around music festivals and other sites. So we should begin by putting on record that we understand why they are bringing the bill, even if we do not agree with the solution that is proposed. I think it is important to see that there is a lot more common ground than people might think on some of these issues, and

obviously there is a concern about the – ‘proliferation’ may be too strong a word – widespread availability of certain drugs at festivals and other locations.

This bill seeks to establish a pilot to carry out drug checking, known as pill testing, whereby clients would be able to have the composition of drugs or other substances analysed and receive information about the composition and particular risks that may be associated with that. So we understand the purpose, and we can see that some good could come of it. But we also see that there is another side to this issue. There could well be an opportunity for education at that point. Again, I understand what this bill is trying to achieve. The pilot includes a mobile facility for drug checking at locations where there is significant drug use by young people, and these include various festivals and dance parties. Some of us may be rather too old to go to dance parties and so forth these days, but once upon a time many of us might have gone to such things. I am not meaning myself in particular; I am extending this to other members of the chamber in a cross-party sense.

**A member:** Get to a festival at your next opportunity.

**David DAVIS:** Probably my festival days of this type are not current.

I should indicate this is the fourth attempt to legalise pill testing in Victoria, going back to 2016, 2017 and 2019. The licensing and governance elements of the bill have been largely built upon the legislative framework in the existing bills. Clause 4 would provide for a minimum age for pill testing of 18 years, although that could be amended by the Governor in Council. It provides information about the composition of a substance and whether it includes a poison, as provided to those who would seek these services. It also outlines the objectives of services and so forth.

One of the things that mobile pill testing does not do is measure the dose strength, potency or dissolution rate of the drug. Unknown substances in fact are very, very rare in music festival related overdoses. The truth is overdose is usually attributed to heat or excessive consumption, and pill testing will not necessarily prevent either of these contributing factors. Pill testing does not take into account the metabolic rate of the consumer or polydrug use – either alcohol or antidepressants particularly listed there. Education is currently very poor on drug-taking habits, how to recognise toxicity and what to do in the event of toxicity. There is I think very little drug education in schools. Heat is another aspect which plays a huge role, especially during the summer festival season, and this was a contributing factor to the nine overdoses at the Hardmission festival in January this year. Music festivals, I should add, are not licensed as such in Victoria, and there are no requirements for minimum clinical support, medical coordination protocols or treatment medication to be available onsite.

I note in terms of the government’s view the then Minister for Mental Health ruled out licensing and pill testing at music festivals in 2019. The truth is that the current government, the Allan Labor government, has failed to implement other, far more effective harm reduction strategies. There is no drug early warning system available. Opioid replacement programs are being wound back, as the government has failed to recruit doctors to prescribe opioid replacement therapy – methadone. Frankston is an example of that, where previously there was a significant service, and that is no longer the case. Labor refused to support hydromorphone treatment for heroin addiction, and that was something we took to the election in 2022. Labor have failed to expand residential rehabilitation, with Victoria having the second-worst rehabilitation bed access rate in the nation, and again we took to the election a commitment to bring Victoria to a similar level of rehabilitation beds to New South Wales.

There is a strong correlation, we understand, as do most people who know this sector, between mental ill health and substance abuse disorders, and they are very hard to in fact disentangle in many cases. I am going to quote here:

Many individuals who develop substance use disorders (SUD) are also diagnosed with mental disorders, and vice versa. Multiple national population surveys have found that about half of those who experience a mental illness during their lives will also experience a substance use disorder and vice versa. Although there are fewer studies on comorbidity among youth, research suggests that adolescents with substance abuse disorders also

have high rates of co-occurring mental illness; over 60 percent of adolescents in community-based substance use disorder treatment programs also meet diagnostic criteria for another mental illness.

We understand the spirit in which this bill is brought. In this circumstance we have to indicate that we cannot support the bill. We understand what the parties are trying to achieve, but I do think there are significant issues with what is proposed, and it is those reasons that make us very cautious about supporting this particular bill.

Just to recap, we understand the issue. There is a view by some that in fact the idea of pill testing like this provides a tacit approval, and I understand that theory and I think it is a legitimate point to raise. But I think these other points that I have listed are also legitimate points to raise, and for that reason the Liberals and Nationals cannot support the bill on this occasion, although, as I say, we understand the spirit in which it is brought to the chamber.

**Rachel PAYNE** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:42): I rise to speak to the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pill Testing Pilot for Drug Harm Reduction) Bill 2023. I am extremely proud that Legalise Cannabis Victoria is a co-sponsor of this bill along with the Animal Justice Party and the Victorian Greens. I would also like to acknowledge that this is not the first time this bill has been in Parliament. As my colleague earlier pointed out, this is the fourth time a bill like this has been presented before Parliament. We have seen bills like this co-sponsored by the Victorian Greens and the Reason Party, and other members of this chamber have been very vocal in this space, including Mr Limbrick from the Libertarian Party, who has called for drug-checking services as well. What this demonstrates is that harm reduction measures of this magnitude are above political lines and are above party politics.

This bill in principle is fairly simple, but most importantly, it is sensible. It is about reducing harms, and it is about keeping people safe. This bill's aim is to create a drug-checking service pilot in Victoria. This would include a mobile testing set-up at major music festivals and, secondly, a fixed-site location that would provide year-round drug-checking services and would service partygoers as well as those who regularly use drugs. The pilot would run for two years with the option for extension to four years.

So what do we know about drug-checking services? Well, firstly, we know that they work. They were first trialled here in Australia at a music festival called Groovin the Moo in 2018 and 2019. This led to the establishment of Australia's first ever pill-testing service provider, and it was at a fixed-site address in Canberra, called CanTEST. That was set up in July 2022. In the first six months CanTEST offered 675 discussions, 85 health interventions and 614 substance tests, and this evidence saw funding extended for the service to remain permanently. This is what happens at drug-checking facilities: a person who is considering using a pill or another drug can have them tested to discover what it is they may be taking. They then have a health professional provide a consultation where they provide a range of information to help that person make an informed decision while underlining the risks and what to do in an event where there may be adverse outcomes.

I had a constituent recently approach me who visited this facility in Canberra, and what I found really interesting was that their experience was very non-judgemental. They presented what substances they were planning on consuming, and a test was, obviously, performed. The follow-up with the health professional was a disclosure that, yes, what you have provided is what you think it is, but also there are additives in this. This particular person was able to tell me what those additives were and also what the experience was anticipated to be. In this particular instance it was an additive of caffeine. That person then was able to go, 'Well, I know how much I really do aim to consume here.' It gave them an ability to manage that risk.

Again, the evidence for pill testing shows that it reduces the amount of drugs consumed by individuals and it reduces the variety of drugs consumed in one session – both of which, we know from the experts, are risk factors for overdose and death. Opponents to pill testing say that drug checking encourages people to take drugs, but this is just not the case, and this is not the evidence that we are being presented with. What these services provide is an opportunity for early intervention, education and referral

pathways to a range of health and community service providers if they are needed. Pill Testing Australia, who facilitate CanTEST, stipulate that they never advise people it is safe to take drugs, they never promote the consumption of drugs and they offer a non-discriminatory health service. In fact what the evidence from Canberra and around the world shows is that people who have access to drug-checking services adjust their intended drug-taking behaviour to reduce their risks, as my constituent reported he did in that particular instance.

We have seen this Parliament have discussions around drug checking before, and we even saw in March 2018 the Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee, a joint committee, deliver the report for the inquiry into drug law reform. I thought it would be interesting to reflect on what this inquiry experienced, where they went and where they travelled to internationally, because the committee visited Geneva in Switzerland, Lisbon in Portugal, London in the United Kingdom, Vancouver in Canada, and Denver and Sacramento in the United States. What an interesting experience that would have been. As part of that overseas study tour the committee observed the drug-checking services provided by the Loop, and this was during a music festival event called the Secret Garden Party. The Loop is a not-for-profit community interest company that provides drug-testing services, welfare and harm reduction services at nightclubs, festivals and other events – exactly where they are needed.

Interestingly, the delegation included Rick Nugent, who at the time was assistant commissioner for Victoria Police in the eastern region, and I highlight this because the quote that I am about to read out really demonstrates that there was so much enthusiasm there to learn from other jurisdictions. What Rick said was:

What has been particularly helpful and has broadened our thinking was the opportunity to attend overseas with the delegation ... Some really good initiatives, some good policies being trialled in various areas, and all of that has been brought back to VicPol as well to help inform our thinking, to challenge our thinking and to really look at a contemporary way in which we can target the harms from drugs in the community.

That committee also spent time with local police at the Secret Garden Party, and what they reported back was that they were really impressed that people found them really approachable.

This harm reduction initiative and having this as a normal part of when you go to a music festival in the UK meant that people felt safe and they felt more engaged with those that were there to keep them safe. The committee observed that the police presence was welcome and positive. They also noted, however, that there was a strong consensus in the evidence to this inquiry supporting drug checking, with most recommending that the Victorian government take:

... immediate steps to establish pill testing services in the State, modelled on international best practice.

Now we get back to what is happening here in Victoria. Well, this summer alone, on 6 January we saw nine people who attended the Hardmission festival – and I know that a few of my colleagues have spoken in this place about that festival – rushed to hospital, with eight requiring intubation, after ingesting what they thought was the party drug MDMA. Then the following weekend, on 12 January, two women were taken to hospital after suspected drug use at Juicy festival in Melbourne. We know from the reports following those events that all of those people who attended that festival thought they were taking MDMA, but there were other substances in those drugs and those drugs were particularly strong. If there had been a drug-checking service provision there, that may have alleviated a lot of those incidents.

Unfortunately, this is not a new occurrence just this summer gone. We have heard multiple coroners call for a harm reduction approach. In fact last year Victorian State Coroner John Cain recommended the government introduce drug testing after the death of a 26-year-old man who had taken a highly potent form of MDMA. Another Victorian coroner investigating the death of five young men who consumed a potent psychoactive substance called on the state government to introduce illicit drug testing and a warning program. The coroner Paresa Spanos said on Wednesday the men, aged between 17 and 32, died in a six-month period starting in mid-2016. Again, in October last year we also saw

the experts coming forward. The Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association, or VADA, in collaboration with RMIT University, released a statement supported by 77 health and community agencies calling on the Victorian government to legislate a drug-checking system and enhance a public alert system. So we have the parliamentary committee recommending pill testing, we have multiple coroners calling for action and we have at least 77 health and community agencies calling for drug-checking services. This is very compelling. I actually applaud the government for acknowledging the importance of harm minimisation, and I appreciate the valuable work that the Minister for Mental Health is doing in this space as well as the Premier.

We know this impacts so many in our community, not just those who consume drugs. I mean, can you imagine being the ambo that turned up at Hardmission festival not knowing where to start? Can you imagine the cost of loss of life to a family? Can you imagine how much it is costing Victoria Police to instil a 'Just say no to drugs' approach by having sniffer dogs present – and do not get me started on that, because we know that that actually causes young people especially to just swallow what they have got. The costs are adding up. When you look at opponents and they are concerned about the costs adding up, they are more concerned about how much pill testing is going to cost. Well, think about the hospitalisations, think about the ambulance call-outs, think about the mental health and wellbeing of the front line who have to deal with that instance. How much is that costing? I know that some of my fellow crossbench colleagues have actually had the Parliamentary Budget Office look into these costings.

I guess what I really want to highlight, though, is that drug taking is not an unusual thing amongst our society. I have also consumed pills. I had my first pill when I was 19, and I was fortunate because I was surrounded by people who had experienced drug use before. They encouraged me to just have a small amount to start. If I had not had that support there or that little bit of 'This is how you do it' information, who knows where I would have ended up. I am 42 now, and we always talk about back in our day what drugs were like then. But now there are so many new and emerging psychoactive substances, and they are presenting at these drug-checking services. These drug-checking service providers are saying, 'We don't know where they're coming from. We're astounded at what is being created.' Drugs are being sold as MDMA that are in fact dangerous doses of opioids. Drugs are two or three times stronger than they are reported to be, and these are the reports that we are hearing coming out of these drug service providers.

But the experts are actually offering a solution here, and Pill Testing Australia have publicly offered the Victorian government a free trial. They are ready to go. They have the staff, they have the resources, they have the specialist equipment and to alleviate any other concerns they have the insurance to facilitate a trial at a major music festival. They are ready to go, and I really do encourage the government to accept this offer as a way of just seeing how it goes. Can we just trial it at one music festival, see how it goes and see what the outcome will be? I promise you that people will engage with that service provision if it is there, and this will not cost the government anything.

Just to conclude, I would like to say that drug-checking services are a no-brainer. The evidence is clear. Across different party lines we all agree that we need a harm minimisation approach, so I look forward to collaborating with you all on this.

**Sonja TERPSTRA** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:56): I rise to also make a contribution on this bill. I have had the benefit of listening to the contributions made by my colleagues in the chamber today in regard to the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pill Testing Pilot for Drug Harm Reduction) Bill 2023. It is good to hear that in the contributions and the way they have been pitched today there is a lot to agree on. When we listen to the contributions there is a lot that people actually agree on and have in common when we talk about pill testing, but when it comes to drug and alcohol harms in our community the Allan Labor government proudly takes a health-led harm minimisation approach. With that context I just also want to personally acknowledge some recent overdoses that have occurred both here and in New South Wales. Of course any drug-related harm or tragedies that are a consequence of that are obviously unintended but very tragic and distressing for

the families who have lost loved ones. My thoughts and deepest sympathies and condolences go to those who are impacted.

Of course as with any private member's bill, the government will not be supporting the bill, and I am going to go on to reiterate the government's position on that in a moment. But I was listening to Mr Davis's contribution and Ms Payne's as well, and there are just a couple of points that I would like to make. Personally, individually, I actually think pill testing is a good idea. But I am a member of the government, so I am not supporting the bill. Nevertheless I will go through why I think it is important. The debate sort of conflates a couple of issues here. One is about abstinence, and I think that is where Mr Davis and his colleagues are coming from and saying, 'Look, just don't take it.' We do not want people to take drugs that are going to be harmful; that is pretty clear. But history shows us that that approach does not work.

The whole point about pill testing, as I see it from a harm minimisation point of view, is that it is an intervention. It is an opportunity. It is another step to protect a person who has already made the decision to buy a pill. They have already made that decision, so the idea that we can convince them to further abstain from taking it kind of does not make any sense. Having pill testing at that juncture provides an opportunity for that intervention and an opportunity to say, 'Hey, you may not know what you're taking here. You might think you know what you've bought, but you really don't know what that's going to do as a substance once it enters into your system.' For all the reasons Mr Davis talked about, and I know Ms Payne talked about it too – there can be differences in body composition, how we metabolise substances, what is in there, whether you have had a lot of fluids on the day, whether you have not, whether you have eaten – all of these sorts of random things can impact the way a person metabolises these things – heat, all of that. There are a lot of factors that can impact the way a person can respond to these things.

Helpfully, I did see that the parliamentary library actually put out a great research paper on this. I had the opportunity to read it, and it is really good. It highlights some points around some of the things that have been happening in this space as well in terms of different states and different approaches, costings and the like. It is very helpful and very useful. As I said, I know Mr Davis commented and said that in his view there is widespread availability of drugs at festivals. I am not sure that it is actually widespread. I just went to Rochford Wines and saw Simple Minds there in the Yarra Valley the other day. I could smell things in the air, and I know there were people who were drinking and all the rest of it –

**David Davis:** You were not partaking in anything –

**Sonja TERPSTRA:** They were partaking, obviously.

**David Davis:** No, you.

**Sonja TERPSTRA:** I was not. I just went, 'No, no, not me.' Look, I have admitted to inhaling marijuana in the past. I have said that in here before. Who cares? No-one cares. The thing is that I wanted to go to a festival and enjoy myself and I also had to drive home, so I was not going to have substances in my system that meant if I was getting behind the wheel of a car I may have been putting myself at risk, and other drivers. I do not do that, right. I would be an hour in the car after being out at a festival all day in the heat – no, that is not a good thing.

Nevertheless, as I said earlier, it is a different issue; we are conflating the issue of purchasing drugs and taking drugs with pill testing as an intervention. Just in regard to that, there are some questions in my mind about it, and I note the Premier's position and that of the Minister for Health. The Premier has publicly stated that while there are no current plans to trial drug checking in Victoria, they have sought further advice from the Department of Health about the opportunities to improve safety at music festivals and evidence around additional harm reduction approaches.



I just want to get into the weeds – pardon the pun – for want of a better term, about pill testing. This comes from the research paper that the library did. According to that research the main form of pill testing is the Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy system. That can help identify what substances and cutting agents are used, and 10 minutes is taken to complete the process. Another process is the liquid chromatography-photodiode array analysis. I guess my concern with having a testing arrangement would be that a young person goes to a festival, they have already made the decision to purchase a pill, they then make the decision to go and get the pill tested and the test might say – and again, I do not know the outcomes of these tests; I have heard different reports – it is inconclusive. That might mean that there is no certification about what is actually in it but perhaps it is not a good idea for them to take it because they do not want to certify what is in it. That is reasonable. I would be more concerned about a test that says either it has got something in it or it has not, because if someone then relies on that test and takes the pill, a whole manner of lawsuits and other things might transpire from that.

