



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Thursday 30 May 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 ¹	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 ²	Western Metropolitan	IndLib	Ratnam, Samantha ⁵	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 ³	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 ⁴	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Watt, Sheena	Northern Metropolitan	ALP
Lovell, Wendy	Northern Victoria	Lib	Welch, Richard ⁶	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib

¹ Resigned 7 December 2023

² Lib until 27 March 2023

³ Appointed 14 November 2024

⁴ LDP until 26 July 2023

⁵ Resigned 8 November 2024

⁶ 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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Thursday 30 May 2024

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

Joint sitting of Parliament

Senate vacancy

The PRESIDENT (09:34): I am pleased to report that the house met with the Legislative Assembly yesterday to choose a person to hold the seat in the Senate rendered vacant by the unfortunate, sad death of Senator Linda White, and Lisa Darmanin has been chosen to hold the vacant place in the Senate.

Papers

Papers

Tabled by Clerk:

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 –

Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule No. 38.

Legislative instruments and related documents under section 16B in respect of Service Victoria Identity Verification Standards under the Service Victoria Act 2018.

Business of the house

Notices

Notices of motion given.

Adjournment

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (09:40): I move:

That the Council, at its rising, adjourn until Tuesday 18 June 2024.

Motion agreed to.

Committees

Economy and Infrastructure Committee

Membership

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (09:40): I move, by leave:

That Mr Welch be a participating member of the Economy and Infrastructure Standing Committee.

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Middle East conflict

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:40): I move, by leave:

That this house:

- (1) notes that since the Legislative Council's resolution on 17 October 2023 concerning Israel and Gaza, which stated this house 'stands with Israel', the following has occurred:
 - (a) over 450 attacks on health infrastructure by the Israeli defence force, which have killed hundreds of health workers;

- (b) due to these attacks, of the original 36 hospitals in Gaza, only 12 remain operational while 20 out of 80 primary care centres are functioning;
 - (c) Israel has restricted the entry of fuel and medical supplies, further limiting healthcare availability;
 - (d) the remaining healthcare facilities have been overwhelmed and unable to provide care for tens of thousands of people injured or sick as a result of the conflict;
 - (e) routine medical care, including antenatal care for the over 50,000 pregnant women in Gaza, is unable to be provided;
- (2) further notes projections from a study by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine which demonstrates that without an immediate ceasefire the excess mortality from health-related causes, including due to disease or starvation, will be in the tens of thousands and exceed those caused directly by armed conflict;
- (3) does not support the state of Israel's continued invasion of Gaza;
- (4) supports calls for an immediate and permanent ceasefire;
- and calls on the Victorian government to advocate to the federal government that it ends its support for the state of Israel's invasion of Gaza.

Leave refused.

Members statements

International Everest Day

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (09:42): I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate International Everest Day, a date which holds great significance for Nepalese people, including the vibrant Nepalese community in my electorate of Northern Metropolitan. 29 May is marked as the day that Mount Everest was first ascended in 1953 by Tenzing Norgay, sherpa of Nepal, and Sir Edmund Hillary of New Zealand. Mount Everest is of great cultural and spiritual importance to Nepalese people, and this day is an opportunity to honour and promote the conservation of this great natural wonder. More broadly, it is an opportunity to come together and celebrate the Nepalese culture and the great contribution made by the growing Nepalese community right here in Victoria.

Last night I had the privilege of co-hosting members of Melbourne's Nepalese community at Parliament House to celebrate this occasion, joined by my parliamentary colleagues the member for Broadmeadows Kathleen Matthews-Ward, the member for Mulgrave Eden Foster, the member for Glen Waverley John Mullahy, the member for Yan Yean Lauren Kathage, the Speaker in the other place Maree Edwards and of course our guest of honour the 49th Premier of Victoria Jacinta Allan. My electorate of Northern Metropolitan is home to a vibrant Nepalese community, and I know the immense contribution that this community makes in a number of fields. In particular I wish to thank the Federation of Nepalese Community Associations of Australia for organising last night's event and their tireless advocacy. I also wish to give a special thanks to Mr Bom Yonzon as well as Bhola Giri and Keshab Sapkota for their important contributions and for informing the community of the Nepalese community's work.

Supermarket prices

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:43): Angus, a guy in Scotland, once survived for 382 days without food. During this time he lost 133 kilograms and lived solely on water, tea, coffee, soda water and vitamins. I would not recommend it. We cannot live without it, really. It provides us with the nutrients and energy for our bodies to continue functioning. Some might say it is essential. Like most organisms, we do not do well when we do not have enough healthy, fresh food. We get sick, we cannot function and if it goes on long enough, we do not survive. There are no two ways around it: food is essential. For most of us city or suburban folk, and even many outside of the metro regions, we just do not have the skills or time or space to produce food of our own. We rely on supermarkets to provide us with the essentials to fuel our bodies. Wouldn't it be great if buying these essential items was easily affordable to everyone, rather than struggling to pay for something essential

to life. Wouldn't it be great if everyone could buy the food they need and like without having to stress about the cost? We should live in a state where buying a chocolate bar is not considered an extravagance, as someone recently told me that it was for them. Food is essential. We should treat it as such and make sure everyone can afford it.

The PRESIDENT: Mr Puglielli, the last thing I want to do is be the fashion police, but could you go back to your skivvy-and-jacket combo? I think we can live with that.

Kanhiya Mittal

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (09:45): It was a real privilege to join over 3000 of my friends at Kali Mata Mandir temple to welcome great singer Kanhiya Mittal to Craigieburn, alongside Liberal candidate for Calwell Usman Ghani; Jason McClintock, the great Liberal candidate for McEwan; Richard Welch MP; and Cr Jim Overend. Thank you to Bhawna Gupta and the team at Kali Mata Mandir for an incredible evening. It was also great to welcome Kanhiya Mittal to the Victorian Parliament, with my colleague Matthew Guy, and show him and the Kali Mata Mandir community around the Parliament. The Liberals will always back our vibrant Indian community in the northern suburbs.

Ancient Church of the East, St Mary's Church

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (09:46): I had so much fun at the Assyrian night market run by St Mary's Ancient Church of the East in Coolaroo and the energetic team at ACE St Mary's Church Youth Group. I joined Usman Ghani, the Liberal candidate for Calwell, and it was great to see culture and community celebrated with hundreds of locals in the north. Thank you to ACE St Mary's Youth Group president Merry Youkhana and committee members Pamella Shazo, Michael Yaha, Nina Pito, Ashtah Slewa and Mark Isho for putting on an unforgettable evening.

Roxburgh Park Football Club

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (09:47): It was also great to attend the game down at Roxburgh Park Magpies Football Club. It is a great club in the electorate of Greenvale that I am happy to support. I participated in an incredible ladies day that was put on. Thanks to the president Tom Mason for having me down.

Family violence

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (09:47): I would like to acknowledge the work and leadership of Kate Graham and Gippsland Women's Health in calling on men in leadership positions across Gippsland to discuss gender equality and family violence. Men came in from small business, industry, unions, local government and health services right across Gippsland for the conversation. I also want to acknowledge Chris Buckingham and the Latrobe Valley Authority for the work they did in bringing people together. I think everyone in the room agreed it was the first meeting of many, and everyone took on a responsibility to act to see change occur. I look forward to continuing to be a part of that group of men pushing for the change that we all want to see across our communities.

Deakin University Battery Research and Innovation Hub

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (09:48): I also want to inform the house I recently visited the Deakin University Battery Research and Innovation Hub. It is great to see what is going on there, world-leading research right here in Victoria. The state government invested \$5.2 million in the facility, and it is incredible to see. They are developing, manufacturing and trialling batteries – leading the world in emerging technology in the battery space – so I want to acknowledge the work of everyone there for all they do.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region electorate office

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:48): Colleagues, it is with great pleasure that I share some exciting news with you all: my electorate office is finally officially open. Located at

384A Nepean Highway in Chelsea, I am truly immersed in a great part of the south-east and look forward to engaging with local businesses and the community in the area. I would like to thank the team at property services for their support throughout the process. From the first siting through to the move in they have been amazing to work with. I would also like to thank my incredible team who are joining me at Chelsea, from my new starters Monique and Charlotte through to my right-hand man Jasper, Mira, Paul and Lyanne. Not only did they help me throw a fun little party to warm the place but they are also committed and valuable members of my team, and I am truly grateful for their support.

Speaking of the party, a big thank you to Dandenong mayor Lana Formoso and Kingston mayor Jenna Davey-Burns for being my first official guests. I would also like to give a special thankyou to the formidable Lisa Abbott, who was formerly the executive manager of social impact and growth at TaskForce. Lisa is such an amazing person to collaborate with, and I am extremely happy to continue to work together for our community. I thank Lisa for being my official guest as a community leader.

I know I am lucky to live, work and represent the South-Eastern Metro Region. We are blessed with beautiful coastlines, dynamic communities and vibrant suburbs, and I am very excited to now have my doors open to my constituents and to advocate on their behalf.

Andrew Sloane

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:50): On 27 May I had the honour of attending a celebration of life for Andrew Sloane. Very many of us in this place and the other chamber will have many opportunities I am sure over the years we are here, if we are fortunate, to meet very many principals and teachers. Andrew Sloane was an outstanding teacher and an outstanding principal. He was in fact the principal of Norwood Secondary College. Andrew was born on 17 July 1955 and sadly passed away on 14 May 2024. He passed away peacefully after a short battle with cancer. He was joined in the celebration of life by his loving wife Jennifer, and he was also the devoted and cherished father of Erin, Hamish and Callum. He was the loving and respected father-in-law of James and Madelaine and the adoring Papa of Sullivan. He was, in addition to that, the loved son of Herbert and Helen, both deceased; the loved brother of Ian, David, deceased, and Anne; brother-in-law of Megan and Ross; and uncle of Richard and Robert. He was a man that was treasured by very many in our community. I know that over the years very many of us may have had interactions with him. He will be dearly missed by those locally, by his family and by his broader community, and we thank him immensely for his service to our state.

Battle of Crete commemoration

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:52): Recently we commemorated the 83rd anniversary of the Battle of Crete, which took place in May 1941. The Battle of Crete saw the culmination of the Greek campaign, in which many Victorians served with distinction as part of the Second Australian Imperial Force. It was my pleasure to take part in a number of these events organised by Melbourne's Cretan organisations, including a wreath-laying service at Melbourne's iconic Shine of Remembrance.

The significance of the Battle of Crete for both Australia and Greece was underscored by the attendance of a high-level Hellenic military delegation from Greece. The delegation was led by deputy chief of the Hellenic defence general staff Vice Admiral Christos Sasiakos and included Lieutenant Commander Stylianos Mitsiotis, Captain Pavlos Angelopoulos and Colonel Ioannis Fasianos, the defence attaché of the embassy of Greece in Australia. It was my pleasure to welcome them to the Parliament of Victoria on behalf the Victorian Parliamentary Friends of Greece along with co-chairs and other members of Parliament. The delegation was accompanied by the Consul-General of the Hellenic Republic in Melbourne Emmanuel Kakavelakis and local representatives from Melbourne's Cretan community.

The delegation discussed our enduring bonds and the opportunities to strengthen them further and toured the Parliament, beginning with a visit to the Hellenic memorial in the parliamentary gardens unveiled in 2017, a memorial featuring a thriving olive tree and commemorative plaque, which I had the honour of helping to establish. The memorial commemorates the solidarity forged between the Greek and Australian people from Lemnos in 1915 to the Greek campaign of 1941 and the waves of postwar migration. The classical Greek quotation on the memorial was selected by my good friend the historian Jim Claven OAM and says:

They gave their shining youth and raised thereby Valour's own monument which cannot die.

It is a fitting reflection of this connection between Australia and Greece.

Shepparton Greyhound Racing Club

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (09:54): On Saturday 18 May I was delighted to attend the Shepparton Greyhound Racing Club's Dog of the Year awards, and what an excellent night it was. The love and compassion these people have for their dogs was well and truly on display. We heard the story of the track record setting dog Rejuvenate, who is now loving life as a couch potato, with cuddles and love from his owners, after breaking his hock. We were entertained with stories of bygone football days from Carlton legend David Rhys-Jones and laughed until we cried with comedian Marty Fields. I want to congratulate the Shepparton Greyhound Racing Club on a fantastic evening. This club is a testament to the greatness a community can achieve when everyone pitches in and works together. Thank you, Brad, Carl, Tracey and Simone, for putting on a brilliant evening, and I cannot wait to be back.

Wonthaggi planning

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (09:54): Residents of North Wonthaggi recently found out by accident that the government has applied a retrospective environmental audit overlay to 500 homes and thousands of blocks of land. The government did not even have the courtesy to tell them that this had happened. This has caused enormous stress. Residents have been left in the dark, and they feel like they have been blanked by the Minister for Planning when they have looked for answers. At a gathering of hundreds of residents at the park in Wonthaggi three weeks ago a committee was formed, the Wonthaggi north-east residents action group. Five members were unanimously selected to lead the campaign against this. Their names are Helen, Pru, Liam, John and Alan, and they are doing an incredible job. They are fighting for their community, they are lifting people up when they are feeling down, they are holding people together and they are lobbying the government. They know that this is something that is unjust. It is something that is well within the minister's authority to change with the stroke of a pen, and they have my full support. They are fighting hard, and I can confidently say that the people of Wonthaggi are very thankful for them.

Police Veterans Victoria

Maira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (09:56): Recently I began meeting with representatives from an amazing organisation, Police Veterans Victoria. As we all know, our police and protective services officers put their lives on the line for us every single day. They are part of that very special group of people who run towards danger when everyone else is running away. But what often comes as a result is trauma and mental health issues, and as I found out yesterday at their brilliant annual fundraiser, this trauma is not actually evident until after their service is finished. Then they are isolated, and it takes a visit from a fellow retired police officer, someone who understands them without them having to explain a thing, in order for them to accept the help that they need to get back on their feet again. Just like our army veterans, we need to ensure police veterans are recognised and supported. That is why I was sad to hear that their promised \$200,000 commitment from the government was overturned, and I do hope to see it restored. But I just want to put on the record my congratulations to Police Veterans Victoria for all its amazing work.

National Volunteer Week

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:57): Last week was National Volunteer Week, and I want to say a heartfelt thankyou to all our incredible volunteers, who are the heart and soul and indeed the engine room of Victorian community life. Your dedication and hard work does not go unnoticed. Throughout my electorate I have had the pleasure of witnessing firsthand fantastic work that volunteers do for our community. Stuart Richardson at the KBH Brumbies hockey club is a prime example, doing outstanding work to get kids involved in sport from an early age. Similarly, Dallas Newton and the entire team at the North Box Hill Tennis Club, who have dedicated hundreds of hours of their own time maintaining clay courts; Daniel Smith at Eley Park football club; and Chris Parr and other leaders at the Bundoora Scout Group are making significant contributions by getting young people – kids – in Melbourne’s north involved in camping, hiking and other fun outdoor activities. These are just a few examples of the many volunteers in our community making a real difference, and their efforts are truly appreciated.

Ashley Gordon

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (09:58): In January this year I, along with 600 others, gathered to mourn the death of a beloved person in the Latrobe Valley, Dr Ashley Gordon. His family are bereft. They loved their brother, uncle, friend, nephew, and he is gone. He is gone because of a home invasion; he was fatally injured in that home invasion. I have sat with my dear colleague Martin Cameron in the kitchen of the family of Ashley Gordon as the family cried and said that something has to change, something has to stop so that people are not killed innocently defending their homes in this state.

I support Mr Cameron’s petition that he has coordinated with the family in these terms:

... afford police greater ‘stop and search’ powers, including the ability ... to ‘stop and search’ if they have reasonable suspicion; reinstate section 30B of the Bail Act; and cancel plans to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14.

To sit with Natalie, his sister, and to see his mother and father so bereft – we have to change the system. We have to support families, and we have to stop this sort of home invasion and criminal activity in Victoria.

Mother’s Day

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (09:59): I rise to say a big shout-out to the mothers of this state. It was Mother’s Day on 12 May, and mothers are an integral part of our society – that is, biological mothers who give birth to their children. I have done that; my daughter has done that. I am a very proud grandmother of three children. They do it tough often because there is a lot of stress often in trying to maintain a job while caring for their children. Mother’s Day is a very important recognition of the wonderful work that mothers do in our society. They are vitally important obviously to keeping the population going. If we did not have mothers who give birth to children – and many of them are breastfeeders, like I was. I am certainly not a chestfeeder; I am a breastfeeder. I think it is most important that mothers who give birth to children are recognised and that we pay every respect to the extraordinary contribution they make to this population and to our society.

Business of the house**Notices of motion**

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:01): I move:

That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 452, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

*Bills***Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024***Second reading***Debate resumed on motion of Harriet Shing:**

That the bill be now read a second time.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:02): I rise to speak to the Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024, and I do so very happily to speak about this year's budget and how it has let down so many Victorians, and in particular so many women. I want to put on record support for what the government is aspiring to do here in terms of providing women with greater financial security and in a number of other areas, as the bill highlights. What the bill does is basically legislate what the government has been undertaking over a number of years, since I think 2017, in relation to their agenda. What this bill does is embed gender-responsive budgeting into the Victorian budget. I note that the bill says:

- (a) to include in the principles of sound financial management a requirement to consider and promote gender equality and inclusivity in the pursuit of spending and taxing policies; and
- (b) to provide for a statement of the gender impacts of the budget to be prepared in association with the budget for each financial year; and
- (c) to provide for the Minister to request a gender impact assessment in relation to any matter under that Act.

I will be asking a number of questions in committee around some of these points, because I think they go to the point about what the budget is doing to all Victorians, and of course that includes women. I note that in the government's budget papers they have a 'Gender Equality Budget Statement', and it says:

Our action to make sure women are given the economic security they deserve. And our serious focus on women's health.

The Minister for Women and the Treasurer go on to say:

It will ensure the impacts of our decisions are taken into account at every stage of the budget process. And, crucially, it means the issues that affect women and girls will be given the focus and funding they deserve.

On this side of the house we do not discriminate against gender, religion or ethnicity; we believe in opportunity for all and providing incentives for all to get ahead – aspiration. What this budget is doing is killing that aspiration, and we certainly support the aspiration of women. There are many women in this state –

Jaclyn Symes interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: The Attorney is saying she is not sure why I would be going to this, but I make the point that it is. I think we all – Dr Ratnam has just arrived in the chamber, a successful female member of Parliament on the Greens side. There are those in Labor, and there are many on my side; there are many women who are taking these roles and bringing them into the Parliament. I want to commend women for taking on those roles. I want more women to be able to take on these roles. I think we are all in agreement on that. But this is about the economic and financial issues around the budget that do affect women, and I am getting to that point. I want to make the point that this budget is actually killing aspiration, because there are many women who are in situations where they are being taxed further and further. They cannot get ahead, so their economic security, as outlined in this document, does not ring true. And that is my point – there are so many issues with this budget that do not help women, and I will go to those.

I want to say that with 55 new or increased taxes, many women who have got their own small business are paying the price for Labor's big-spending, big-taxing agenda. That is not putting women in a

position where they have got their financial security, as stated by the Treasurer and the Minister for Women. Again, it says:

Our action to make sure women are given the economic security they deserve.

Well, I would say that women do deserve that. I agree with that, but not when they are being taxed and not when their aspiration is being killed by those taxes and the policy decisions of Labor. That is what this budget does.

We have got frontline services; we have got a number of areas that are being cut in this budget that affect women. Whether that is in the areas of mental health, family violence or a range of other areas in relation to what is happening in the real world, that is what is happening on the ground. I think it is terribly disappointing that we have got that. If I can just go back to my issue around the spending and the debt, and what this bill is about – the budget – we have got a budget that is way out of control, that women of this generation and of generations to come will have to pay for. That is going to impact, those daily interest rate payments of \$26 million a day in just a few years time, and what does that do? That \$26 million a day can pay for 298 paramedics, many of whom are women; two breast cancer centres; 2651 elective surgeries; 307 nurses; 510 Victoria Police recruits – there is a lot within those areas that impacts women. So the budget is impacting women in a way that the government should realise.

It is having a massive impact on the way women are trying to undertake their roles in relation to being self-sufficient and having economic security. We do understand that that security, whether it is housing – and look at the homelessness rate, which is on the increase, the number of people that do not have a secure home and the government's taxes on rentals and landowners that are forcing sales and forcing rentals out of the market. Where do those people go? A lot of those are women, and single women with children. Again, these are decisions the government have made. Those policies are having a direct impact on women. So it is concerning that whilst the government want to promote their gender agenda, they are actually having a negative impact because of the financial situation the state is in.

I see that again the cuts within this budget have impacted women's safety, which is a key concern. There have been record numbers of sexual assaults on women. We see that in the residential care space with young women and young girls. That is just a horrific stat. We see that in the general community. We see that with the personal security of women, which is becoming an increasing problem, and I can speak from firsthand experience of having an aggravated burglary myself, being a woman on my own at home, alone. Having that happen to you is absolutely terrifying. It was terrifying. I was lucky, but there are so many women who have been in that situation who no longer feel safe. That personal security is a real aspect of where we are at. The stats do not lie. The crime stats are there, and the police will tell you that they have never seen anything like it.

That is one issue, but we have got other issues like the mental health of women, especially young women and girls – the eating disorders. The government have put out their eating disorder plan, but those numbers are increasing. We know the COVID lockdowns impacted young women in particular. We know those lockdowns had a massive impact. I have spoken to people at the Royal Children's Hospital who have said, 'Yes, we are expecting an influx of young people to come through our doors because of the mental health impacts of the lockdowns' – of not being able to be schooled through that time. We were saying, 'Don't do this to our children because it will have an impact for years to come.' We are seeing it happen now, and it will flow through.

We see that with the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System and the lack of funding in this year's budget. In today's press former ACCC chairman, economist and lawyer Allan Fels, who is very highly regarded, as we all I think appreciate, has been commenting on this. He has done an analysis of the budget papers and he says they show just \$109 million of new mental health spending in this year's budget compared to last year's budget with \$776 million. This is despite the government forecasting that their mental health levy on business payrolls will raise more than \$1 billion. There is a massive mismatch, with the mental health levy

going in to plugging the government's black hole because of their mismanagement. It is Victorians who will pay the price of that mismanagement and the reduced spending in this very important area.

The article mentions the significant slowdown in implementation of the royal commission's recommendations. The suicide rate and mental health related presentations to the state's emergency departments have surged to a five-year high. Many of those are women, and they are vulnerable women. That is the point about the budget and why the government has put this in. They say these words, but the reality of their policy decisions and their mismanagement of the budget is having a direct impact on women. I understand that there are a number of issues around workforce in that particular area, but it is not as if the government did not know this. This has been years in the making. They have done nothing to address those workforce issues and now all we hear from government is them blaming COVID or the former federal government or the Ukraine war or some issue, but they are not taking responsibility for the policy decisions that they have made in these very important areas.

As we know, budgets are important. They set out a vision for the state. The government has included gender equality in their vision for the state because there are issues around how women are missing out, as I have said. Women, whether they are small business owners or they are being sluggish by the increasing taxes – the land tax or the schools tax – want to have choice about where their children are being educated. The schools tax is taking that choice away. That tax directly impacts on women. Many of those women are single women, bringing their children up in single households, working extremely hard to get ahead to enable that choice. We believe they should be able to have that choice, and we believe that schools should not be taxed. It is a bad tax, but the government are doing that because of their ongoing mismanagement of the budget. You can say all you like in your gender statement, but the impacts are real for women, and that is my concern around this particular piece of legislation.

I note that the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing has a budget of \$5.1 billion and a lot of that is for women-related issues, but the annual net debt in three years will be \$9.4 billion. Again, you can see that there is an enormous mismatch here in terms of what is going on with the economics in this state.

I want to also say: women, and many women who are successful in their own right, are doing what they can to support their families, whether that is elderly parents or their children. They know the cost of living for their families is going up, and that is also as a direct consequence of Labor's mismanagement. It is Victorian families, and women, who are paying that price. In one year the average electricity bill has gone up by 24 per cent. In one year the average gas bill has gone up by 35 per cent. In one year the average rent bill has gone up by almost 17 per cent. Women who run businesses understand that those government taxes, like those for WorkCover and payroll, have skyrocketed. WorkCover bills have skyrocketed. They might be working in a business where transportation has an impact – those costs have skyrocketed. The payroll tax threshold for many businesses is not competitive, and many women have got their own business and they are successful in their own right. Surely we should be incentivising women and providing them with more support, not putting on taxes because the government has mismanaged the budget.

There is a whole range of other things – the bin tax, for instance. Again, it directly impacts women. So I say that this legislation around responsive budgeting actually is just words on a glossy production by the government to say that they are looking after women, whereas in actual fact the reality of the budget is that it is hurting many, many women, and it is taking away the aspiration of women to be able to do what they want to do – get into business, be self-sufficient and have the support that they require to care for their families, whether that is elderly parents or whether that is children – to enable them to have choice. This government and this government's budget are killing that aspiration and are killing that choice. It is a bad budget, and it is Victorians who are paying the price.

There is a range of other things around the government's budget that I think Victorians are concerned about. Overall, it does go to the fact that women constantly are speaking to me about that rising debt – what that will mean for their children and their grandchildren. They are so concerned about that debt,

and the government has no plan to bring it down. They cannot see any way out of this. They are saying, 'Why is the government forcing this debt on me, on my family, on my children and on my grandchildren?' They do not see any plan from the government to pay down that debt. All they see is soaring debt, soaring taxes and soaring interest payments that then decrease the standard of living. When I speak to many women, they want to understand, 'Can I get my child into the nearest hospital?' and 'Can I get an ambulance for my elderly father?' They are the issues that impact women. They are the things that they think about. They care for their family in a way, as we know, that is an innate role. When they see the demise and what is happening, whether it is the failure of the health system to meet the needs of Victorians, they understand that. They are seeing that. They know you cannot get a hospital bed when you need one. They know you cannot get an ambulance when you need one. They know that the elective surgery for their elderly parent is in the queue sometimes for years, and that has a real impact on an individual's mental health and wellbeing, let alone those impacts on family members to then support them.