So there are still some questions in my mind about how this would actually work. I am sure there is lots of data and information on it, and I am sure someone will tell me about that, but I still have concerns about how that would actually work in practice. Nevertheless, even if a person did undertake a test of their pill, it is still their choice as to whether they decide to take it or not. They may have had the pill testing undertaken and it may have been inconclusive but they may have still taken it and ended up suffering harm from taking that pill.

As we all know, pill testing will not stop drug use. It is not designed to do that; it is really just a harm minimisation and safety intervention. Having drug testing available serves as a port to provide information to drug users, but again, it is an opportunity to provide education – so another intervention – to people about what they may actually be doing. I know there has been discussion around how much it would potentially cost. I heard Ms Payne say someone was prepared to offer a trial and do it for nothing and all that sort of stuff, but you have got to make sure any trial you do is rigorous as well. I know the Parliamentary Budget Office, in the paper, costed a two-year trial at \$3.2 million, I think, but there was an important caveat on that. They did say that that figure would depend on the uptake of pill testing within that trial, the number of festivals that this trial might happen at, operating hours, whether the testing machines were purchased or leased, the number of machines needed to have these testing capabilities and also the cost of staff and those sorts of things – all of that for \$3.2 million. I reckon that is undercooked myself, because we know there will be many other logistics. I do not know whether they looked into public liability insurance and insurance for workers and things like that; that was not mentioned in the report, so I do not know. But I just think that would be undercooked.

Pill testing, as we know, is not intended to provide a green light to drug taking, and I have laboured this point: it is an intervention; it is another opportunity just to provide that harm minimisation approach.

As has been noted before, Queensland is in the process of setting up its own trial drug-testing system, and it is expected to be operational by the end of 2024. The ACT has continued to run its own fixed facility, extending the period and the funding to it as a result of its success. So it is good to also have the opportunity to review these sorts of trials and to see the successes, trials, tribulations, however you want to call it – what worked, what did not work and what could be improved. So perhaps waiting has some benefits. I do not want to make comparisons in a flippant way, but we had a similar thing where the container deposit scheme were able to look at other jurisdictions and how they approached things and then actually get the best result. We were criticised for being slow on it, but the point was we had the benefit of a lot of evidence and information then to make the best choices, and something like this could fall in the same realm. I do not want to say that it is. I do not want to be glib about it, but there are some benefits in waiting and looking at some of the research that we get in an Australian context as well.

I have 4 more minutes on the clock. It is an important issue. It is one that obviously is about protecting young people from the ongoing impacts of harm associated with drug taking. I mean, when you talk about drugs and alcohol anyway, often people use them as a form of escapism. Some people may be self-medicating because they might have ongoing other mental health conditions. There is no one size fits all that describes why a person might take drugs. It can be periodic. They might be lifelong users and be quite successful and high functioning in their life; they may not. There are all sorts and manner of different reasons and permutations and combinations about how people function and why they do things. But obviously what we know about pills is that young people who go to music festivals and raves love it; they like doing it. Again, I just think, 'Don't do it,' but we know that approach does not work. But if you are going to do it, there is an opportunity for some safety there.

I will just move to some of the other important issues that we know around drug and alcohol testing, because it is an important issue, and we know that some people will go on to have lifelong complications and mental health issues arising from drug taking. That is a fact. But in terms of this government's approach, in the nine budgets the government has handed down since being elected in 2014 we have invested over \$2 billion in alcohol and other drug treatment support and harm minimisation initiatives.

I note that Ms Payne and others have talked about drug rehabilitation beds, but I know I am fortunate in my region to have one of the only – well, it is in a public hospital – public detox facilities in my region, based at Box Hill Hospital. It does an amazing job. The thing about that facility is that it is not like people have to find money to fund their own rehabilitation. It treats people as being able to go in and be an inpatient in that facility and gives them the care that they need for at least a 12-month period. There may be relapses in that period; they can go back in and out. It is a very well structured program designed by people who have lived experience, and those things are important. It is just a little bit distasteful that we have drug and alcohol detox that is really privately funded. We like to and we should think of drug and alcohol issues as public health issues. As I said, there are a range of reasons why people might take drugs.

Our \$370 million investment in the most recent budget is more than double that which was provided before we came to government, and on top of that there are important legislative reforms and steps that we have taken, from passing of legislation to make naloxone more accessible to our recent decriminalisation of public drunkenness, also a very important reform. This is a year-on-year investment to drug and alcohol support that means more than 400,000 Victorians each year can access help from government-funded alcohol and drug treatment and support services, so it is very important.

I know there are also a range of initiatives that have been done in the space in terms of harm reduction. You have got Harm Reduction Victoria's DanceWise program. It is a peer-based alcohol and drugs harm reduction program that delivers peer care at music festivals and events, which is important. Of course the project involves attendance of key peer educators, who host a chill-out space and discuss safer drug use and distribute health resources. I am pretty sure that young people would like to listen to young people rather than old people lecturing them, like me, so it is really good to see that they have a peer program that is actually involving young people who can talk and educate young people from that space. It might look a little bit lecture-y, older people talking to young people about drugs. Obviously there is a fair way to go in the space. The government's position on this private members bill is we will not be supporting the bill, notwithstanding my own personal position. But I thank members for bringing the bill –

**David Davis:** Take a stand.

**Sonja TERPSTRA:** I have, mate. I thank the members for bringing this bill before the house today. I will leave my contribution there, but we will not be supporting this bill.

**Renee HEATH** (Eastern Victoria) (15:12): Acting President Ermacora, may I extend my congratulations on your appointment to the role. I am pleased to rise and speak on the Drugs, Poisons

and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pill Testing Pilot for Drug Harm Reduction) Bill 2023. I understand and appreciate the intent and the purpose of this bill. I do understand and appreciate what it seeks to achieve, and I spoke earlier today to Ms Payne and said that to her.

Firstly, I would like to start by saying that drug policy is something that is close to my heart. I have heard firsthand about the hooks that have led to addiction – that first drug, trying something new, trying something to escape different things – and I have seen firsthand the harm that drugs can cause. I have been lucky enough to have friends that have broken away from the hold of drug addiction to reclaim their lives. When that has happened, it has been incredible to hear from their family members about the joy of having their loved one back, but also it has been amazing to hear about the grief that they have experienced throughout that process. Of course not everyone is lucky enough to get their loved ones back, and I would like to acknowledge that. Those friends who have broken free from the grip of drugs have become the strongest advocates for living drug-free lives, because to them a drug-free life is a free life, and I do want to acknowledge that true experience that they have been through.

I cannot speak about this topic and not remember a friend of mine, Michael, who died from drugs. I still remember getting that phone call. It was the most horrendous thing, and at the time I absolutely could not get my head around it – the most beautiful, bright, fun-loving, caring person, lost to drugs in an instant. That is a loss that so many carry. A lot of families carry that. To be honest, I still cannot get my head around that completely, and that is why I took the opportunity to speak to this bill. I acknowledge that often what starts out as a bit of fun can end up in unspeakable tragedy.

The *National Drug Strategy: 2017–2026* provides a national framework that identifies national priorities relating to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. It aims to guide actions of governments in partnership with service providers and the community. It outlines the national commitment to harm minimisation through a balanced adoption of effective demand, supply and harm reduction strategies. It aims to build strong, healthy and resilient communities through preventing and minimising alcohol, tobacco and other drug-related health, social, cultural and economic harm. It outlines a balanced approach across three pillars of harm minimisation. The three pillars are demand reduction, supply reduction and harm reduction, in that order.

I found it interesting, because I question whether pill testing is in direct contradiction to the first two pillars of the national drug strategy, which are demand reduction and supply reduction. Will pill testing reduce the demand for drugs, or will it encourage people to use them? Will pill testing reduce the supply of drugs, or will it create a market for them? I know they are uncomfortable questions, but they are ones that we have to just honestly and pragmatically look at.

MDMA is the most popular recreational drug in Australia, and it has been responsible for many deaths at music festivals. We do not know how many of these could have been prevented with pill testing, and I will explain why I say that shortly. In 1995 Anna Wood was the first Australian to die from MDMA. She was aged 15. She died from a single ecstasy pill. That pill had no impurities or adulterants. Four of her friends took pills from the same batch, but they did not die. The very first death in this nation from MDMA would not have been prevented by drug testing. I think that is important to note in this sensitive debate, because it is important to make sure that we are across the information. Anna's father Tony has worked for years since then – it was nearly 30 years ago when she died – educating young people about the dangers of MDMA and about the causes and what happens when you die in that way.

So what does cause those deaths? Mostly ecstasy deaths involve hyperthermia, causing your organs to shut down and then death. Many die from idiosyncratic vulnerabilities to MDMA. That means that some people have an ability to metabolise the drug while others just do not. For one person it could be entirely safe, but then for the person standing next to them, their friend, it could be fatal, like in Anna's case, where it was deadly. This means that pill testing cannot be a very strong indicator as to whether or not that will cause death. In Anna's tragic case, when she died and her four friends did not, there were no deadly impurities in the pill that she took. There were no other drugs that were mixed with

MDMA. It was MDMA alone that killed Anna. It was MDMA alone that was directly responsible for 23 per cent of all Australian MDMA-related deaths between July 2000 and June 2005, and it was ecstasy alone that was directly responsible for 14 per cent of all MDMA-related deaths between 2000 and 2018. I was also very interested to learn that New Zealand's first death from MDMA was in 1998, and testing later on of blood concentrations showed that she only had a fraction of the pill in her system. This proves that for some even a fraction of a pill can be deadly.

Contaminated drugs, which is really what this bill focuses on, pose a huge risk. They absolutely do, and I want to acknowledge that. But we must not overlook the fact that engaging in drug taking is engaging in risk-taking behaviour, and I think that we really need to have a campaign that highlights that as part of the overall strategy. I am concerned that pill testing promotes a risk-taking culture. There is a lot of talk about pill testing, and even though it is really well intentioned it does appear to be evidence thin. So I am going to quote some of the research from an article which I accessed from the National Library of Medicine called 'MDMA-related deaths in Australia 2000 to 2018', just to highlight the ones that could fall through the cracks in something like this. In this study Australian coroners reported that 14 per cent of these deaths were from idiosyncratic reactions – like I said before, reactions to MDMA in ecstasy pills, as with the first death in Australia, which was Anna Wood, who bought the same pill as her friends did, yet she died. Pill testing does not provide a blood test, and there is not a blood test that can identify who will have such a reaction. Forty-eight per cent of Australian MDMA-related deaths were from polydrug use, which we have spoken about as well, where ecstasy pills were co-used with alcohol, amphetamines or cocaine, which creates a deadly synergy. Pill testing again does not have a blood test which highlights what users have already consumed. And 29 per cent of MDMA-related deaths in Australia were from accidents, which I know has also been highlighted – mostly car accidents. Pill testing has no equipment of course that can identify who will have such accidents.

Idiosyncratic reactions and polydrug use explain most of the hospitalisations that are caused from drug taking at, for instance, music festivals. So clearly it is MDMA itself which has killed these Australians – it says so in the data and the science – yet pill testing can green-light the very drug responsible for these reactions. That is not just my opinion; of course all of us would love to see harm minimisation, but it is what the science shows.

We just hope that a well-meaning bill will not lead to more deaths in Australia. Pill testing could give young people the confidence to engage in risk-taking behaviours, and some, as with one of my friends, could end up paying the ultimate price. By the way, it was not MDMA specifically, it was another drug that was pure.

There is a reason that illicit drugs are illegal. They pose an unacceptable risk, they can be deadly and they can lead to other risk-taking behaviours. It is very hard – and I know I have heard this from all sides of the chamber today – to guarantee safety from an illicit drug in a drug-taking culture no matter how hard we try. Pill testing does have limitations. John Lewis from the University of Technology Sydney and toxicologist Dr John Ramsey emphasise that pill testing is a complex process. It is costly, it is time consuming and it detects mainly major components of a sample that may not be the active substance. I read this to just highlight that even the experts are saying that pill testing has its limitations.

In closing, we obviously have an issue that we need to deal with. There are obviously a huge cohort of people who are susceptible to drug use. I think we need to think very carefully about what we are promoting and encouraging because for so many it can cause incredible destruction. Drugs are not safe, however we try to package it. They can lead people down an extremely dark path, and it can take years to break free from that – and sadly some never do. I know people who have become so hooked on drugs and have suffered so much loss as a result. Parents have literally lost their children and children have lost their parents, and the results can be devastating. Often this just starts with a little hook that seems to get you in.

I think we should be doing something to address the issue, and I think maybe we should look at examples of how other drugs in this national strategy have been dealt with – for instance, tobacco. There is one message, and it is: quit. It does not mean that you are not allowed to smoke and it does not take away anybody's ability to smoke, but what it does is highlight the truth about a situation and what the results can be because of it, and that has provided a lot of people with an incredible amount of safety.

When we look at the difference from a couple of decades ago and the amount of people that smoked – everyone would. You would smoke in your office, you would smoke wherever you liked – you would smoke indoors. This campaign is confronting, almost offensive. I have got friends that smoke, but whenever they have got that packet out and it has got that disgusting tonsil-looking thing, you turn it upside down because it is gross. But it is a very good deterrent because it highlights how unhealthy it is. I think the Quit campaign has helped many. The secret to its success was never about making it more accessible, it was never about making smoking safer – it was actually the opposite. It has been about highlighting the truth about the effects of smoking, and it has worked. The rates are far lower. I think people can choose, but it is important that we highlight the truth while we are also trying to reduce supply and demand and minimise harm.

I have got 55 seconds left on the clock. I would like to see better information. I would like to see a better campaign around these issues. I would also like to see more rehabilitation. I think that that is an area where we fall dismally short, and there are so many people that are vulnerable and in desperate need of rehabilitation. I do not think it should be demonised; I think it should be encouraged. I would like to see more support for families and loved ones that are supporting people who might fall into the hands of addiction.

**Michael GALEA** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:26): Acting President Ermacora, once again it is wonderful to see you in that seat this week, and you are already doing an excellent job. I also rise today to speak on the bill, the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pill Testing Pilot for Drug Harm Reduction) Bill 2023. I do note that this is a bill that has been put forward today in Mr Puglielli's name but is actually one that has been co-sponsored by three different parties: by Mr Puglielli himself of course from the Greens party; we also have Ms Payne from the Legalise Cannabis Party, a fantastic fellow member of the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region – always good to mention; and of course Ms Purcell from the Animal Justice Party, who is not in the chamber with us at the moment. She is well and truly in her *Reputation* era – I am sure she would agree if she was here.

Speaking of eras and speaking of amazing things that can happen in our cities, how good was it to see Taylor Swift on the weekend in Melbourne. We are talking about pill testing today, but who needs drugs when you have got Taylor Swift. I mean, really. Even if you are not a fan, and frankly you all should be, the absolutely huge turnout – 96,000 people every night, the biggest concerts that she has had on this tour, or on any tour in fact – was amazing to see. It was amazing to see even if you are not a fan of Taylor Swift. As I said, you absolutely should be – check out the *Midnights* album, for one – but if you are not, you should absolutely feel elated by the fact that it has so heavily contributed to our state's economy. There are going to be some shows in Sydney this weekend as well. I know she will do just as well over there. Some of us were not able to get tickets to Melbourne, so I am sure there are many people from this place making that trip up to our friends up north to see her in Sydney. But there is going to be nothing – nothing – as remarkable as seeing Taylor Swift perform at the MCG. What an absolute phenomenon. As I said, if you have got Taylor Swift, really, who needs drugs?

This is quite a serious thing that we are here to discuss, though, and I think it is important to note that when it comes to drug harm reduction, this is a government that takes a health-led response very, very seriously. This year both the Premier and the Minister for Mental Health Ingrid Stitt from this place publicly stated that whilst there are no current plans to trial pill testing or drug checking here in the state of Victoria, they are seeking advice and have sought advice from the Department of Health about what potential opportunities there may be to improve safety at music festivals as well as seeking further

evidence around various harm reduction approaches, including but definitely not solely focused on or restricted to the matter of pill testing itself.

This is a government that has not been shy in leading from the front when it comes to the important progressive reforms that make a difference to people's lives. We spoke this morning about medical safe injecting rooms, and again I acknowledge that it was Mr Ettershank from the Legalise Cannabis Party who brought that motion before us. I acknowledge that that too is an area where a public health response can lead to far better outcomes: 7600 overdoses attended to and 63 deaths prevented. Sixty-three is a huge number. That is yet another example of this government's willingness to embrace a health-led response, with the Premier and the Minister for Mental Health looking at the best options that we can find to ensure that overdoses and other drug-related illnesses or deaths arising out of music festivals can be averted as much as possible. That is one more example of that.

I also note Dr Heath just prior to me was referring to tobacco in her contribution. Of course we know that too can have severe health consequences. In responding to Dr Heath's comments I think it is also worth repeating here that the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee has initiated a public inquiry into tobacco and vaping regulations in the state of Victoria, following from our inquiry into the gambling sector last year, which was very, very illuminating. I can highly recommend that members read that report. I for one as a member of the committee am very much looking forward to engaging with this inquiry into tobacco and vaping controls, what works well and what needs to be improved. We are in a very fluid environment with the take-up of vaping not just in Victoria but of course nationwide, and frankly you do not have to walk very far. You can walk down the halls of this very building and see people vaping from time to time. It has certainly taken off in a very strong way, and it is important that the regulations that we have in this state are responding to that. I also note that there has been some significant federal intervention in this area, which has been announced in the past couple of months and which will have a big impact as well.