Whilst I understand the government wanting to legislate what they are trying to do, I would say there is a real concern around this budget in the way it is impacting women and that this Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024 needs to do much more. In actual fact it should be cutting taxes. It should be spelling out a plan for how this government is going to reduce the debt so that women and their children and their grandchildren can see a way forward. It should be giving hope and aspiration to women so that they can aspire to do whatever they would like to do, with support, not with the burdens of increasing taxes and an enormous noose around every Victorian's neck as this government proceeds with their priorities, which are the wrong priorities.

Women in the western suburbs are missing out because the government is prioritising the Suburban Rail Loop. Women in the northern suburbs are missing out because the government is prioritising the Suburban Rail Loop. Women in rural and regional areas are missing out because of the government is prioritising the Suburban Rail Loop. This government's priorities are all wrong, and many women understand that. Many Victorians understand that. I think there is a missed opportunity with this piece of legislation. The government could have laid out that plan and could have done far more for Victorian women and future Victorian women to give them an understanding of how the state is going to really proceed in an economic, fair and unburdened way. That is not happening at the moment because the economic impacts of this budget are impacting women very significantly. I again say I think there is a missed opportunity in this, and I look forward to asking the minister some questions in the committee stage around the government's legislation.

In closing, can I say that I am very pleased to be part of a party that does recognise aspiration for women, equality for all and opportunity for all, and that includes women of this generation and future generations to come.

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (10:22): I rise to speak on the Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024. This bill is intended to embed gender-responsive budgeting into the Victorian budget and create budget reporting obligations on gender equality. Gender-responsive budgeting has been around since the 1980s, and it has been adopted by governments all over the world. It is premised on the idea that budgets are not inherently gender neutral and that expenditure and revenue-raising choices made by governments can further entrench or alternatively reduce gender inequality.

However, questions remain about the effectiveness of this approach and whether it can just become a bean-counting exercise when it is not undertaken in an informed and genuine way. In Victoria, while a lot of progress has been made, women continue to face significant inequality across many aspects of life. The gender pay gap persists, driven in large part by the enormous amounts of unpaid labour women continue to do in households. Most women will experience family, sexual or gendered violence in their lifetime. As a direct result of violence and economic disadvantage, we are seeing women become the face of our housing and homelessness crisis.

This government's approach to addressing this inequality this year is outlined in the 'Gender Equality Budget Statement'. This statement is intended to fulfil the requirements set out in the Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024. Upon reviewing the statement, I have to say it is less of a fiscal road map for how to tackle gender inequality and more of an account of any policy that vaguely impacts women. I commend the government's efforts to address the gender pay gap and continued funding for women's preventative health services, though noting this funding has not been indexed for inflation.

However, there are some significant gaps when it comes to women's safety and economic security, which are two critical pillars for women's advancement. A cause for major concern is the government's obscurity on how much is being allocated for women's safety. As the community continues to reel from devastating family violence news almost every week and family violence services sound alarm bells about overflow in demand, it was a questionable decision by the government to have not prioritised women's safety within the budget and to have instead addressed it as an afterthought, or so it seems.

The 'Gender Equality Budget Statement' claims that an additional \$269 million is being invested to prevent family violence, while the Treasurer's speech reports this number to be \$211 million. We have heard from family violence service providers that actually there is no new funding and only a continuation of existing uplift funding. Up until the budget was delivered, the government had been hinting that this may be cut. The scourge of family violence is a major inhibitor to achieving gender equality, so why then has the government been obscuring their approach rather than coming out and clearly investing in frontline services, including in much-needed and overdue services for culturally diverse communities, and ensuring that we have culturally specific family violence refuges and a service network surrounding them to ensure that our culturally diverse populations are able to access the family violence preventative and support services they so desperately need? We are hopeful that the government's women's safety budget will deliver on what is needed, though you would think such a budget would be central to this 'Gender Equality Budget Statement'.

The statement also contains a section on women's economic security. We can all agree that economic security is paramount in the fight for gender equality, but it is simply not good enough to say you will invest in essential services like hospitals and education and call it a day on gender equality. But this is what the government's 'Gender Equality Budget Statement' essentially does. There is no mention of how axing the sick pay guarantee for casuals will disproportionately impact women, especially migrant and refugee women who are commonly only able to attain precarious jobs, or how little funding has been allocated to the community sector, which is also dominated by women. The statement does not identify how this budget clearly prioritises funding for jobs in construction and infrastructure, which are male-dominated industries. It also fails to account for the negative impact that stalled mental health and kinder reforms will have on women.

I would love to know whether any gendered analysis of these policies was done. If it was, it certainly has not been mentioned in the 'Gender Equality Budget Statement'. While the intent of this bill is commendable, given the shortcomings of this year's budget and the vagueness of the 'Gender Equality Budget Statement', I question whether gender-responsive budgeting has in fact been effectively embedded in this government's budgeting process. Gender-responsive budgeting started in the 1980s through the advocacy of radical feminist economists. They hoped that this could be a tool to help government closely examine their decision-making and work towards budget justice for women. For the intent of this bill to be realised fully, the government must commit to real intersectional gendered analysis of its policies. If the exercise is not taken seriously, we will just keep ending up with a tokenistic, largely rhetorical accounting practice, such as the one outlined in this year's 'Gender Equality Budget Statement'.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (10:28): I am very pleased to speak on the Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024. Along with this budget we have introduced legislation to require every budget in the future to include a statement about gender

equality. This legislation will amend Victoria's primary financial management legislation, the Financial Management Act 1994, to ensure that consideration of gender equality remains one of the key principles of sound financial management. The Andrews Labor government made history with the passage of the Gender Equality Act 2020. This was a landmark step in breaking down discrimination and gender barriers in the workplace. This bill will complement the Gender Equality Act 2020, allowing the Treasurer to request gender impact assessments and ensure gender equality is given the priority that it deserves.

It is worth reflecting on what we mean by equality for women in our society, since it is not only important to myself as a woman but also the Allan Labor government. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women provides a useful explanation of gender equality. It is a little bit long, but it states:

Equality between women and men (gender equality): refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men.

This bill and the Gender Equality Act 2020 are Australian firsts, and both provide a once-in-a-generation opportunity to influence policy, culture, attitudes and importantly outcomes for Victorian women and girls. The Allan Labor government has been leading the nation in systematically persisting with our much-needed gender equality reforms, and our notable achievements began in 2016 with the release of *Safe and Strong: A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy*. This was followed by the publication of a gender equality budget statement in the 2017–18 budget and has continued annually ever since. The passage of the pioneering Gender Equality Act 2020 and the introduction of gender-responsive budgeting practices in 2021 further solidified our leadership, and all of this pioneering legislation has helped drive real change.

One significant change we see daily in our workplace is the number of women MPs in the Victorian Parliament. The Victorian Parliament for the first time in its history across all parties and individuals is now 50 per cent women, and the Victoria Labor caucus is now 55 per cent women. The cabinet – the leadership of the government – is currently 68 per cent women, and of course we have a regional woman as the Premier of this state in Jacinta Allan. This equality of numbers was achieved in the Labor Party through quotas and targets and what we have seen as a result is the policy changes and more that I have already mentioned above. I personally witnessed a change to board leadership across our state. In 2015 former Minister for Water Lisa Neville decided to appoint 50 per cent women on water boards for the very first time. This has led to the inclusion and promotion of women employees within the previously male-dominated water sector in this state.

The Gender Equality Act is now driving the production of gender audits, gender action plans and gender impact assessments across the entire Victorian public sector. This covers 11 per cent of workers in this state. As change permeates throughout the public sector, it is also making impacts in the private sector. In some cases the private sector are leading in this space – in fact leading further in some cases – and that is because the evidence is clear that when you have diversity amongst decision-makers you have better decisions, and when you make better decisions you make more profit. So in the private sector it is being seen as a valuable thing, not just because it is a good thing or the right thing to do.

The journey to gender equality is a complex and at times frustrating one. Nowhere is this more demonstrated than in the increasing rates of violence against women. We will never achieve gender equality while women live in fear for their health and safety in their homes or in the community that they live and work in, and we will never achieve gender equality if we continue to exclude women from economic reports.

If we do not measure all of women's work, our economic models will continue to exclude a significant portion of economic activity, which means that often economic reporting will be inaccurate because

it is not telling the full story. This is why with this bill the Victorian government is moving to enshrine gender-responsive budgeting into legislation. We recognise the essential role of government in considering gender impacts through the funding process as one of our most effective tools for driving positive change. Gender-responsive budgeting will identify budget measures that will close gender gaps and advance gender equality objectives. Gender-responsive budgeting will be a part of the budget process as well as non-budget funding decisions. The bill removes embedded inequalities by considering gender in all funding decisions with a direct impact on Victorians. It identifies how resources can be best allocated to close gender gaps and it improves value for money by achieving gender equality goals concurrently with other policy goals, and that is certainly something that our government has been very effective at. Gender-responsive budgeting recognises that as far as we have come, there is still more work to do.

The bill we debate today will make Victoria the first jurisdiction in Australia to make gender-responsive budgeting law. The bill enshrines an enduring high-level commitment to gender equality and inclusivity in spending and taxing policies. It creates a minimum standard for budget reporting obligations on gender equality and also empowers the minister to request gender impact assessments.

Just to go back to that point about inclusivity in spending and taxing policies, I remember the debate on the GST when that was being introduced by the Howard coalition government. Women argued that pads and tampons should not incur GST but the Howard government were determined that they would. With 50 per cent women in the Parliament today, it is a great thing to see free pads and tampons available throughout Parliament House, and in public schools as well nowadays. I think that is a perfect example of the kind of policy change you get when you have got women at the table.

Critically, the bill introduces a new principle that emphasises a commitment to gender equality and inclusivity. This requires future governments in Victoria to adopt gender-responsive budgeting as a core aspect of financial management. This principle will be backed by specific tools and practices that are not fixed by legislation, allowing them to adapt and evolve over time.

I mentioned better decisions. Another example of better decisions is right at the beginning of COVID the federal coalition government formed a six-man committee to formulate the controls Australians would face to keep them safe from COVID. This was very, very early days when the strain of COVID that was spreading was very, very dangerous. This six-man committee presided over many decisions, but one of them was how long Australians were allowed to take to have a haircut. They decided that 30 minutes was the limit. This led to incredible consternation amongst the women of Australia, who absolutely know that a haircut for women takes 55 minutes to an hour, and that is not to mention the better part of 2 hours for hair dye. I am not someone that has dyed their hair – yet – so I am lucky that I do not have to incur that cost or the time. But that is a minor example of a group of men, without diversity, without women sitting at that table, setting a rule that completely disregarded the impact on women. So if you apply that to far more important issues like the issue of family violence and the rates of death of women, if you have got an all-male decision-making body wherever that is, whether it is a football club or whether it is in the federal government or the state government, the issue just will not come up. That is why it is so important for us to be legislating about this so that it gets structured into the core activity and the everyday business of budgeting and taxing and policymaking.

We know that legislating changing frameworks and making change obligatory has led to real outcomes in gender equality. We also know that how we measure things influences decision-making and we need data that shows a comprehensive picture of work and life for women and families in our society. What we do not count, we do not talk about, and what we do not talk about, we do not change. That is why I would like to discuss for a minute the theme of this year's International Women's Day, Count Her In: Invest in Women, Accelerate Progress. Professor Rees, who has written an article on this issue, discussed the non-traditional labour market contribution of women. Using Australia's time-use survey, it is estimated that each week Australian women undertake \$771 worth of unpaid work, and in a direct comparison the same study identified \$500 per week of unpaid work for men. So the actual labour pay gap there is 50 per cent, and it shows just how important this bill is today to further address in a

concrete manner the gender pay gap. The gap is so big in terms of paid and unpaid labour that to not continue to make change truly is to the detriment of our society. Quite frankly, the amount of unpaid labour makes the workplace gender gap look positively mild in comparison. So it is extremely important to make sure that we count the correct economic data and not leave out women and the activities of other diverse communities as well. This legislation will contribute to that in a really strong way.

I really would like to express my support for this piece of legislation and just close by saying that there is a continuum of violence against women that starts with sexist jokes in the pub at one end and ends with aggravated assault at the other. We do need to ensure that women sit at the table, that women are accounted for in decision-making and that their needs, their uniqueness and their unique contribution to our society and to our community, to our governance, to our clubs and our organisations are respected and accounted for in the beauty of their difference. I commend this bill.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:43): I rise to make a contribution on the Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024 on behalf of Legalise Cannabis Victoria. Gender disparities in Australia are reducing, but they are still there. We see it in income, we see it in freedom from violence and we see it in roles in economic, personal and political life. Research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has shown that if we think about gender impact early in policy design, we improve measures of gender equality.

Policies may seem gender neutral, but they can still impact people differently based on their gender and entrench existing inequalities. A failure to engage with gendered issues often means a failure to create good policy. During the pandemic the Morrison government's home builder program gave out \$25,000 grants for 137,000 people's home renovations. This was designed to create a pipeline of work for the male-dominated construction sector. This was despite data showing that the economic downturn had hit women particularly hard, with plunging employment and paid work hours. Research by economists Jerome De Henau and Susan Himmelweit compared investment in construction with the same investment in the care sector. They showed that the employment gains from investing 1 per cent of GDP in the care sector would generate more total employment than an identical investment in construction, especially for women.

Jacinta Ermacora: They didn't count hairdressers.

Rachel PAYNE: What a lost opportunity – I agree. If you would like to go back even further, let us look at the event of the GST. Personal grooming products for men were essential and exempt, and so were coffee, Viagra, condoms and lubricant, but tampons and pads were not considered essential. I mean, how ridiculous.

When government shapes policy we need to look at how it impacts everyone and who is being left out. Too often those left out are women. These are the consequences of the remnants of a world that was, and in many ways continues to be, built for men. Women are less likely to be involved in a car crash but more likely to die. There is a rich gendered history in car design, the result of which is that the standard seating position means the average woman sits out of position, putting them at greater risk of injury. For a long time in our society men were treated as the baseline for all human experience. Gender-responsive budgeting is one step to dismantling this baseline. This is an opportunity to weave considerations of gender impact throughout the budget process, empowering governments to adapt policies and investment to better address gender inequity. In Austria landmark tax system reform led to incentivising women's workforce participation. In Mexico it led to targeted investment in health conditions more likely to affect women.

In Victoria we cannot speak of gender-responsive budgeting without acknowledging the prevalence of gendered violence that confronts us. We have seen too many women murdered at the hands of men. Last year alone there were approximately 54,000 breaches of intervention orders, a call-out every 6 minutes and a family violence arrest every 18 minutes. Funding for child and family services like

Berry Street and Orange Door are central to supporting victim-survivors, working with perpetrators to end cycles of violence and addressing gendered issues. But there is still so much work to be done.

In Victoria we have taken a nation-leading position on gender-responsive budgeting. Following the work of the inquiry into gender-responsive budgeting in Victoria, we are set to be the first state to legislate it. We have supplemented this work with a robust gender equality strategy, extensive data collection, the gender-responsive budgeting unit, the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector and the Gender Equality Act 2020. These reforms allow Victoria to lead the way in targeting some of the drivers of inequality – things like the pay gap, gender segregation, under-representation in leadership, lack of workplace flexibility and sexual harassment.

Some of the opposition have raised concerns that this will not alleviate persistent gender inequality issues faced by Victorians. These policies will not do that overnight. Cultural and systematic change takes time, and it is imperative that not all policies are reactionary; some need to work towards long-term, incremental change. I commend the decision to legislate the statement on the gender impacts of the budget each financial year. When Abbott killed the women's budget statement, a decade of potential progress was lost. His appointment as minister for women undoubtedly also did little to progress gender equality in this country.

The sustainability of gender-responsive budgeting is largely dependent on political will, and legislating it goes a small part of the way to overcoming this. I commend the clarification that the consideration and promotion of gender equality and inclusivity includes taking into account, where possible, that gender inequality may be compounded by other forms of disadvantage or discrimination that a person may experience on the basis of Aboriginality, age, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, race, religion, sexual orientation and other attributes. Gendered inequalities are best understood when we use an intersectional lens – that is, seeing where things like gender and race and disability overlap to create unique policy needs.

Turning to my concerns, the Women in Social and Economic Research network at Curtin University have warned that the 'Gender Equality Budget Statement' in Victoria is a political document rather than a detailed analysis of the impact of the budget on equality using gender-disaggregated indicators and statistics. They have encouraged for its role to be reviewed. The statement of gender impacts of the budget that is to be legislated by this bill is only explicitly required to set out the impact of the budget on gender equality and inclusivity. There is no explicit requirement to track progress against outcomes or show how plans and policies were changed to address gender equality and inclusivity. If the government is not committed to gender-responsive budgeting it is still very easy for them to publish a statement and fulfil this basic duty.

The Morrison government's first women's budget statement was in 2022. It cited pre-existing policies and short-term reactionary funding. It was also preceded by the March 4 Justice and 'bullets' for protesters remarks. Here in Victoria we have a range of measures that target gender equality, but for many Victorians the budget statement is the only one they may read. It is important that this statement tracks progress towards outcomes and shows how gendered considerations have influenced policy decisions across all of government. These statements must be more than just lip-service. I will be putting forward several questions in committee of the whole that delve into the recommendations of the inquiry and seek to understand the progress this government has made, because when it comes to gender-responsive budgeting it can be done in a superficial way, and having commitments beyond statements is integral to avoiding this.

I want reassurance that there will be independent oversight. I want reassurance that a gendered lens will be embedded across all budget areas. I want reassurance that these are targets, objectives and indicators, so these statements have meaning. Regardless of the merits of this bill, given the government's willingness to subject medicinal cannabis patients to what will now be a decade of discrimination on Victorian roads, we will be abstaining from voting.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:53): I am very pleased to speak on the Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024, which is another demonstration of the Allan Labor government's commitment to gender equality in Victoria, because it will require in law our budget processes and our budget documents to absolutely acknowledge and understand the gendered impacts of the decisions the government takes through the budget on Victorian society and particularly on Victorian women. It will ensure that every budget in the future includes a statement about gender equality. It will amend Victoria's primary financial management legislation, the Financial Management Act 1994, to ensure that consideration of gender equality remains one of the key principles of sound financial management, because we understand and we know that sound financial management requires that all issues are taken into consideration and the needs of all Victorians are accounted for, particularly for Victorian women. It is just another step, another iteration, another example of the Allan Labor government's commitment to gender equality in this state.

Obviously the Labor government passed the Gender Equality Act in 2020, which was a landmark piece of gender legislation to break down gender barriers in the workplace, and this new legislation will complement that Gender Equality Act by allowing the Treasurer to request gender impact assessments on various measures to ensure that gender equality is given the priority it deserves in decision-making. Both of these pieces of legislation – the Gender Equality Act and the new gender-responsive budgeting provisions in the Financial Management Act – will provide a groundbreaking opportunity for the question of gender equality to be at the heart of the policymaking of this state and help influence not only public policy but also culture and attitudes and most importantly achieve better outcomes for Victorian women and girls.

Gender-responsive budgeting is a tool that is used and has been used in other jurisdictions and also in Victoria, I should say, prior to the enactment of this legislation. This will enshrine that practice in law to ensure that budget-related decisions take into account and have an understanding of the gendered impacts they have when those decisions are made and also that that analysis is then communicated in formal budget documentation as a normal part of the budget process. It will help remove embedded inequalities by considering gender in all funding decisions with a direct impact on Victorians, it will identify how resources can be best allocated to close gender gaps and it will help improve value for money by achieving gender equality goals concurrently with other policy goals.

Victoria has been on this journey for some time under this Labor government. In 2021 we were the first state jurisdiction to introduce a form of gender-responsive budgeting. Every year, as part of the budget process, since we commenced that work, we have analysed and considered the impacts of our investment decisions on women at every stage of the budget process and we have kept improving decision-making processes, considering ways in which the decisions that the government is making through the budget process affect people differently, women in particular. That leads to better decisions.

The movement to promote gender-responsive budgeting is grounded in a lot of sophisticated understanding and research about the impact of gender inequalities on our society, not just here in Australia but also internationally. One of the things that the International Monetary Fund has said about the need for gender-responsive budgeting to be an important part of fiscal policy is this:

Fiscal policy design and budget systems can also play a large role in reducing gender inequality. Fiscal authorities can ensure that tax and spending policies and/or public financial management instruments address gender inequality and the advancement of women in areas such as education, health and economic empowerment ... This approach is called gender-sensitive or gender-responsive budgeting. If designed well, gender budgeting can improve the efficiency and equity of the overall budget process. Fiscal authorities at any level of government can assess the needs of boys and girls and women; identify key outcomes or goals; plan, allocate and distribute public funds; and monitor and evaluate achievements ...

The value of gender-responsive budgeting is that it not only allows us to look at the outcome impacts and the expected outturn impacts of a measure on women in particular through things like the use of

distributional analysis – the understanding of whether a particular course of action or policy is going to have a disproportionate impact on women in our community – and allows us to produce those kinds of gender impact assessments that form part of these processes but it also requires, by its very nature, that that consideration, that analysis, gets taken further up the budget planning process. We know that the process of constructing a budget is one that involves a large number of bodies, a lot of people and a lot of consideration over an extended period of time. Ensuring, as this legislation will, that all throughout that process the impact of each of these single decisions that is made, that make up the entirety of the budget process, if thinking about their gendered impact will in the end inevitably lead to more consideration of the gendered impacts of particular policy decisions on women and how they might be measured.

I think it is quite clear that we have seen here in this state but also – as others have mentioned in the context of their contributions – in other jurisdictions and other levels of government how they have either taken this task seriously or abjectly failed in considering how in particular budget decision-making has an economic impact. Again I will quote from the United Nations in understanding why this is important:

Gender-responsive budgeting is not about creating separate budgets for women, or solely increasing spending on women's programs. Rather, gender-responsive budgeting seeks to ensure that the collection and allocation of public resources is carried out in ways that are effective and contribute to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment. It should be based on in-depth analysis that identifies effective interventions for implementing policies and laws that advance women's rights. It provides tools to assess the different needs and contributions of men and women, and boys and girls within the existing revenues, expenditures and allocations and calls for adjusting budget policies to benefit all groups.

I do want to reflect on how some of that was undertaken, particularly in the last few years in the context of the then federal government's response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. We saw very clearly at the outset of that pandemic the very clear differentiated impacts that were being felt across the workforce, particularly across female-dominated industries. It was very clear in the early months of that pandemic that women were losing their work, losing their jobs, at a much faster rate than men. I had the opportunity at that time to be working in a public policy think tank, and we did some particular work looking at the impacts of the early months of the COVID pandemic on women in work and found that, for example, there were some months in July 2020 when women in Victoria were losing their jobs at a rate five times faster than men and the number of women unemployed in this state at that time was higher than it had ever been. What that enabled us to do was to put into the public policy debate a critique of the decisions that were being made by the then Commonwealth government about the design of the programs they were putting in place to support those who were losing their jobs through the pandemic.

One of the things that they had done in the policy design, particularly in the early months of the policy design, was really fail to account for the gendered impacts of not only the pandemic but also the measures they were putting in place to design policies to support Australians through that absolutely uncertain economic time. In the early months of the pandemic the response that was made principally by the provisions of the rules around things like the JobKeeper payment excluded large female-dominated industries like early childhood and some of the childcare sectors. It saw them excluded on the basis of their rules about the applicability of that support to things like casualised industries, because women are more likely to be in insecure work because women are more likely to be in industries where there are higher rates of casualisation and because women are more likely to be in industries where they hold more than one job. The design of the supports was very strongly predicated on outdated notions about single-earner households, largely single-employer households, largely full-time households, and that historically has been where male-dominated industries have been seen.

It was very clear in the early months of that pandemic that the decision-making that was taking place did not match the reality of what was happening on the ground, and one of the explanations for that was because a gendered lens was not being applied to decision-making there. There was a significant critique – a significant critique – of the then coalition government's response, and that was really felt

in the response to that budget in the federal budget in late 2020. I think that is an important and illustrative example of where a failure to take account of the gendered impacts not only of external events on our community but then also of the government response to those events in our community can have serious consequences, serious economic consequences and serious consequences for individuals, but also where they are not reflective of community sentiment and not reflective of community attitudes. I do think that we have seen, we do see and we are witnessing an acknowledgement across our community that governments being more responsive to gender equality and taking actions to demonstrate that they take these issues seriously is supported, obviously by many women in the community but also by men as well, because we all understand that our community is made stronger, that our economy is made stronger, when the needs of everyone who participates in it are taken into account. When the interests of all are taken into account, everyone benefits.

It is not a zero-sum game. Doing things like introducing gender-responsive budgeting does not mean that someone else is losing out, does not mean that someone else is missing out; it means that our decisions are better. And when we make better decisions, when we make decisions that benefit more people in our community that understand the differences that make up our society, when we make those kinds of decisions that are better informed, we all benefit from them. That is why I am such a strong supporter of the move towards gender equality – because we all benefit from having a more equal society; we all benefit from having mechanisms of our government understanding, acknowledging and responding to the interests, the needs and the challenges that are faced by women and girls in our society. It is not something that only benefits some in our community. Moves like this, like the move to equality, benefit all of us. That is why the Allan Labor government has been such a strong supporter of moves towards gender equality, which is why the documents in the budget process that help shape what happens in the state of Victoria, making them more gender responsive, making them more gender aware, will lead to an improvement in the lives of all Victorians. That is why I am so strongly supportive of this legislation today.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:08): I also rise to speak on the Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024. I will state from the outset that the Libertarian Party will not be supporting this bill. I would say that the budget papers are already rather bloated and incomprehensible, and adding yet more bloat to them for questionable outcomes is not something that I think is a very productive use of taxpayer resources. The government's own response to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee report on gender-responsive budgeting concluded that:

... gender impact analysis ... for all initiatives would add considerably to the size and complexity of the budget papers ...