As part of this inquiry we are very much looking forward to seeing what is the best practice, what can we do to improve and how can we improve that situation for the people of Victoria. If anyone does have a particular interest in that inquiry, I do strongly encourage them to lodge a submission with the committee, register themselves to attend a public hearing and, if you wish to do so, appear as a witness. The more that we hear from the Victorian community on this, the more valuable it will be. It is very important that we hear from all the various stakeholders, ranging from the retailers to the public health advocates, which is exactly what we will be doing. But lived experience will be a very big part of that.

Consequently, with that as well we will be doing another youth round table. The gambling inquiry which I referred to last year had a youth round table here in the Parliament on a non-sitting night. I believe we had around 30 to 40 young people from across different backgrounds, different parts of the state, different experiences. We had a young man from Shepparton, and we had a young woman who was a recent arrival as an international student in the city of Melbourne, education of course being one of our biggest exports. We heard some really fascinating feedback, and we heard some really good experiences that in the ordinary committee structure we might have missed out on. So that youth round table was particularly exciting to be a part of – to convene a small table and hear directly firsthand from people who are most affected. Then we went into the chamber. Sadly, it was the Legislative Assembly. But we did go into the other chamber, and those participants got to speak to us all in that setting and tell us about their experiences, which was a deeply powerful experience. I do recall one remarkable young man who told us about the hundreds of thousands of dollars he had lost on sports gambling, what the impacts of that were on his life, how he was moving on from that now and the journey he had been on as part of that. That was a really profound thing to hear, and I am sure that when it comes to the tobacco and vaping inquiry we will hear similar stories as well.

As I say, a public health response is what this government is looking at, and I am sure we will have many further contributions today. I look forward to hearing them, and I will conclude my comments there.

**Katherine COPSEY** (Southern Metropolitan) (15:35): I move:

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

**Motion agreed to and debate adjourned until later this day.**

*Committees*

**Select committee**

*Establishment*

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (15:35): I move:

That:

- (1) a select committee of six members be appointed to inquire into, consider and report on Victoria's energy transmission, including but not limited to:
  - (a) the reliability and stability of Victoria's energy transmission and distribution networks;
  - (b) the electricity supply outages that occurred on Tuesday 13 February 2024 and subsequent days and their impact on Victorian households and businesses;
  - (c) the cost of developing, maintaining and enhancing the reliable distribution networks necessary to support Victoria's increasing reliance on renewable energy and the affordability of such networks;
  - (d) the role of local energy generation and networks and storage, including batteries, in supporting the reliability and stability of Victoria's energy distribution networks;
- (2) the committee may provide an interim report and will provide a final report by 30 June 2025;
- (3) the committee will consist of two members from the government nominated by the Leader of the Government in the Council, two members from the opposition nominated by the Leader of the Opposition in the Council and two members from among the remaining members in the Council;
- (4) the members will be appointed by lodgement of the names with the President within seven calendar days of the Council agreeing to this resolution;
- (5) a member of the committee may appoint a substitute to act in their place (for nominated meetings or for a defined period of time) by that member, or the leader of that member's party, writing to the chair advising of the member who will act as their substitute;
- (6) a member who has been substituted off the committee must not participate in any proceedings of the committee for the nominated meetings or defined period of time that they have been substituted off for;
- (7) substitute members will have all the rights of a member of the committee and shall be taken to be a member of the committee for the purpose of forming a quorum;
- (8) the first meeting of the committee will be held within one week of members' names being lodged with the President; and
- (9) the committee may proceed to the despatch of business notwithstanding that all members have not been appointed and notwithstanding any vacancy.

Last Tuesday we suffered a very significant setback in Victoria with an enormous impact on our electricity system.

*Members interjecting.*

**David DAVIS:** You may well laugh and make funny jokes, but it is a very serious point after what occurred last week. Victorians are still without power, and you think it is a matter of jocularly. We do not think it is a matter of jocularly that tens of thousands of Victorians –

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jacinta Ermacora):** Order! Mr McIntosh, you are not in your place.

**David DAVIS:** Tens of thousands of Victorians are still without power. This is a very serious matter. 530,000 people had their power knocked out – or connections were knocked out. It is much more people than that, probably north of a million Victorians indicated and businesses – families and businesses.

I doorknocked families, I doorknocked businesses and I spoke to people across my electorate in Clayton and Oakleigh and other areas. I went into businesses –

*Members interjecting.*

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jacinta Ermacora):** Order! I think Mr Davis should be heard in silence.

**David DAVIS:** Others in the chamber may not care, but I do care about those in Victoria who lost power. I do care about those businesses in Eaton Mall, Oakleigh. I went and spoke to a number of the business owners in Eaton Mall who lost power in the afternoon on Tuesday and did not have their power restored until early on Wednesday morning. Thousands and thousands of dollars of business was lost, thousands and thousands of dollars of stock was lost and preprepared foods were lost. There were all sorts of impacts through that area of my electorate, the Southern Metropolitan Region. Let us be very clear: this was metropolitan-wide but it was also into country areas in Victoria, and on that day we also saw the terrible fires occurring up into the north-west of the state, in the Grampians and elsewhere. So really it was a very significant day for Victoria. The impact on Victoria was very significant. Families were hit quite hard.

*Members interjecting.*

**David DAVIS:** I have never argued against climate change. I challenge you, on a single occasion, to find where I have said, ‘I do not believe in climate change.’ I actually understand what is happening with climate change. Let me say, despite the interjection that is coming from over there, the reality is it may not be convenient for government members to face up to what happened last Tuesday and into subsequent days, but it actually has had a tremendous impact on many families and many businesses. I think most sensible people in the chamber would admit that. There may be some who will not, but most will. Most understand what has happened, including the significant impact on businesses. It is for that reason that we bring this motion. Aside from the machinery and the reporting, which I am not going to dwell upon – I am going to focus on what we have said here – we have talked about the need to look at the reliability and stability of Victoria’s energy transmission networks.

We know that at Anakie a series of large towers were knocked out. Those large towers were knocked out essentially because of downdrafts and because of the very significant winds in that area. They are old towers, built around 1980 to 83 – that time period. They are older towers and towers that have got significant problems. We know from the government’s own analysis in 2020 that those towers have clear and serious deficiencies. That is the reality. The government’s own review showed in 2020 –

*Members interjecting.*

**David DAVIS:** Your government’s review showed the serious deficiency there. They said the towers were not designed for these downdrafts. They said the towers went down at Cressy in 2020 because of inadequate design in the days they were put there, between 1980 and 1983, by the old SEC. So let us be quite clear what has gone on on a number of these points.

Elsewhere trees and a whole range of other issues have intervened right across parts of the metropolitan area, the east and south-east of Melbourne, parts of the northern suburbs of Melbourne and in the country. My colleagues at Mirboo and so forth have certainly taken an absolute pounding. I put on record our concern at the tragic losses that have occurred in that area, but I also put on record our concern about the tragic impact on families and businesses. There are many thousands of people still without connection after that time period, and I have to say we need to get to the bottom of what has gone on here. There have been a series of incidents that have occurred in recent years which have not been properly responded to by government. Government has actually not been able to deal with a number of these key points. We know the government did not accept all of the recommendations of the resilience review, so there are real problems with that resilience review; there are real problems with the government’s implementation of it. There is the 2020 incident which I have pointed to, and



there are a number of other recent incidents that have occurred. Those incidents have shown real fragility, real weaknesses and real concerns about our electricity distribution network, and that is before we start with the challenge –

*Members interjecting.*

**David DAVIS:** Climate change is part of it. I am not in any way denying that, and I am quite open about that.

*Members interjecting.*

**David DAVIS:** No, but you have got to have a response. You have been in government for 20 of the last 24 years, and you have not dealt with it.

*Members interjecting.*

**David DAVIS:** So what are you talking about?

**Michael Galea** interjected.

**David DAVIS:** I do not have to answer for every person on our side of the Parliament. But let us be quite clear, you do have to answer for the performance of government on this. For 20 of the last 24 years your party has been in power, and your party has been in power when the network has declined. That is actually what has happened. The last 10 years –

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jacinta Ermacora):** Mr Davis, please speak through the Chair.

**David DAVIS:** Acting President, of course I will. I was provoked, and I responded. I will in future try not to respond when I am provoked so relentlessly.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jacinta Ermacora):** I will not provide a feminist analysis of that.

**David DAVIS:** Pardon? Anyway, I was provoked, Acting President, and I will seek to avoid such provocations in the future.

Let me just say the motion is actually targeted to the reliability and stability of our energy transmission and distribution systems, and I think we all want to see that dealt with. In point (d) we talk about the role of local energy generation and networks and storage, including batteries, in supporting the reliability and stability of Victoria's energy distribution networks. They can actually add part of the mix. They can add part of the challenge that we have got into the future. There is no question that that is an important part of the challenge, and that is why that dot point is there.

The cost of developing, maintaining and enhancing the reliable distribution networks necessary to support Victoria's increasing reliance on renewable energy and the affordability of such networks – we are going to see more renewables in the system. The government does want more renewables; we all want more renewables. But they have got to be backed up by the reliability and the security that people need in the supply. You actually need a reliable system. You need a secure system. You need a system that is not repeatedly going down. You need a system that does not leave half a million households without electricity.

*Members interjecting.*

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jacinta Ermacora):** I think there is quite a bit of disorder in the chamber, and I think the debate should continue calmly.

**David DAVIS:** I will seek to resist the interjections in future. As I say, we do need to have a system that is reliable and secure. We need to make sure that our system has networks that are able to deal with renewable energy coming on. It is clear that a number of the old lines do not have the capacity and reliability for –

**Tom McIntosh** interjected.

**David DAVIS:** Acting President, I think the member over there is defying your rulings and suggestions. I am trying to say that we actually do need a reliable and secure system. We do need a system that is actually able to provide electricity to families, to businesses. One business I went into in Eaton Mall – and I am just going to use a number of small examples here – had had to destroy all of the food that had been prepared, all of the food in its fridges, extensive fridges. All of that had to be thrown out – many, many tens of thousands of dollars of prepared food, a huge waste. Those who saw the pictures of the –

**Georgie Crozier** interjected.

**David DAVIS:** Middle Camberwell supermarket, right near Ms Crozier's office – basically that supermarket went down its shelves and it threw out everything because it had lost the energy supply. Its backup did not cut in in the right way, and it was forced to throw out enormous quantities of food, enormous quantities of produce, that should have been able to be securely dealt with. So these are key points, and when we go further into the east and south-east of Melbourne there are massive impacts and still, as I say today, thousands and thousands of households and businesses without the connection that they require.

The cost of developing the maintenance – as I have said, we need to have a reliable system where renewable energy is able to be brought into the system. Now, we will not be able to do that if we do not have a reliable distribution and transmission system, and that is what this is focused on, the outages on Tuesday 13 February and subsequent days and the impacts on Victorian households and businesses.

I have moved this motion today because it needs a proper independent examination. The government on Monday when we announced this inquiry was stung. They were stung and they did not know how to respond, and they had a whole series of stupid and irrelevant conversations about why we could not have an inquiry and why we did not need an inquiry. They rejected the idea of an inquiry.

**A member** interjected.

**David DAVIS:** No, but you did not on Monday. You did not want an inquiry on Monday. It was later, on Tuesday, that you went, 'Oh dear, we actually need to do something here.' So then they started to cobble together – and there was Lily D'Ambrosio's extraordinary news release, which laid out the fact they were going to have an inquiry but she did not know by whom, did not quite know what. It was a shambles. It was an absolute shambles. The minister did not know who was going to do the inquiry or how it was going to be done. She did not even know the terms of reference.

But let me just say the fix is in. What the minister is trying to do is put in some tame cats to do a quiet inquiry – to do an inquiry that ticks the work for her. She does not want an independent inquiry. She does not want independent scrutiny of her performance, which has been tardy and hopeless. We have seen her failures with offshore wind. We have seen her failures on a wide front – an incompetent minister, a minister who is struggling to get anywhere with her portfolio, a minister who has not signed off key issues of the backstop, a minister who has not been able to arrange to have the response that is required to many of the issues of reliability and security.

We have seen prices surge. Prices have surged upwards on electricity and gas, and even though the minister cannot guarantee electricity supply and cannot guarantee affordable electricity, she wants, over on the other side of the equation, to turn off the gas. She wants to turn off the gas. She wants to ramp up the price of electricity. It is already up 27 per cent, and small businesses have been clobbered hard with increases in electricity prices. You go and do a walk-through on some of your small businesses, those on the other side of the chamber, and ask them whether their electricity prices have gone up, ask them whether their gas prices have gone up, ask them whether that is feeding through into inflation and ask families: are they paying more for their electricity? Are they paying more for

their gas? Well, I tell you what: they absolutely are. They absolutely are paying more for their electricity. They are paying more for their gas. They are paying more on every turn.

Let me try and be economical here in what I want to say.

**Tom McIntosh:** Have you got a plan to reduce prices? Have you got a plan to supply Victoria?

**David DAVIS:** We sure do. We sure do have plans. One of them is to maintain the gas system in order so that there is actually an opportunity to put hydrogen down it. There are a number of different ways that we can broaden the spread of power supply into the state. There are a number of ways that we can actually ensure that there is a better outcome in terms of renewables too.

I hasten to add none of us want to be lectured by a minister who could not get the offshore electricity industry running. We could not get offshore electricity going, could we? We could not get offshore wind going. We could not get the offshore electricity coming through. We could not get the offshore wind going. We actually decided we would put it at Hastings. We went to Hastings, we got the Port of Hastings to put a submission into the federal minister and what did Tanya Plibersek say?

**Tom McIntosh:** Are you saying offshore wind's not going ahead?

**David DAVIS:** I am saying offshore wind has got a significant role. I have always supported offshore wind. But what I say is you cannot have an incompetent minister who cannot get these programs going. She cannot get the programs going, because she is an incompetent minister. She went to the federal minister through the Port of Hastings and said she wanted –

**Michael Galea:** On a point of order, Acting President, Mr Davis is making unfair allegations against the minister. I ask that he does that through a proper motion if he wishes to do so.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jacinta Ermacora):** I dismiss the point of order.

**David DAVIS:** The minister is not up to it. The minister went to the federal minister via the Port of Hastings to get a tick and did not seem to understand that there is a Ramsar wetland in the area. She did not seem to understand that actually you need approvals from the federal minister, and Tanya Plibersek, who I personally do not think is a great minister – I will put that on record – sent her packing. She sent the state government packing. She said, 'No, this is actually hopeless. It's a hopeless submission, and we won't approve it.' There you are. But we do need offshore wind, so the state government has got to go back to the drawing board, back to square one. They have actually got to start and work their way to bring offshore wind forward. I know the federal government is pushing for offshore wind.

**Tom McIntosh:** Are you talking about offshore wind or assembly?

**David DAVIS:** I am talking about offshore wind, of which assembly is a key part. I will give you a tip: you cannot put up a big wind farm offshore without assembly. You cannot actually put it in place. You have actually got to assemble the thing. You cannot send it out there unassembled, mate, I have got to say.

Let us just be clear: you have got a hopeless minister who is unable to get these processes in order, who is unable to bring stuff forward in a proper way, who is unable to manage all of this. This is a key reason why we need this inquiry. We actually need to get a grip on what is happening. Victorians deserve secure, reliable electricity. We recognise that there are going to be much more renewables, and we need to make sure that renewables are part of the system. I know there is another inquiry that is looking at a much broader examination of things, and we were prepared to remove the bottom two dot points of this motion in the circumstance, after discussions with some of the crossbench. It appears that the crossbench at this point are not going to support the motion –

**A member** interjected.

**David DAVIS:** Some of the crossbench – so there seemed little point in amending the motion in line with their requests. In that sense we will push forward with the motion as it is. We understand that some of the crossbench will not support it. That is their entitlement, of course it is, but at the same time I do think that is a pity because I do not believe the state government's proposals are up to scratch. I think this would have been independent, and their processes are not independent.

**Michael GALEA** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:55): We have just seen a 20-minute demonstration from Mr Davis as to why this motion should not be supported. For the Liberal Party this is, has been and always will be about base politics, not actually about addressing the issues that are important to Victorians. Mr Davis well knows this, and this is why he went off on all of those tangents that he did in his contribution. This is just yet another political vehicle for him, turning a genuine issue into another vehicle to try and attack the government with. Obviously his other ones have not worked. His other inquiries that he has got have not been going as well as he had hoped, so this is what he is trying to do here today – absolute same old typical Liberal politicking.

This is a very serious issue, and this is where I agree with you, Mr Davis. Last week an unprecedented storm came across Victoria and did untold damage. I reported in my members statement yesterday that the Monash SES alone, which covers both our regions, as you know, Mr Davis, dealt with over a thousand cases, and I thanked them for it. We have had extended electricity outages. You might not have had any in your region, but I do in mine, Mr Davis, and I have been talking with those residents and with those business owners. I was out in my community last week. I was not holding press conferences at their venues; I was out there meeting them, talking to them, hearing what they had to say and finding out what we can do to support them. This is such an important issue, the resilience of our electricity networks but also our communications networks, and I spoke about this in my members statement yesterday as well. It is simply not good enough that if the power goes out, people do not know what is going on. It is simply not good enough for the mobile phone networks to collapse as well. We have seen this on multiple occasions, and I really urgently call on Telstra, Vodafone, Optus and all the providers to actually make their mobile phone towers resilient. We have a fantastic resource in the VicEmergency app, but it is completely unusable if you do not have a phone signal at times like that.