As to exactly how much that will cost, we are yet to know, and maybe we will be able to ask questions in committee on that.

Putting that aside, the fact is that although the government seems to be talking about only two genders, this government also tends to believe that there are an infinite number of genders out there, which makes this a fairly interesting analysis. Once they actually put this out, I will be interested to see what the government puts in response to all of the other genders that are not male or female.

But if we want to know how this process is going to work, we only need to look at how some of the existing processes work. I would much rather the government focus on fixing those before adding more things. One that I will bring to the attention of the house is the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities. As we saw throughout the pandemic, and I spoke about this many times, it is pretty broken. It has turned into pretty much a tick-and-flick exercise, it is seen as a hindrance and a barrier to processes – it looks like those in the public service just figure out ways to tick and flick and get by it. The statements of compatibility that are tabled with legislation in this place are often less than substantial, I would say. In concept I really like the charter of rights and responsibilities, but when it was put to the test, it failed, I would say.

Another process which is to do with the budget estimates process is the media was openly ridiculing the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee last week over the Dorothy Dixers and those sorts of things. They were comparing our PAEC estimates process to the Senate estimates process and saying how the Senate estimates process is so much better than what we do in Victoria, and maybe we should look at that. I have been on PAEC through estimates processes, and I can say that it was very frustrating, with so much time being taken up in PAEC by all these Dorothy Dixers from the government, which did not really seem to add a lot to the process.

That said, I would like to state that we will not be supporting this bill. I would like to see the government focus on fixing the stuff that is already broken before adding more bloat to these processes.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (11:11): I rise to speak on the Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024. This bill embeds gender-responsive budgeting into the Victorian budget to include in the principle of sound financial management a requirement to consider and promote gender equality and inclusivity in the pursuit of spending and taxing policies, to provide for a statement of gender impacts on the budget to be prepared in association with the budget for each financial year and, lastly, to provide for the minister to request a gender impact assessment in relation to any matter under the act.

I think once again this government, when it comes to women, talks big and acts little. I spoke about this a little while ago. I am normally all about participation in marches and rallies and things like that, but I found it so interesting that the leader of this government turned up to a rally against violence against women to demand that the government do more. They are the government, and I think that that is something that is quite sad. Yes, we do need to be doing more to bring women into the equation, to support women, but it has to be more than just a policy and more than just words on a piece of paper.

There are some things in this budget where I wish we did consider women more, and one of those things is early childhood sector supports and regulations. They were cut by \$79 million. That is 11 per cent. I wonder where in their gender-responsive budgeting that came into the equation. Wellbeing supports for schoolkids were cut by \$34 million, or 8.4 per cent. Again, I think if they had used their own principles when budgeting this, they would have thought, 'Hang on, how is that actually going to impact women? Will that help participation in the workplace, or will that be something that limits participation in the workplace?'

At the moment in Erica in my electorate, in Narracan, which also is Wayne Farnham's electorate, there is a real fight to keep the kindergarten open there. This is so important, because if that kindergarten shuts, it is going to have a huge impact on women's participation in the workforce. Because of the sort of area it is, if that one shuts down, it is going to be a 3-hour round trip to drop kids off at a kindergarten. This is something that I think has to be considered. What are we doing about gender equality here? If kids are not able to access these sorts of services, most of the time it is the female caregiver, the mum, the foster mum or whoever it is, that is the one that is affected most because of this.

Sadly, child protection was cut by \$141 million, or 6.2 per cent. Family violence service delivery was cut by \$29 million. This is an area where we really have to see some strong changes. It is not only women that are affected by family violence, but the vast majority affected, unfortunately, are women. In my electorate in Pakenham I saw two women last week who are suffering seriously because of the effects of family violence. It has caused them to completely withdraw from society, to stay at home and to give in to different coercive controls. These are things that we actually do need to address, but cutting funding from it most likely is not going to help. So once again, I often say it, I am for gender equality and I am for women's participation, particularly in the workplace, and for women's participation on boards. However, whatever we do has to be more than just headlines and words on a piece of paper; it has to be something that can actually be translated into reality and into life.

Women's policy was cut by \$0.3 million following a \$3 million cut in 2023–24, and public IVF services were cut by \$42 million. This is something that a lot of women really rely on. Women are having children later at the moment. My mum got married at 20 years old. By that standard, if I had followed my mum's trajectory, I would have four and a half kids by now, but it is a different way of life now. It is not that a traditional dad goes to work and mum stays home and cooks and all of these things. The world has shifted away from that. So I think that there are certain things that we really have to keep in mind when we are supporting or rejecting policies like this. I think it is one thing to put it on paper and to have a certain policy platform around it, but are we actually living the message? That is what I do not think is happening in this government.

There are serious consequences to financial mismanagement. This state now has more debt than Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania combined. You might say, 'Oh, well, it's only money.' That trickles down into every area of people's lives. What we must understand is when the government goes into debt that is actually people's money. There is no such thing as government money – it is taxpayer dollars. And if this government cannot balance the books, if it cannot manage money, then what happens is it affects the everyday Victorians that we are put here to serve.

I think this is an interesting bill. I think, absolutely, we have to be doing more to support women, but it has to be more than just words on a paper. It has to be more than just marches with no action.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (11:18): I am delighted today to speak on the Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024, which covers the gendered budgeting policy platform that this is pioneering. Gender equality really is central to the Allan Labor government. You only needed to have been here in this Parliament last year to have seen that we made history with the election of the new member for Mulgrave in the other place by becoming the first gender-equal parliament in Australia, if I recall correctly. In fact the cabinet of the government has a strong majority of women in it, including, and most significantly, led by the Premier, who is of course only the second woman in Victoria's history to ever lead the state, following in the footsteps of Labor Premier Joan Kirner, someone who I regard with great affection. It is pretty safe to say that Joan would be very proud of how far we have come, thanks to the work and incredible dedication of the Labor government headed up by Jacinta Allan.

We made history with policy like the Gender Equality Act 2020. This was a major step in breaking down discrimination and gender barriers in the workplace so women all around Victoria could go to work safely, knowing that they can be – and should be and will be – treated as equals. This new legislation will complement the existing Gender Equality Act 2020 and allow the Treasurer to request gender impact assessments and ensure that gender equality is given the priority that it deserves. Both pieces of legislation truly are Australian firsts, and both provide a once-in-a-generation opportunity to influence policy, culture, attitudes and, most importantly, outcomes for Victorian women and girls. Gender inequality negatively affects the lives of women, girls and gender-diverse people. It continues to be a persistent challenge, with gender gaps in both participation and outcomes for Victorians. With both pieces of legislation in effect, it will mean that Victoria will have concrete legislative frameworks to provide the necessary financial support to women and girls all over the state to bridge the current divide. This gendered budgeting means that we can effectively target primary issues causing disparity all around the state.

Gender-responsive budgeting is a tool used to close gender gaps and promote gender equality through budget measures. It integrates gender considerations into budget processes and funding decisions by addressing inequalities in all funding decisions, allocating resources to close gender gaps and improving the value for money by achieving gender equality alongside other policy goals of this government. Of course gender-responsive budgeting offers tangible benefits. In 2021 we became the first state to implement it, analysing the impact of investment decisions on women annually, and this has enhanced our decision-making, allowing us to better target services and investments.

The Allan Labor government intends to make amendments to the Financial Management Act 1994, known as the FMA, to embed gender-responsive budgeting into legislation so we can use these tools to make the positive changes this government is known for, undertaking in that such crucial actions as including the principles of sound financial management, requirements to consider and promote gender equality and inclusivity in the pursuit of spending and taxing policies and providing a statement on the gender impacts of the budget to be prepared in association with the budget for each financial year. It includes providing for the minister to request a gender impact assessment in relation to any matter under the FMA, which is intended to be used in limited circumstances where the Gender Equality Act 2020 does not apply.

In Victoria, gender-responsive budgeting began with the 2022–23 budget and has since become more widespread within the Victorian public service, establishing legal foundations which will help ensure its long-term sustainability and making sure that future governments continue to address the diverse needs of all Victorians. Incorporating gender-responsive budgeting into Victoria's main financial management legislation, the Financial Management Act 1994 demonstrates our commitment to responsive budgeting that also promotes gender equality. Addressing these provisions in the act underscores that gender analysis is essential to effective budgeting and emphasises the budget's role in achieving gender equality. This government knows that inclusivity involves empowering access to opportunities, addressing the structural inequalities and developing inclusive organisations. It is preferred because it emphasises actively removing barriers to equality.

The bill's approach allows for considering various factors when reflecting on inclusivity. These factors include recognising that gender inequality can be compounded by other forms of disadvantage or discrimination based on Aboriginality, age, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, race, religion, sexual orientation and other attributes. You can also say that this aligns with the considerations outlined in the Gender Equality Act 2020, an act that the Allan Labor government passed to revolutionise women's parity in Victoria. The bill expands the principles of sound financial management to encompass considerations and promotion of gender equality and inclusivity. The bill mandates that the minister prepare and present a statement of the gender impacts of the budget to both houses of Parliament for each financial year. The purpose of this statement is to identify and describe the anticipated impact of the budget on gender equality and inclusivity, and this statement must include the expected impact of the budget on gender equality and inclusivity and any additional information as determined by the minister.

Proposed amendments include granting the Treasurer the authority to make a gender impact assessment for any matter under the FMA, intended for limited use when, as I said, the Gender Equality Act 2020 does not apply. Any GIA, or gender impact assessment, provided under this provision must comply with the requirements of the Gender Equality Act. It is really not intended to limit the operation of the Gender Equality Act.

This bill before us today includes a provision allowing the minister to issue guidelines regarding statements on the gender impacts of the budget and gender impact assessments. The bill also introduces additional matters on which the Governor in Council may make regulations, including statements of the gender impacts of budgets and gender impact assessments.

Let me pick it up and tell you all about gender-responsive budgeting, the overarching term that we use to incorporate the many different tools and functions within government powers to form a broader approach to gender inequality. How fantastic is that. We have looked all around the globe and we have scoured all the nations and discovered that there is no single best practice approach to gender-responsive budgeting in the world. In fact we think that this model right here is right for Victorians, not just now but very much into the future. The practices that the Allan Labor government will undertake will be dynamic, they will be flexible and they may change over time. They may be changes to suit the specific needs of Victorian women and changes that are required for our state to thrive in the years ahead.

But let me tell you, having responses that can be tailored is so very important for whatever issues present themselves in a manner that I think the Treasurer and treasurers of the future will deem appropriate. If we are ready to respond as a state and as we should to gender-based issues, we can bridge the gap between men and women all across our state. You see, gender inequality is rubbish, and I do not like it. It negatively affects women and girls, and it remains really a persistent challenge to Victoria's future success. Let me tell you that we recognise the crucial role of addressing gender impacts through the bill before us today and also through the previous legislation passed in 2020. This will be a powerful tool for driving positive change and one that I look forward to seeing in future budgets in years to come.

Gender-responsive budgeting is essential for promoting gender equality by shaping how budgets are created and how funds are allocated. Is there anything more exciting than that? In fact in the budget before us there are some very key investments to address gender inequality in our state. This includes \$657 million for health services, including addressing women's health issues, and \$1.8 billion – can I just draw your attention to that, Acting President, \$1.8 billion – to enhance women's economic security by supporting workers in female-dominated sectors and helping women reskill, retrain and get the jobs of the future. There is \$292 million – how fantastic is that – to alleviate cost-of-living pressures that disproportionately affect women. I was especially excited, and I know all of us on this side were, to see the \$216 million to support housing for women experiencing homelessness. There is also \$269 million to prevent family violence and ensure women's safety. How fantastic is that.

In fact there are over 130 active initiatives to address gender inequality in our state in the budget before us. There are nine initiatives that total \$352 million that are expected to have very significant statewide implications. These will change attitudes, and they will reduce the gaps in the outcomes, access and participation for women right across our state in various sectors. You see, 61 per cent of all OECD countries, let me tell you, which are five of the seven largest economies – some places that I have not been to, but that is all right; I can read all about them – Canada, France, Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom, recognise the importance of considering gender impact early in policy design. According to OECD research – gosh, there are some good folks in there – this approach leads to better gender outcomes, helping to dismantle structural inequalities and barriers that disadvantage women and girls. It will provide better insights, more effective outcomes and a fairer distribution of resources to address this inequality.

I was thinking about years gone by and what we have done in the past, before this bill before us. In 2017–18 Victoria was at the forefront of the approach to address gender inequality with the publishing of the 'Gender Equality Budget Statement'. If the bill passes, Victoria will become the first Australian jurisdiction to enshrine gender-responsive budgeting into law. How exciting is that. That is fantastic. I am thrilled to bits to say that this recognises that, despite progress, significant work remains to be done in achieving true equality. Victorian women are amongst the world's most educated. As at May last year, 39.3 per cent of Victorian women had university degrees, compared to 32.2 per cent of men. More women are taking on male-dominated industries, and all credit to them. I am talking about women in IT and women in engineering, and what I have had the great pleasure to see is significant take-up of women in trades. How exciting is that. Female workforce participation has hit record highs. For the period March 2020 to March 2024 the participation rate of women rose by 1.6 per cent to 62.9 per cent, and the employment rate for working-age women increased by 2.5 percentage points. There are nearly 170,000 new jobs being filled by women, with 90 per cent of those being full-time roles. How fantastic is that.

You know what, despite all of those brilliant statistics, challenges remain. The gender pay gap persists, and women often face exclusion from full-time work due to their disproportionate share of unpaid labour. Australian women do 2.3 more hours of unpaid work and 2.2 fewer hours of paid work per day than men. They are twice as likely to work part time, primarily due to higher unpaid caring responsibilities. Can I just highlight that that is not just about women that have children, it is also about the high proportion of women that take on caring responsibilities for their parents. I just want to take

a moment to acknowledge all of the women out there that do the heavy lifting on behalf of their siblings to care for their elderly or sick parents or often parents experiencing disability later in life.

I have more to say, but I have got to tell you I was very excited to read this bill and very excited to see how far we have come. I am excited to say that this will help even the playing field on economic opportunity for Victorian women, and I am proud to commend this bill to the chamber.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (11:33): I rise to speak against the Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024, because I believe that equality of the sexes should be addressed on the basis of sex and not gender. I disagree with this bill because frankly I think it is pathetic, and I am not going to pretend that it is anything other than a degrading and absurd spectacle of disingenuous exploitation of women. It is not about equality of the sexes, it is about identity politics, and not just gender but Aboriginality, age, disability, ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation and other attributes. Biological sex is not even stated properly.

This government loves to wax lyrical about women's rights and women's pain and women's perspective, but they have obliterated women's own defining sex-based category in the law. Anybody can say they are any gender, multiple genders or no gender at all, so none of the data that you are going to collect and have been collecting to inform these ridiculous gender impact statements means anything at all anyway. Whilst you are all congratulating yourselves on your brochures and your campaigns and your themes and your plans and redistributing taxes on the basis of identity politics rather than objective need, what is actually going on for women and girls? As I have said many times before in this chamber, we have lost our right to speak and be heard and to disagree with gender-ID laws without being accused of hate speech.

We have lost our right to single-sex change rooms. Our feelings and our privacy do not matter – women and girls and our feelings and our dignity and our privacy do not actually matter. This is a farce. We have lost the right to single-sex sports. We have lost the right to single-sex prisons, and need I remind this house that we still have a twice-convicted male rapist in a women's prison in my area. We have lost the right to single-sex rape and domestic violence services, and I am sure you all heard in the news about the male who tricked rape victims in the UK by pretending to be a female rape crisis counsellor. That is disgusting, and that is what we are allowing here as well. Lesbians have lost the rights to associate exclusively with lesbians, because now men can say that they are gay women and demand entry. Women as mothers – we have lost the right to protect our children from harmful gender ideology in schools and to protect them from the totally discredited gender affirmation treatments still endorsed and funded by this government even though we are in huge amounts of debt.

The truth is that this bill totally undermines principles of sound financial management, and it does so by overlaying them with Labor's own political ideology of redistribution of wealth based on divisive identity politics. Real principles of sound financial management include managing financial risks prudently, ensuring stability and predictability in the level of the tax burden, maintaining the integrity of the tax system regarding the financial effects on future generations and providing disclosure of financial information relating to the activities of the government and its agencies, like we debated yesterday in my motion.

This government has been publishing a gender impact statement every year since 2017, and there is no real reason to legislate it anyway. I noted a few interesting little sections in this. One of them is, and I agree that it is true, that women experience pain from heavy periods, cramping, premenstrual syndrome, perimenopause, menopause and endometriosis. But these conditions are as a result of our sex, they are not a result of discrimination and oppression by society against women. In the section 'Securing the future of housing' the document states that:

Women can be particularly vulnerable to homelessness. In the past decade, women over 55 have been the fastest growing cohort experiencing homelessness.

I have seen that in my area; that is just atrocious. And they are made all the more vulnerable because of their sex and their lack of access to privacy and dignity, as I said before. The rates of homelessness for women aged 40 to 49 years have increased at double the rate. But data from the last census, published by the ABS in 2021, shows that males make up 58 per cent of Victoria's homeless population.

I just find all of this virtue-signalling and all of these words that are used – when the real meaning of them has been eradicated in law and nothing practical is happening – offensive. It is an insult to my intelligence and an insult to me as a woman. When this government finally discovers what the real definition of a woman is, which is an adult human female, then I might take them seriously on a bill of this kind.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (29): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Gaelle Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Renee Heath, Shaun Leane, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Evan Mulholland, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Samantha Ratnam, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

Noes (3): Moira Deeming, David Limbrick, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Committed.

Committee

Clause 1 (11:46)

Georgie CROZIER: Minister, the government has reported on gender budget impacts since 2017–18, or since that budget. Does the government attribute any improvements in gender equality to this reporting?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) as a whole is obviously the tool that helps us identify budget measures, but the advice from the box is that it has been successful in removing embedded inequalities by considering gender in all funding decisions – and that is across the whole of government, not obviously limited to any one portfolio – and it also identified and assisted government more broadly to identify how resources can be and have been best allocated to support closing gender gaps.

Georgie CROZIER: Could you provide some examples to the committee of spending and taxing policies that have been influenced by the government's reporting on gender impacts in the budget? I am wanting the positive aspects of those taxing policies and spending policies.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I firstly would make the point that gender-responsive budgeting is applying across the whole of government, and we would argue that applying a gender lens to all policy ensures that we are developing policy in a way that assists in removing gender inequalities in the implementation of those policies. But in terms of a specific measurement, the Minister for Women is currently developing a new gender equality outcomes framework, which will be realised into the future and provide a new way to also track impacts further down the track.

Georgie CROZIER: On the same basis, what are the negative impacts of the budget? I do not know if you were listening to my contribution, but I spoke about the rising debt and the concerns for women currently and for future generations. Has the government identified through that gender lens any areas of gaps where the current policies might need to be reviewed?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Gender-responsive budgeting is something that is looked at from both the positive and the negative. I did not specifically hear your contribution, Ms Crozier, but in terms of assessing all aspects of the budget and whether it has a negative impact or a positive impact in relation to gender, that is what we are seeking to do here. We are really seeking to understand the effects of budgeting across all services. One of the ways that we are doing this in the 2024–25 budget is by continuing to fund Respectful Relationships. That is a good example. It is a tool that applies both in the negative and the positive in terms of it being applied in assessments.

Georgie CROZIER: Minister, have budget initiatives been denied funding on the basis that they were not expected to make a positive impact on gender equality through that gender lens that you just spoke of?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I am advised that that is not the case. It is an assessment tool, so it is providing a measure against policies or programs that might be put forward. It is an assessment tool, but it has not resulted in the decline, or non-approval if you like, of funding on that basis.

Georgie CROZIER: So just in relation to that assessment tool, does the government expect that mandatory annual reporting on gender impacts will improve gender equality in Victoria?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes. It is envisaged that by having the assessment tool in place we do apply a gender lens to the development of policy and programs and the funding thereof and budgeting for those policies and programs – so yes, our expectation is that it does have a positive impact.

Georgie CROZIER: Minister, if I could just tease that out a little bit more, is it expected that those annual reporting requirements across government – there are many aspects of government that would have to apply this, and that reporting – will require additional resources to undertake that reporting in each department and each agency, given this is across government?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The government will continue to give ongoing consideration, if you like, to any implications in costing to departments of the application of the tool. But it is an assessment tool that is being applied as a lens over policies and programs, so it should be the case that that is something that does not have to have a cost unless the entity chooses to hire perhaps a consultant to do it, for example, but it should be part of the standard policy development process undertaken by policy officers and programs and staff across government.

Georgie CROZIER: Minister, do you think it is regretful that the government has not fully funded the Best Start, Best Life program that you are responsible for? Has the government undertaken an assessment on the gender impact of this decision?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you, Ms Crozier, for the opportunity to speak Best Start, Best Life. Best Start, Best Life is \$14 billion program that is being funded over a significant amount of time. We have already invested around \$8 billion, \$9 billion in Best Start, Best Life reforms, and we will continue to roll out the \$14 billion Best Start, Best Life reform, just on a more gradual basis for some elements of it, particularly in relation to pre-prep, but that is something that has been done in consultation with the sector. As the Municipal Association of Victoria and many others have put forward, this has been welcomed as a more gradual rollout of the pre-prep aspect of Best Start, Best Life, but Best Start, Best Life is obviously much bigger and much broader than just that, and it continues to roll out as we have otherwise said.

Georgie CROZIER: I was not actually asking about the rollout of the program. I think we understand that there have been delays, but it was really around the assessment of the gender impact of that decision given there are delays in that rollout. I am taking it that there has not been an assessment undertaken. Is that correct?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: There has been gender analysis when asking for new funding in each and every state stage of the Best Start, Best Life reforms.

Georgie CROZIER: Minister, under this bill gender equality will be understood to mean equality of rights, responsibilities and outcomes between persons of different genders. What are the key metrics the government will use to monitor and evaluate the progress on each of these points? And in relation to the different genders, how many genders is that?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Ultimately this amendment is about dealing with gender inequality, and that can go different ways. We are not proposing to define specific genders through the amendment. What we are doing is looking at how to take gender into consideration at the outset of policy development. In relation to definitions of gender inequality, that is defined in the Gender Equality Act 2020.

Georgie CROZIER: I was going to ask this question in clause 6 because it goes around that gender inequality, but if I can ask this question now given that you have just responded, clause 6 says these include:

... taking into account, where possible, that gender inequality may be compounded by other forms of disadvantage or discrimination that a person may experience on the basis of Aboriginality, age, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, race, religion, sexual orientation and other attributes.

I am wanting to understand what those other attributes are as applied to this bill through that gender inequality reference that you made.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As you have highlighted, Ms Crozier, gender inequality goes to different things, therefore so does gender equality. As it is considered in the terms of this legislation:

gender equality means equality of rights, opportunities, responsibilities and outcomes between persons of different genders ...

Ultimately this amendment, as I said, is about dealing with those gender inequalities which can go one way or the other.

Business interrupted pursuant to standing orders.

Members

Minister for Housing

Minister for Skills and TAFE

Absence

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:00): For the purposes of today – I think everyone knows their portfolios – any questions for Minister Shing or Minister Tierney or their representing portfolios, please direct them to me, and I will do my best.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Mental health services

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:01): (549) My question is to the Minister for Mental Health. Minister, you have slashed spending on new mental health initiatives to just over one-tenth of the \$1 billion the government expects to gouge from Victorian businesses via the mental health and wellbeing levy. Has the government given up on meeting its royal commission commitments?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:01): Absolutely not. I do take issue with the way you have framed your question, Ms Crozier, because the budget papers clearly show that output funding for the 2024–25 financial year is almost \$3 billion, which is a historic high, and our government is proud of our record investment in mental health since the royal commission handed down its report in 2021. We have already invested \$6 billion into many, many initiatives. On 90 per cent of the recommendations, we

are underway with the work to implement those. We have record output funding in the budget, which is almost double what it was prior to the royal commission. I am on the public record, as is the Premier, that we are absolutely committed to continuing the reform journey and implementing every single one of the royal commission's recommendations.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:02): Well, Minister, thank you for your response. Commissioner Alan Fels does not agree with you. He said that the budget 'indicates a significant slowdown' by the government on implementing its election promise to fulfil the recommendations of the royal commission. So which recommendations have you decided to drop as indicated by your budget cuts?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:03): We are not dropping any. I have just made it abundantly clear to the house that we will be implementing every single one of the recommendations contained in the report. I want to thank Professor Fels because he was one of the commissioners who was of course instrumental in setting out a very clear road map for the Victorian government to reform the mental health system and rebuild it from the ground up. So any notion that this government is doing anything other than pursuing those reforms with intent is an absolute fabrication by those opposite.