I understand the genuine concern from your small business owners, Mr Davis, and your residents, as I have had from mine. I know Mr McIntosh to my left here has been out all week in Mirboo North talking with people on the ground going through the most difficult situation imaginable and hearing firsthand from them as well. We get it. We are not denying any of what happened last week, and we are not denying any of the seriousness of it. That is exactly why Minister D'Ambrosio, who you are so quick to arrogantly dismiss, has been out there day in, day out. She has been meeting and talking with every one of the power distributors.

**David Davis:** Where was she?

**Michael GALEA:** She has been taking the case forward, and she has been in the community. She has been in Emerald, she has been in Cockatoo, she has been in Mirboo North – she has been out there actually talking to people and hearing, not just waffling on and writing up motions like you have been doing. She has been getting on with the job of actually fixing this issue. She cannot control the distributors. As you well know – as we have told you many times this last year – we have a privatised energy distribution network. She has been working tirelessly to hold them to account and to make them do their jobs for my communities and for Mr McIntosh's communities in particular.

I have to say I am so disappointed that when AusNet's grid went down we saw, not for the first time, their outage tracker website go down as well. Again, that is not good enough. I commend them for their efforts in getting something up – their frankly barely readable spreadsheet is better than nothing – but they need to do better as well.

As I say, Mr Davis, we are actually listening and we are delivering that support. Anyone who is still affected by the power outages – anyone who has had seven days or longer without power – qualifies for the power outage payments of \$1920 per week per household or \$2927 per week per small business. This is meaningful support for those customers. Now, this is being administered by the power companies, and I have to say it is very disappointing to see again this fantastic minister having to call out AusNet for failing to actually deliver those payments as they are obliged to do. They need to get their act together. They need to not sit around waiting; they need to actually get these payments out to people. These people need their payments now. I really support the minister in putting as much pressure on them as possible to actually deliver that meaningful relief. People need that relief now. They do not need it in three weeks; they need it now. I know it has been a difficult week for AusNet, and I do want to acknowledge this is nothing against their amazing line workers. I have seen them out in my community. I have also seen the line workers from other distributors coming to help over the weekend across my region, and I thank them all for the amazing work that they do, as I know many of my constituents do as well. This is not against them, but AusNet need to lift their game.

This motion today, as I have said, flies in the face that we already have an independent inquiry that has been announced. This obviously is on top of various other reviews and inquiries launched by AEMO too, last week I believe. But we do have a genuine independent inquiry that is going to forensically look at this issue to see what we need to do to make energy networks more resilient and have the resilience that we need. We know these sorts of freak storms are going to, regrettably, happen more and more often, because we are undeniably experiencing climate change. This is a government that is doing everything in its power to bring down our emissions, despite the nine or 10 different policies that your federal counterparts had. We know what you guys would do if you were in government.

**Tom McIntosh:** More like 16.

**Michael GALEA:** Sixteen, was it? However many policies that you had – God knows if you were in charge of the state of Victoria how many policies you would have here. I am sure getting some of your other backbenchers to support you on even the most modest of changes would be all we would ever be reading about in the papers. We know that for sure.

This is a government that does believe in tackling head-on the challenges of climate change, but undeniably this is a risk. We do have an inquiry that has been set up in the Environment and Planning Committee which is looking at climate resilience as a specific issue. I do have it on good authority from the minister's office that, specifically pertaining to this storm event, any information that that committee seeks to have from government will be provided without incident. I understand and I note the minister's absolute genuine willingness to engage as much as she is asked to. Furthermore, as I have mentioned, we do have this independent review which has been announced. I also understand and can report to the house that it will provide its interim report in June this year.

**David Davis:** Who's going to do it? You don't even know who it is.

**Michael GALEA:** What I care about, Mr Davis, is getting answers. You seem to care about the who is who, who is what, getting the politics out of it. It just underscores the fact that this is all you do: you politicise, you politicise, you politicise.

I do want to make the point that this is a genuine inquiry. It is going to look into the issue as long as it needs to, but it is going to provide an interim report, which will be publicly available, in June this year. I would also like to take this opportunity to note –

**David Davis** interjected.

**Harriet Shing:** On a point of order, Acting President, I always do like listening to Mr Davis's dulcet tones, but perhaps if he could issue them forth from his seat, we might all be able to enjoy them similarly.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** You are cutting it real fine there, but you are technically correct. Interject from your own seat, and also I might bring up that it is unparliamentary to point, Mr Davis.

**Michael GALEA:** I do also note that this is a genuine issue. I want to acknowledge the participation and the work, the genuine engagement we have had – not from your party; sorry, Mr Davis – from others. I do wish to acknowledge Dr Mansfield in the chamber. I do wish to acknowledge the genuine, cooperative nature of the Greens and also the Legalise Cannabis Party in getting the best outcome possible. People do deserve answers as to what happened and how we stop issues like last week's from happening again, where a freak event, though it may be, could cause such havoc on our network. It is a big, big problem. It is a wicked problem in fact, and that is what I look forward to seeing this inquiry address, which I am confident it will. Again, there are thousands and thousands of people who have been affected. I have had the honour to speak with them, and I know how frustrating it is for them, some of whom, as Mr Davis says, are still without power. Some are in my communities. There are still people in parts of Upper Beaconsfield, Knoxfield, Lysterfield, Narre Warren North and Harkaway who are severely affected, which is to say nothing of the large areas in Mr McIntosh's and Minister Shing's region as well, which I know has been very severely affected.

I do also wish to acknowledge the comments made just yesterday in the other place by the member for Monbulk, who spoke so passionately about her community and what her community has been going through and so passionately about why this is such an important issue and why we should not be allowing misinformation or disinformation. The absolute rubbish that we hear from some people, like 'Coal keeps the lights on' – they are in your party; you know they are. You just let them get away with it. You have not called it out. It is absolute rubbish. Misinformation and disinformation do not help anyone in this debate. Call it out. If you genuinely care about this issue, call it out and stand with us for a proper outcome.

**Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (16:06):** I would like to thank the Liberals and Nationals for putting forward this motion today. It deals with some really important issues that certainly warrant scrutiny. Our government does need to address many of the issues that have been raised here today, so I really genuinely thank you for putting this out there and bringing this issue to the chamber. I would also like to at the outset acknowledge all of those who have been affected by the extreme weather events that occurred last week and thank all the organisations and community members who are rallying behind those who have been affected and who are still being affected.

There are many aspects to this motion that we actually support. We think everyone in this chamber would agree that it is incredibly important that we have a stable and reliable energy grid. I do not think there is any argument about that. However, there were a couple of aspects that we could not get behind, particularly those that had the potential to shift the focus away from the need for a rapid transition to renewable energy. That is the reason we will not be voting in favour of the motion before us today, but as I said, we saw a lot of merit in aspects of the motion.

We agree that the events of last week warrant a thorough investigation, and the Greens are pleased that the government announced an independent inquiry into the electricity grid and how it can be made more reliable and stable, particularly as we move away from coal to renewables. We thank the government for their constructive collaboration on this. Victorians do deserve answers, and we really hope this inquiry does its job. If it does not, this chamber should revisit these issues, and we would certainly be supportive of any moves to do so if the inquiry does not live up to expectations.

It is also worth noting that last year the Greens in this chamber secured an inquiry into climate resilience, as has already been mentioned – it is the climate resilience of our built infrastructure. That will be a further opportunity to look at the ability of our energy grid, including transmission infrastructure, to withstand extreme weather events, which we are unfortunately going to see many more of due to climate change. We thank the minister for agreeing to make the findings of the independent inquiry available to that committee so it can I think do a more thorough job and take into

consideration events that we know have already happened and learn from the mistakes that potentially occurred in the past.

The events of last week really should serve as a wake-up call regarding the need to end our reliance on fossil fuels and move more rapidly to 100 per cent renewables. We know that coal and gas companies are causing climate change. They make our energy systems more unstable and more unreliable. Victoria's old, unreliable power stations and the ageing grid were built for the coal era. They are failing Victorians, and it is well past time that we got on with upgrading our energy systems to be more climate friendly and resilient, and we will continue to push the government to do this.

**Richard WELCH** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:09): I rise to speak on motion 315. Obviously, energy transmission is fundamental infrastructure. It is as fundamental as roads and it is as fundamental as hospitals, and we should be as concerned about it as we should be about any other fundamental element, whether it is in private hands or public hands. The consequences, as we all know, have been severe. They have been severe for families, they have been severe for businesses and they have been severe for our emergency services. Whilst I commend anyone who has gone out to the communities to show support to them, they are all things taking place after the event, after the fact. The issue that is most pertinent here is that the transmission system is an essential service, so dealing with it after the fact is actually completely inappropriate. You need to deal with it before the fact.

It comes down to competence. The role of government is to ensure our essential services are reliable and resilient, not after the fact. Commiserations after the fact are fine, but in inventory management of our transmission system, each one of these power pylons et cetera are numbered. They are assessed, there are audits done, there are risk assessments. This is basic competence.

As we all know, as we diversify our energy supplies and as we transition to renewables one of the defining features of renewables is that transmission is the greater part of the effort. It is very, very cheap to get the energy; it is very, very difficult to transmit it. Therefore the competency of managing these specific assets is critical to all of our aspirations to decarbonise the electricity grid. If we do not have competence in transmission, we cannot have competence in renewables. Therefore a specific committee to look specifically at that is in all our interests, and it should reveal the most explicit and interesting things that we can learn that are going to aid the transition to renewables.

I am disappointed that the Greens are not supporting this, because there are really explicit things we should be learning from this. We talk about whether this is politics. Well, the politics was 'We're not having a committee inquiry – oh, now we are.' We should be actually going to what is most important to the people of Victoria, and that is reliable transmission of energy.

I grew up in the 1970s and 80s, when we had blackouts. In the 1970s they were not uncommon – two or three times a year we would have them – and we fought tooth and nail as a society to get to a point where we did not have blackouts anymore. That was considered a great achievement. And now we are in a position again where we are having blackouts, and it is because we are not maintaining the inventory, the assets. That comes down to competence. You can only deal with that before the event, and your job in government is to assess, manage risk and deliver it.

Again, I am disappointed that we are not having this select committee, and yet again it comes down to competence. The minister clearly, in a series of mistakes all around renewables, all around transmission, not just this event, is not delivering for us.

So the question remains: how many more assets are subpar? How many other weak points exist in the transmission chain? How many more times, and will any other inquiry get to this point? I really honestly doubt it. I would have enjoyed getting down to this because we would have learned something. We are not going to learn anything now, and this government has no record of transparency – none. So not only will we not learn anything, we will not learn what we did not learn. Again, I commend this motion, and I wish it was going forward.

**Sheena WATT** (Northern Metropolitan) (16:14): I rise today to speak on Mr Davis's motion. I acknowledge that that was the first contribution to a bill or motion from our new member, Mr Welch. Thank you for putting yourself out there so early on in your term here in this place. I in my remarks would like to reaffirm the Allan Labor government's position that an expert-led review will be conducted into the energy sector following the power outages faced by Victorians over the last week.

First and foremost, my thoughts are with every Victorian who has been affected by this week's unprecedented and catastrophic weather event. To all those Victorians who are first responders in emergency situations: we pay tribute to you for your ongoing efforts and thank you for all that you do, but also I want to acknowledge your families during this time. Mr Davis, I think you could not be more wrong about the outstanding leadership of the Minister for Energy and Resources, and I know just how hard she has been working with the regulators and the companies and others to make sure that we see the improvements that are just so necessary in our system.

This motion really in its essence is another way for those opposite to politicise what really is a catastrophic weather event – to undercut, demean and bog down the government's nation-leading renewable energy agenda; to undercut the Victorian people once again; to feed into their own climate scepticism and anti-renewable crusade that goes on and on, both in and out of the party room; and to perpetrate their own cycle of baseless, ignorant fearmongering against renewable energy.

I have spoken on a great number of occasions about renewable energy and my fierce support for it. Those opposite had their chance to create a robust energy network but instead chose to sell off the network, because privatisation first and foremost is in their DNA.

We agree that there is a legitimate conversation to be had about power outages following the extreme event last week, one of the largest outages in our state's history, and we are not hiding away from that. That is why the Allan Labor government announced that we are commissioning a supplementary independent review into the distribution system responses to the February storms.

Yesterday I had the opportunity to meet AusNet CEO Tony Narvaez, and can I say I highlighted the distress that so many Victorians are under due to supply outages this last week and that the community expects baseline needs to be met, especially during emergencies such as the catastrophic weather conditions like those that affected Victorians last week. Mr Narvaez assured me that AusNet is doing all it can to restore power to those still affected by the outages and expressed the importance of clear communication between the government, energy providers and consumers as well as providing up-to-date information as soon as it is available, and I will join with my colleague Mr Galea in saying that website is, well, not up to scratch and needs a certain amount of work. But it is true that we can work together to manage and work through crisis events such as last week to make the experience as smooth as possible for the consumer.

We understand the frustration that is being felt by those affected. We are working with the industry providers on rebates for affected customers and will continue to hold our providers accountable for the delivery of those rebates. Any delay in these rebates is simply unacceptable.

The bulk of the outages come from fallen powerlines on the low-voltage distribution network caused by extreme wind and lightning. These extreme winds also caused the collapse of six of the transmission towers near Anakie. This caused the immediate shutdown of the high-voltage 500-kilowatt line between Moorabool and Sydenham, which in turn tripped Loy Yang A, the state's largest power station. Despite enough generation being available to meet demand, the sudden loss of a major transmission line and the largest generator created some system instability, albeit temporarily. To manage this AEMO directed AusNet to shed about 90,000 homes for a period of less than an hour in western Melbourne. This is an unprecedented event, and there are hundreds of faults across the network caused by these storms. AusNet and the other distributors have all available crews working. Thank you to the many doing 16- to 18-hour shifts – let us acknowledge those workers – to assess and repair faults as quickly and as safely as possible. There were more than 12,000 kilometres of



low-voltage line damaged in this event. We are committed to bringing back power to Victorians still affected. This government is committed to learning from these past events and adapting solutions to hazardous weather.

You will recall that after June 2021 we initiated the electricity distribution network resilience review, which was an expert-led panel – that is right, an expert-led panel – that sought recommendations on improving Victoria's energy network and the state's response to extreme weather events. The government's response was released late last year, and all but two of those recommendations were supported and adopted. This government took the review recommendations and invested \$7.5 million into crucial backup power systems in 24 towns hit by major storms in 2021, including batteries and rooftop solar on community buildings, which have continued to provide relief in the event of prolonged power outages. Eighteen of these hubs are complete and are operational. These energy systems provide power to community hubs when damage to the network causes a widespread outage, allowing crucial essentials to continue to be delivered to affected Victorians. That is what this government is continuing to do – deliver a sustainable energy grid built on renewables.

Those opposite continue to spout that this is what the future will look like under a renewable energy system, and I have got to say that that is dangerous. This could not be further from the truth. The renewable energy system that this government has invested in, frankly, was the hero of last week. When the Loy Yang A coal-fired power station tripped, it was the renewable energy systems set up by this government that bore the brunt by supplying more than 50 per cent of power during Wednesday's peak period. It was because of renewables that we were able to keep more Victorians' lights on. I think that needs to be heard time and time and time again, because it was renewables that kept Victoria's lights on.

I want to reaffirm absolutely that the government understands and sympathises with the households and the businesses that these power outages affected, whether they be energy dependent for health reasons, whether they have lost whole fridges worth of food or whether they have suffered inventory losses as a result. It is absolutely critical that we ensure that our future electricity grid is as resilient as possible, with extra precautions taken by government and the community in some high-risk regions, and we know where they are. This is precisely the action the government is taking as we prioritise our goals to deliver energy affordability, reliability, security and sustainability.

However, this inquiry needs to be led by a panel of industry experts, absolutely not politicians, which is why the Allan Labor government will commission a supplementary independent review into the energy distribution network in direct response to last week's storm, led by this panel, as I have said. This panel will focus on the operational arrangements and preparedness of the distribution companies to respond to these extreme weather events, including the distribution businesses' management of the incident, as well as the timely and effective restoration of supply. It will also compare the operating models of the different energy network companies. It will investigate if there are any material opportunities that could enable a more rapid reconnection for customers, such as the availability of field crews and technical expertise through the use of mutual aid agreements and resource sharing within our state or indeed from interstate resources, which could certainly be considered. The panel will investigate communications with customers, the effectiveness of information platforms and services such as outage trackers – I am very excited to see that one be added, as I know so many others are – and preparedness to administer relief to impacted communities.

The Victorian government will also be seeking assistance from the Australian Energy Regulator for information regarding the energy resilience requirements of energy infrastructure companies. The final scope of the independent review will be given detailed consideration, and it will build on the work of the energy distribution network resilience review, which I mentioned, which followed the storm events of 2021 and focused on the resilience of the physical grid infrastructure.