Duck hunting

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:03): (550) My question is for the Minister for Outdoor Recreation in the other place. Lake Boort was closed to duck shooting preseason due to the presence of threatened species but was reopened last week following advice from the Game Management Authority. On Saturday some of the few wildlife rescuers who are yet to receive a banning notice from the wetlands discovered a pit of buried native ducks at Lake Boort Wildlife Reserve. In the absence of compliance officers, volunteer rescuers were onsite looking for onshore breaches when they came across a still-smouldering log left abandoned by shooters. A closer look revealed three grey teals, two wood ducks and a protected grebe, which for the record is not a duck. Has the GMA identified and charged the shooters responsible for killing protected native species this season?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:04): I thank Ms Purcell for her question and obviously her ongoing passion for this issue. I am sure that Minister Dimopoulos will be pleased to respond to her question.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:04): Thank you, Attorney, for referring that on. The reopening of Lake Boort to shooting forces the only Aboriginal keeping place in Boort to close its doors to visitors. Cooking mounds at Lake Boort are estimated to be more than 10,000 years old, and it is home to the densest population of scarred trees in the entire country. This season rescuers have once again documented damage to Indigenous scarred trees and the illegal cutting down and removal of trees which are also important habitat to waterbirds. Following recommendations from the inquiry into native bird hunting arrangements, what measures will the government implement to protect Indigenous sites from damage by recreational shooters, and when?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:05): There is probably a bit of crossover into Mr Dimopoulos's other portfolio as well, so I am well placed to direct that to the minister.

Ministers statements: the Torch

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:05): I rise to update the house on a fantastic program in my corrections portfolio, the Torch's In Prison program. The Torch is an Aboriginal-led organisation that has a longstanding positive relationship with Corrections Victoria. They assist Aboriginal people in

contact with the criminal justice system to use art to reconnect with culture, foster community connections and learn vital skills that support rehabilitation and reintegration after prison.

This is an important time for the Torch. Their major annual exhibition, *Confined 15*, is currently on at the Glen Eira City Council gallery. The exhibition is showing over 400 artworks, all created by participants in the program, giving the artists a public platform to promote their work and express their cultural identity. I would encourage everyone in this place and anyone watching to get down to Glen Eira gallery to see the exhibition for themselves, as I know my good friend Mr Batchelor, as one of our representatives in Southern Metropolitan, did last week with a number of brilliant Aboriginal wellbeing officers, who are working hard every day inside our correctional facilities. But you need to be quick: the exhibition is closing on Sunday. For those watching, you have got until Sunday, so this week is your last chance to see these stunning creations until next year.

I am also very pleased to inform the house of the Allan Labor government's ongoing commitment to the Torch. The 2024–25 budget provides over \$3 million to maintain this important program for many years to come. In my role as minister I regularly hear from Aboriginal partners about the importance of maintaining cultural connections for Aboriginal people who are involved in our justice system, and Aboriginal people do remain over-represented in our system. That is why I am proud to be part of a government that has made this ongoing commitment, a four-year commitment and an ongoing commitment after that – \$3 million. We do not just talk about working with Aboriginal people, we walk the talk. I want to congratulate everyone at the Torch and all of the artists involved on another successful exhibition. Thank you again for your great work.

Community safety

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:07): (551) My question is to the Attorney-General. In the Australian Senate it was revealed this week that as a consequence of ministerial direction 99, signed off by the federal Labor immigration minister Andrew Giles, dozens of visa cancellations were overturned by the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. People whose visas were reinstated include a suspected people smuggler, a paedophile, multiple repeat domestic violence perpetrators, drug traffickers and a kidnapper. Has the government sought or received any advice as to how many of these criminals reside in Victoria?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:08): I thank Mr Mulholland for his question. However, I have been asked similar questions before and I have provided the very clear advice that this is a federal government matter. The AFP work closely with Victoria Police, but in relation to directing a question to me – and I am not undermining the seriousness of the issues that you raise – to seek information that is not within the remit of my portfolio as a direct responsibility, because of the nature of these matters, I have already been very clear about this. I guess I would seek your advice, President. When I have given advice to the chamber clearly that it is not appropriate to ask me these questions, and it continues, can I seek your guidance? When my answers repeatedly are the same and questions continue to be directed to me, it leaves me in a position where I am just repeating the answer.

The PRESIDENT: I was taking that as an answer to the question, but the last bit I will take as a point of order. I will take the repetitiveness into consideration for a later date, but as far as answering a question goes, if a minister's answer is 'The question is not inside my remit as far as my responsibilities as a minister go,' then that is the answer and they have given an answer. Mr Mulholland has a supplementary, which will be very difficult for him to ask in relation to the answer.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:10): I will have a go at a supplementary. I was simply asking if the coordinating minister had sought advice, which should not be too hard to answer. After doing nothing for months until it appeared on the front page of the *Australian* newspaper, the federal immigration minister was finally sufficiently concerned enough about the conduct of these criminals to cancel their visas; however, they remain in the community. What actions,

if any, has the government taken to ensure that these convicted criminals will not pose a continuing threat to the safety of Victorians?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:11): Some of the information that I did provide in my answer to the substantive question talked about the relationship between the federal government, the Australian Federal Police and their information-sharing responsibilities with Victoria Police in relation to any dangers to the Victorian community.

Extremism

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:11): (552) My question is for the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. In 2022 the Greens initiated an inquiry into the rise of far-right extremism in Victoria, responding to the concerning rise of neo-Nazi gatherings and threats to Victoria's multicultural fabric by these far-right actors. The inquiry at the time was opposed by the Liberals and Nationals, despite these growing threats, and we appreciated the support of the government to begin the inquiry. The inquiry found that far-right extremists were exploiting people's fears and anxieties during the pandemic and were becoming more organised and would use online forums to recruit people. It made several recommendations to counter the threat of far-right extremists, which were accepted by the government, including social cohesion and anti-racism initiatives. Minister, can you detail what specific activities were funded in the latest budget that implement the inquiry's recommendations?

The PRESIDENT: Can I just check, Minister, did you hear the question?

Ingrid Stitt: It was quite difficult to hear.

The PRESIDENT: Dr Mansfield, could you repeat just the last bit?

Sarah MANSFIELD: Certainly. Minister, can you detail what specific activities were funded in the latest budget that implement the inquiry's recommendations?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:13): I thank Dr Mansfield for her question. It is an important issue. The inquiry predated my time in this portfolio. I am happy to get you some more details about each of the specific recommendations, but if my memory serves me correctly I think it was across a whole-of-government kind of lens that we were looking at a number of the recommendations. I know that, for example, for some of the recommendations the responsibility sat within the Attorney's department and others. I am happy to provide a little bit more detail and take that part of the question on notice.

In relation to the multicultural affairs portfolio and the budget outcomes this year, we have obviously got some important social cohesion initiatives. Frankly, we are at a time across the community where our social cohesion has never been more fragile, and so it is important that we redouble our efforts in terms of making sure that communities not only feel safe but feel well supported to be able to get that support in understanding their rights and indeed responsibilities when it comes to anti-discrimination. There was provision in the budget – \$4 million – for us to continue important work in this regard. Under a previous minister, Minister Spence, the Anti-Racism Taskforce was established. That group will be reconvening very soon to finalise the anti-racism whole-of-government strategy, and the funding that we have received through this year's budget will go to some of the priority recommendations within that strategy, which we hope to be able to launch later this year. That is important work. We have also obviously provided support to communities across our Muslim community organisations and to the Jewish community and Palestinian community to support what we see as the very concerning rise in antisemitism and Islamophobia. Those initiatives were as a result of an election commitment to the tune of \$6 million.

There are other portfolios that provide important support as well, including the education portfolio. I talked a little bit about the homework club yesterday as part of the African communities action plan,

and there is certainly provision for funding within the health department as well that goes to support for newly arrived communities and refugees and asylum seekers.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:16): I thank the minister for her response. Minister, during PAEC you said that the anti-racism strategy that you have just referenced would be released by the end of the year, but the community is in need of a government response quite urgently. For example, within the last six months we have had neo-Nazis who felt emboldened to walk through the streets of Ballarat and spew racial hate speech. Surely the strategy needs to be released urgently and the government needs to act now. So, Minister, will you release Victoria's anti-racism strategy within the next three months?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:16): It is certainly my intention to make sure that we complete that work and release the strategy as soon as possible, but I do not want to pre-empt the important work of the taskforce. They have been through this journey for some time. The taskforce and the work that they have been pulling together has been complemented by a lot of community consultation, so I am loath to put a specific timeframe on the work, other than to agree with you that I believe that it is a priority. But that is separate and distinct to work that the Attorney is leading on anti-vilification measures. I think we have talked about that quite a bit and the Attorney has answered a number of questions in this place in relation to that body of work. That is over and above the \$4.4 million in the multicultural affairs portfolio.

Ministers statements: family services

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:17): I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is continuing to invest in family services, providing early intervention to at-risk families. In the 2024–25 budget we are investing \$198 million in family services, providing funding for family preservation and reunification response, early help family services, family group conferencing, Putting Families First and other family services aimed at diverting families from statutory services. I am proud to say that this investment continues to grow the total funding for family services, and we are investing in these programs because we know that they work. Funding from the 2024–25 state budget will enable 3330 families to continue to benefit from the early help family service, over 1400 families per year to continue to have access to the family preservation and reunification response, over 1400 families to have access to family group conferencing and 72 families to have access to Putting Families First.

Overall, our family services platform provides statewide coverage across a continuum of needs from emerging to complex. Services are designed to be repeatable, adaptive, flexible and scalable. This includes capacity to respond to specific ages and stages and different family contexts. Importantly, culturally safe practices support work with Aboriginal children and families. We have more than tripled funding for family services from \$120 million per annum in 2012–13 under those opposite to \$425 million per annum in 2024–25.

Last sitting week I advised the house that I was assuming that those opposite were not intending to be dishonest by alleging that we had cut the child protection and family services output, and to assist them I provided those opposite with the page references in the 'Department Performance Statement' – 39 for a reminder – that showed our increase in this funding. But just yesterday, despite me providing assistance in how to read a budget paper and interpret data, we saw quotes in the *Herald Sun* from the shadow minister again misleading the Victorian people by stating that we had cut the child protection and family services output. President, we will keep investing in child protection and family services while those opposite – (*Time expired*)

Stalking law reform

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:19): (553) My question is to the Attorney-General. In June 2022 the Victorian Law Reform Commission handed its final report on stalking to the Labor

government. This report contained 45 recommendations to improve safety, especially for women, who sadly, are far more likely to be victims of stalking behaviour. On Friday at PAEC the Attorney-General stated that the government will not formally respond to these 45 recommendations. Given the Labor government's claim about tackling gendered violence against women, why is the government refusing to formally respond to the law reform commission's recommendations into tackling stalking?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:20): I thank Dr Heath for her question and her interest in this area. My response in PAEC was that the question implied that there was going to be a formal, written, verse-by-chapter response to the VLRC report. What I was at pains to explain is that unlike parliamentary inquiry reports, VLRC reports do not have a requirement to provide a formal written response back. What I am more interested in is drawing on the work of the VLRC to inform policy changes and produce real outcomes. Actions are much better than spending time writing down responses. I would prefer to feed them into the current work that we are doing.

We are continuing our work in relation to women's safety. I was honoured to stand with the Premier today, the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence, the Minister for Women and the new Parliamentary Secretary for Men's Behaviour Change, accompanied by a victim-survivor, talking about all of the initiatives that are in the package announced today. Coming back to your question about stalking, I did reaffirm the government's commitment to a broader piece of legislation on women's safety to be brought into the Parliament next week. We will be amending section 21A of the Crimes Act. That is the crime of stalking. The report showed that the crime of stalking in Victoria is actually very well developed. It covers a range of behaviours that are not covered in other jurisdictions. For example, in other jurisdictions you have to prove that you knew someone was stalking. We do not have those types of barriers here. We have good laws, but we want to make them even better. We have identified some gaps in the ability for them to be as clear as they could be. 'Course of conduct' is something that we need to better define, and that is part of picking up the recommendations in relation to the stalking report.

I have got a copy of the recommendations here, Dr Heath, and I am happy to talk to you offline about it, but a lot of this is built into the work that we are doing. It talks about reviews, looking at cyberstalking, identifying gaps, are there shortages in data? A lot of these recommendations are about how we look at the system to improve it. It is not as though there is a series of 'will you' or 'won't you' types of recommendations in here. As I said, I am more than happy to take you through here and show you where a lot of this work is building into the broader women's safety package.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:23): I thank the Attorney for her response. Celeste Manno's mother Aggie Di Mauro has campaigned for stronger stalking laws in the light of the horrific death of her daughter at the hands of a stalker. Celeste's murder was the trigger for the VLRC's report on stalking. As the final report noted of Aggie:

Her relentless pursuit of justice has been an inspiration. She often said that nothing would bring Celeste back, but this report will be a fitting legacy of her lovely daughter.

How is refusing to formally respond to these 45 recommendations in any way respectful to Aggie Di Mauro or the memory of Celeste Manno?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:23): Dr Heath, what happened to Celeste Manno is a tragedy. I have spent a lot of time with that family and I cannot imagine how hard it is for them, but they have certainly outlined it in their words to me on a number of occasions. Yes, that tragic case has indeed sparked a lot of the reviews and the consideration. Importantly, one of the recommendations to come out of the VLRC's work is the stalking and harassment tool that the police use, which is about identifying high-risk perpetrators when victims come into the police station. That is very much the experience of Celeste and her mother – coming into the police station, telling the story and wanting to get the help that they deserved, and the police having the ability to make sure that they can accurately identify those high-risk perpetrators.

That tool is currently under trial with VicPol in two locations, and it is something I am talking to them about, the broader application – *(Time expired)*

Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:24): (554) My question is also for the Attorney-General. Governments throughout the world have found themselves becoming captured by radical gender ideology. However, unlike many other governments, Victoria continues to bury its head in the sand following the release of the Cass review. It was reported by Bernard Lane in *Gender Clinic News* that last week the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission held an online briefing on the change and suppression act. A question from the audience about the Cass review was met with a response that likened England's landmark report to disinformation from a 'village idiot'. They then went on to claim that the Cass review was 'not legitimate at all'. Is it appropriate that VEOHRC makes public claims about the legitimacy of scientific literature?

The PRESIDENT: I do not think the minister is responsible for that particular organisation.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:25): There are a couple of issues that I have with your question, Mr Limbrick. I have no reason to doubt your words, but you are relaying third-hand, possibly fourth-hand, an incident that you cannot verify, and I certainly cannot verify. You are also seeking an opinion from me about an organisation that I have high regard for, but I certainly do not have responsibility for directing the actions of an independent agency. They do good work in relation to talking to community about a range of matters that protect people and respond to human rights discrimination, anti-vilification and the like, and I commend them for that good work. In relation to the specifics of your question, I think there are just too many problems with it for me to go on any further.

David Limbrick: On a point of order, President, I am actually not asking for an opinion, I am asking for –

Jaclyn SYMES: You said, 'Is it appropriate?'

David Limbrick: Well, is it within their remit that they make public statements about scientific literature?

The PRESIDENT: I will call you for your supplementary. The minister has answered.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:27): Is it within the remit of VEOHRC to make public statements about scientific literature? Because to me it does not seem to be something that their organisation should be doing.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:27): As I said, Mr Limbrick, I do not think it is appropriate for me to be drawn on specific comments that cannot be verified. What I can say is that it is important for VEOHRC to be out there talking to the community and responding to questions that are put to them.

Ministers statements: medical research

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:27): I rise to update the house on the world-leading research our government is backing to reduce the transmission of respiratory viruses in residential aged care, such as COVID-19 and influenza. I was pleased to visit Boyne Russell House in Brunswick last week to announce \$16.8 million of investment to deliver a trial that will assess the efficacy of germicidal ultraviolet light technology in a real-world setting to help reduce the level of COVID-19 and other airborne viruses in aged care residences. Completely safe for residents and staff, the technology works by shining an invisible ultraviolet light across the ceiling with the purpose of neutralising particles of airborne viruses in the room. It will be the first time the technology is measured in a clinical study.

Aged care services are home to some of our oldest and most vulnerable Victorians, and this trial was established in direct response to the severe impact the pandemic had across the aged care setting. The study is about new ways of reducing illness in our aged care facilities, keeping residents, staff and visitors safe and reducing the pressure on our broader health system during peak COVID-19 and flu season. After a successful trial, ultraviolet light will now be installed in facilities across Melbourne and Geelong over the coming weeks before the study led by the Burnet Institute – those very clever people – formally commences. A successful outcome could pave the way for a wider rollout of this technology in other health settings, and I am looking forward to seeing the results with interest.

Corrections system

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:29): (555) My question is to the Minister for Corrections. During her appearance at PAEC last week the commissioner for corrections noted that it is too difficult to know if minimum staffing levels at Victoria's adult correctional facilities are being met. As the responsible minister, how is it appropriate that the system you oversee cannot measure a key benchmark?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:29): I thank Mr Mulholland for his question and his interest in the commissioner's comments at PAEC. What I will say is that every facility must be maintained in a safe way. That is an obligation that is not just what my expectation is, that is the law. As employers the department have an obligation to ensure all of their workplaces, not only in my portfolio but across portfolios, are as safe as possible, and as an employer that is an obligation that I am sure the department take very seriously and as minister I take very seriously. In my previous career I was a personal injury lawyer, and I saw firsthand the results that an unsafe workplace can have on not only the injured worker but their families, their loved ones and their communities. As a government that is why we introduced laws to provide greater protections for workers. The industrial manslaughter laws were the first in the nation, so we do not just talk about workplace safety, we take action.

In relation to our corrections system, we are in a unique position in Victoria at the moment, where we have 25 per cent less people in corrections than we did pre pandemic. That is a good position to be in, especially when I reflect on the position that other jurisdictions are in, where they have got capacity issues and they have a range of other issues. As a government, we will continue to invest in programs to provide not only better facilities but better training and the implementation of better technologies to make these facilities as safe as possible. I want to thank our hardworking corrections staff, because I know they do an amazing job in an inherently complex environment. We will continue to support them and not just try to score cheap political points.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:31): I was going to make a point of order because the minister went nowhere near the question about minimum staffing levels and he or his commissioner not knowing the minimum staffing levels and the benchmark. But I ask as a supplementary: will you request that the department implement a suitable system to track staffing levels, and if not, why not?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (12:31): I think in my substantive, Mr Mulholland, I did answer your question. It is my expectation that these facilities are kept as safe as possible, and that is not just my expectation, that is the law. That is the law in Victoria. In terms of staffing, at the moment, as I stated in my substantive, the number of people in our custodial settings is 25 per cent lower than what it was pre pandemic. We are employing at all our facilities, from what I have seen, a relatively good complement of staff. We are continuing to invest in technologies and facilities and better training to ensure that they are as safe as possible. This is an inherently challenging environment, and I do thank the frontline staff for the amazing work they do.

If you look at the ROGS data, one of the indicators of how prisons are performing in terms of staffing ratios, for example, is out-of-cell hours. Victoria continues to perform better than other jurisdictions

in relation to out-of-cell hours. That is one indicator of how our staffing ratios are working, but there are many indicators, and my expectation is that these facilities are as safe as possible.

Early childhood education

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:33): (556) My question is for the Minister for Children. Minister, your predecessor believed that the community sector sessional kinder services would not charge higher fees to adjust their operating model under the government's kinder arrangements, despite the experience in fact of many parents. I therefore ask: do you accept that some community sector services have raised their fees and will raise their fees to adjust their operating model to the government's kinder program and that additional support is therefore required?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:33): I am very pleased to receive and respond to Mr Davis's question, because I have been seeking to clear up whether those opposite support free kinder or they do not. It certainly –

Members interjecting.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: President, I cannot hear myself, let alone assume that the chamber can hear me, for those who might be yelling over the top of me.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, the minister has started off on the wrong tack. She started off attacking the opposition. She should just answer the simple question.

The PRESIDENT: I am tempted to go and add a ruling to the book about ruling about the wrong tack. The minister has just started, and I would appreciate it – and I appreciate it is coming from all sides of the chamber – if the minister can answer the question in silence.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you very much, President. I appreciate that those opposite might wish they were on the answer side of question time, but if you would like to answer your own questions, I suggest perhaps do not ask them in the first instance. But what I have been seeking to understand is whether those opposite support free kinder or they do not support free kinder, let alone getting into the intricacies.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: I have not called you yet, Mr Davis. Dr Heath was up for a point of order before you, sorry.

Renee Heath interjected.

The PRESIDENT: You will give him yours? Okay.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, question time is where the opposition or non-government parties ask questions of the government ministers, and they answer the questions. It is not a time for the minister to seek information from the opposition – actually the opposite is the case – so it is just on relevance.

The PRESIDENT: I will call the minister back to the question.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you very much. I was very much seeking to be relevant, but as I have said, I am trying to understand whether those opposite support free kinder or they do not, because the shadow minister recently wrote to me asking whether kinders would be able to charge an additional fee. I was a bit confused because judging from those opposite the question seems to suggest that they are not in favour of charging additional fees, and yet the shadow minister for education is writing to me and asking me whether or not kinders should be allowed to charge an additional fee.

Our Best Start, Best Life reforms, which include free kinder, are an important part of ensuring that every child in Victoria gets access to two years of learning, because we know that children who get two years of learning do better at school, they do better in the transition to school and their school

journey, and their school outcomes are better both through primary school and secondary school if they get access to kinder, and an important part of delivering access to kinder for children is free kinder. So those opposite, instead of asking such ridiculous questions in question time, need to decide whether they support the early education of our children through the delivery of free kinder or if they do not.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:37): We have heard a little rant there, but let me thereby ask this question. Minister, a briefing signed by the Acting Treasurer Danny Pearson released \$1.2 million across 2022–23 and 2023–24 to provide transitional support for these community sector sessional services who currently charge higher fees to adjust their operating model, and I therefore ask: will your department provide additional support in 2024–25?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:37): Thank you, Mr Davis, for your question. More than 90 per cent of services eligible to participate in free kinder are participating in free kinder. We also know that the funding model for kindergarten is ensuring that there is adequate funding available for those kinder programs. What those opposite need to do is decide whether or not they actually support free kinder, and instead of having the shadow minister write to me asking to charge additional fees and then putting questions like this suggesting that somehow the funding model does not work, they need to work out on their own side whether they support free kinder and support the early education of children in Victoria or if they do not.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, the minister again is trying to attack the opposition rather than answering the simple question: will your department provide additional support in 2024–25, as they did in the previous two years?

The PRESIDENT: I believe the minister was relevant to the question that she was asked, but I will uphold that in question time, as per the previous rulings, the answers are not there for the ministers to hop in to the opposition, so I will call the minister back to the question.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you, President, and I am more than happy to talk about the extensive investment that we are providing in early education and in particular in kinder. The Best Start, Best Life reforms are nation leading. They represent a \$14 billion investment in the early education of children, because we know that children who have access to two years of early education do better in their educational journey and their lifelong outcomes than those who do not.

Ministers statements: family violence

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (12:39): I have touched on some of these issues today, but I would like to send us home on a Thursday talking again about the Allan Labor government's commitment to tackling family violence and women's safety related issues. I have been working in this space for many, many years, and I have seen our response to family violence having been built from the ground up and continually improved because it has been a continual focus of this government. I commend the efforts of courts, police, legal services and especially the victim-survivors and their advocates who have come forward to share their stories and experiences. I am proud to have delivered recent legislative reform in this space, such as the 22 protections for victims of sexual offences. We introduced an affirmative model of consent, made stealing a crime and introduced new jury directions to address common misconceptions about sexual violence, just to name a few. Last year we did changes to non-fatal strangulation and made it a standalone offence, highlighting that it is the reddest of red flags and a precursor to serious injury or death, predominantly for women.

But there is always more to do. We need to ensure police can appropriately charge offenders and the justice system can hold perpetrators to account. Part of our announcements today include strengthening laws, and we will introduce a new minimum length for family violence intervention orders and improve service options, work with stakeholders to look at giving police the power to issue longer family violence safety notices or a version of an intervention order, change the offence of

stalking to ensure it is clearer and improve personal safety intervention orders. The reforms announced today address what we have heard from victims, from the police, from the courts and from those amazing advocates, and we will consult thoroughly on any further changes. We will work out the exact details and we will have legislation in 2025.

We know that you cannot just focus on the justice system when it comes to addressing women's safety and think that that will fix it. There is so much more to do – it is a bigger picture. That is why I am very pleased to be co-leading the ministerial action working group to continue looking at how we can further prevent and respond to family violence and keep women and children safe.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:41): That ends questions and ministers statements. Minister Symes will get answers for both of Ms Purcell's questions from the Minister for Outdoor Recreation. I know Minister Stitt offered to Dr Mansfield, outside the standing orders, if she can get any extra information for her.

Constituency questions

Eastern Victoria Region

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (12:41): (899) My question is for the Minister for Consumer Affairs in the other place. Financial counsellors provide an incredible role supporting Victorians when they are in times of hardship and ensuring that our big corporates in Victoria are delivering on their responsibilities to support Victorians in that hardship. Whether it is telcos, whether it is road toll operators, whether it is banks or whether it is insurers, I am proud to have been part of a government that has ensured that sufficient legislation and regulation is in place to protect Victorian consumers, because we know as sure as hell the Liberals would never pass such laws to protect Victorian consumers. I am proud that the most recent budget has money to assist Victorians with the cost of living and supporting families, and I am also proud that there is millions of dollars to support financial counsellors and the work they are doing. Minister, how are we supporting Victorians to access essential financial counselling services?

Melina Bath: On a point of order, President, constituency questions need to be specifically about constituents in your electorate. That was a generalist question that had no relevance to Eastern Victoria Region.

The PRESIDENT: Ms Bath, before I called the next constituency question, I was going to say I was happy that Mr McIntosh was prepared to forge through when I could not hear him because of all the conversations around the room.

Tom McIntosh: I'll have another go if you like.

The PRESIDENT: No.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! What about if I just review it and remind members –

Tom McIntosh interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order! I remind members that sometimes people can be questioned about what a constituency question is across the board. I will make sure people try to keep their constituency questions relevant to the standing orders as best as possible.

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:44): (900) My question is for the Minister for Health. When will construction on the City of Whittlesea community hospital be completed, and when will it start accepting patients? In the lead-up to the 2022 Victoria election the Liberal Party committed to investing \$300 million to build a new Plenty Valley hospital if they were elected. The Labor

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government instead decided to build a much smaller health centre in Mernda with no overnight beds, calling it the City of Whittlesea community hospital. In June 2022 the minister announced the appointment of contractors for the Whittlesea community hospital, saying it would be completed in 2024, but the last Victorian budget says that the City of Whittlesea, Pakenham and Point Cook community hospitals will be completed in 2025 and 2026. Due to its own financial mismanagement, this Labor government has delayed the completion date for the City of Whittlesea community hospital by up to two years. Concerned residents, as well as health workers, in the area need clarity on when the hospital will be open for business, and the minister must confirm its new completion date.

Northern Victoria Region

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:45): (901) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. On 7 May a koala died from a road strike in the Macedon Ranges after having her jaw shattered. The following week two koalas were hit by cars in the same area on 11 May. Neither driver stopped nor called wildlife rescue teams. The first female was left overnight and was freezing by the time one of my constituents called her in. The second male sustained serious head trauma. Despite working around the clock to save both, they both died from their horrific injuries. Carers at the Wildlings are pleading with VicRoads to take action. They currently have a joey in care named Nettle that they are afraid to release, knowing she too could meet a similar fate as these other koalas. Will the minister implement signage to caution wildlife crossings in the Macedon Ranges?

Southern Metropolitan Region

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:46): (902) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety in the other place, Minister Horne. What can be done to improve pedestrian safety in my community of Hawthorn? My community of Hawthorn dearly miss their former hardworking member John Kennedy, an enthusiastic user of public transport and supporter of pedestrian safety. As a former branch secretary of the Transport Workers' Union, I know the importance of keeping our road users safe. With their local member too busy fighting internal political games, I have been spending a lot of time in Hawthorn over the past year and a half. Many pedestrians who frequent Auburn train station have raised concerns with me about their safety. We know that there can be high-volume and high-speed traffic during the rush hours after work and school. This can become dangerous. Minister, let us work together to improve pedestrian safety in the Auburn area in the electorate of Hawthorn.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:47): (903) My constituency question is again for the Minister for Mental Health, and it is in relation to an issue I raised in the adjournment last night around the sobering-up centre in St Kilda. She sighs at my questions, but these are important issues for the residents who were again abused by employees last night. Now, the government has said this sobering-up centre –

A member interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: They were abused and called racist last night. They are getting more and more aggressive, and they get more and more fearful, the residents. But the government promised that this centre would be open 24/7, 365 days a year. There are people that have slept outside the door. I have photos of that if you would like to see it. So the question is: is the government going to keep this centre open fully staffed and provide a safe place for people that are seeking the assistance? These employees are there on a part-time basis, and could you please counsel them again to stop abusing residents like they are regularly doing?

Western Victoria Region

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:48): (904) My constituency question is for the Minister for Education. In 2022 the then –

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Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Can we reset the clock.

Sarah MANSFIELD: My constituency question is for the Minister for Education.

Members interjecting.

Michael Galea: On a point of order, President – apologies to Dr Mansfield – it is not appropriate for members to be waving around props as an interjection in the chamber.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! We are getting a bit loose. We are going to have to reset the clock again. If we have to do that 15 times until we get to lunchtime, we will continue with the constituency questions after that.

Sarah MANSFIELD: My constituency question is for the Minister for Education. In 2022 the then Premier and member for South Barwon announced \$11.2 million to Belmont High School to provide much-needed new facilities and repairs. The school councillors contacted me as they are yet to see any progress. On 10 May I visited the school as part of the Be Bold Be Heard initiative working to empower young high school students across Geelong. Belmont High is an outstanding public school, but while onsite I was shown the dire state of the school's buildings. The students, their families and teachers deserve better. Minister, will you follow through on your 2022 election commitment and provide Belmont High with the \$11.2 million of infrastructure funding?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:50): (905) My question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. This year's state budget included \$29.7 million in additional funding to deliver expanded and upgraded bus services, helping people to get where they need to sooner. This included upgrades to the route 800 service, which included the provision of Sunday services. I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the hard work and advocacy of public transport advocate Peter Parker, who has been extremely forthcoming and vocal on this upgrade, and it is wonderful to see once again a Labor government listening to the community and delivering on what they are asking for. Minister, how many commuters in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region will benefit from Sunday services and expanded services on route 800 running from Dandenong to Chadstone?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (12:51): (906) My constituency question is to the Minister for Water regarding the Victorian Constraints Measures Program. The program completed its feasibility study last year, but I understand the final report on that study was to be released by the end of March. It has still not been released. My constituents in the Murrindindi shire need to know the outcome of this report as soon as possible in the light of the fact that Eildon Weir is again over 90 per cent full, with irrigation season finishing shortly and a strong La Niña forecast for later this year. When will this feasibility study be released to the public along with the technical documents associated with this report?

The PRESIDENT: I did not rule on Mr Galea's point of order because I stood up and acted like everyone's dad instead. Mr Galea, you are right: props should not be waved around.

Northern Metropolitan Region

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (12:52): (907) My constituency question is for the Minister for Emergency Services. I ask that she sustainably fund the Victorian State Emergency Service Fawkner unit so their volunteers can continue to provide our community with their vital emergency response services. VICSES has over 4800 volunteers across the state who sacrifice their time to help their communities. Unfortunately, the VICSES has not been sustainably funded for years.

These volunteers often find themselves at sausage sizzles or on the street asking passers-by for money so they can fund their units appropriately. Fifty-one per cent of the VICSES fleet is due to reach the end of its life by 2028, necessitating a capital investment of over \$150 million. Without recurrent capital investment and ongoing decreases to funding, volunteers will need to keep spending more time fundraising so they can work safely. But this comes at a cost to their own personal lives when it really should be the state funding this essential service, including at the Fawkner unit. Minister, will you sustainably fund the VICSES Fawkner unit?

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:53): (908) My constituency matter is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and it relates to roadside maintenance or lack thereof at the Agar and Corinella roads intersection near Coronet Bay. This intersection unfortunately has a history of road crashes. Indeed the former Liberal and National coalition government in 2016 created some road improvements, raising the pavement and installing markers, signposts, guardrails et cetera. Recently the speed limit has dropped from 100 to 60 kilometres per hour, but the constituents' issue is that there is a need for tea-tree roadside maintenance everywhere. So I ask the minister: will she please cut back all this tea-tree and make sure that there is clear vision to reduce that safety hazard for my constituency? Also, the Regional Roads Victoria maintenance budget has been cut and cut and cut. They are the meat in the sandwich. We need to make sure that people are safe when they drive through intersections.

Southern Metropolitan Region

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:54): (909) My matter is for the attention of the Minister for Transport Infrastructure and concerns the Suburban Rail Loop and the ongoing issues with the Suburban Rail Loop and some of the planning around the Suburban Rail Loop. We have discovered today in the paper and elsewhere that the City of Monash has essentially been bullied into agreeing to a large area of the municipality having six-storey buildings. This has not been the case – and I make the point that these areas that are in question are in my electorate in Clayton, Monash University and Glen Waverley – and I ask the minister: will the minister reconsider the attitude towards the City of Monash, reconsider the bullying approach, reconsider the decision to forcibly take over planning powers – *(Time expired)*

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:55): (910) My question is for the Minister for Housing. Rental providers are leaving Victoria at a record rate. What incentives will you advocate for to keep rental providers in Victoria? Since Labor were elected, they have introduced 55 new or increased taxes, including around 30 of those being on property and land, all in the midst of a housing crisis. What Labor cannot seem to understand is that when they tax things, they get more expensive, and ultimately it is vulnerable Victorians that are hardest hit. In this case it is Victorians who are at risk of homelessness. My constituent in Pakenham has provided a rental property for the same tenant for 10 years. It is their home. But due to increased taxes and costs, they are forced to sell. A real estate agent in my area said that for every four homes on the rental market that are sold, only one returns to the market. This is something Labor should address as a matter of urgency.

The PRESIDENT: Dr Heath, I am led to believe that it might be better to direct it to the Minister for Consumer Affairs.

Renee HEATH: That is fine.

The PRESIDENT: And if I am wrong, you can blame me.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:56): (911) My constituency matter is directed towards the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events. Recently I had the pleasure of joining the

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Nunawading Lions football club reserves for a game against Scoresby. While we did not secure victory, we actually had remarkable progress by doubling the previous week's score from 1 to 2 points. I was lucky enough – sorry, skilful enough – to get five disposals, and remarkably I was only flattened twice. I am thrilled to report I came away completely uninjured, and I would be happy to share strategies with the member for Nepean on that.

I get to enjoy football, but not so our schools. I have been shocked by the number of schools in my electorate that do not have AFL-viable fields because of portables extending. This beautiful Indigenous game of ours has been central to uniting our community for generations, but it is now being marginalised. I would ask the minister to ensure that school ovals for generations to come will be available so that we can continue to enjoy this great game.

The PRESIDENT: I take it they are school ovals in the east?

Richard WELCH: In the eastern suburbs, North-East Metro.

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:57): (912) My constituency question for the Minister for Health comes from a constituent in South Barwon – lacking a local member at the moment, but anyway – and it concerns the installation of incontinence bins in male public toilet facilities. 1.34 million Australian boys and men live with incontinence, but for those who use incontinence products there are very few – or no – places to swiftly dispose of them. There are several reasons as to why men may experience incontinence, such as post surgery; older age; diabetes; cancer, including prostate, bowel or bladder; and the list continues. This widespread issue is not often talked about due to the shame and embarrassment that many men and boys feel. It is important for us to support them, just as we do for women when we provide sanitary bins. Minister, will you afford men the dignity in public bathrooms by supporting the installation of disposable bins for incontinence products in male public toilets?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:58): (913) My question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport, and it is: when will the government finally commit to Wollert rail? Over the weekend I and my good friend member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region Mr Richard Welch met with the residents association of Epping North and Wollert. It was I would say a passionate discussion, that also included the Labor member for Thomastown. However, locals were lively and in agreement that they feel forgotten by this government, who are prioritising the Suburban Rail Loop over this fast-growing community. Aurora resident Tony Francis says the failure to extend the rail line into Epping's north has created an unhealthy road culture. Labor have put all the houses in, taken all the stamp duty revenue, spent it for the Suburban Rail Loop and blowouts on the North East Link, and the suggestion of a busway by the Labor MP went down like a lead balloon.

The PRESIDENT: We have done 15 constituency questions, but I reckon if we call Mr Luu, he will take us beautifully to 1 o'clock.

Western Metropolitan Region

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (13:00): (914) My constituency question is directed to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, seeking some clarity regarding the government's position on the proposed Melbourne Airport link. Can the minister please provide an update to my constituent on the status of the previous \$10 billion offered by the Melbourne Airport towards an underground airport railway station, and does the Allan government intend to use this offer from the Melbourne Airport? It was suggested by the Deputy Premier Ben Carroll, member for Niddrie, that the previous offer would have seen the Melbourne Airport rail built tomorrow. At the moment my constituent is a bit confused. Worksites are abandoned. The Treasurer was earlier contemplating turning government

investment to Avalon Airport. Every Labor government has promised to deliver the project. The rail link is a generation-defining project. My constituents deserve an answer.

Sitting suspended 1:00 pm until 2:02 pm.

Bills

Financial Management Amendment (Gender Responsive Budgeting) Bill 2024

Committee

Resumed.

Clause 1 further considered (14:02)

Georgie CROZIER: Before question time we were speaking about the key metrics the government will use to monitor. I am just wondering: will the government's annual financial statement report on these metrics?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: There is a budget paper 3 measure in relation to number of people trained. But as I said earlier, the outcomes framework measure is being developed, so once we have that, we will also have further measures.

Georgie CROZIER: Minister, clause 1 of the bill states that it includes:

... in the principles of sound financial management a requirement to consider and promote gender equality and inclusivity in the pursuit of spending and taxing policies ...

I want to ask around that issue, around the principles of sound financial management: in the 2024–25 budget government forecasts that debt will reach \$187.8 billion by mid-2028, so would the government categorise their financial management of the state's balance sheet as being sound?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Ms Crozier, really we are not talking about the budget as such here, we are talking about the broader framework settings that are created in relation to gender-responsive budgeting as a tool. That is really what this goes to as opposed to the question that was put.

Georgie CROZIER: I appreciate that you are trying to work in the gender response through this, but the very first point of clause 1 talks about the 'principles of sound financial management' and a requirement that this is then to be considered. My question is therefore: could you define what that 'sound financial management' is as a principle so that people can understand how the gender requirement then fits into that aspect?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I think it is important that the questions as they are put here today are not about other acts, other legislation and definitions in other pieces of legislation. What we are talking about here is gender-responsive budgeting and it being a tool for identifying budget measures which go to closing gender gaps and advancing gender equality objectives. I appreciate that the questions that have been put might be of interest to the opposition, but what we need to go to here are questions in relation to this bill and gender-responsive budgeting.

Georgie CROZIER: Could I seek some guidance from you, please, Deputy President?

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Yes.

Georgie CROZIER: This bill amends the Financial Management Act 1994. Clause 1 goes to this very point – it speaks about the Financial Management Act and about the principles of sound financial management. So when the government comes in and says it is moving to gender-responsive budgeting, surely that has an impact on that Financial Management Act. I think my questions are in order, given that clause 1 refers to that act.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Ms Crozier, I am sorry, I cannot direct the minister how to answer the question, but it would be helpful if the minister was responsive.

Georgie CROZIER: Well, I will have another go, Minister. And if you are going to refuse to answer questions based on this, I think you have got to, frankly, go and start again with your bill, because the whole of clause 1, in fact this whole bill, is amending the Financial Management Act. It is ridiculous to say it has got nothing to do with it when point one of clause 1 makes it very clear that it is about principles of sound financial management. Anyway, I think it is clear the government does not have sound financial management, so I will move on. I am going to go back to a question around this because I do think it is relevant to women and what you are trying to achieve here. I will say it again before I ask the next question. Point one of clause 1 says:

to include in the principles of sound financial management a requirement to consider and promote gender equality and inclusivity in the pursuit of spending and taxing policies ...

Okay? So that is in the context of that first point.

Interest on debt is expected to surpass \$9 billion per year by mid-2028, representing \$25.6 million each and every day. Does the government think that this level of spending to service their debt is financially sound and meeting the requirements of spending and taxing policies as outlined in clause 1 of this bill?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I would just go back to what the purpose of this bill is. I appreciate that Ms Crozier might like to use this as an opportunity to canvass more broad-ranging issues, but what we are seeking to do here is introduce a gender-responsive budgeting tool which identifies budget measures that go to closing gender gaps and advancing gender equality. To want to turn this into a conversation that is perhaps better suited to a question time debate around debt and other issues I think is missing the point of what this bill is about and what questions should go to today, which is clarifying the intents of the bill, and what we are going to is gender-responsive budgeting and the development of that tool.

Georgie CROZIER: Have you read the bill, Minister?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I have given it due consideration, Ms Crozier.

Georgie CROZIER: Then you would understand that in the first paragraph of the explanatory memorandum it says:

The Bill enshrines an enduring high level commitment to gender equality and inclusivity in spending and taxing policies ...

That is what the bill says, so when we have got a government making decisions that are very high spending and very high taxing, when we have got \$25.6 million a day in interest being paid and a debt that is running up to \$187.8 billion in just a couple of years, I would contest that it is actually going to be worse for closing what this bill is trying to achieve, because things will get harder in this state. That is why I am asking these questions. I am just trying to get an understanding about what financially sound looks like in the reality of what the budget is doing.

You are not the Treasurer. I understand that. It is not your responsibility for those overall decisions, but you are responsible at the table for this bill, and in the context of the overall budget, when it is becoming very difficult, I am trying to understand how you are going to make it better for women through those tools that you speak about when there is just such high debt. I will go to this next one. Again, it goes to the principles of sound financial management. You may not be able to answer it. Over the past decade the use of Treasurer's advances has grown by 3200 per cent, from \$364 million in 2013 to \$12.2 billion in 2022–23. Billions in taxpayers funds are being secretly stowed away for pre-election funding. Does the government think that this practice aligns with principles of sound financial management that go to the issue around spending and taxing policies and how women will be impacted through that initiative?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: You said it yourself, Ms Crozier: I am not the Treasurer. I appreciate the political pointscore that you are attempting to achieve here, but this is perhaps an issue that is better

suited to a question time discussion, or perhaps you could take some of these issues up with the Treasurer. But what we are here to answer right now are questions in the committee stage of this bill in relation to gender-responsive budgeting. What this bill is seeking to do is ensure that we have a tool to identify budget measures that will close gender gaps and advance gender equality in all circumstances.

Georgie CROZIER: If the debt is growing to \$187.8 billion and interest is being paid at \$25.6 million each and every day in just a couple of years, how is that going to help with that gender inclusivity that you speak of? People are going to lose their jobs. I know you were not listening to my speech, but I was talking about the impacts on women that this government's policies are directly having. They are leading to a loss of jobs, a loss of access to services and high cost-of-living pressures, and that directly impacts women. I think your government's policies are all wrong when you are increasing debt and interest payments to these extraordinary levels where women are the very people that are going to miss out. We have seen in the budget that kinder programs have been delayed. There have been cuts to women's health. There had been cuts all across the budget. What you are trying to achieve here is going to have a negative impact given the dire situation that this state's budget is in. I will move on to the next question because clearly you cannot answer it.

Clause 5 talks about empowering the minister to issue guidelines in relation to statements under the gender impacts of budgets in new division 4A of part 5 and gender impact assessments under new section 40AA. Can the government provide an overview of the scope of the guidelines the minister will be able to issue?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As we have outlined previously, Victoria's gender-responsive budgeting practice is built on the use of gender-impact assessments as a major tool to implement the practice across all of government. The Gender Equality Act 2020 requires gender impact assessments for policies, programs and services that will have a direct and significant impact on the public. There are many examples, but a clear example is in relation to pharmaceutical development trials. For example, the impact can reasonably be considered to be indirect and therefore an assessment would not be required under the Gender Equality Act 2020. However, if we did not include consideration of potential gender impacts from the beginning, the end results might be skewed or lead to exacerbating inequality. In situations like this the Treasurer would be able to request a gender impact assessment under the Financial Management Act 1994 and the amendments would work together and build on the requirements set out in the Gender Equality Act 2020 and clarify any inconsistencies or irregularities which may occur in the budgeting process. I will leave it there.

Georgie CROZIER: The bill does not provide a criterion for what a gender-responsive budget statement must contain. You mentioned the Financial Management Act and how it would apply. Has that guide been determined by the minister as yet, or is that still to be worked on?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Consistent with current requirements that are specified in the Financial Management Act 1994 in relation to budget statements and publications, the bill outlines a high-level requirement for a statement of the gender equality impact of the budget without prescribing a specific detail to be included. This approach allows future governments to address the requirements in a manner appropriate to them and enables the form and structure of any statement to evolve over time. For example, a government may choose to publish specific information in a chapter of an existing budget paper or produce a separate or standalone budget paper.

Georgie CROZIER: What information will actually be reported on annually in the government's gender-responsive budget statement then?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I have said previously, gender-responsive budgeting is an overarching term incorporating many different methods and tools, such as the gender impact assessments. It is important to look at international best practice. There is no single approach; instead, jurisdictions embed aspects of gender-responsive budgeting that are right for them. This bill does not

define gender-responsive budgeting, because some practices may not fit Victoria and other practices may still evolve over time. However, while the bill does not define or prescribe gender-responsive budgeting as a specific term, it does legislate important gender-responsive budgeting practices – being, for example, the gender impact assessments and gender budgeting information included in budget documentation – under the Financial Management Act 1994, which ensures that legislation remains relevant and practical. It will prioritise Victorian gender-responsive budgeting practices and international best practice as they may evolve over time.

Georgie CROZIER: Minister, I am just seeking clarification after what you have just described. The annual reporting does not need to be undertaken because this gender statement or gender impact statement is quite fluid, as you said, and the minister can put in various things as they see fit. So is there any consistency, and what mechanisms are in place to ensure that consistency, transparency and accountability are in place for the preparation of the gender impact statement? What you just described was a free-for-all.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The statement will include information, as I have said, on the impacts of the budget on gender equality, and this may include the impacts of specific initiatives.

Georgie CROZIER: Well, thank you, but that does not give us any reassurance about transparency and consistency. It seems like it is just very loose. What are the measures important to Victoria? You mentioned other jurisdictions, and I am just wondering, as you keep saying that other jurisdictions are doing various things. But this in Victoria does not have any accountability, it can be opened up, and I am just wondering where on earth this bill is going to go to next?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The budget papers include a compliance index of how the budget papers acquit legislative requirements, and this goes under independent Q and A as part of the budget production process, but I think what is clear in the presentation of this bill is that our priority is ensuring we have a gender-responsive budgeting tool which does go to ensuring that we have gender-responsive budgeting, which removes embedded inequalities by considering gender in all funding decisions which impact on Victorians.

Georgie CROZIER: Well, you have just opened yourself up, Minister. That last line about budget impacts to Victorians was exactly why I asked the questions previously about the debt.

Tom McIntosh interjected.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Mr McIntosh, Ms Crozier has the call.

Georgie CROZIER: Mr McIntosh, I know you want to be at the table, but you are not, and I am asking the minister.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: It is okay. Ms Crozier has the call. I ask that she be allowed to continue in silence.

Georgie CROZIER: I say again: the minister has just opened herself up around the budget, yet you refuse to answer questions relating to the budget, to the debt or to the interest payments that are going to directly impact women. It is farcical. On the government's Victorian budget 2024–25 website under the 'Gender Equality Budget Statement' there are several announcements promoting investment in women's health, skills and training, prevention of family violence and homelessness. Will future statements therefore also provide analysis on where the government's budget falls short and fails women?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I have said a number of times now, clearly this bill is about implementing a tool that is ensuring gender-responsive budgeting. That means we will have a tool to remove embedded inequalities by considering gender in all funding decisions with a direct impact on Victorians, which identifies how resources can be best allocated to close gender gaps and which

improves value for money by achieving gender equality goals concurrently with other policy goals. What this bill does is establish a tool that measures that.

Georgie CROZIER: It establishes a tool to measure them, but then you could not even answer whether it will be reported on annually. You could not answer that question, so you are creating a tool that is not going to be reported on annually. Is that correct?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: We are implementing a tool which will assist in the measurement of policies, but it is important to also note that no single piece of legislation can and should do this alone. It will work in concert with the Gender Equality Act 2020 to support improved design of policies, programs and services across government by taking into account how each affects the different needs of people of different genders and on different policy impacts.

Georgie CROZIER: You just mentioned different genders. How many genders are we talking about?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I have said a number of times, this is not about defining gender. It is about having a tool which looks at whether or not there are inequalities for people in the implementation of government policies.

Georgie CROZIER: Minister, you have said it is not about defining genders, but you have spoken about genders – plural. You cannot define what that is, so can I therefore assume that the government is leaving this wide open?

I want to go back to another statement before I get onto a question I have around that, though. On the government's Victorian budget 2024–25 website under the 'Gender Equality Budget Statement' it states that 130 initiatives funded in the budget have 'a positive impact on gender equality' and nine initiatives 'are expected to have a significant positive impact'. Will the outcomes of these programs as they relate to gender equality be reported on publicly?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sorry, Ms Crozier. Could you please repeat the question?

Georgie CROZIER: Sure. On the government's Victorian budget 2024–25 website under the 'Gender Equality Budget Statement' it is stated that 130 initiatives funded in the budget have a positive impact on gender equality. Nine initiatives are expected to have a significant positive impact. So the question I asked was: will the outcomes of these programs, as they relate to gender equality, be reported on publicly?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: That is something that we would remain open to in the future, Ms Crozier.

Georgie CROZIER: In the same line of questioning then, if I may, have the government considered making public the initiatives that do not have a positive impact on gender equality and would they also be reporting on those publicly?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: That will remain under consideration as well, Ms Crozier.

Georgie CROZIER: This is my last question, so I am just going to skip to it. In clause 6 it speaks about the principles of sound financial management again and where this requires considering and promoting gender equality and inclusivity, already referred to in section 23D of the principal act. It says these include:

... taking into account, where possible, that gender inequality may be compounded by other forms of disadvantage or discrimination that a person may experience on the basis of Aboriginality, age, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, race, religion, sexual orientation and other attributes.

Does the government have plans to provide a tool such as you say this bill is doing for any of those groups that I have just referred to so that they also have inclusivity around principles of sound financial

management in the pursuit of spending and taxing policies as outlined by this gender-responsive budgeting bill?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Inclusivity in the consideration of empowering access to opportunity, addressing structural inequalities and developing inclusive organisations is preferred because it highlights the action of addressing the barriers to equality. The approach taken in the bill under clause 6 allows for factors to also be under consideration when reflecting on inclusivity, and these factors – which include taking into account where possible that gender inequality may be compounded by the forms of disadvantage or discrimination that a person may experience on the basis of Aboriginality, age, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, race, religion, sexual orientation and other attributes – mirror the considerations found under section 9 of the Gender Equality Act 2020.

Georgie CROZIER: How can that be done if you are not taking in any reporting or looking at those mechanisms that I spoke of earlier around consistency and transparency around this statement? You are saying, ‘Well, we’re open to all of those things,’ but you are actually not measuring what is happening under this bill through the gender impacts.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I said earlier, the Minister for Women is developing a new gender equality outcomes framework. This will be realised in the future to provide a way to track these impacts.