There is more that I could say on this. We absolutely understand and acknowledge that the review is needed. It is standard protocol, frankly, following a weather event like we saw last week, but it needs

to be independent and led by industry experts. Let us not politicise something that is very much right now affecting Victorians every moment of this last week or so. I thank you for the opportunity to make a contribution.

**David ETTERSHANK** (Western Metropolitan) (16:23): I would like to firstly thank Mr Davis and the opposition for bringing this motion before the chamber. I would also like to at the outset acknowledge the more than 500,000 Victorians who were affected by the power outages and also the amazing first responders who stepped up as always to support their communities. I am sure everyone in this place has a similar high regard for the work that those people undertake for little or no pay and under the most difficult and challenging circumstances.

Mr Davis in his motion has raised some important issues with regard to the rights of Victorians to have confidence that they have a secure, reliable energy system. I do not think anyone in this place would deny that that is a critical consideration. It is a part of our lives. We take it for granted, and when incidents like this occur it shakes us all, doesn't it, because suddenly it is not there. If there is this event that has occurred, there is a major question as to why and how the system failed and adversely affected so many Victorians. There is also a second question of at least the same or greater importance, and that is how this is to be avoided in the future. Mr Davis's motion – and excuse me for paraphrasing here, Mr Davis – has broadly four elements: how reliable the system is, what happened on 13 February, the cost of developing a more sustainable electricity system and the role of new technologies and evolving power generation and maintenance systems into the future. The proposal is that this inquiry that is being put forward by the opposition would occur over the period to June 2025, about 16 months away.

These are all important questions, there are no two ways about it, but the issue that we on the crossbench have been considering is how these and also important broader questions are best addressed, and addressed in a timely manner. I would like to personally express my appreciation to Mr Davis and also to Ms Crozier for the very courteous and professional discussion that we had in considering this very question. The question we ask ourselves then as crossbenchers is: is this actually the best way to deal with the issues facing the Victorian community?

Juxtaposed to those conversations we have also had discussions with the government, and I would like to express our appreciation to Minister D'Ambrosio and her staff for their likewise courteous and professional approach to addressing these issues. Arising from those discussions with the government we effectively have a two-staged approach, and this has been canvassed by Mr Galea and Ms Watt. Firstly, there will be an independent expert inquiry, with agreed terms of reference and agreed membership, into what actually happened and why, because I think that is a really big question that every Victorian would like answered, and they would like it answered not by people like us. They want it answered by people who know what it means, who are steeped in the industry, who understand the engineering and who understand the realities of the generation system and the distribution system. From our discussions with the minister there is a recognition that this report will take quite a long time to do. It will take at least 12 months I believe, but – and I think this is really important – the government has committed to the production of an interim report that addresses those most urgent questions within six months. And that six months is very important for those of us who are committed to another process that is underway, and that is, as Dr Mansfield alluded to, the inquiry into climate change resilience and adaptation.

All Victorians I think know the climate is changing, yes? We are beyond the point where we ask: is it going to happen? The question is: how much of it is going to happen, what is it going to mean and how are we going to respond to it? Mr Galea referred to the events that happened at places like Anakie, and I am sure anyone who saw those six high-tension towers that were snapped as though by an act of God thought this was the product of a freak meteorological event. It was a freak event, but it was also a freak event that is going to become more and more common. We are also going to have a whole lot of other things to deal with, like increasing temperatures, increasingly unreliable precipitation and rising flood levels. So if as a state we are to respond strategically and responsibly to those changes,

then we also need to have an inquiry that does not simply focus on the events and the outworkings and specifically the power industry, because the power industry is one subset industry within a broader context that all Victorians want to know about. How are we going to adapt to climate change? How are we going to make our state more resilient? How do we keep the lights on? How do we feed our community? These are big issues, and it requires a broad perspective for them to be addressed.

In that sense the inquiry into resilience and adaptation that will be commencing in a few months time, in the middle of the year, will be informed by other works. The first one I have already alluded to, which is the independent expert panel looking at the causes of and the response to the power outages. The second one is the Council Environment and Planning Committee, which has spent a long time looking at the response to and the causes of the 2022 flood event, which affected Victorians across the state. That committee has heard really heart-rending stories of disadvantage arising from those floods. We need to, as a Parliament and as a community, be thinking through these big issues. The inquiry that will kick off in June into resilience and adaptation will be informed by the technical analysis of the power industry and it will also be informed by the findings of the flood inquiry, and it will hope to engage a broad cross-section of the community to consider these issues. I guess the other thing that is really critical is that it will do it in roughly the same time frame as the proposal from the opposition.

We would like a more comprehensive and a bigger picture that meets the needs of all Victorians to be our focus. So in that context and after a lot of discussion and careful deliberation, Legalise Cannabis Victoria will not be supporting the opposition's motion.

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (16:32): I am pleased to speak to this motion. The Liberals and Nationals are putting this forward – and I thank David Davis for his work on this – to have a committee inquiry into Victoria's energy transmission and particularly the reliability and stability of Victoria's distribution network. That is what a committee inquiry is all about. We talk to experts. I have been involved with committees now with members across this chamber, and it is important, as it states in this motion, that the committee would comprise two members from the government nominated by the Leader of the Government in the Council, two members from the opposition and two members from amongst the remaining members in the Council. The aim of a committee inquiry is to have transparency, to invite experts in to hear their information and the facts and then to be able to report back on that and have recommendations in that transparent way. We know that we do need independent scrutiny and transparency on this issue, so I certainly support this motion as a way of doing that.

The reliability of our electricity network in Victoria is essential. Communities rely on it. We saw the impact of the recent storms. We had half a million homes without power, and according to reports today there are still 3000 homes that do not have power reconnected. I attended a briefing today with the emergency management commissioner Rick Nugent. It was very informative, and just the extent of the damage that these storms caused is quite incredible.

After the events last week I was contacted by a constituent, Larry, who lives near Warburton. He sent me a message, and he said:

More than 500,000 homes including businesses had their power cut off due to the storms yesterday in Victoria. Today, more than 200,000 homes & businesses still awaiting for their power to be restored. If extreme weather events are going to occur more often resulting in widespread power outages, we may have to revert to stone age living!

We know that they had a huge impact. We saw supermarkets closed, we saw surgeries deferred, we saw traffic lights down for extended periods. But the issues that we saw last week – the power outages – have been happening for some time. This was well before last week. In Northern Victoria towns like Euroa, Violet Town, Longwood, Strathbogie and Benalla have also had issues, but not as frequently. Euroa has experienced 17 unplanned power outages in two months. While wild weather may explain the causes of some, many have gone unexplained. My Nationals colleague Annabelle Cleeland has held community meetings in Euroa, Longwood, Nagambie and Violet Town and had

over 300 people attend, because she wanted to hear the stories of those that had been impacted. We know that power outages do have a significant impact. They cause a loss of income for businesses and households – people throw out food and are unable to communicate or stay cool in the hot weather – and they have an impact on people trying to work and certainly cause challenges in emergency situations. It does cause distress. We are aware of residents with a disability being stuck in their electric wheelchairs; people unable to get their cars out of the garage during a crisis; pensioners with expensive medication unable to be refrigerated; people with sleep apnoea tormented at night, unable to sleep without a working machine; and businesses going broke because they cannot operate. I was in Mount Alexander recently and I heard similar stories of problems that had been going on for some time with power outages. There is no ability to do your payWave, very few people carry cash and it has a big impact on business.

I know Annabelle Cleeland has received feedback from many constituents, and I thought that I would share some of these comments with you. Renee wrote:

Other than losing food, having to find and refill generator, no power has meant no internet and no mobile phone but also no landline because the power tripped the local phone exchange each time. We've been unable to operate some of the day to day business activities that rely on phone internet and power. We had to prioritise which items we put the extension lead to ... run.

This is from Damian:

I think ... we need to be looking at clearing some of the high Tree from a falling distance from the lines so ... the power does not get damaged when we have wind

With the large Trees close to Power lines is a danger for Power outage and also bushfire

Erik said:

We pay too much as it is for ... power, it's not reasonable to shut it down in rural areas to keep the city grid with their aircon and elec car charging going. If this is indeed the case, rural residents should receive cheaper rates.

Judy said:

Outages have impacted access, costs increased due to food spoilage, health and wellbeing impacted due to non-operational cooling, toilets, showers and drinking water.

This message is from Gay:

I am emotionally disturbed for the elderly in our community, their health can be adversely be affected during power outages. Especially those on sleep apnea machinery. Also it is impossible to call 000 in an emergency as our phones go down as well ... they say if you have issues email us, that's a joke ... it does not work with power outages!!!

Anne, who is in business, wrote:

Financially disruptive to my homebased business. Also financially & physically disruptive to my residential situation in that large amounts of food have had to be discarded when the freezers thawed due to electricity outages.

Margaret wrote:

I have a c-pap machine to help me breathe. It has ... to be reset each time and is not working properly yet.

Finally, Rachael stated:

I've had to throw food out of the fridge and freezer due to the long outages. I no longer have much perishable food stocked up due to the uncertainty of the power outages and basically buy for a few days only.

My husband had his work emergency phone when the mobile phones went down and the call centre was unable to make any contact with him and therefore clearing roads of trees etc was unable to be reported and actioned.

These are the stories of real people, people living in regional areas that are tired of the ongoing power outages. The government has been aware of these issues for years, but these outages continue to occur. We rely on electricity, and we need reliable transmission networks. I know that concerns have been raised over the VNI West, which is a single line of huge towers that are as high as the MCG lights, and I have been to community meetings where people are very concerned. But Professor Bruce Mountain has developed an alternate plan to upgrade existing powerlines and still manage to connect the state.

I am not surprised, a day after the coalition pushed for an inquiry, that the Labor government has jumped to do an inquiry, because this government certainly love to give jobs to their mates and mark their own homework. The government has announced an independent review, but as David Davis has asked, who is the mystery person? We need further detail. The government has indicated that power prices are going down, down, down, but ask any family, any business owner – electricity prices are going up, up, up. The Nationals are pleased to support this motion.

**Harriet Shing:** Wireless technology.

**Ryan BATCHELOR** (Southern Metropolitan) (16:40): Wireless technology – there are all sorts of things that we can use to transmit our views in the context of this debate, and I will be more than delighted to make a contribution, as many on this side and on the other side have, on Mr Davis's motion. Obviously, the motion is in response to what was absolutely a catastrophic day in Victoria. We know that it was a catastrophic day in Victoria not only because of what we witnessed happen but also because we were warned by emergency services prior to the day that things were going to be bad. I think it is a credit to our emergency services framework, our staff, that they prepare us and themselves for days like this. But obviously, as the events of Tuesday demonstrated, there are some things, some catastrophic weather events, that are very, very difficult to absolutely prepare for. We saw that on Tuesday.

I think it is worth just spending a little bit of time, as I begin my contribution, talking through some of what actually happened on the day, because unfortunately in this debate, for whatever reason, there is a bit of conflation I think that occurs between the events that occurred and what led to power outages. And in what might only be described as an attempt to either whip up a furore or score political points I think some of that conflation is being done disingenuously to generate outrage.

What we saw on the Tuesday was an absolutely catastrophic weather event, with winds that we had never seen before sweeping through different parts of the state, almost in a band from parts of western Victoria going through places like Anakie in Geelong, really in a band that stretched east. We saw from Anakie pictures that are ingrained in our minds of those six transmission towers that looked like they had been stepped on by a giant. The consequence of having that significant transmission line go down was the tripping of the significant power station at Loy Yang A, not because the power station itself was in any way faulty or affected by the weather event but because the power that it was generating as per its operational requirements could not be distributed anywhere because of the freak event. And so the safety mechanism kicked in and the generation was shut down for a short period of time for safety reasons, which then led to some load shedding in western Victoria – about 90,000 homes for about an hour.

The bulk of Victorians who lost power that day did not lose it as a result of the crushing of the Anakie towers and the problems at Loy Yang A. They were the result of localised poles and wires either being ripped out of the ground themselves by the wind or having trees fall on them. And we have all seen the video of the winds howling through the suburbs and the towns on that day. We have seen quite remarkable vision and footage and photos of huge gum trees lying horizontal on the ground with their root balls exposed to the elements.

Never before had we seen such widespread felling of such huge trees in such widespread parts of Melbourne. We know that this happened, because people were posting videos about it in the aftermath

showing us just how terrible it was. We saw a great response from members of the community and their elected representatives out there showing us exactly what had happened. We saw our colleagues Mr Galea and others in the Dandenongs and the south-east of Melbourne showing us exactly what was happening. We had our colleagues and comrades out in Gippsland showing us there. We even had Mr Davis standing valiantly on the street in Clayton next to a bin that had fallen over and a powerline that was down.

*Members interjecting.*

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** It was very compelling vision; you should go and have a look at the footage. But what it demonstrates to us is right across Melbourne localised transmission was down, and that was the big cause of the power outages to so many homes. What we saw on that day was also a remarkable effort to aid recovery – the line workers and SES out taking down the fallen trees, clearing the roads and putting the powerlines back up again. They did a remarkable job. Just in my local area in Moorabbin, the Moorabbin SES unit responded to 172 requests for assistance in 48 hours, and they were not the worst hit in metropolitan Melbourne or in regional Victoria by any stretch of the imagination. But they were out there – 172 requests to the Moorabbin SES in 48 hours on Tuesday and Wednesday – catastrophic day, catastrophic events.

So the question we have got to ask now is: what should we do about it? Because after all serious disasters we should have a look at what happened and why, what the response was like and what it is that we can do to learn from this for the future. I think we have had in the contributions to this debate some questions raised. Were we well enough equipped? Is the transmission infrastructure that we have in this state being kept up to the standards that we need in order to meet and withstand the effects of climate change in our community? These are really important and valuable questions and ones that we need to ask, obviously. I think the inquiries that we have on foot will get to them, particularly in answering the question: has privatisation of these assets been good for them and been good for Victorians? I look forward to those matters being canvassed in the inquiries that we have got ahead of us.

**David Davis** interjected.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** I will come to that, Mr Davis. I will absolutely come to that, because what has come about in this debate is a question of competence.

*Members interjecting.*

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** Order! We are getting towards the end. If we could bring this home without too much furore, that would be awesome. Mr Batchelor to continue without help.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** I have absolute confidence in Minister D'Ambrosio as the state's energy minister, who I am the first to say I think is the best energy minister this state has had at least for the last 20 years and possibly longer, because she is absolutely committed to not only transforming our energy system from where we were in the Dark Ages to where we need to be with renewables but also ensuring that we have got the transmission networks, that they are reliable and that we have the power coming to us when we need it.

We are going to learn from what happened last week, but we are going to get the advice on that from an independent review led by experts, not a political theatre. But also, because it is important for members of Parliament to be able to consider these matters, as Mr Ettershank and Dr Mansfield said, this chamber has already asked the Environment and Planning Committee to do an inquiry into how well our built infrastructure is going to adapt to climate change. We supported that. I am pleased to be chairing that inquiry. Submissions to that inquiry are open right now, and I would encourage everyone who has an interest in this topic to put a submission through to that inquiry. Submissions are open,

there will be public hearings later in the year and we will report. These matters are being looked into. They were catastrophic, they warrant further work and that is exactly what we are going to do.

**Jacinta ERMACORA** (Western Victoria) (16:50): I do speak on this motion to have an inquiry into the energy sector. Of course the energy sector being one of the priority areas for reform for the Allan Labor government, you can be assured that there are inquiries occurring all the time – critical-thinking inquiries around the reform process that is underway, in addition to the inquiry that we have initiated in response to the events last week, mentioned in particular by my colleague Mr Batchelor.

We know now that the catastrophic weather events like what happened on Tuesday were predicted. On Monday they were predicted to be catastrophic in the Wimmera region. It showed that the new national system was very effective and accurate. I want to acknowledge, before I mention the electricity side of things in the central and eastern parts of the state, that there is a community of people in Pomonal who are really hurting right now. There were around about 100 houses in Pomonal, and we are pretty sure that about 45 of them have gone. I acknowledge what those people are going through and that the Allan government is completely behind them.

I want to thank the firefighters and volunteers, 000 responders and local governments – the Northern Grampians Shire Council in particular as well as Ararat city – who responded so beautifully and so in coordination, together, very, very quickly. That is what you get with the all the preparation that goes on for these kinds of events, right down to the precontracted mental health services that are provided, already in place for such an event. There is no need to ask for these things; they are automatically contracted, priced and provided. That is what I saw on Wednesday, the day after the event, when I visited the Stawell emergency relief centre, where between 40 and 50 residents of Pomonal were seeking refuge from the incident that had occurred. I saw with my own eyes the mental health support that was being provided by those organisations that are contracted to do so. As I said, the Victorian government has a funding agreement in place with the Australian Red Cross and the Victorian Council of Churches, which supports them to provide psychosocial supports in the immediate aftermath of emergency events or disasters. These organisations have been providing mental health support on the ground to the communities impacted in Pomonal from 14 February, which is the day that I visited the Stawell emergency relief centre.

I am very much thinking of the communities of Pomonal but also thinking of and thanking the volunteers and the responders in the emergency services that worked so hard that day and have continued to work hard as we transition from the response phase of the emergency through to the recovery phase. I want to express my appreciation and respect for the skills, experience and technical expertise of the people that did respond during that emergency. When it comes to technical expertise, I think mental health support is very much one of those spaces where it is absolutely clear that confidentiality, respect and courtesy are very, very important. It is not a space that we can talk a lot about in particular examples, and it is not a space that we can talk about publicly. I think it is certainly not a space to be exploited. I might leave my contribution there because I believe in sharing, and that is what I wanted to say about the services that were provided in Pomonal and how much I support that community.