Rachel PAYNE: Minister, submissions to the inquiry into gender-responsive budgeting suggested an accountability process through independent bodies. What independent review processes will this gender-responsive budgeting go through?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I have said, the Gender Equality Act 2020 sets out the requirements for when a gender impact assessment must be done and what it should cover, including requiring the gender impact assessment to include consideration of how policy programs are designed or reviewed as part of undertaking the assessment of equality, and there are opportunities for reviews of that.

In terms of what the government is doing in relation to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee recommendation about an independent gender budget reviewing process, the government obviously supported the PAEC recommendation in principle and is undertaking analysis to better understand the scope of any other relevant considerations. This analysis will be supported by consultation on the most effective way to implement such a group. As outlined in our response to the PAEC recommendation, this may include a phased approach over time.

Our approach to implementing GRB was to initially to focus on embedding the gender impact assessments as part of the budget process, to continue enhancing the ‘Gender Equality Budget Statement’ and to evolve the other practices over time. The independent inquiry into economic equity for Victorian women reported to government in 2021. The report provided a set of gender equality priorities to guide government decision-making in the early stages of GRB in Victoria. This panel essentially delivered what an independent group would provide while we consider options for a longer term model as well.

Rachel PAYNE: Minister, what progress has been made on the government’s establishment of an independent gender equality budget group that would undertake an annual gender equality needs assessment of these kinds of government initiatives?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I have said in relation to what the government is doing in relation to the PAEC recommendation to have an independent gender budget committee or review group, my answer is the same as that given previously.

Rachel PAYNE: So the government is committed to establishing an independent gender equality budget group. That is being undertaken?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I have said, this has been or is in the process of being explored. It was a recommendation that was supported in principle. The government continues to consider options for consultation as part of gender-responsive budgeting, which could include an independent gender-responsive budgeting advisory group as outlined previously in our PAEC recommendation response. This may include a phased approach over time.

Rachel PAYNE: Minister, does this government continue to reject the Austrian model of publishing gender impact analysis details for all initiatives in the budget papers?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I have said, the proposal that is before us today is the government's current proposal, which is establishing a gender-responsive budgeting tool to identify budget measures that will close gender gaps and advance gender equality objectives.

Rachel PAYNE: Will the statement of gender impacts include comparing outcomes against objectives, targets and indicators in a way that demonstrates measurable progress? I do note the minister previously answered questions around a tool that would be a measure of policies, programs and services. Am I thinking correctly that the tool is also accessible for managing objectives and targets?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes. As I said earlier, the Minister for Women is developing a new gender equality outcomes framework, which will be realised in the future and will provide a way to track impacts.

Rachel PAYNE: Am I correct in anticipating that that information will be public?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I am advised that it will be.

Rachel PAYNE: This will be my last question for the minister. Can the minister provide any examples of programs that have been varied in response to a gendered analysis of their impacts?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I am advised that any such information would be cabinet in confidence.

Clause agreed to; clauses 2 to 11 agreed to.

Reported to house without amendment.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (14:43): I move:

That the report be now adopted.

Motion agreed to.

Report adopted.

Third reading

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (14:43): I move:

That the bill be now read a third time.

Motion agreed to.

Read third time.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Pursuant to standing order 14.28, the bill will be returned to the Assembly with a message informing them that the Council have agreed to the bill without amendment.

Appropriation (Parliament 2024–2025) Bill 2024*Second reading***Debate resumed on motion of Harriet Shing:**

That the bill be now read a second time.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (14:44): I rise to speak on the Appropriation (Parliament 2024–2025) Bill 2024, which provides appropriation authority for payments from the Consolidated Fund to Parliament. The amounts contained in schedule 1 of the bill provide for the ongoing operations of Parliament, new output initiatives and new asset investment, insofar as these are funded by way of annual appropriation. In addition to the annual appropriations contained in the bill, funds are also made available to Parliament by way of special appropriation. These appropriations provide for the specific purposes set out in that legislation, and they do not lapse annually like the annual appropriation act.

Our Parliament is the cornerstone of our democracy, so while this bill is not a controversial one, it is important, as without a properly resourced Parliament we would have no effective parliamentary democracy. This bill is an appropriate time to talk about the hardworking staff involved in running our Parliament, so I would like to thank all of the staff, particularly the clerks and the Hansard team. I would like to thank them particularly for being on my case about getting them the names of members of my multicultural communities to ensure that their contribution is recorded in *Hansard* forever, as valuable as it is. Thank you to the committee staff, the ushers and the catering staff. I thank the gardeners in particular for the amazing gardens we have. The security staff I think have been doing a terrific job under difficult circumstances of late. The cleaning staff, all of our electorate officers, the staff that work in the parliamentary library and the Parliamentary Budget Office as well – I am very grateful for all the support that you all give, and I know my colleagues are as well.

I am privileged to have taken part in a number of committees, and committee inquiries, in the past year. I am on the Economy and Infrastructure Committee, and we have had several inquiries. A particular shout-out to Michael Baker for the extraordinary work he has done. Particularly of note was the inquiry on the WorkCover bill, when he was working all the way in the lead-up to Christmas. We all thought we were not going to get our summer holidays, and then he helped pull everything together for that inquiry. In the end the Liberals and Nationals were justified in sending that bill to an inquiry, because it led to a much better outcome for both businesses and for workers.

It is not only the staff in the Parliament that do a great job but all those who deal with parliamentary officers around the place. I know many members have been through this process, which can seem long, but I was involved in an office relocation this year. I would like to particularly thank Spencer King from the property team, who made the whole process run as seamlessly as possible. It was great to move my office to Meadow Heights shopping centre in the electorate of Greenvale. It is great to now be in a central location on the ground floor of a highly frequented shopping centre, where my office can be easily accessed to give advice, advocacy, referral services and support. It is really great to be there, as Meadow Heights is an extremely diverse part of Melbourne, with 20 per cent of the community speaking Turkish as their first language and 18 per cent speaking Arabic as their main language. This often creates a barrier in communities to accessing services and speaking to their members of Parliament, which is why I am very, very proud to have both Arabic- and Turkish-speaking staff members on hand to assist constituents in my community with their everyday needs. This is something that has been extremely well received by my community. It seems the word has got out that my office can ably assist people with services in their language, because that is often a barrier for people approaching their local MP, whether it be assisting them with visa applications, Centrelink services or accessing state government services.

It is great to also be able to offer my office as a free local meeting space for a number of community groups. I know a few that are very excited to take that up. I would like to particularly thank my

electorate officers – James Wilcox, Bernadette Khoury, Baris Duzova, Bora Evdiren and Kevin Zhu for ably assisting me in my role in the Northern Metropolitan Region. It is at times a stretch as one Liberal member in the Northern Metropolitan Region to represent such a large part of our state – from Melbourne CBD to Wallan – but I do it, and I do it somewhat passionately, and I try not to miss anyone, and my staff help with that every day. As the only MP at a state level with an office within the electorate of Greenvale, it is my honour to serve this community on behalf of the Parliament and of the Liberal Party. So I would like to thank my staff members for their support, but I would also like to thank the community in Meadow Heights, in Greenvale and in Roxburgh Park and the surrounding areas for how warmly they have welcomed me into the community. It is great to have people be able to come in and have a chat; especially when it is not a sitting week and I am there every day it is great to be able to go out in the local community. I am actually across the road from the Islamic Community Milli Gorus (ICMG) mosque, which some of my staff go to, so it is great to be able to greet people after Friday prayers as well and give them a free shopping bag on their way into the shops and also to be able to sit down and meet with different community groups.

It is an area that has not been well serviced for a long time. They have never had a local MP nearby. In the previous term Meadow Heights was part of a different electorate where the local member actually lived on the other side of town, the previous member for Broadmeadows, so it is great to be able to be there and be there in person to service the community, because if you look at the local road infrastructure and at the access to services, it is clear that this part of the world has been neglected for a long time. It is only since that seat received the single largest swing towards the Liberal Party in the entire state, 15.5 per cent, turning a super-safe Labor seat into a marginal seat that we will win at the next election, that Labor MPs and ministers have finally started paying some attention to our community.

It is great to be in the electorate of Greenvale every day servicing that community, and as I said, as the only MP with an office in the electorate it is great to be able to serve them and serve the community well. I was originally in Epping, on Cooper Street, and as is usual for MPs, particularly upper house MPs, I got given an office in an industrial estate on Cooper Street on the second floor where no constituent traverses – no constituents really traverse that area; it is more of an industrial area – and no constituent could possibly find it either. I think I had, in the space of the year that I was there, probably about 10 visitors, half of whom were searching for Bronwyn Halfpenny.

It is great to have the amount of people I had in a year daily now in Meadow Heights walking in, saying g'day and being able to support them. I want to acknowledge all the work that the property team did to make that happen, and I know it was received with great excitement from the community. Several times I wandered in as it was being fitted out and under construction, and one of the construction workers even recognised me from a duck hunting forum I held up in Craigieburn that the Deputy President was at which had over 400 people. He was very delighted that he was fitting out my office. But, as I said, as soon as I got into that office on Cooper Street in Epping, I did not really want to be there; I wanted to be where some people could access me, but I also wanted to be somewhere where people were not being represented very well.

I knew the property team was very busy – not their fault; they had a whole lot of new MPs at the last election they had to find offices for. I actually searched all the local listings for the commercial and retail real estate, found the office myself, spoke to the landlord and referred them on to the property team, who from that point were absolutely brilliant in setting the whole thing up. It was a fantastic outcome overall, but a fantastic outcome for the community to finally have a member of Parliament that listens to them, that engages with the community, that attends a lot of events in that community but also advocates on their behalf.

One of the things they would not be getting if it were not for a local MP in the area is the bus route extension. The 525 from Roxburgh Park to Greenvale is now being extended to Craigieburn Central, and that is because of the hard work that I did with the help of the Greenvale Residents Association. We had been on this case advocating for this bus extension for over a year. We had petition posters all

over Greenvale shopping centre and around the community; we had hundreds of signatures. The government finally, after waiting two years to spend any money collected from the Growth Areas Infrastructure Contribution Fund, allocated that to extending the bus route to Craigieburn shopping centre, which is a great outcome for this community. How can the nearest major shopping centre be inaccessible by public transport? So it is a great outcome for the community. What I would say to the community is that we are not done yet. I will continue to be present in the community – I and my office – serving constituents.

Look at the Frankston line. Our line has got greater usage than the Frankston line but half the frequency. So I am definitely advocating on that part and waiting with bated breath for the new Metro timetables to come out to see if we get that increased frequency. I am also advocating – I and my office – for things the community needs, like the stage 2 duplication of Mickleham Road, currently the most expensive road duplication in Victoria at \$222 million for 1.6 kilometres of duplication. If you put that into perspective, Plenty Road was 6.6 kilometres of duplication back in 2019–20 and it only cost \$145 million. So the people of Greenvale are copping a more expensive road for a much shorter distance. We need the second stage of Mickleham Road duplicated. Unfortunately, the state government pushed through the Craigieburn West precinct structure plan for about 10,000 new homes along the single-lane stretch of Mickleham Road. The council was against it, the community was against it; Labor pushed it through against the wishes of the community, and everyone says without the duplication of Mickleham Road all the way up to Craigieburn Road this is going to end up like another Kalkallo, another Labor traffic nightmare where people are waiting hours to get out of their housing estate. Again, as I said, as the only MP with an electorate office in the Greenvale electorate, I will keep advocating on their behalf, because people in the electorate of Greenvale deserve better.

It has been terrific to service that community and be out and about in the community near my electorate office, like on the weekend, when I was at St Mary's Ancient Church of the East. I was at Our Lady Guardian of Plants Chaldean parish as well. I have been to the ICMG mosque, the Turan Australia Association in Roxburgh Park and the Suleymaniye education centre next door to my office, and I have certainly visited a lot of the retailers around Meadow Heights shopping centre, where my office is, who are struggling under the weight of Labor's taxes, whether it be Labor's land tax, WorkCover premium increases or payroll tax. It is similar at Roxburgh Village down the road, where the tenant has passed on a lot of Labor's increased land tax to the retail offices.

Lee Tarlamis: On a point of order, Acting President, I think we are debating the Parliament appropriation bill, not the appropriation bill. I think the speaker may be going quite broad. He is talking about a number of things that do not really relate to the bill.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Thank you, Mr Tarlamis. I have literally just sat down, so I will just remind the member to stay within the confines of the bill and bat on.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Thank you, Acting President. Acting President, if you had been here, you would have known that I was talking about how my office can service the community and about all the things I am able to hear from the community and advocate for on their behalf as a result of having an office that was set up by the Parliament in the Greenvale electorate. As the only MP with an office inside the Greenvale electorate, I am able to better advocate for that community, who have been long forgotten by the Labor Party. The previous member, when it was a different boundary, I think he lived in Brighton – quite a long way from the area. Although I would say we are seeing lots of ministers out in Broady and in Greenvale as well, which we never used to get before it became a marginal seat. It is quite clear that they are quite concerned about the area. But people in the electorate know – through engaging with my parliamentary office, which was largely put together by the property team, and through the interactions I am able to have in my electorate office – that they have been forgotten by Labor.

It was great to be able to have my office opening recently, which was attended by Liberal leader John Pesutto, the Shadow Treasurer Brad Rowswell and a number of colleagues and friends and different

members of the community as well. It was great to have my old boss there in former senator Mitch Fifield, back from the UN, and Senator James Paterson as well. That was a terrific event.

It has been great to be able to host different groups in my electorate office, groups like the Greenvale Residents' Association and the Craigieburn Residents' Association, who are great advocates for their community. It is also a real privilege being able to be a voice for those people who have not had a voice in past. They have not had a voice who was able to advocate on their behalf, because their MPs have been part of the government that has not invested in the northern suburbs, that has not done anything for the northern suburbs, particularly the outer northern suburbs. Anyone who travels – as I travel to my electorate office, which was set up by the Parliament – on Somerton Road, Mickleham Road, Mount Ridley Road or Craigieburn Road knows that traffic in the north is an absolute nightmare.

I will keep speaking truth to power no matter how many points of order are taken. I will keep advocating on behalf of residents that I have met with in my electorate office, because it is really important that they have a voice in this place. I am looking forward to the good people of Greenvale having a new representative in 2026, a Liberal representative, because that is what they deserve, and that is what they will get.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all the staff members in the Parliament. I would like to thank all my staff, but I would particularly like to thank all of the committee secretaries and all of the committee managers for the incredible work they do on committees. As I said, Michael Baker does a terrific job and did a terrific job in the WorkCover inquiry and in the stamp duty inquiry. I know we have got the pig-gassing inquiry coming up and we do have the local government inquiry coming up, which I am looking forward to. I am hoping that we get to go out to somewhere like Broadmeadows for our northern suburbs day and hear from northern suburbs councils, who I know are feeling the pinch from Labor's cost shifting onto local government. I am looking forward to being able to advocate on their behalf as well, as I have many times in the past. Even Labor councillors speak to me in my office and are getting me to advocate for things on their behalf, because they know if they did dare to criticise the state government, they would be in big trouble.

I do not have much more to say on this bill, but again, I want to thank all the people that put so much work into making the Parliament tick and making this place a workable place for our democracy, for members of Parliament and for people in the building.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Just before you start, Mr Tarlamis, lead speakers are given a wider range in general, but let us try and keep it to the bill. That would be really awesome.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:05): I also rise to speak on the Appropriation (Parliament 2024–2025) Bill 2024. As you say, Acting President, it has been a very wideranging debate so far, but I will speak about this bill and its function in providing for the ongoing operation of Parliament and I will also take the opportunity to acknowledge and thank the many people, both prominent and not so prominent, who work so diligently to facilitate the running of this place and the Parliament more broadly.

This bill funds the core operations of the Parliament through the Department of the Legislative Council, the Department of the Legislative Assembly, the Department of Parliamentary Services and the parliamentary investigative committees. It also funds the integrity agencies which perform various important roles in our democracy and enhance public confidence in the conduct of government, elected representatives and the public service. These are the Victorian Inspectorate, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office, the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission, the Victorian Ombudsman and the Parliamentary Budget Office. It is notable that our integrity agencies have had budget independence since July 2020 whereby they submit their budget bids directly without other oversight. While they do not determine their own budgets, funding for IBAC and the Ombudsman has almost doubled since 2015–16. They can also seek additional funding for special investigations on projects that arise in addition to the funding allocated in the budget.

In terms of staffing, there are many staff across this Parliament fulfilling a great variety of roles with commendable diligence, courtesy and expertise. Some of these roles are prominent while others are more behind the scenes, but they are important and appreciated nevertheless. I hope that I do not overlook anyone because there are so many to thank. If I do, it is inadvertent, but I will try and thank as many as I can.

To the table office, the Clerk, the Deputy Clerk, the assistants, the Usher of the Black Rod, their supporting officers and staff and the broader team, including the secretariat staff, thank you for all that you do to support us and to be there for us when we have questions and are unsure about things to provide that clarity for us. We really appreciate everything you do for us.

To the Hansard team, who always make us sound better than we probably actually are in terms of our contributions, and to the broadcast team who spread our messages and our contributions far and wide to all those many people who are listening along at home or want to download and come back later on to listen to it, if they like something that we have said or perhaps if they do not like something we have said, thank you.

To the PSOs and security staff, I want to thank them for all they do to keep us safe. They have had some particularly challenging instances in recent times, and I know that they do all they can to support us and keep us safe, and I thank them for all that they do in that regard. To the education and community outreach staff for the wonderful work they do to promote the important work that Parliament does, to educate the young people about the importance of our democracy and to promote to them the different ways in which they can engage and get involved as well, thank you.

To the library staff, who do a plethora of research and provide information and briefings for MPs that assist us in our role, thank you. To the catering and kitchen staff who keep us sustained and able to endure for the hours that we do in this place, thank you. To the Department of Parliamentary Services staff, thank you. While some people do not always agree with the DPS staff, they are there to support us and perform an important role. To the cleaners who keep this place looking immaculate, to the gardening team who keep the gardens looking immaculate and to the chamber attendants who are always there to support us in any way that they can as well, thank you.

And to the electorate office staff, thank you. All of our electorate office staff, regardless of where our electorates are or what political party we come from, do an amazing job in supporting us and they are there for us whenever we need them to support us. They do an invaluable role, and I want to give them a big shout-out today as well.

This chamber in particular can be unpredictable, and its schedule and hours are somewhat uncertain as well, but the agility that the staff show in adjusting to this is greatly appreciated by me and I trust by all of my parliamentary colleagues in this place. Similarly, we greatly appreciate the patience and manner in which the staff acquit themselves when responding to the many and I trust repetitive questions that they receive on all sorts of matters, from parliamentary processes and procedures to requests for guidance on the holding of events in this precinct.

I would like to thank all my parliamentary colleagues in the chamber, and their staff who support them, for working with me in my role as the Government Whip. Together we manage an efficient running of this place despite the many competing priorities that we all bring to this place as we seek to represent and progress the needs and the interests of our communities. I want to thank everyone for the collaboration that we are able to advance to get us through what we need to.

This chamber does change from time to time, and I think currently half of the chamber is doing their first term. I have been here for quite a while now in one capacity or another, but we have all been new members at some stage. It is important and testament to this place and Victorian democracy that, although we argue our views and values passionately, there is still a level of camaraderie in this place and across the chamber that we show and we support new members when they are finding their feet, and I think that is a good thing.

The President – who I have noted in the past is a fierce advocate for the staff in this place, something for which he should be commended – performs an active and important role across the entire parliamentary organisation as well as within this chamber, acting in an impartial manner and always trying to support the staff and members in the performance of their roles. I thank and commend him on this and also the Deputy President and acting presidents who take the chair at various stages and also try and act in an impartial way at all times.

One of the important, and often surprising to the wider community, things is the collaborative, cooperative nature of the parliamentary process and the work of committees. The in-depth research and granular consideration of matters by parliamentary committees and the ability of the public as well as subject matter experts to contribute to the process is an extremely important part of the work that Parliament does and that members of Parliament do. We have a long and proud history of committee work in this Parliament and this state, dating way back to the early days of the Parliament of colonial Victoria. Many important findings and recommendations have been made in committee reports, resulting in significant legislation and policy reforms and initiatives over various Parliaments.

In recent times I have had the privilege of working with parliamentarians from Fiji, sharing information and experiences to better their parliamentary practices and continue improving the already close relationship between our two nations, which are part of our twinning program. One of the subjects I have had the honour of sharing with them is the Victorian parliamentary experience with regard to the committee system processes and policy development aspect. Policy development is not currently a feature of the committee role in the Fijian parliamentary system, but it is something which our Fijian counterparts are very interested in exploring, and I have been pleased to discuss and promote the potential benefits and opportunities that flow from this.

Of course this would not be possible without the work of the staff, as I mentioned earlier, of each of the committee secretariats and their work in research, drafting and associated support and all the great efforts that they go to in managing the logistics of meetings, public hearings, site visits and associated travel. I have served on several committees and chaired the Electoral Matters Committee during my time in this place, so I have much firsthand experience and great appreciation of the work done by committee staff, and I thank them for everything that they do to support us in the work that we do.

I acknowledge the high-quality information and support provided by the parliamentary library team to members and our staff and thank them for this work. We appreciate the range of resources the library makes available to us and the research they do and the information they provide on current and historical issues. We also appreciate the responsive assistance they provide to us on all matters of research queries.

I want to also thank the staff involved in education and community engagement, as I mentioned earlier, which is central to ensuring the Victorian public are connected to their Parliament, the people's Parliament, and understand that they can engage in the work that is done here in many different ways. This includes the public and school tours, the more intensive education programs done with school students from primary through to secondary school age and the hosting of functions and showcases here. There are a tremendous and quite innovative range of educational materials and programs for students at all levels that explore Parliament and the government through various lenses.

We also see a fantastic variety of displays here and have an opportunity to engage with a range of groups, who educate and assist us as members. A recent example was the hosting of members of the Pasifika community in Queen's Hall, which included displays from many individual groups that constitute the community as well as performances and traditional dances. I also had the pleasure of participating in the recent Pasifika youth summit, New Horizons, where I took part in a Q and A session with passionate youth representatives. These are happening all the time in many different ways to try and access different parts of multicultural communities to ensure that they can engage in many different ways and learn more about this place and the work that we do.

As well as community groups, we also have industry associations and peak bodies showcasing their work and their exciting developments and innovations in their respective sectors. It is a great privilege of our role as members of Parliament that we get to engage with so many parts of our diverse Victorian community and the many industry sectors and learn about them and their needs and their achievements. Much work goes into organising all of these events and ensuring they run smoothly – from the community outreach components through to the essential logistics of getting people in and out of the building – and I thank the many staff involved in assisting with this.

In conclusion, it is a great privilege to serve our community in this place as their representative. Serving and working with my community is something which I have always been passionate about throughout my entire life. To be able to do that in my role as a member of Parliament is a complete honour to me and something which I hold dear, and I take the responsibility of that very seriously. This work would not be possible without the support of the parliamentary staff – the people that I have listed here today and many that I have not and many that you do not see each and every day because they are slaving away in various parts of the building or the precinct doing so much work to support us. But I just want everyone to know that we support you and we acknowledge the work that you do to assist us in doing our jobs. I want to thank everyone. I look forward to continuing to work with you. I look forward to making representations on behalf of my electorate and my community and continuing to work and advocate for the best possible outcomes so that our communities remain vibrant and inclusive and so that we celebrate all our achievements. With that contribution, I commend the bill to the house.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (15:17): I guess this is an annual opportunity to say thank you to all the people that make Parliament work. It is not a bad exercise – even though the actual passing of the bill is very important to that function. This bill funds essential services for the day-to-day and year-to-year running of the Parliament. Parliament includes the following agencies in addition to the Parliament's core operations: the Parliamentary Budget Office, the Victorian Inspectorate, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office, the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission and the Victorian Ombudsman. The Appropriation (Parliament 2024–2025) Bill 2024 provides appropriation authority for payments from the Consolidated Fund to the Parliament in respect to the 2024–25 financial year, and this includes any ongoing liabilities incurred by the Parliament, such as employee entitlements, that may be realised in the future. Long service leave – I reckon there would be a bit of that owing around here.

It is all too easy to take for granted the core operations of the Parliament that surround us all. In fact much of the work that holds the role of an MP up is almost invisible to us. We do not really notice that it is happening. In fact if it is all happening smoothly and being done well, we do not notice it, and I think that is where it is beholden upon me once a year to say thank you for the work that is done. I am glad that this bill causes us to reflect on this unique work and this unique workplace and gives us an opportunity to thank those who keep Parliament running.

I would like to specifically mention a few different things, including the security support for us, particularly in our offices. They visited us and provided us with some training last year. It is always useful to learn a bit more about security issues. I also want to thank those involved in providing security at Parliament, especially in the face of recent divisive activity. I think there is a level of expertise that perhaps we do not appreciate as well that keeps us safe in the building. There is absolutely no doubt that there has been a high level of protest activity and demonstration activity outside the Victorian Parliament, certainly in the last 18 months since I have been here, so that really does provide a very unique scenario.

We all benefit from airport security at the front entrance – I call it airport security. Everybody knows what that means when they come to Parliament, and it is a far more complex protocol than it used to be. It used to be that the team at the front of the Parliament just got to know you, and I used to just walk in and they would say hello to me – I would just walk straight in. It is a different world now. There is a lot more complexity to the level of protection required for us.

I also wish to thank those who manage the front visitor desk specifically. They deal with all of our registrations, because we are all good and as MPs we do register all our guests, don't we? Religiously – or reliably, perhaps, is a more appropriate phrase. Then they look those registrations up when a guest comes and check the photo ID to make sure that person is who they say they are, and then they get their sticker. Then they ring us and let us know, and either I or my team will come and get them. So that is a very, very nice and useful reception service that is not just security oriented, it is also a greeting and a welcome to Parliament, in a way. A special shout-out to Ros as well at the front there. I appreciate the exchange on interesting shoes. She likes the same shoes that I do.

The other area I wanted to say thank you on is the upper house committees that I have been involved in over the last 18 months. I have been involved in the Commonwealth Games committee, and I am now on the planning and environment committee. I see that that team of people that provide that support, they do not always know what their workload is going to be. They do not always know what the outcome of a motion out of this chamber will be, and sometimes there might be several referrals that might happen in a short period of time and they literally have to go and hire additional staff to implement the decision of this chamber. I really want to particularly say thank you to those people in the secretariat that undertake research roles for committees.

I am a bit of a fan of research. I used to teach a little bit of research and evaluation in welfare studies. It is a skill to identify factual information and find out valid and useful information that can be used in an inquiry, and then to express it in a form that is consistent with the terms of reference of an inquiry. Again, that work gets done; the committee flows along, and the work of the committee listening to public hearings usually runs smoothly, but behind the scenes the researchers are doing an enormous amount of work for the committee. Then you have got the secretariat corporate type of support – administrative roles, recording the outcome of decisions of committee meetings, setting meeting dates and working with the chair. There is that team of people as well. And of course, the Hansard team are involved in the committee work as well. People probably do not realise that. Supporting the operations of the committees is the committee services office, which provides corporate services to committees. These are necessary functions to the running of the Parliament that the general public probably have no idea about, and indeed I really did not give much thought to it before I became an MP myself. Now, though, with some experience I have seen how these staff make the running of their committees possible and just how much work goes into answering the many, many questions and conducting the research.

On electorate offices and support for electorate office staff members, last year there was – and I believe there will be one this year – an electorate officer conference introduced, which was provided, hosted and led by the Department of Parliamentary Services. The feedback that I have received from my electorate officers is that they really appreciated learning some of the skills that are required to be an effective electorate officer and also being able to do the networking at a once-a-year conference to meet other electorate officers and learn great ideas from their colleagues. That again is another really useful innovation, and I think that is what we have seen in this Parliament – the Department of Parliamentary Services and all of the teams that look after the Parliament are adapting and changing and innovating all the time. And there is even recognition of gender as an issue in this very, very old building, which was sort of conceived when there never would have been a woman in here at all, and I believe there were no women's toilets at all. But now there are more paintings of women in Queen's Hall, all the male busts have disappeared and there are now women's toilets – there are even pads and tampons, which I mention for the second time. So there is lots of innovation going on and adaptation, and I think that is a great reflection of the values of the Victorian community as well.

My staff in particular are looking forward to this year's conference in July. Once again I think it is important that we take time to appreciate the amount of work and organisation that goes into a two-day conference. Training throughout the year is also appreciated. The increasing complexity and professionalism of the roles in an MPs office need to be backed by professional development. Again, thank you to the Department of Parliamentary Services for providing that.

For me, there are efforts to find an office. Maybe I am going to be the last to end up getting an office; I do not know. There is always someone with a sadder story than oneself, I suppose, but I still have not been able to secure an appropriate office in Warrnambool, and I am frustrated about that. But I am also very aware that the Department of Parliamentary Services have been working very hard to provide me with the first Labor electorate office in Warrnambool since 1955 – that is according to the parliamentary library, and I would like to say thank you to the library staff as well. There have been significant frustrations for the Department of Parliamentary Services in trying to secure an office for me in Warrnambool, and I very much understand that. They have been doing a great job and a professional job, even though there has not been success yet.

I would also like to mention the Echuca regional sitting. There was an enormous effort on the part of the parliamentary staff teams to move us all up to Echuca for a day, really – it felt like a big excursion, actually. Thank you to the security staff, who had to work in a new environment and do all the research that they needed to do to make sure the place was safe. It is a little bit off topic, but thanks to the Echuca library staff; they were the last two standing – or sitting in the gallery – as we left. They were watching what had been done to their library. And thanks to the community of Echuca as well for having us; the local police in Echuca; our attendants and chamber staff, who had to be adaptive; and of course, as our President said, the IT team, who were absolute champions I think – he used some other word. What an amazing feat to be able to retain internet connection for all of us in a different location. I would also like to, before I finish up, thank the catering staff, who look after us all with consideration each week. They keep us all caffeinated, they keep us all fed and they have to put up with us rushing in after bells or rushing out for bells, so it is always a difficult and unique environment.

The chamber attendants also have a broad range and a unique role. It always looks very important when an attendant comes in and hands a manila folder to an MP – it must be urgent and it must be very important – but I am thankful that I observed an attendant bring in a tissue in a manila folder for a long-suffering MP who had a cold. I thought that was very adaptive. Thank you for all of the work and all of the requests that you have to put up with from us, checking what it is we want. I must admit last year I forgot all sorts of things when I came to the chamber. I know that Greg was run off his feet with Kylie, my staff member, giving him bits and pieces for me. A big thankyou to that team as well.

In closing I will say thank you to all those people that I do not see, all those people that I have not mentioned that I have not interacted with – it is probably good that I have not interacted with them – but I thank them for the role that they play. Last year I thanked HR and the onboarding team over there; this year it has really been about the operations and the interactions that I have had.

The last thing I would say is that a few sitting weeks ago we had a fire drill, and it was pretty impressive with all the staff herding us out. We all walked out and ended up on the grass outside – I am very thankful it was a sunny day that we had the fire drill – but I was amazed at how many people were working in the building and amazed by the staff and the calm and expert way that they guided us all out to safety. I think that is a great example of the work they do in the background. I heartily endorse this bill.

Tom McIntosh (Eastern Victoria) (15:32): It is a pleasure to speak on the Appropriation (Parliament 2024–2025) Bill 2024 today. I am very happy to follow on from my colleagues Mr Tarlamis and Ms Ermacora, who delivered very concise and I think very reflective contributions that stuck to the bill and stuck to the topic. I will endeavour to do so also; I am not implying that anyone on the other side who may have spoken went on a bit of a rant somewhere else, but anyway. We will carry on.

It is a small part of the Victorian government and one that often flies under the radar, but the role of the parliamentary staff is one that, especially to all of us, is absolutely clear and something that is absolutely present in our day-to-day lives, particularly for those of us who at whatever stage enter Parliament. There are a lot of unknowns, so it is incredibly appreciated, all the help that we, our staff and our teams receive all the way along. This bill provides funding for more than just the immediate

parliamentary staff. It also funds Parliament's core operations, the Parliamentary Budget Office, the Victorian Inspectorate, the Auditor-General, the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission and the Victorian Ombudsman, all core parts of our Victorian democracy. Funding from this budget includes supplementation following the Parliament. There is a 2.6 per cent increase from the 2023–24 budget, the highest level of funding provided to date.

As have my colleagues, I would like to acknowledge so many of the incredible staff that make this place and the broader Parliament and our broader democracy function. Obviously, our clerks, our ushers and supporting staff, all of whom somehow remain friendly to all of us despite whatever is going on in here, are absolute professionals. Hansard, as Mr Tarlamis said, make us sound better than we are. Broadcast, thanks for all that you do in enabling us to get our messages out. We all have our messages that we are passionate about, that we want the public to know about, to hear, so thank you for the work that you do that makes that happen. If people do not hear, do not see or do not read the work that we are doing, then it is just simply in a vacuum.

I want to give a shout-out to the gardeners, because the grounds here are absolutely stunning. We are very, very fortunate to be in this place when we work in Parliament and on committees. It is just something that is incredible that we have.

It has been mentioned about security and the PSOs and the work they do in keeping everyone safe, but it is just the friendly manner in which they approach their role, their welcoming manner. They are doing their job competently but doing so in a manner that makes the whole building and the grounds a very, very nice place to be in. I think post COVID we all, even more so, appreciate the role of our cleaners and what they do in keeping us in a clean and safe work environment.

Thanks to the library team for the research that comes out of there. They are not only looking after what is a stunning part of the precinct, keeping that information and knowledge there available, but also assisting so many of us when needed.

The education and community outreach team have been touched upon. I just want to delve into this a little bit more, because I think it is incredibly important. It is something I love seeing when there are students in the grounds learning about our Parliament but also having conversations about democracy and the democratic process. They might not remember it all when they get home, but they may be talking to their families and there are key themes, key ideas. It might be that they do not remember everything that has been said but how it made them feel – for our Victorian students to have a memory and understanding of where Parliament is and what it does but also some takeaways of why our Parliament and our democratic process is so important. It can be easy at times to take it for granted, but there are so many countries in the world where the people living within them would love to have the democratic structures and infrastructure and strong institutions that we are so lucky to have here. They are ones that we fought for, that my great-great-great-grandfather fought for at Eureka and was arrested for. So I think we should never take the democratic structures and process for granted.

There has been some talk about the catering in the kitchen. I have to give a shout-out to the new club sandwich. I am a man who loves quantity of food over quality, but the new club sandwich delivers both for the low price of \$12. I even at times struggle to eat the whole thing, which is something to be said, so absolute hats off to the team in the kitchen and those out front who are delivering that and so much more for us. It is absolutely sensational.

To our Department of Parliamentary Services staff, the budget office and, as Mr Mulholland mentioned, the committees – I want to second his comments around Michael Baker. Michael has been incredible in the work he has done in my time on the Economy and Infrastructure Committee. Mr Berger is on that with me. Michael approaches it in a manner of absolute professionalism but also gets information across to everyone on the committee in a very timely manner and will always make the time to go through information in detail. We have talked about the work he did over the summer on our committee. I absolutely want to acknowledge Michael.

The IT team must be some of the most frustrated people in the world sometimes, having to deal with all of us, probably on some very simple questions and some not so simple ones that they make the time to go through. In payroll I want to give a shout-out to Amanda. She has just been an incredible help to me and many other MPs. In Parliament HR, Celine has been incredibly efficient and professional in her work in assisting me.

Of course my electorate officers do an incredible job delivering for people in Eastern Victoria. I just have to thank the team for doing their work in such a dedicated manner that I am fortunate enough that it makes me look good but also, most importantly, it delivers outcomes for people who need support across Eastern Victoria. It is a really big area. We have got the peninsula, we go up into the Dandenongs, we go all the way out to Mallacoota and all the way up to the New South Wales border. Obviously in recent years there have been fires and floods. We have got ag, we have got industry. There are lots of big transitions happening. There are massive coastlines, with coastal erosion and different issues. So whether it is issues people have around housing, whether it is consumer issues, whether it is insurance, whether it is businesses, there is so much going on that it is an incredibly rewarding area to represent, as I am sure Acting President Bourman, in the chair at the moment, knows, but its diversity of issues and people are incredible. I will start by thanking Sam, who manages my office and does an incredible job. I am very, very fortunate to have him and that he has not been snapped up into a role elsewhere. I have Gemma and Jaydan on the peninsula; Tom, who has joined the team in recent months with his fantastic comms experience; Lachie and Nick, who again are more recent additions to the team but absolutely straight on top of everything they do; and Ollie, who I believe might be in Africa at the moment. So, Ollie, if you are tuning into this, I hope you are having a great trip and we will see you when you are back.

Just coming back to that point of community, this budget, this expenditure, is here to enable community to have a voice, for community to be heard, for community to know that our democracy is one that is worth what so many before us have fought for. We have a place where we can come. We have days like yesterday when at times we are being a little adversarial in here, but that is good, and so we should. We should have differing opinions and differing ideas. It is great that there are so many different voices and opinions and ideas – the fact that Mr Limbrick can come in here this morning and talk about the fact that Mrs McArthur and Mr Welch support him in his vision for nuclear in this state and that they would like to see a regulated nuclear industry, and then on the other hand everyone else in here can stand up and say they do not support that and they do not want to see it. Whether it is crossbenchers or our parties – in the case of the Liberals and Nationals, having differing opinions on things within their own party or among their own coalition – it is great that they can be here, they can be heard and it can be done in a respectful way.

I will circle back again to mention security and the PSOs and everyone working on our front and back doors, because we need to always maintain a level of respect in our debate and in our political discourse and any disagreement we may have. We have seen in recent years in America where that has faltered at times, and we cannot ever allow that to happen in Australia. That is why again I think it is incumbent on all of us, despite that disagreement, despite those points of difference, to ensure that the conversation remains as respectful as it possibly can be. I was, as I said, amused by the contribution that came from the other side before. It was like, for a Liberal MP, being surprised that turning up to your electorate office and working with your team and delivering for the community somehow deserves a pat on the back, perhaps a cape, a ‘Mr Mulholland’ cape for his incredible work in fulfilling his role that he is elected and paid to do. But it was tongue in cheek – I do say so absolutely respectfully.

So to close, hats off to everyone in this place. Hats off to everyone that keeps the wheels greased and keeps the wheels running. Oh sorry, I forgot to call out the electrician, the in-house electrician – fantastic. Fortunately, safety protocols stopped me nearly running into him twice with a ladder yesterday, so it is the good measures and the way he approaches his work that ensured we got around safely. He is always there for us if our rooms are perhaps too cold or too hot or whatever they might be. He is there with the rest of the team. And the rest of the maintenance team, as well, I should shout

them out, because they do an incredible role, as Mr Tarlamis said, at all hours. They have to be here whenever we are here contributing, so we appreciate that. Thank you for the opportunity to make a contribution, and that is all.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (15:46): What a delight to join my colleagues and speak on the Appropriation (Parliament 2024–2025) Bill 2024 so that we can keep the lights on and the water running in this place. This bill, for those that are not aware and those that are tuning in online – and I will give a shout-out to the Hansard and broadcasting team that make that possible in a moment – is aimed at making sure that Parliament has the appropriate funds to operate this spectacular workplace. Some of the other agencies, some that we are familiar with and others less so, include the Parliamentary Budget Office, the Victorian Inspectorate, the Auditor-General, the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission and, finally, the Victorian Ombudsman. Whilst all respect is due to those other agencies, I am going to spend the majority of my contribution today speaking to the Parliament’s core operations, so before I get onto that I will just take a moment to acknowledge those other agencies and organisations as listed.

There is of course much to be said about the bill before us, but what it does is allow for \$285 million in the 2024–25 budget, which will see an increase in funding from last year’s 2023–24 budget from \$277.8 million. We know on this side that transparency and integrity are incredibly important. That is why the agencies that I mentioned earlier will see that their funding has almost doubled since we came into government. The decisions to nearly double the funding of the Ombudsman and the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission are significant moves towards strengthening the integrity and accountability of public institutions. This substantial increase in funding underscores the commitment to transparency, justice and rule of law within the state that we all live in and love. Increasing funding for the integrity agencies enhances the ability of these bodies to do their work, to effectively monitor, investigate and address issues relating to misconduct and unethical behaviour. This increased oversight promotes transparency and accountability in government operations. With additional resources, integrity bodies can contribute to a more honest and efficient government, fostering a fairer society and reinforcing the principles of good governance, which is what we are all striving for.

I now might go to some remarks about this place and the core operations of our Parliament, and it would be remiss if I did not thank the staff that keep this place running. I am going to take some time, like speakers before me, to highlight some of the staff who do such incredible work. To Hansard, the clerks and the staff at Sessions and Strangers, I want to give my big, heartfelt gratitude and deep appreciation to each one of you for the work that you do. Your collective efforts really are the cornerstone of the effective functioning of our Parliament. It is important to recognise the dedication, the professionalism and the commitment that you bring to these roles each and every day. Sometimes I wonder how you keep such serious faces with all of our nonsense and carry-on in this place.

Can I just say to the parliamentary staff: you are so valuable, and your support is so treasured by each and every one of us. To the clerks, administrative personnel, researchers and advisers, each of you plays a really critical role in ensuring the wheels of our democracy here in the state turn smoothly. Your attention to detail, your organisational skills and your behind-the-scenes efforts provide a foundation on which this Parliament operates. Your work often goes unnoticed by the public, but we see you. Even when we do not, it is true that your work is essential for the seamless functioning of this institution.

To the cleaning and maintenance staff, your hard work and dedication ensure that the Parliament remains a clean and welcoming place for all. Your efforts to maintain the orderliness and cleanliness of these facilities are truly vital, and I am really, truly grateful for what you do. Thank you so very much.

To a team that captures me often at my most frustrated, the IT and the technical support team, thank you, thank you, thank you. Your expertise keeps the Parliament connected and operational in a way

that I do not imagine we would have ever thought necessary 20, 30 or 40 years ago. Truly your ability to manage and troubleshoot some really technical issues ensures that our sessions, our communications and our day-to-day operations run smoothly. Your support is crucial in enabling everyone to carry out their duties. At any given time members are in this chamber using the resources supplied and supported by your team. We would not be able to do our job without you. I am pretty sure everyone here knows the IT extension – it is pretty much burnt into our minds, I have to tell you.

To the media and the communications team, a big thankyou. You bridge the gap between the Parliament and the public. You provide some updates on the proceedings, and you connect members of the public to our work. I am truly grateful for your work in promoting understanding and engagement with the democratic processes. I have got to say some of your outreach tools have just been quite incredible, so to the community engagement team, thanks for what you are doing.

I had the good fortune the other day of someone very dear to me sending me a photo from the Parliament website. It was of me and Lee sitting next to each other in this place, and it was from the previous Parliament. I am reminded of all that time and all the efforts of our parliamentary team who supported us during COVID. I remember the big giant TV screens in this chamber and how different and new that was and the enormous efforts to make that possible. Since then there has only been more innovation coming from the teams, so thank you very much.

A pretty serious email has just gone out to members of Parliament about some security risks that certain members will be facing possibly tomorrow. It reminds me that the security team are always on foot to help us maintain a safe and secure workplace, whether it is right here in the Parliament or in our electorate offices, in conduct of our parliamentary business like the inquiry work that we do. Can I just say to you: thank you very much for your dedication, your professionalism, your vigilance – it is absolutely incredible – and the really indispensable role you play in keeping us safe.

Whether it is here in the precinct or out and about, I know that we have had quite a few heightened security issues when it comes to not only our regional sitting but most prominently the work of our committee inquiries. I am thinking to some inquiries I have been a part of, but knowing that the security team were there and across it and working with local law enforcement to ensure our safety is always so valued, and you are pretty special people. I am really grateful, and you keep good humour throughout, which is pretty hard to do but it is certainly something we appreciate. I do not know what happens in that secret security room with all the screens and everything, but I am comforted by the fact that it is there, and it is full of folks who go about their duties each and every day, keeping us safe. I just want to thank you for your personal sacrifices that you make, the long hours, the constant vigilance, the calls that you get from members and our staff at all hours, because you know what, security risk does not keep a nine-to-five schedule and nor do you, and we truly appreciate that. Thank you very much.

I know that there is a lot behind the scenes, but I want to take a moment to go to the electorate office now. It has been just over a year since I moved into my electorate office with the support of the property services team, and so to them can I say a big thanks for such a smooth transition. I did not know when we moved in that it would be in the middle of a construction zone, and on any given day we are dealing with three or four building notifications around safety, security, construction, street closures and other things, but the property services team keep us across all of that. So to you, thank you very much. The fact is that we have almost got staff in hi-vis because of the construction zone that our electorate office is pretty much in, and I appreciate your patience and working with us as we get through the challenges of being not only a new office but a new office amongst a construction zone and a new office that backs onto the office of the Victorian Socialists, so that in itself comes with some additional challenges. I would love to take the next 4 minutes giving you my thoughts on the Victorian Socialists, but given that I am going to see them tomorrow when they are likely to come and visit me, because I am not the longest commute of all for them, I will give you perhaps an update to the chamber on my neighbours. Can I just say it will be a very interesting day tomorrow, and to security in advance I am saying to you thank you very, very much, and I probably will be calling. I am sure you have got

my number saved by now, and I do not even want to guess, but it is probably under something like ‘Sheena, distressed, of Brunswick’.

Even to this day I have got to say I have not had much of a chance to talk about the regional sitting, and I just want to take a moment to acknowledge the behind-the-scenes work that went into making the regional sitting happen. It was really nice to visit Yorta Yorta country and head up to Echuca and see what the Parliament looks like in a regional community, and I think for many in this place this was their first regional setting; it was my second. I have got to tell you was pretty special to head out to some of the community groups and meet some folks as they came into that absolutely transformed library – my goodness. So thank you for allowing us to conduct parliamentary business in Echuca and gain a firsthand understanding and insight into local perspectives and local challenges and some aspirations of community leaders, businesses and residents. I do not think I am never going to forget that mayor and his deep want of a pool, so there you go. Regional sittings like this in Echuca facilitate greater public participation in our democratic processes, and I loved all the public forums, the youth forums and the other things that all came to make it possible. They are enormous efforts, just enormous efforts, so thank you to all the team that made that possible.

I know that every effort is put into this place every single day to continue to make it an institution that Victorians can be proud of – an institution that Victorians can instil their trust and faith in for us to do the job we are doing. So whether it is the youngest Victorians that come into this place on their school tours or it is older Victorians or even our interstate and international visitors that come in here, they get to see a place that we are all equally proud to come to as frequently as we do. I cannot thank our folks enough for the work that they do to keep us safe and keep us serving not only the institution of the Parliament of Victoria but also the people that we enjoy the good fortune and honour of serving each and every day. I commend to this house the Appropriation (Parliament 2024–2025) Bill 2024.

I will finish with big thanks to the team that make me such a valued soy chai latte every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday morning when the Parliament is sitting, because I am not quite sure that I would still be going after the late nights that I do without your good soy chai latte. I am always grateful for you and to you. Thank you, and I look forward to hearing other contributions on this.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (16:01): I am going to take a moment to use this opportunity to thank all the people that make this place happen. I have written a list. I apologise to anyone that I have left off – I always do. First of all I need to thank my staff, who do their best to make me look good; it is not easy, I must say. I want to thank the clerical and the chamber staff – the newer and the past ones; the buildings, grounds and IT staff, and I do know how challenging the IT situation is here; the security staff and the PSOs, who are currently having to deal with some hypocritical rabble-rousing from some in this chamber – it has probably been the worst it has ever been; and Hansard – my favourite, Hansard – who do their best to make me not look like a dolt. They do pretty good. I really appreciate how much work they put into making what we say into words which will follow us into history. I want to thank catering, Department of Parliamentary Services staff, VicFleet and anyone else I have forgotten. I think sometimes in here we tend to forget that we are all here to do a function. The function is to make laws and debate and do all that, but we are all here. Some of us are elected members, some of us are Hansard, some of us are clerical, some of us are security, some of us are catering and some of us are IT, but we are all here doing the same thing – serving the state of Victoria, and for that I thank you all.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:03): I would also like to briefly rise to add my name to this very good bill that we have before us today, the last of the budget bills we should be debating this week. It is always a special time to reflect on the role of this very special, unique building that we find ourselves working in, the Parliament of Victoria. I am sure many members are the same, but I certainly pinch myself every time I am in this building – in this chamber in particular, indeed, and looking up at this marvellous ceiling above us. It was actually only just the other day that one of our wonderful security guards George told me about the issue with the lady of liberty holding the chains just above where Mr Welch is sitting right now. Apparently the statue is meant to have the

chain in pieces and broken apart to signify freedom, but the people that were installing the piece actually thought it was broken and so they fixed it. So we have the chains, perhaps not in the desired outcome, but still nevertheless looking resplendent, as this place always does.

Indeed as with Mr Bourman, there are far too many people to mention, and if I were to try I am sure I would probably fail to mention everyone. But I do want to pay tribute to all of the amazing people that work in this place so that we can do our jobs and so that we can, most importantly, represent our constituents and bring their concerns and needs to the fore.

In this chamber of course we have a wonderful group of attendants who look after us. We have both old and new attendants, some who have been here a long time and some who have just started. All of them, though, work extremely hard to make this place run smoothly. Indeed members may not be aware but last week they were making sure that the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (PAEC) was well supported as well, so it is not just on sitting days that they are here to assist us.

We have our senior clerks, from Robert to Anne. I see attendants in the room today and clerks in the room today as well, including Richard and Viv. It is fantastic to have your support here as always. Indeed we are very much missing our Usher of the Black Rod, Sally. Matt Newington is doing an outstanding job, and we are very glad to have him, though we do of course miss Sally.

Our property team are wonderful, as ever. I would actually like to pay particular note of them at the moment because I have had some property issues of my own this year. During the storms in February my electorate office was hit with some severe damage, and a particular shout-out goes to my property partner Amy, who has been helping us to rectify those issues so we can be out of our temporary office and into our regular one hopefully before long.

Our Hansard and broadcasting teams do an amazing job, firstly just putting up with all of us and putting up with all of our banter and our contributions into this place. They do a superb and professional job, as always, so to them I say thank you. Indeed they will always be seen at committee hearings too and are always working extremely professionally and hard.

I note everyone from our buildings and grounds and projects teams to our catering staff, who are always friendly and always helpful, and our IT department, for whom nothing is too much to ask. We also of course have an amazing crew of security staff, and I have to say with great regret how much strain they have been put under with some of the incidents we have seen particularly in this place but also in some electorate offices over the past few months in particular.

In the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (PAEC) meeting last week one of our sessions was actually for the Parliament, and we unfortunately had it confirmed that during a recent pathetic stunt in the Legislative Assembly on budget day a security staff member was assaulted. It might have actually been an attendant, but it was a staff member of the Parliament who was assaulted by a protester. That is completely unacceptable. No-one should come into work and face that sort of behaviour – abuse, assault or violence. Staff in this place are amazing, wonderful people and they deserve better than that. I hope that we can return very soon to having galleries open to the public and we can have that done in a way in which the staff of this place are respected. That is the least that we all owe to them.