**Tom McIntosh** (Eastern Victoria) (16:56): I am glad to stand and talk in opposition to this motion. I do so for exactly what we see up there today: the future of Victoria. Those opposite, both state and federally, seem to have taken no consideration of the future of our state or our nation in the last 10, 20, 30 years on this issue. Last week's storms were catastrophic events. We lost a life in Mirboo North. We lost homes across the state. There has been immense damage to community assets. Homes are still without power. Whilst emergency workers have been on the ground, communities have been pulling together and volunteers have been fighting fires, clearing driveways and caring for fellow Victorians, what have the opposition been doing? Cheap political pointscoring. They have been raising nuclear power. That is straightaway what we heard from Canberra from the Nats: false cries about restrictions to gas, fearmongering and scaring Victorians in a time when we need to be out there supporting them, getting power back on, getting them access to their driveways, making sure there is

food in the fridge and looking after them. But there is no surprise. I have said it before in this place: you have no plan. It is only cheap political pointscore.

On a plan, Mallacoota's power went out last night, and the battery backup powered by renewable energy came straight back on and the town had power. But of course you guys do not care about that, because you are not actually interested in the reality of what is going on on the ground. You are technological dinosaurs. I cannot for the life of me understand why you are stuck in this climate-denying, renewable-hating mindset. I do not know where it is driven from and whether there are vested interests elsewhere in the nation that have set the position of your party that you cannot break out of. Mr Davis has said 10 to 12 times today that we have been in power 20 of the last 23 years. Mr Davis, thank you for highlighting that for the Victorian people. There is a reason why that is the case. They know you cannot be trusted on climate change and you cannot be trusted on energy. Kennett sold things off. Nap Time and Dolittle came in and did nothing. They gutted the state's capacity to deal with climate –

*Members interjecting.*

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** Order! Mr McIntosh without assistance, please.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Since coming back to power after those four years of not only inaction but taking this state backwards, this side has got on with building our energy system, putting in the renewables and setting us up to go into the future. It is very clear you will never come to this place with a plan. You will never come with a proposal; you are too busy fighting amongst yourselves. With all due respect to the new member, Dr Bach, probably one of your most talented people, looked around in your leadership group and said, 'I don't want to be here; I want to go to the other side of the world.'

**David Davis:** On a point of order, Acting President, I think the member is straying from the motion in talking about Dr Bach and others. He has gone on a long, long time.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** Mr McIntosh to maybe not comment on the recently departed Libs.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Yes, thank you. To those of you that are still here, I say: we must act on climate change. We must set up our energy generators, our transmission and our distribution network to go through this century.

*Members interjecting.*

**Tom McINTOSH:** And it is not cheap political pointscore; it is getting on with the real work. It is easy for you lot to sit there and take cheap shots, because we are getting on with delivering on a massive, massive task and a massive challenge, and you are not up to it. Victorians know you are not up to it, and you know you are not up to it, so do not pretend, Davis. Sit in your chair and do not pretend. We all know you have got nothing to offer Victorians, and you will be sitting on that side for a very long time to come.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** Order! Enough. It is getting out of hand, and your time is up also.

**David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (17:01):** I am pleased to rise and make a contribution here. We have seen strange and wacky contributions from some on the other side, but leaving all that to one side, the reality is that this is a sensible, grounded motion to deal with an event that actually has done tremendous damage to the Victorian community. It is an event that has seen more than 530,000 households locked out. It has seen businesses hurt, and those businesses are owed a proper explanation.

I notice the government members and crossbench members are talking about the government undertaking an inquiry. Well, the truth is the government was shamed into that inquiry because we announced this on Monday. They had no intention of doing any such inquiry. They have been shamed



into it. Do we know who is going to do this independent inquiry? Which person? It is time the government came clean. This is, as I say, a very sensible motion. It looks to the future. It deals with the incident, it deals with the past and it looks to the future with renewables playing a greater role.

**Council divided on motion:**

*Ayes (17):* Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Georgie Purcell, Adem Somyurek, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

*Noes (20):* Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Samantha Ratnam, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

**Motion negatived.**

***Bills***

**Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pill Testing Pilot for Drug Harm Reduction) Bill 2023**

*Second reading*

**Debate resumed on motion of Aiv Puglielli:**

That the bill be now read a second time.

**Trung LUU** (Western Metropolitan) (17:09): I rise today to speak on the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pill Testing Pilot for Drug Harm Reduction) Bill 2023. After 10 words into this bill, I would have an issue with this bill. The title itself is misleading and gives a false sense of security. Pill testing is not drug harm reduction, and I will give you a reason why. Pill testing does not actually give you the amount or concentration of the drug. Proper testing requires a lab and 24 hours. Safework Health laboratories, a drug screening agency, outlines that during proper analysis of a pill it would take at least 24 hours for something to be accurately recorded in relation to the concentration of a substance in the pill. It is something that is impossible to do at any festival. Real harm reduction is taking nothing that could harm your body and taking no substance that could affect you adversely. I will give you free advice: do not take drugs. Do not take any substance that harms your physical body or your mental health, and do not take illicit drugs. That is real harm reduction.

I also have an issue in relation to the way members and society go about casually mentioning party drugs and MDMA as if it is something they do every day. It is bad for you and it is not legal, so members and people in society should be expressing concern when these sorts of things are thrown around at leisure.

I also have concern in relation this bill, and I will bring you to clause 4. The bill itself says that the minimum age people can provide pills for testing is 18 years, although this age limit can be amended by the Governor in Council – 18 years – and it can be amended. I take from that that it does not mean that they can increase the age, it means that they are able to decrease the age to allow kids to take drugs and kids to have pill testing. So already this bill is aimed, targeted at our youth and our kids.

It goes further. It provides:

... **information about the composition** of a substance includes information on whether it includes a poison, controlled substance or drug of dependence and the amount or concentration of any poisons ...

What pill testing does is it gives you an indication of what is in there, but it does not give you the exact concentrations. What people do not realise is that when you take pills it is the amount of concentration in the pill that causes overdose to occur – not what is in it but the amount of concentration which

causes overdose to occur. If the pill testing does not indicate the concentration, then how do you know it is good and can you certify that it is okay to take it?

Also, Dr Heath mentioned earlier that the adverse effects impact individual people differently. With all these unprescribed medications, whatever drugs and whatever poisons are in there, it is not prescribed. It affects you differently, and that is why you do not take it. If you give someone an indication that it is fine to take it, that is not harm reduction. So that is already my first issue in relation to this bill, the title: 'pill testing pilot for drug harm reduction'. It is not.

Today I want to address the issue of pill testing and the arguments against its implementation. There is no safe level of drugs that a person can consume. One of the essential elements of good legislation is that it reflects society's values and Victorians' stance against drug use. There are two primary arguments that proponents of pill testing often raise, and I believe it is essential to examine these closely.

Before I do go through some of these reasons, I want to repeat something from the secretary of the Police Association Victoria Mr Wayne Gatt, who I have worked with in the past and who is currently representing tens of thousands of members of the police. These are the people who deal with this issue every single day: the aftermath, the tragic outcomes when people take drugs and decide to take unprescribed substances and chemicals just to have a buzz and to feel good – a fix. No more self-indulgence, no more taking something to get a buzz, and all those aftermaths – let me tell you, there is a better way to achieve this. Wayne said, and I am confident that when he said this he represents all the police officers and all the people who have seen the effects of drugs and the devastating outcomes that they have on people's lives –

**The PRESIDENT:** I am sorry, Mr Luu, I have to interrupt general business.

**Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.**

*Statements on tabled papers and petitions*

**Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria**

*Victorian State of the Environment 2023 Report*

**Sheena WATT** (Northern Metropolitan) (17:15): I rise this afternoon to speak on the Victorian government's response to the *Victorian State of the Environment 2023 Report* – and I thank Environmental Sustainability Victoria and their commissioner Dr Gillian Sparkes AM for the submission of this report – and to note the continued nation-leading work the Victorian Labor government is doing to reduce emissions and protect our environment.

This report conducts a five-yearly report card on the health of Victoria's natural environment – our land, water, air and ecosystems. The report is a considered analysis of the available science and the pressure and challenges ahead. It covers three areas: the health of Victoria's natural environment, the adequacy of our science and areas of future focus. This report marks the first time that a comprehensive scientific baseline analysis of Victoria's environment has been carried forward and re-evaluated in consecutive *Victorian State of the Environment* reports. The SOE 2023 reports on 139 indicators of environmental conditions. This is fewer than the 170 indicators assessed in 2018. There are 171 trend assessments of 139 indicators, and it reports that 33 are improving, 34 are stable, 60 are deteriorating and 44 remain unclear.

The report was handed down last year, and it was highlighted that Victoria's temperature increases reported in the previous report have continued. Victoria is getting warmer and more fire-prone and can continue to expect more extreme weather in the future. However, the annual net greenhouse gas emissions have improved by a reduction of 27 per cent for the 2015 to 2020 period. Positive mitigation efforts are further supported by the energy indicators, with five of the six energy assessments improving compared with the 2018 assessments. This is in no small part due to the actions, the policies,

the framework and the hard work put in place by the Victorian Labor government to meet its climate action targets and the continued work underway to support Victoria's response to climate change and transition to net zero emissions by 2045.

Victoria is unequivocally the country's leader in climate action. We smashed our 2020 emissions target of a 15 to 20 per cent reduction: we achieved 29.6 per cent. And in 2021 we achieved a 32.3 per cent reduction. We do not just talk about climate change, we are delivering on it. We are decarbonising at the fastest rate in the country, and since this government was elected in 2014 we have cut emissions by more than any other state. We have the strongest climate change legislation in the country, and Victorians have voted overwhelmingly for the next step in our ambitious agenda. It is true that the people want this. We are at a critical point in protecting our unique and precious environment, and I am proud to be part of a government that does not just talk about the environment but is getting on with doing what needs to be done to protect it.

We are seeing an unprecedented number of natural disasters which are impacting our wildlife and biodiversity, and the Allan Labor government remains committed to preserving the environment and communities through these disasters. We will continue to strengthen Victoria's environmental protection policy and legislative framework, including continuing to deliver on the *Biodiversity 2037* targets and working with traditional owners to create on-ground assessments and continuing to develop contemporary biocultural indicators consistent with existing policy. We will work with the Commonwealth government on their ambitious reform agenda too.

The Allan Labor government is delivering the grid of the future, with \$540 million over the next four years – more than any other state – to establish six renewable energy zones, from sunny Mildura to the windy east coast, unlocking new renewable energy investment that will support economic growth and jobs. We have invested \$540 million to unlock all six of the Victorian renewable energy zones. We have brought online the largest battery in the Southern Hemisphere and recently opened another big battery in Hazelwood. We have built more batteries than any other state, and that is all part of our plan to tackle emissions and act on climate change.

We will continue to support recovery of public land impacted by storms, floods and bushfires and prepare for the upcoming bushfire season. Importantly, we will grow our partnership with traditional owners to support self-determination and to have progress towards treaty. We are hearing a lot in this place and the other place about what is real and what is fake, but the Allan Labor government is getting on with acting: real change, driving down emissions, striving towards a better future for all Victorians. I do recommend the *Victorian State of the Environment 2023 Report* to the chamber.

### **Department of Transport and Planning**

#### *Report 2022–23*

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (17:20): I rise to speak on the Department of Transport and Planning annual report 2022–23, and I would like to highlight the failures of this government to adequately maintain the road network in Victoria, particularly the regional road network. What the annual report reveals, on page 44, is that the measure 'Road area treated: roads in regional Victoria' actually failed to meet its target by more than 25 per cent. The government failed to meet their own target. Their own target was to treat 12,140,000 square metres of roads – this is maintenance of regional roads – but they only treated 9,029,000, so a failure by this government by more than 25 per cent to meet that road target.

The ABC actually reported yesterday – and this is no surprise, considering that failure to meet the maintenance target on regional roads – that there are more than 60 Victorian regional road sites that have been waiting for repairs for more than a year. That is no surprise to people in my electorate. We have a saying in our electorate that the government requires us to have cars that are roadworthy, but the roads are not carworthy. We also have another saying, and that is that we used to drive on the left

of the road, but now we drive on what is left of the road. That is because the roads are in such a state of disrepair.

The annual report goes on to reveal even more failures on the regional road targets by this government. Minor road improvements for regional roads, on page 45, shows that the government actually failed to meet that target by almost 45 per cent. This is an absolute disgrace, that the government cannot even get their targets right. Also, the bridge strengthening and replacement program – they failed to meet that target by almost 29 per cent. The failures continue to go on and on under this government. The regional report also reveals that the program works completed within agreed time frames did not even meet their target. In fact they missed that target by almost 50 per cent – 47.5 per cent of projects were not completed within the agreed time frames. This government is really failing regional Victorians on roads.

One of the things that comes through our office regularly is a number of people wanting to claim compensation for damage to their vehicles, particularly their tyre rims that have been severely damaged. The government will only pay if a claim is worth \$1580 or more. But even with that small amount to claim, they actually only paid out one claim last year. You can see in the last three years the way that these figures have gone up. In 2020–21 there were 298 claims. The government did not pay out any. In 2021–22, that figure went to 755 claims, and they paid out three, one of which was in regional Victoria and two in Melbourne. Then in 2022–23, the 2020–21 figure had increased fivefold. It was actually 1532 claims, and they paid one claim. This is an absolute disgrace.

The budget papers revealed last year that the government had cut the road maintenance budget by 25 per cent, and if we go back over further budgets, we know that they have cut the budget by 45 per cent since 2020. No wonder our roads are in such a state of disrepair. No wonder local newspapers are running surveys on Facebook for people to name the worst roads in their area. Certainly the *Shepparton News* is doing this, and Echuca Road, the Midland Highway and the Goulburn Valley Highway get regular runs on that particular site.

### **Economy and Infrastructure Committee**

#### *Inquiry into the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (WorkCover Scheme Modernisation) Bill 2023*

**Samantha RATNAM** (Northern Metropolitan) (17:25): I rise to speak on the parliamentary inquiry report into the WorkCover bill, recently tabled. Firstly, a big thankyou to the committee members and secretariat staff who essentially worked over summer to complete this really crucial inquiry. It is indeed our Parliament at its best when we can create the opportunities for proper review and investigation of legislation, especially legislation that is so crucial, such as this. I hope it is a practice that we can begin to do more of, similar to what the federal Parliament does as it conducts its business on legislation.

This inquiry was and will be crucial for workers. It found that this Labor government in Victoria developed this harmful bill without adequately consulting stakeholders and without publishing any modelling on the impacts on workers of the proposed changes in the bill. This is evidenced in the government's failure to actually address the fundamental issues present in Victoria's WorkCover scheme. Instead the bill they are putting forward stigmatises mental illness and blatantly attacks workers rights by paring back eligibility for injured workers. The bill, if passed, will restrict eligibility to WorkCover support by excluding mental injuries caused by stress or burnout from work activities and increasing the whole-person impairment test to 20 per cent for workers receiving payments after 130 weeks.

Injured workers, unions and other stakeholders had a clear message for the inquiry: this is not the reform that is needed. We all agree the WorkCover scheme needs to be reformed, but this bill will do little to fix it. It will only harm Victorian workers more and leave the system in disarray. This is why, in a minority report submitted together with committee colleagues Mr Ettershank and Ms Purcell, the

Greens urge Labor to withdraw the bill, go back to the drawing board and reform the system to help workers, not inflict more harm. In fact what the majority report clearly shows is Labor working with the Liberals to pass reforms that leave workers worse off. They could have worked with the progressive crossbench to improve the WorkCover system but have decided to work with the anti-worker Liberal Party to pass anti-worker laws. The proposed changes will push injured workers into poverty, emergency departments and an already overstretched mental health system. Yet despite the damning evidence heard by the inquiry against these changes, Labor and the Liberals have teamed up to keep this bill alive. Plainly this bill is a desperate attempt by the government to claw back money after deliberately underfunding WorkCover for years, and injured workers are now being expected to foot the bill.

What is needed is a far broader look at WorkCover, with a focus on prevention, rehabilitation and the overall operation of the scheme. Much of that work has actually already been done. There have been multiple reviews into WorkCover over a number of years, including two comprehensive reviews by the Victorian Ombudsman in 2016 and 2019. Many of these reviews included detailed recommendations to improve the scheme. The changes proposed in this bill are inconsistent with the findings and recommendations of these reviews, the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System and the government's own mental health policy. So we are asking the government to listen to the advice provided by numerous inquiries, to listen to the unions and to listen to the voices of injured workers. They are calling for systemic reform, not these regressive, bandaid solutions. Labor's anti-worker bill must be withdrawn.

### **Peninsula Health**

#### *Report 2021–22*

**Michael GALEA** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:28): I rise to speak on the Peninsula Health report from 2021–22. Peninsula Health is a major public health provider in my region, providing care for my constituents, particularly those in the Frankston, Carrum and Cranbourne electorates. The Allan Labor government is delivering critical and transformative changes to the region with the \$1.1 billion redevelopment of Frankston Hospital, an unprecedented investment into the future health and wellbeing of my constituents in the south-east. The new facility will add capacity to treat approximately 35,000 more patients each year, cutting wait times and reducing pressure on other nearby Melbourne hospitals, especially those in the south-east.

This redevelopment is also creating thousands of jobs, with a workforce in the hundreds and the entire redevelopment set to create up to 1700 local jobs, right from construction to new opportunities in the hospital once it is re-operational. The redevelopment will deliver a new tower with 12 levels of clinical services; 130 more beds; a new main entrance and hospital street to connect new and existing facilities; new operating theatre suites with 15 theatres; new spaces for mental health and oncology services; new inpatient units; a new medical imaging department; a rooftop helipad; more than 600 car parks; a new kitchen and expanded logistics zone; expanded women's and children's services, including new maternity, obstetrics and paediatric wards, a women's clinic and a special care nursery; and a refurbished and expanded emergency department, including a new mental health, alcohol and other drugs hub and a dedicated paediatric zone as well as shelf space for future expansion.

The redevelopment will also provide extra community benefits, including a new community centre, a childcare centre, extensive landscaping and connection to nearby Beauty Park, new bus stops, a new pedestrian crossing on Yuille Street, new traffic lights at the intersection at Hastings Road, retail and food services for visitors and staff and improved staff amenities. I recently had the privilege of visiting the worksite to see just how much progress has been made, and it is quite remarkable, the absolute scale of the project once you get up there and look from one of the cranes down upon the entire site. Hundreds of people are working to make this wonderful new hospital a reality.

This could not have happened of course without the strong advocacy of local members such as that of Paul Edbrooke, the member for Frankston, who has been a tireless advocate for this project and for

his community, as indeed have been the member for Carrum Sonya Kilkenny and the member for Hastings Paul Mercurio. I would like to acknowledge their work, particularly that of Mr Edbrooke, in advocating for this project.

Any discussion of fierce local advocates in the Frankston area has to of course acknowledge the late, great Peta Murphy, who was such a strong voice for her community. She worked hard on so many projects, including the Frankston Hospital redevelopment, and it was a real privilege to work with her. We all deeply, deeply miss her. As part of the redevelopment, the new Peta Murphy breast imaging suite at Frankston Hospital is, to say the least, a fitting tribute to her service to the community. This \$4.5 million suite, which has been funded by the state government, is the first public diagnostic breast imaging service in the Peninsula Health region, and it is going to provide local access to mammography, ultrasound and biopsy right in the heart of Frankston. Around 2400 mammograms are expected to be delivered at the centre annually.

Dunkley still deserves a strong advocate, and that is why I am so thrilled to be supporting Jodie Belyea, who is running to stand in Peta Murphy's place. She is a fantastic local community-driven person who has been standing up for her community in supporting disadvantaged women across the south-east for many years. She has the skills, she has the know-how. Most importantly, though, she has the ethics and she has the passion to stand in Peta's place, and she is standing to put her name up to be the next federal member for Dunkley. I wish her all the best as well.

There are many areas of health infrastructure that this Allan Labor government is investing in right across my region, let alone the rest of the state. The Frankston Hospital redevelopment is one cornerstone of our investment in health infrastructure in the south-east.

### **Department of Treasury and Finance**

#### *Budget update 2023–24*

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (17:33): I want to speak on the 2023–24 Victorian budget update. The points I want to speak on are related to infrastructure. We know that there has been a massive infrastructure blowout. We saw the Premier forced to begrudgingly acknowledge that the North East Link has blown out to \$26.1 billion – a massive amount of money, a massive amount of taxpayers money. I am very keen to pursue many reasons behind this. We saw on the weekend, revealed in the *Herald Sun*, that labourers and junior stop sign holders working a 36-hour week on construction sites will soon earn \$120,000 a year under a CFMEU pay deal. We already know that on CFMEU sites the costs for building are far greater than they are with other unions. Data obtained by the Liberals and Nationals from Major Road Projects Victoria show that to be the case. The CFMEU-run Craigieburn Road upgrade project reached more than \$190 million, compared to the AWU-run Sunbury Road project, which was just \$116 million in the same 16-month period, so a \$74 million difference – 6 kilometres for Craigieburn Road, CFMEU run; a 7-kilometre duplication for Sunbury Road, AWU run. They even built a bridge as part of the Sunbury Road upgrade. So the government really needs to explain the cost difference here with taxpayer money. Jacinta Allan needs to explain why a stop-go sign holder could earn up to \$120,000 a year while at the same time she is penny-pinching our nurses, our teachers, our ambos and our firies. She needs to explain also why she is penny-pinching customers of Montego Homes for her failure to fix compliance issues in the construction industry. The government will sacrifice just about anyone except for her CFMEU bosses.

Victoria deserves better. We need value for money. This is why the opposition are calling for a standing infrastructure oversight committee of the Parliament. We all want better infrastructure, and Victorians deserve value for money on these projects.

Jacinta Allan expects to build 80,000 homes a year for the next decade, but many, many builders report not being able to source the labour required to build those homes, and this would make it even worse. We have seen reports of evidence of fraud in the government's Big Build. We have seen reports of ghost shifts, where shifts are faked. At the time, the former Premier and then minister Jacinta Allan

brushed this aside. It has now been confirmed by the national safety regulator. Surely the government has a view on the rorting of taxpayer money going on on Big Build sites. Surely the government has a view. If you do not and if you are silent, you are truly the guilty party. There is rorting going on on construction sites. It is taxpayer money. Taxpayers deserve transparency as to how their money is being spent.

On the pay deal that is supposedly in the works, Jacinta Allan on the weekend said that the government is not party to these negotiations and does not have a view. Well, the government should have a view, because again it is taxpayer money. She is not going to be able to meet her housing targets and her promises, because already we know from people that do build homes that they cannot source labour, supply and materials because they are all being sucked into government Big Build projects. But again we see the government cave to this basic extortion going on on construction sites, where it costs more for CFMEU-run projects, where there are ghost shifts going on, where there is clear evidence from the national safety regulator of rorting of taxpayer money on construction sites. Yet this government stays silent. Even though they are aligned with the AWU, which is a much more efficient workforce for the government to use, it stays silent – all to please the Premier's union bosses. It is an absolute disgrace.

### *Adjournment*

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (17:38): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

### **Energy security**

**Michael GALEA** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:38): (716) My adjournment matter this evening is for Minister D'Ambrosio in her capacity as the Minister for Energy and Resources. The action that I am seeking is that the minister meet with me in my electorate to discuss the issues and experiences of my constituents affected by prolonged power outages, particularly those who have dealt with AusNet.

Extreme weather caused severe damage to our power network last week, resulting in over 530,000 homes without power. This storm event heavily affected the south-east, with ongoing power outages in parts of my region. I have mentioned before in the chamber this week and I will mention again constituents of mine in Upper Beaconsfield, Knoxfield, Narre Warren North, Harkaway and Lysterfield, many of whom are still without power, as well as of course in other regions, notably Eastern Victoria Region. This is one of the most significant single outage events in the state's history, surpassing the October 2021 storm event.

I was recently contacted by Sunena in Knoxfield, who has been without power for a week. She told me of the impact this is causing her daughter, who is doing VCE and has struggled to keep up with her studies; the stress and the anxiety that this has caused her family; and the financial impact of spoiled food and other expenses. Sunena is understandably frustrated with a lack of timely and accurate updates from AusNet regarding the power outages and the time frame for restoring power. Frustration with this is something that many in my region have experienced, where for a week after the outage online information regarding power outages has been hard to access, if it is accessible at all.

In response to the needs of families like Sunena's in Knoxfield, the government has announced prolonged power outage payments of \$1920 per week for families and \$2927 a week for small businesses, but I am very disappointed that AusNet has delayed its implementation of the first round of these weekly payments. I note that the minister has rightfully decried this delay in setting up these support payments, and I support her calls for AusNet to immediately process payments for these families. These families have gone through a difficult week; we should not be seeing them going through further hardship.

The storm event and power outage deeply affected hundreds of thousands of Victorians, and I want to commend the swift response of this Allan Labor government in establishing a supplementary independent review of the distribution system in response to the storms. I am glad that a panel of independent experts will be leading this review. Again, the action I am seeking is for the minister to meet with me in my electorate to discuss the issues and experiences of my constituents, such as Sunena, who are affected by these prolonged power outages and who have dealt with AusNet.

### Wild dog control

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (17:41): (717) My adjournment matter is for the attention of the Minister for Agriculture. The action that I seek is for the minister to provide details of the engagement plan to assess the future of the declaration of the dingo as unprotected, including the livestock protection buffer in north-east Victoria. The buffer gives the state's wild dog controllers the authority to bait and trap wild dogs on public land within 3 kilometres of a farm fence. It was put in place in 2012 with great success. It pushes these ruthless killers back into the bush. A decade ago trappers would catch 120 feral dogs a year. The number now rarely tops 30. In September the agriculture and environment ministers signed a 12-month extension to the declaration, but instead of the previously accepted five-year term, it was an interim measure to allow a comprehensive assessment of the dingo population across Victoria. A spokesperson talked up working with farmers and private landholders to balance the protection of livestock and dingo conservation. The government needs to explain what has happened since October, what is planned and who it is talking to.

Those who have lived through the torment and terror of pre the buffer zone have told me and my colleague the member for Benambra that the buffer saves livestock and protects humans. They should be the government's first call. They will tell you about herds decimated and animals left half eaten. They will tell you about the toll on their mental health and the impact on native animals in the years before the buffer. But I fear this government has been misled by what it calls emerging research that says all dogs in the bush are dingoes. The research was generated by a Dingo Foundation acolyte and was far from independent. It had very few dogs from the north-east in the study of around 307 dogs from the width and breadth of Australia. Their findings are nonsense. The wild dogs in the north-east are crossbred domestic dogs gone wild – large beasts with laid-back ears.

Animals Australia has also added its voice of dissent, taking the government to the Supreme Court over the unprotection order. They argue the stock losses are now minimal, and locals would agree. But that is because the buffer zone works. Animals Australia say the dingo is threatened and needs protection, but if the assumption is that all these dogs are dingoes, then they are definitely not at risk. Meanwhile the *Bush Telegraph* says that the department is already talking to dog men about their future, linking the Animals Australia court action to the end of their trapping. Given the government's tendency to surrender to these bleeding hearts, I fear that like a good dog it may have already rolled over.

### Beaconsfield Reservoir

**Jeff BOURMAN** (Eastern Victoria) (17:45): (718) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Water, Minister Shing. Beaconsfield Reservoir is a small reservoir, located unsurprisingly in Beaconsfield, that is slated to be decommissioned. I was approached some time ago by the Save the Beaconsfield Reservoir Action Group and subsequently toured it to see for myself what the place is and what made it unsafe and in need of decommissioning. The reservoir is a beautiful body of water surrounded by trees and parkland. The reservoir has been there long enough that there is a thriving ecosystem with plenty of bird life as well as other animals. There is also plenty of space to create some parkland for people to be able to come and enjoy the site. Unfortunately, that is not possible at the moment as Melbourne Water want to decommission it for potential safety issues, and there is no public access.

After talking to some Melbourne Water officials I understand that there is some consternation about the reservoir wall, with earthquakes seeming to be a major cause for concern, particularly given the



age of the wall. There is a worry that should the wall collapse, the water will be released and cause damage downhill. None of the issues I heard were insurmountable, and we did discuss some options. The action I seek is for the minister to contact the Save the Beaconsfield Reservoir group, travel out to see the reservoir in person and work with the group to try and save the reservoir for future generations, as it is truly worth it.

### Energy security

**Richard WELCH** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:46): (719) I seek action from the Minister for Energy and Resources. While she may have been unaffected at her home in Brunswick, her constituents in Melbourne's north were doing it tough with significant power disruptions. The minister has allowed Victoria to slip to its weakest redundancy in energy in a generation, so disruptions like this wreak havoc on families, on businesses and on our state's reputation in particular. The action I seek is I would like the minister to join me to come and meet residents and businesses so that she can understand the consequences for this in our mutual community.

### Joseph Road precinct, Footscray

**Samantha RATNAM** (Northern Metropolitan) (17:47): (720) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and my ask is that she commit to taking a role in coordinating and funding the appropriate works to make the Joseph Road precinct in Footscray safe and livable. The precinct is home to hundreds of people who live in several new high-rise developments. These residents are facing a plethora of road hazards on a daily basis, from atrocious pedestrian crossings to a lack of disability access, dirt roads, no bike paths and gutters littered with broken glass and debris from surrounding construction sites.

In November last year Frances Jeyann Ramirez was tragically killed when she was hit by two cars at a notorious intersection at this precinct. She was an international student from the Philippines, just 22 years old. Though her death sent shockwaves throughout the community, few people were surprised, as many of them had experienced near misses of their own.

I spoke recently with representatives from the Joseph Road precinct action group. They have fiercely been advocating for improved safety in the area for years to little avail. They say that the absence of safe crossings and pathways poses a tangible risk to pedestrians navigating many streets in the area. This is further exacerbated by unsafe road conditions and insufficient pedestrian infrastructure, which results in residents often walking on the road.

What we are seeing here are the direct results of the planning approvals made by then Minister for Planning Matthew Guy, which allowed property developers to build towers of heights that were double what the local council preferred. These approvals were also made with little community consultation and in opposition to the advice given by the Office of the Victorian Government Architect. It also appears that these property developers were not required to contribute much, if anything, towards the local amenity. This clearly demonstrates that when governments are beholden to property developers and possess unwieldy planning powers, it is the community and local councils who will ultimately pay the price in terms of amenity and safety and who are left to pick up the pieces.

The community are urging that the Joseph Road precinct to be upgraded for safer use by pedestrians and that the government make good on its promise for active transport infrastructure in the area. The local council has agreed that there are a range of improvement works that need to happen and that these should be largely developer funded. However, after years of inaction community members are growing increasingly frustrated. Minister, I am sure you would agree that the requests being made here are the bare minimum of what should be available to any community in any neighbourhood. My question is: will the state government take a role in coordinating and funding the appropriate works to make the Joseph Road precinct safe and livable?

**Energy security**

**Renee HEATH** (Eastern Victoria) (17:49): (721) My adjournment is for the Minister for Energy and Resources, and the action that I seek is for the minister to re-evaluate the ban on natural gas and consider including it in Victoria's future energy mix as a low-cost, low-emission and weatherproof energy option. Last week's storms devastated Victoria, particularly the Eastern Victoria Region, but when it comes to blackouts that saw half a million Victorians without power, it is less the fault of the storm and more a result of our fragile energy system, unreliable supply and substandard infrastructure. While the government cannot control the weather, they should be able to manage a reliable energy network. That includes contingencies for extreme weather events so that we do not have the level of disruption that Victorians have been and still are suffering. Transmission towers which the government knew were outdated and substandard failed. Loy Yang A tripped, taking out more than 20 per cent of Victoria's energy supply. Load shedding followed. Renewables failed. Solar generates nothing during a storm, and wind generation, ironically, dropped.

What was there for Victorians, though, was gas. Victoria's gas generators provided a quick response to this emergency and supplied more than a third of the state's electricity at low cost. While overhead powerlines and transmission towers were failing, the underground network of pipes protected gas distribution during the storm. Without this source of energy Victoria would have been in a much worse situation. Victoria has large reserves of gas that are locked up. The minister is going as far as calling for national support to weatherproof our electricity grid but ignoring the resource that is in our backyard and can achieve that outcome.

In addition to this, the government's ban on household gas connections that came into effect this year will leave more people at a disadvantage. All of those people without power during the storm who still had the luxury of cooking food and having a hot shower thanks to household gas connections will soon be a minority. This government's energy policies are forcing Victorians into reliance on energy sources that are more vulnerable to weather, leaving them exposed to further energy crashes in the future, so I ask that you consider what I have just asked.

**Medicinal cannabis**

**Rachel PAYNE** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:52): (722) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, Minister Thomas. This week is Medicinal Cannabis Awareness Week – a time to focus on combating the stigma around medicinal cannabis and raising awareness about barriers to access.

It was Victoria who led Australia in 2015 with the passage of the Access to Medicinal Cannabis Bill 2015. One of the first groups to access medicinal cannabis under these changes was children with severe epilepsy. In their second-reading speech on this bill the former Minister for Health, Minister Hennessy, gave an example of one child who contracted bacterial meningitis and was left with severe brain damage, epilepsy and cerebral palsy. This child's seizures would last up to an hour and a half. Doctors advised there was nothing that could be done and that the parents should start planning for the child's funeral. Fortunately, access to medicinal cannabis oil allowed this child to be seizure-free and to have a good quality of life.

In making these changes this government recognised that parents should not be forced to turn to the illicit market in desperation to alleviate the pain and suffering of their children. But earlier last year the Therapeutic Goods Administration changed the rules for prescribing category 2 medicinal cannabis to children under the age of 17. Instead of a GP prescription, applications must now be supported by a paediatrician or relevant specialist, meaning more cost and more wait time.

We know that access to medicinal cannabis has been life-changing and life-saving for many children and their parents. In Penington's latest report on cannabis in Australia it was found that most GPs do not have the confidence or knowledge to discuss medicinal cannabis inquiries with patients. Of course we need to protect children's health with appropriate safeguards, but we also must avoid inadvertently

creating more barriers to access that fail to address the stigma and knowledge gap associated with medicinal cannabis. So the action I seek is that the minister commit to ensuring that children can receive their prescribed treatment by their GP without impediment and that health practitioners receive better training on how and when it is appropriate to prescribe medicinal cannabis.

### **Country Fire Authority Mirboo North station**

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (17:55): (723) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Emergency Services, and the action I seek from the minister is to make sure that the upgrade to the Mirboo North CFA station is in this year's budget. Our CFA volunteers do the most amazing job in bushfire response, in house and grassfire response – hay sheds, as we know in the country – and as first responders to road crashes and indeed only last week to our storm-ravaged area.

On Tuesday 13 February we saw a tornado-like storm hit the township of Mirboo North and surrounding districts. We saw gusts of reportedly up to 200 kilometres an hour that ripped through the town, shredding trees and peeling tin off homes, snapping goalposts at the local football club and wreaking havoc. The dedicated and nimble Mirboo North volunteers rallied at their antiquated station. They responded to the crisis, chainsaws in hand to remove fallen trees to open up access points to get other people in and out of the town and checking on the safety of the residents.

Their station has been identified in the capital works program for some years, and with good reason. The majority of it was built in 1978, with an extension funded in 1995, solely, completely and utterly funded by volunteer-raised funds – these are the sorts of people that we have in regional Victoria. The occupational health and safety there is an issue because the appliance doors cannot both open at the same time. Actual firefighters have to squeeze into their trucks. Indeed during the storm one of the members had to go and get their own Starlink unit off their house and bring it so that there was telecommunications.

I want to place on record my absolute gratitude to the member for Gippsland South Danny O'Brien, who has been relentless in this quest for this new CFA establishment. What we also know is that unfortunately this government is starving the CFA of funds. Last year there was a budget of \$310 million to service 1200 CFA brigades and their communities, and it has dropped \$3 million since that budget. I urge the minister to re-look at this budget, identify and respect those CFAs and certainly give them an operating budget that is worthy of all of those brigades. I do say that we have had the Premier mention the Mirboo North brigade in Parliament and we have had the emergency management minister here mention it and pay their gratitude. Well, one of the best ways you can pay that gratitude and respect is to actually fund and upgrade a fit-for-purpose fire station in this year's budget.

### **Middle East conflict**

**Aiv PUGLIELLI** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:58): (724) My adjournment matter is for the Premier, and the action that I seek this evening is for the Labor government to finally end its partnership with the Israeli defence ministry and Israeli weapons companies in light of the recent bombing and planned invasion of Rafah. In the safety of my home, I do not pretend to understand the suffering of the Palestinian people, but it will haunt me for the rest of my life.

'I am so scared. Please come.' These are some of the final words from a six-year-old girl Hind Rajab, trapped in a car with her dead loved ones, pleading for someone to come and help her. And when paramedics from the Red Crescent Society tried to help, pleading with Israel to let them help her, they were killed too. Hind and the paramedics' bodies were not able to be retrieved for 12 whole days. We do not know the suffering that this six-year-old child was forced to endure before she was murdered by Israeli forces. All I know is that no child should have to suffer like this.

I am sure by now that you have seen the photo of Sidra Hassouna, a 12-year-old girl seeking shelter in the only place Palestinian people had to go to, a place where this 12-year-old was told she would be

safe, where she was murdered by Israeli bombs. More than 1 million displaced Palestinians are seeking refuge in Rafah, yet Israel continues to bomb even the place the civilians were told to go to for safety. There is nowhere else for people to flee. There is nowhere safe for Palestinians whilst Israel is allowed to kill indiscriminately and a ground invasion looms. As a result, 12-year-old Sidra lost her life in one of the most horrific ways humanly possible. I cannot describe the details seen in that final photograph of Sidra to you, because it is something that no person, no child, should ever have to experience in this world. Expressions of concern will never be enough. It is incomprehensible to me that there are people in this place who sit here in safety and celebrate partnerships with Israeli weapons companies and the defence ministry that has killed thousands of children just like Hind, just like Sidra. These lives are worth so, so much more than jobs for Victorians.

### Community safety

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (18:01): (725) I want to raise a matter for the Minister for Creative Industries today. What we have seen in recent days with the doxxing, with the extraordinary steps that have been taken releasing the details of Jewish artistic community members, is nothing short of disgraceful. It is wrong that these materials have been released and that people have been targeted. I am aware of individuals who are afraid to attend their home. I am aware of people who are worried about their businesses. The arts and creative sector should be able to operate freely and without fear, without attack, and I am very concerned that the Jewish community in Victoria has been made the target of these extraordinary attacks.

What I am asking the Minister for Creative Industries to do, given that these are artistic community people, is to advocate within the Victorian community but also within the government – to the Premier, to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, to the Minister for Police and so forth – to ensure that there is a proper response. At the moment I do not believe that those members of the Jewish community who have been targeted so disgracefully can have the confidence they deserve that the government is actually operating on their side, operating to protect them and doing everything it possibly can to make sure that people with a Jewish community background who happen to operate in the arts are able to do so. Essentially what has happened here is that a WhatsApp group has been distributed, and there is a number of individuals who have been involved in that. Frankly, I think the police ought to be investigating that. That is my humble view. But there is much more that can be done beyond that, and that is what I am asking the Minister for Creative Industries to do: to intervene and make sure that other ministers within the Allan Labor government actually stand up for these members of the Jewish community and make sure they are reassured that they can be safe and secure, that they can go about their pursuits, whether they are artistic or other business –

**Georgie Crozier** interjected.

**David DAVIS:** Well, indeed – attacked last night. People are very, very, very concerned. This is a nasty turn of events that has occurred in Victoria. Victorians should actually take great heed here. If the government are not prepared to stand up and the government are not prepared to send clear signals that this is totally and completely unacceptable, I think it reflects badly on them.

**The PRESIDENT:** Mr Davis, I am not underplaying the seriousness of the topic. Would it be better to direct it to the Premier?

**David DAVIS:** It could be to the Premier. But I know that this is a group of artistic and creative people who have been involved, and we need to protect creatives in that regard.

**The PRESIDENT:** I am just wondering how to get your best response.

**David DAVIS:** I am happy to be guided by you on this, President. I think it is the Premier.

**The PRESIDENT:** I think so, given that it is to speak to a number of ministers.

### COVID-19 vaccination

**Moira DEEMING** (Western Metropolitan) (18:04): (726) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Emergency Services. As I understand it, Fire Rescue Victoria is the only state fire authority in Australia that is still enforcing COVID vaccine mandates for workers. The federal government has never mandated firefighters to take COVID vaccines, so many of our Victorian firefighters are working right now at Tullamarine airport doing exactly the same work that they are barred from doing under Victoria's rules. Also today I read a Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission report about a Victorian COVID vaccine injured firefighter on WorkCover leave who won his case and was allowed to return to full duties as a Victorian firefighter on the basis that (a) it would promote his rights under the Victorian human rights charter to equality, protection from medical treatment without consent, privacy and the right to participate in public life, (b) the public would benefit from his return to the firefighting force due to his significant years of experience and skill in being able to respond to life-threatening emergencies and (c) that the overall health risk to him and others was mild. The truth is that Fire Rescue Victoria, the United Firefighters Union and the Victorian government are all well aware of the number of successful COVID vaccination WorkCover claims, yet they are still enforcing the COVID mandates that are responsible for the damage that these WorkCover claims are even now paying for and which are reducing our available workforce in emergencies. So my request for action is that the government align their firefighter COVID mandate policy with the Commonwealth government's so that overnight we can deploy another 50 able-bodied firefighters to help Victorians at the worst moments in their lives.

### Homelessness

**Ann-Marie HERMANS** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:06): (727) My adjournment is to the Minister for Housing, and the action I seek is for the minister to tell my constituents what steps have been taken to address the concerns raised in the final report of March 2021 of the Parliament of Victoria Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into homelessness in Victoria that are relevant to my electorate in Dandenong, Cranbourne, Frankston, Carrum, Narre Warren South and Narre Warren North.

I know that a report response has just been dropped, but in my electorate, in Dandenong, we have the highest level of homelessness in Victoria: 148 per 10,000 people, or 2366 people, according to the most recent figures obtained by the Dandenong Zero homelessness project, are currently homeless. There is simply not enough social and affordable housing in our city for everyone who needs it. Latest statistics provided by Melbourne Zero show that there were 61 actively homeless people recorded in January 2024 and 35 actively sleeping rough, but these are just the recorded figures, which do not take into account the temporary accommodation cases, hospitalisations and couch surfers who may move around. I can say that outside my electorate office I regularly see homeless people. According to my local St Vincent de Paul office, the challenging issue of homelessness being seen by their volunteers in Greater Dandenong, where 40 per cent of the population are from groups deemed most at risk of homelessness, is increasing.

In March 2021 the Parliament of Victoria Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into homelessness in Victoria released its final report. According to the parliamentary inquiry, Victoria's social housing stock is insufficient, has been steadily declining for several years and is well below the national average. Victorian social housing dwellings have dropped from 3.85 per cent to even less than that in recent years. Victoria has the lowest housing stock in Australia and is significantly below the national average of 4.5 per cent of total housing stock. Our most vulnerable Victorians are suffering through the lack of social housing and through the lack of access to the small numbers of places that are available.

The big build by the Victorian government is expected to lead to the construction of a whole lot of homes, but there are people that are desperately waiting on the list right now. And what happens to the 32,000 people? What happens to them? It found that social and affordable housing stock met only

31 per cent of the current need in the council areas. We know that children and young people make up a huge proportion of Victoria's worsening homelessness crisis, and there was a 26 per cent increase between 2016 and 2021. According to our last census, 6798 children were estimated to be experiencing homelessness, which counts for 22 per cent of the state's overall homelessness numbers. That is more than 4100 children under the age of 12.

### **Plumpton aquatic centre**

**Trung LUU** (Western Metropolitan) (18:09): (728) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Planning, and the action I seek is for the minister to consider and approve the Melton City Council funding application for the proposal for the Plumpton aquatic and wellness centre through the Growth Areas Infrastructure Contribution Fund program. Melton city is in my region and currently has only one council-owned swimming pool, but that is not enough to cater for the large area in the growth corridor, which will expand greatly in the coming years. In June last year Melton City Council updated and approved a business plan to deliver a new and improved aquatic leisure centre for its residents. The master plan highlights attractive features and new facilities that it will offer residents, including indoor and outdoor pools, community cafe space, a gym and other allied health spaces. But most importantly, the centre will service 90,000 people in an area expected to grow to 170,000 by the year 2040. The aquatic centre will not only provide a place for residents to socialise and improve their physical health and mental wellbeing but also allow children and adults to access water safety programs.

The council is spending \$250,000 to facilitate the design and process through to finalising the master plan. They have recently acquired land for this site and now look to the Victorian government for assistance to complete the development. They have applied for the funding from the growth areas infrastructure contribution funding plan, so I urge the minister to look favourably on their application – to help the residents, my constituents, the over 90,000 people who will benefit from this – and approve the application for Melton and surrounding areas.

### **Flood mitigation**

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (18:11): (729) My adjournment is for the Premier, calling for action on behalf of residents of Huntly impacted again by floods in January this year. I recently held a round table to hear from local residents. After successive years of flooding they are tired of talking about the issues and want to see action. These are residents like Debbie, whose home was flooded and whose yard was destroyed; residents like Kylie and her family, who worked hard to finally buy their first home three years ago only to watch it flood for a third time; those with a mortgage who need to pay for flood insurance, whose premiums have jumped from \$150 to \$750 each month; long-term residents of Huntly, like Elsie – floodwaters rushed through her backyard and large tree branches fell, and despite her age she got out a chainsaw to clean up the mess; and community advocates like Lindsay, who has contributed countless hours working with local council developing flood mitigation plans for the area but remains frustrated that nothing has been done. Residents who have lived in Huntly for many years have always known that they live in a flood plain and water passes through, but extensive housing development in recent years has seen the water levels rise, and locals believe the flood maps are outdated. What was once a one-in-100-year flood has now happened three times in three years.

Bendigo is a city in a forest, and rapid population growth has seen developers look to flood plains like Huntly, where the land is already cleared and level, making subdivision a whole lot easier. Areas that once had dams have now been replaced by housing estates with limited places for the water to go. Council budgets and expenditure on drainage infrastructure have not kept pace with rapid population growth. Back Creek is full of debris and sediment, restricting the flow of water. Locals report it has flooded six times in 14 years. Bendigo Creek is the same, with levee banks left to fall apart. New developments are going in without proper drainage and retention basins quickly overflow. Local drains

are not large enough to cope with increased water flows, and a drainage maintenance program operating once every four years is not often enough.

These are big issues that will take a combined effort from local council and the state government to fix. Locals are tired of the studies and plans, and they do not want a reply that simply passes the buck. The Premier will be aware of the Huntly train station, a brand new station built by the state government out in the middle of nowhere that was flooded in January. The state government has spent nearly \$50 million building new train stations in Huntly, Goornong and Raywood to provide facilities for a growing community, yet they have failed to do the proper planning, mitigation and drainage infrastructure that these communities need. I call upon the Premier, who is also the local member, to work with the City of Greater Bendigo to address these concerns and allocate funding in the coming state budget for better planning and drainage infrastructure in Huntly.

### Patient transport

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (18:14): (730) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for Health, and it is in relation to the Victorian patient transport assistance scheme, VPTAS. Recently I was contacted by a constituent of the Premier's, and Tom shared his experience of dealing with the program.

The scheme provides financial assistance towards the cost of travel and accommodation for people living in rural and regional Victoria who need to travel long distances to access health care. Tom and his wife now live in Bendigo and have used this subsidy when travelling to Melbourne for his wife's cancer treatment. In his email to me Tom explained that claims used to be lodged by email. Processing would take around six to eight weeks and payment would be made electronically. When making a subsequent claim Tom discovered to his surprise that applications by email were no longer available and had to be returned by post. This resulted in further delays, adding weeks to the already lengthy six- to eight-week waiting period.

As I said, Tom is a constituent of the Premier's seat, and he has contacted the Premier twice relating to this matter. On the first occasion he got a response from the VPTAS manager, who advised them there were long delays and backlogs, and an apology was offered. On the second occasion he was advised that the VPTAS system had been reverted to a portal system as they were having trouble with the computer system and the six- to eight-week time frame awaiting processing was due to the workload.

In this day and age it is astounding that a government department has reverted to paper forms because they were having trouble with an electronic system. This is at the same time that the government were spruiking their Services Victoria legislation yesterday – the technology credentials and digital transformation of government services. As I said, that Services Victoria legislation we debated in this place yesterday.

It is an absolute disgrace that rural and regional Victorians are having to suffer like this. As Tom pointed out, claims for Medicare and health insurance are processed within a matter of days. Tom summed it up:

... sadly Regional Victorians are often required to travel to Melbourne to get the best medical treatment available and to receive compensation for travel and accommodation is important, particularly for low income families and pensioners.

He went on to say:

Given that claims to Medicare and our health insurance NIB can be dealt with in days why does it take so long for VPTAS to process claims. I believe a review of the processes and practices of the VPTAS is well over due.

So the action I am seeking is for the minister to review this as a matter of urgency and to get this system up and running for rural and regional patients.

**Melbourne Youth Orchestras**

**Nick McGOWAN** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:17): (731) I am sure we can all agree that supporting our young people and our youth is an important undertaking – certainly an important undertaking for governments. So it is somewhat disappointing, if not alarming, when we in our local electorates, and I in Ringwood in my electorate in particular, have been of late inundated with letters urging action by numerous, if not all, parliamentarians in this place to address what is a cut in funding to the Melbourne Youth Orchestras. The Melbourne Youth Orchestras are unique because among the orchestras around this country they provide an incredible service for 8-year-olds through to 25-year-olds. In fact they are the largest youth orchestras in this country – the largest youth orchestras in Australia. That is something pretty impressive. They have been operating since 1967. On any given week up to 600 students attend the weekly ensemble program. In addition to that, some 1000 young people attend the summer school, and in addition to that the winter school.

I have received, like I am sure you have, President, many letters. I will just quote from one of them. It says:

For many, it's the launching place for professional music careers that span varied musical genres. For all, it enhances their overall experience of the Victorian education system and builds valuable skills for life. Research demonstrates ensemble music-making supports the development of self-confidence and organisational skills, improves socio-emotional wellbeing, and fosters a sense of belonging and an ability to work as a team.

For 50 years the government has supported their endeavours. In 2024, for reasons that escape me and very many others, this government, the Allan government, cut their funding by 100 per cent. We have \$26 billion for a 10-kilometre tunnel from Bundoora to Bulleen, but we cut this funding, in the magnitude of \$200,000, 100 per cent – not a cent. It is a massive hit on families. For many it will make it unaffordable, if not completely unachievable, for their children to actually attend any number of the orchestras' programs.

I call on the Minister for Creative Industries, in this case, to fill that void and to fund from his various programs this important program and, in the words of one of the authors of the letters that have come to me, implore that minister to urgently provide the ongoing funding to the Melbourne Youth Orchestras so they may continue to provide their superb services to the young people of Victoria.

**Responses**

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (18:19): A number of members have raised matters for a number of ministers, and I will refer them accordingly.

**The PRESIDENT:** The house stands adjourned.

**House adjourned 6:20 pm.**