We also of course, as others have mentioned, had a regional sitting of this house just a few months ago when we all went up to Echuca, swapped the intricately detailed walls for a beautiful view of the Murray River red gums and shared a little bit of the Legislative Council with the communities up there. We heard some updates last week at PAEC about the expense and the ins and outs of that particular outing as well. It was good to have that detail come through. It was very good to be up there in the Campaspe shire obviously to show our Parliament to that particular community in northern Victoria but also – and probably more valuably for people such as myself who represent a metropolitan region – to actually hear back from those people in the country.

Aside from the regional setting itself there was a number of other events – youth forums, indeed, in Shepparton. I see Mrs Broad in the room. She and I were both at one of those sessions, which was really, really good to be part of. It is also particularly timely for me then to give a quick shout-out to the wonderful community engagement team of the Parliament. Naomi and her team did an amazing job that whole week in turning what would otherwise have just been a single sitting day into a much more valuable experience, I hope, for the community. Certainly I know it was a more valuable experience for those of us as members.

There are a number of other parts of work that the Parliament undertakes. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association is one which I am very pleased to be part of the Victorian branch executive of. There is a number of things that the CPA does, particularly as one of the leading branches in the Australia-Pacific region, which means that we have sister parliament relationships with three Pacific Island nations, those being Fiji, Tuvalu and Nauru, where we provide mentorship and support to those parliaments as well. It is a particularly special thing to be able to share the best of our democratic parliamentary system with other nations and to give them the tools, supports and resources that they need as well.

One particular area of work that many of us in this place find ourselves doing – perhaps in some cases, like myself, more than we probably thought we would before we were elected – is parliamentary committees. That has been a really fascinating part of the job. Certainly for me I can say that there is a lot that I have learned as part of that, whether it is from being a member of the Legal and Social Issues Committee, participating from time to time on the Economy and Infrastructure Committee or the various select committees that I have had the privilege to serve on or indeed on the aforementioned Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, which does play a particularly important role in this place. Most people think of PAEC as just the estimates and outcomes process, which is a very big, important part of the role of that committee, but it is not the only role. It also does serve a very important function in the traditional public accounts committee space. As part of that work that committee has oversight of a few very important independent statutory offices of the Parliament, namely, the Parliamentary Budget Office and the Victorian Auditor-General's Office. In the case of the latter, we have a wonderful Auditor-General in Andrew Greaves, who has just started his second term. He provides very good, robust, thorough, detailed and factual reports to this place that I know members from all sides of this chamber, and I am sure those in the Assembly as well, very much appreciate. That sort of clear-minded, factual feedback is a very important part of our democratic system, and VAGO certainly does a very good job with that.

We also are one of only two states in the country to have a Parliamentary Budget Office, the other being New South Wales. I recently discovered that in New South Wales their Parliamentary Budget Office is only established for 10 months in the lead-up to a state election, so for the other three years and two months of a parliamentary term their PBO sits dormant. Theirs is solely focused around the provision of information for election costings, whereas in Victoria one of the benefits we have from the Parliamentary Budget Office is the ongoing feedback and support and advice to MPs when they seek to solicit information from them.

Evan Mulholland interjected.

Michael GALEA: I hear Mr Mulholland desperately wanting to interject. Whether those MPs perhaps take those reports in the fullest context and provide those figures in the fullest context for which they were meant to be provided is another matter, but it is nevertheless a very important function that the PBO serves. I would also like to note in particular the relatively early days of our new Parliamentary Budget Officer Xavier Rimmer, but he has done an absolutely excellent job so far and I am sure members from across the Parliament, across the chambers, would agree, so it is good to see him.

Another unique aspect of the Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office, as opposed to some similar institutions in our neck of the woods and broader in the world, is that the PBO is frequently called

upon to provide advice to parliamentary committees and our various inquiries. I mentioned the Legal and Social Issues Committee earlier. In the case of the rental and housing inquiry that we undertook last year, the PBO provided some very useful information to that inquiry, as indeed it has to other inquiries I have had the privilege to sit on. There are some very important functions that are also part of the parliamentary ecosystem, particularly those two statutory offices which fall under the Parliament and in terms of oversight provisions under the purview of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

There is a lot more that I could say about this place, but I know members are anxious to speak in further detail about the budget as it stands in general, so I will leave my comments there. Once again I thank all of the incredible parliamentary staff who make what we do here possible.

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Third reading

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (16:14): I move, by leave:

That the bill be now read a third time.

Motion agreed to.

Read third time.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jacinta Ermacora): Pursuant to standing order 14.28, the bill will be returned to the Assembly with a message informing them that the Council have agreed to the bill without amendment.

Motions

Budget papers 2024–25

Debate resumed on motion of Jaclyn Symes:

That the budget papers 2024–25 be taken into consideration.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:15): I rise to speak on the take-note motion. It is the second time I have done this, so I am looking forward to doing it again. This budget delivers for my community of Southern Metro whilst delivering the sound financial management our state needs to bounce back from COVID, so let us get into it. I was honoured to announce a few weeks ago that Camberwell Primary School, in my community of Hawthorn, will receive \$9.7 million. It has been a long journey, but we have got it done. This is a win for you, and it is a win for the community. The community of Hawthorn knows that only an Allan Labor government is committed to the electorate of Hawthorn, but we must represent all Victorians no matter what. No matter where you live, we have all got your backs.

This is a win for the parents of Camberwell Primary School. On a visit last year I saw firsthand some of the facilities they have, and they are incredible, but they are old and the school is old. It has been operating for decades – in fact for centuries. It opened on 19 August 1867 as a common school. Back then there were 24 students enrolled, and by the third week there were 80 students. A new brick building was opened a year later, and that was big enough for 150 students. That building still exists to this day. The school became a state school in the 1870s, and by the 1900s the community had grown to 1000 young Victorians. By then, the size of school was made bigger, with more classrooms added. The school was renamed Camberwell Primary School, and in 2017 it celebrated 150 years of operation.

To Janet and Stuart, you are part of the current and the now, but what you have achieved by working with the former member for Hawthorn John Kennedy is incredible. I also want to credit the efforts of the now member for Albert Park in the other place Nina Taylor and her advocacy. I am so proud of the work that we have done. It took a lot of work, and we are not done yet, but I am pleased that we got the money in this year's budget. I am excited that I will still be a member in this place in two years to open it with you. The funding will change the community for the better – a new toilet block and refurbished main building will bring the school into the 21st century. Camberwell is the heart of my community of Hawthorn, very close to Camberwell Junction, which has been hallmarked as an activity centre. I am excited to play my part in representing the voices of people of Camberwell and the electorate of Hawthorn.

I turn now to the benefits of the budget for all Victorians, and these will also be of benefit to Camberwell Primary School. The Glasses for Kids program is being funded in a big way – we are giving \$6.8 million to triple the size of the program. This program will reach a further 74,000 prep to grade 3 students at 473 government schools across the state. The program provides free screening and glasses for students who need them, and a lot do. We cannot allow some kids who need glasses to go without or parents to put them off. There should never be a choice between making ends meet and getting your kids glasses, and that is what we are ensuring. It also helps families because they no longer need to juggle appointment times or incur additional out-of-pocket costs.

We are bringing back the Get Active Kids vouchers. We are investing a further \$6 million to extend this wildly popular program, something I know all sides of the chamber can get around. We are also supporting legends like Neil 'the Reverend' Daniher. That is because sport brings communities together, and this program does exactly that. We are providing vouchers worth up to \$200 to help eligible families cover the cost of sports, and in that spirit we are investing \$116 million in the active schools program. Too many people in our community, even adults and the elderly, avoid the beach, the river or the lake. They avoid Port Phillip Bay, Bonnie Doon and the Murray not because they do not want a holiday or a dip but because they cannot swim. In a country like Australia we can do better. I am proud we are investing \$116 million in the program, including \$73 million to support schools to run swimming and water safety programs for their students.

To health care – we are recovering from the pandemic. To list off the main takeaways, we are investing \$8.8 billion for hospitals over the long term and \$1.2 billion to address the reduction in Commonwealth funding for Victorian hospitals; \$755 million to open and operationalise new hospital facilities; \$146 million to ensure Ambulance Victoria continues to meet the needs of our growing state; \$126 million to continue to supply blood, blood products and blood services to Victorians who need them; \$35 million to protect health services from cyber attack; \$28 million to support our healthcare workforce; and \$18 million to provide support to 12 women's health organisations to provide preventative health services and community outreach. I know in my community of Southern Metro my good mate Matt Fregon, the member for Ashwood in the other place, is passionate about these issues, and I am looking forward to working with him on them. There is also no better time to remind my community to contribute to the women's pain inquiry. With less than six weeks to go until submissions are due, let us get that done.

In my community of Southern Metro just near my office is the Alfred. We are investing \$118 million to upgrade infrastructure to ensure that it continues to deliver world-class care. We are investing \$40 million to upgrade and replace essential engineering infrastructure at hospitals to improve safety and reliability; and \$35 million for new and upgraded medical equipment supporting operating suites, emergency departments, surgical wards, intensive care units, neonatal and maternity services in hospitals across the state and much more.

We are supporting our state's specialist palliative care services with a \$38 million investment. This investment cares for Victorians at the end of their life, with support provided in our aged care facilities, hospitals and, most importantly, in patients' homes. There is also \$31 million to support Victorians

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with an eating disorder, to establish a dedicated early engagement and treatment program to combat this. I am proud of our investments in this space.

There are also investments into schools and TAFE. This year we are celebrating five years of free TAFE, and there has never been a better time to take up a free TAFE or free apprenticeship pathway course. There are now more than 80 priority courses available as part of free TAFE. This year we have got four new courses in hospitality, youth work, kitchen management and tourism. What is better is that we have removed the prior skills and qualifications barrier, meaning that there has never been a better time to gain new skills or a new start for a new career. To find out more, google Free TAFE Victoria or, for many residents in my community of Southern Metro, check your mailbox for the QR code in the coming weeks with all the information. The skills offered are essential to help us deliver the big projects of the future.

We know that delivering the biggest infrastructure projects in this state's history, including the Suburban Rail Loop, needs workers. It needs workers with a cert IV in plumbing and services and a cert IV in engineering. It also needs the expertise that comes with a cert IV in engineering or even a cert III in building and construction or supply chain operations. To continue delivering our Big Housing Build and implement the nation-leading housing statement, we need to get this done, and that is what we will do.

The workers at the Metro Tunnel project are remarkable. They are working day in, day out to get it delivered next year, and that is not that long to go. That is why this year's funding of \$394 million will help. It will go towards increased accessibility to vocational training and free TAFE, with \$113 million for TAFE support services and delivery and \$32 million to support worker retention and upskilling. Of course to meet our priority workforce needs, there is \$11 million to support apprentices, trainees and our partnership with industry employers. These workers will help us deliver a \$964 million investment to maintain and improve Victoria's road network over the next 12 months. We know that the 2022 flood event damaged many roads, and many communities continue to suffer from this. I saw that firsthand when we visited regional Victoria. That is why I am proud that an initial \$100 million has been committed to repair the roads. Closer to my community of Southern Metro, there is \$17 million to improve roads and intersections in metropolitan Melbourne.

This budget is about delivering real outcomes, the sorts of outcomes that I am so grateful that Victorians have continued to vote for. So let us get it done.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:24): I am pleased to speak on this take-note motion on the budget. Of course it has been a very difficult budget for most Victorians. We have seen many, many cuts to many, many things except to the Suburban Rail Loop, and of course we have not seen any improvement on the state debt, which continues to climb, and that is very, very dire. It was an opportunity for budget repair. It would have been very healthy to have had budget repair in the order of the \$34 billion to \$40 billion that the SRL will cost, but there were perhaps other areas too that could have been repaired. One I would like to reflect on a little bit is Breakthrough Victoria, the venture capital (VC) fund in the Premier's office that is there to take bets on what it thinks is a good deal or not. The government says that as a stock picker:

Breakthrough Victoria is an independent company that is subject to the same rules and regulations that other companies are held to ...

which is not true, because unlike private venture funds, Breakthrough Victoria does not declare the structure on individual investments, company valuations or when it will deliver a return on taxpayer money. So how would you like to be a shareholder at that particular venture capitalist's AGM? How are we going? Not telling. Are we making money? Not telling. Are we getting a return? Not telling. Are we making good investment choices? Not telling. Who are we investing in? Not telling.

The fact is, though, you will not be attending that AGM, because this VC only has one shareholder, and that is Tim Pallas. He is the only shareholder of Breakthrough Victoria, and the fact is, according

to the annual report of Breakthrough Victoria, its only KPI is to invest in a set number of companies each year with taxpayer money. Its KPI is not making a return. So are the people with that loose KPI qualified to be operating a VC out of the Premier's office? Well, many doubt it. Can the Victorian government genuinely claim with any credibility that it has the expertise to be a venture capitalist? If we take its procurement and its project management and approach to other taxpayers money, clearly the record says no. If it runs Breakthrough Victoria like it runs projects, then we would expect it would be well, well, well over budget and losing money. The CEO receives \$500,000 per annum. It has 52 staff, including a number of former political staffers and public servants, costing a sweet \$9.9 million a year, so this is not a lean VC. It is not operating truly as a VC would in the normal market. Fifty-two staff to make eight investments in 12 months – I think I could do that by myself. What they are doing is trying to pick winners and almost certainly returning less to Victoria than they are earning.

Just like other VCs, we have the SEC as well. It should have been scrapped. Breakthrough Victoria should have been scrapped. The \$2 billion should have been returned to general reserves and been part of a debt repayment strategy. Or that \$2 billion could have gone directly to relieving cost-of-living stress in our own community. Or it could have been a substitute for one of the numerous tax or levy rises that have hit businesses and households. Ineptly investing in failing companies does not achieve this. For example, Breakthrough Victoria invested \$30 million in a medical enterprise in 2022. Thirty million dollars – that is a very hearty investment indeed. Then we hear, in the midst of that company laying off workers and unable to fund its operations, Breakthrough Victoria poured another \$4 million into it this year, in the midst of redundancies. Good money after bad – this is not how you run a VC. It is a very poor VC indeed.

The track record of governments trying to pick winners is almost always, almost inevitably, bad. Occasionally it might get a win, but not over the long run. And we have been here before. This government is fond of blaming its failures on the Kennett government and the difficult decisions it had to make 30 years ago. Well, those decisions did not take place in a vacuum. They were the product of Labor's catastrophic management of taxpayer money and state assets. The Cain–Kirner years crippled this state, and now we are seeing history repeating. Many will remember the collapse of the Pyramid Building Society, the fire sale of the State Bank, the fire sale of the original SEC, the Tricontinental disaster and the National Safety Council.

But amongst those there is one that does not get nearly enough attention, and that is the failed VEDC, the Victorian Economic Development Corporation. The VEDC, if anyone needs a reminder, was considered to be, and I will quote from the *Age*:

... the final nail in the economic coffin of the Cain/Kirner governments; a venture-capital fund that tried to pick winners but racked up losses estimated at \$110 million.

The VEDC and its sister, the Victorian Investment Corporation, were created to back new industries –

just like Breakthrough Victoria. But –

The VEDC collapsed under poor management and the absence of political accountability after it had provided \$450 million of loan and equity assistance to business.

Very poor indeed.

A member interjected.

Richard WELCH: Oh, yes. As businesses went broke under the VEDC – and this is a really pertinent point – they called on other state bodies to bail them out. Guess who underwrote some of the businesses that were failing under the VEDC? Guess what they did. They got the Gas and Fuel Corporation Superannuation Fund to pour money into one of these failing businesses. So they took workers' superannuation funds to underwrite – to bail out – the VEDC, which was acting as a failed venture capital business; the savings and futures of workers were used to bail out a failed government-run venture capital organisation. Of course Breakthrough Victoria is just Labor's next failed attempt

at playing venture capitalist, like the VEDC, only it is even less transparent, less clear in its remit and less accountable.

It is a bit like the Treasurer's lovely new credit card, a \$12 billion reserve for policies not listed in the budget and not scrutinised through Parliament. Of course this Treasurer's reserve is not business as usual. Ten years ago it was just \$365 million; it is now \$12.1 billion. Last year that reserve, this new credit card, funded 335 policy promises that were not in the budget – discretionary, not through Parliament, not with scrutiny, not with transparency. So if our state budget is now so denuded of detail, so blanketed in purpose, it can only imply one thing: this \$12.1 billion is there because it expects failure, not just in a few areas but in \$12 billion worth of areas – \$12 billion worth of budgeting failure is expected over the next 12 months. Add this to the 'to be confirmed' put in place for the SRL, and the budget is utterly compromised. I have it on good authority that TBC is there because they were not able to fit enough zeros at the end of the amount to put it on the page, so they just said 'TBC' instead.

The budget is an utterly compromised financial document that can give no comfort to credit agencies, let alone Victorians, who have the right to know where their money is going, what debt they and their children will shoulder and why they are shouldering that debt. The other VC organisation of course is the parody body known as the SEC; this joke organisation is also in the business of picking winners, only with even less transparency. Simon Corbell, the CEO of the Clean Energy Investor Group, said, 'The SEC's focus is on projects that struggle for commercial funding.' That statement says it all. No VC organisation will invest in a subcommercial transaction unless they are quite insane. This is obviously the act of an insane organisation.

And struggle they do. The Premier announced in October that the SEC, this VC organisation will be tasked with grabbing a chunk of the energy market from the existing retailers by selling directly to schools, hospitals and manufacturers. That statement sent shockwaves through the industry. It is not just picking winners now, it is undermining the viability of the sector itself. So it is no surprise then that yesterday one of the world's largest energy suppliers quietly shelved plans to develop offshore wind in Victoria because it was not commercially viable. Why would it be if you have the state itself underwriting subcommercial transactions to lower the market and underwrite the market? This illustrates the Grattan Institute's view that questioned whether there was a need for government to be in the stock-picking business at all when it could focus on policies that make the market attractive to invest in.

I will not go much further in my contribution. It is simply that it is a very poor budget, as we all know, but Breakthrough Victoria is a puzzling entity, puzzling on many levels because we do not know what it does, we do not know what it invests in and we do not know when we are getting our money back. It is not subject to the usual process of scrutiny and transparency that it should be. It is a case of the government trying to pick winners, which will end in grief, and it should have been going towards cost-of-living relief or tax relief or debt relief or any number of other issues that would have been a far better purpose of our money, of this state's money. And with that I will thank you.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (16:35): I am very happy to speak on this take-note motion for the budget. The Allan Labor government's first budget is dedicated to helping families across the state. Whether it is helping with the cost of living, making sure our kids can be their best, record funding for our healthcare system or continuing to invest in more of the services families rely on, the Victorian budget 2024–25 invests in our community.

I am very pleased it is a budget that is helping families right now. Cost-of-living pressures continue for many families, and for many families interest rate rises have made things challenging. The costs of learning are also real on the family budget. Things like uniforms, camps and excursions can really add up. That is why this budget provides a school saving bonus to help cover costs. The \$400 bonus will help make sure our kids have everything they need for the school day, supporting families with children at government schools and families at our non-governments who need it the most. It will help

cover the costs of learning essentials and the extracurriculars that make school fun. We will work with schools to make it available for the start of the 2025 school year.

Life can also be very busy – providing kids with free vision tests and free glasses is making a real difference to the learning experience for many children. That is why we are also tripling our free Glasses for Kids program, as Mr Galea mentioned. We are tripling our free Glasses for Kids program, making sure even more young Victorians can be at their best in the classroom and beyond. Having already helped 34,000 kids across our state, this investment will help 74,000 more, providing free vision screening and prescription glasses for students who need them. Let us face it: if you cannot actually see the blackboard – whoops, that might be a bit old-fashioned, the screen – it is difficult to participate in a class. Providing Smile Squads, with free dental check-ups, also saves families money and time getting children to appointments, and very much helps with dental health in the long term. These small things add up to making a big difference for our young learners, continuing to help them to be their best in the classroom and outside it. And because we know that learning is not limited to the classroom, we are investing \$6 million to extend our Get Active Kids vouchers, providing up to \$200 to help eligible families with the cost of sporting club registration, uniforms and equipment. What an amazing and wonderful thing to join a club and participate in a group activity and gain that sense of belonging to your local community and neighbourhood. What a wonderful thing it is to be not excluded from that because of price.

We are also backing the community organisations that provide support and services to help young Victorians succeed in and out of the classroom. This includes \$1.7 million for Beyond the Bell. This will improve the educational outcomes of young people through local collaboration and a collective impact model in the south-east region in my electorate.

For too long women's health issues have been overlooked and underdiagnosed. This budget invests \$18.3 million to improve women's health and wellbeing, with support for 12 women's health organisations to provide preventative programs through community outreach and education. I am looking forward to hosting a series of round tables on women's pain across the south-west in the coming months. The uptake of women already registering for these conversations shows me that many women are keen to share their experience of under-recognised pain. We know how important our frontline healthcare services are for patients and their families. Since we came to government, Victoria's public hospitals now employ 5000 more doctors and over 13,000 more nurses. During the pandemic, when our health system was stretched like never before, we acted decisively, providing record funding to bolster our health system. Since the pandemic, the cost of growing and running our health system has continued to increase, but every cent is worth it to keep Victorians healthy. That is why we are making the biggest multiyear investment in our health system in Victoria's history. It will mean our hospitals have the long-term certainty they need over the coming years.

We also know how important regional public transport is in connecting our communities. That is why we are investing to continue running extra train services, including weekday return services for the Warrnambool line, because outer regional Victorians deserve a great and upgraded public transport system as well. Capped fares have made an incredible difference to many people and families across the south-west. Since the capped fares were introduced, residents of Portland and Heywood use the V/Line bus to travel to Warrnambool for specialist appointments. I think that is intraregional travel, if that is the technical word for it, and that is actually making a real saving for residents in Portland to be able to come to Warrnambool and back on \$10 a day. Capped fares have made an incredible difference to those many people and families across the south-west. If you saw the car park at the Warrnambool station, you would know that many locals are travelling to Geelong and Melbourne to visit family and for health appointments, study and work reasons, and they are doing so affordably. This is including regional Victorians when they were previously not included, and it is on an equal basis with metropolitan fees. So it is perfectly reasonable and exactly the kind of thing that the Allan Labor government would do – the kind of thing a Labor government would do.

Stage 2 of the Warrnambool line upgrade – that is, the Warrnambool railway line – will bring further benefits. The works include upgrades to train detection technology at the 53 public level crossings on the Warrnambool line. Axle counters are being installed at the level crossings, along with boom gates, bells and flashing lights to make them compatible with VLocity trains. This means that they will be fully signalised. At various times up to 600 workers are working on the upgrade between Geelong and Warrnambool. Necessary stabling upgrade at Warrnambool station is also included. The 53 public level crossing upgrades will enable the introduction of VLocity trains on the Warrnambool line. However, there is no gain without some pain. Over the next couple of months there will be a pause in train services to facilitate commissioning of the new fully signalised crossings. It will also facilitate major work splits in the Geelong section of the train rail network as well.

I recently toured two of these sites where these works are currently underway and thanked the project workers for showing me the worksite and explaining the additional safety features being installed. The completion of stage 2 represents a great deal of planning, coordination and massive investments towards this truly significant upgrade. We are now on the home stretch, which will deliver huge benefits for passages in Victoria's south-west. The upgraded Warrnambool line will increase road safety and reduce risks for serious crashes and fatalities as more people have the option to take up train travel due to this government's investment. I would also like to point out that other smaller projects of significance have preceded stage 2, such as the return of the popular crossing at Gilles Street near the Warrnambool station. This crossing provides a very important community link from the beach to the city centre. It is used for access to the fabulous Lake Pertobe playground and the Port Fairy to Warrnambool rail trail right in the middle of town. It is an important walking and riding crossing for those who live in South Warrnambool and Merrivale. It is just another example of this government improving and maintaining infrastructure for our communities. It is also an example of this government listening to the community. Ms Purcell is not here, but that is all right. Ms Purcell's predecessor Mr Meddick launched a petition in this very chamber on the matter of the crossing, and I thank the Animal Justice Party for advocating for the Warrnambool community on that matter.

This is a rather stark contrast to what the Kennett government offered the south-west – no upgraded railway lines, no new signalling systems, not five trains a day, not VLocity trains, not new stabling. The Kennett coalition government actually tried to close down the Warrnambool line. Fortunately, he was met with a passionate community resistance who recognised the value of the line. One thousand people rallied at the railway station to resist and to campaign against the closure of the Warrnambool line, and thank goodness it was not closed. Thank goodness we won that battle. It is fabulous to see how the now improving service will be used by so many people across the region, as well as contributing to our carbon neutrality.

The coalition claim that they represent regional Victoria, but in reality, if you look at the record, Labor budgets invest in regional communities and the coalition closes down regional communities. The Allan Labor government, as part of this budget, is providing \$4.11 million to support the Rural Financial Counselling Service in partnership with the Commonwealth government. This will enable the Rural Financial Counselling Service to continue providing free financial counselling to Victorian farmers, fishers, foresters and small related businesses experiencing or at risk of financial hardship.

Another indispensable service in Western Victoria is Food Share. Food Share helps families and households in the south-west by providing much-needed everyday food relief. This includes providing our local schools with fresh fruit every day. I am very pleased that as the cost of living rises this budget delivers an extra \$3.5 million to continue the work of our six regional food relief hubs, including Geelong and Warrnambool.

During devastating bushfires, floods and natural disasters, we rely on our first responders to keep communities safe, and that is why this budget delivers more of the tools and technology that we need to respond to fire and flood and everything in between. The budget provides \$185 million to bolster our state's bushfire prevention and response, including those with specialist aerial capabilities for built-up areas to support our firefighters on the front line. This investment includes 15 new CFA pumbers

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for local fires and volunteers across Victoria, helping keep our communities safe. After visiting Pomonal twice this year and seeing firsthand how that resilient and connected community is dealing with the loss of 44 homes, it remains clear that prevention and response need to be bolstered due to climate change. The CFA does an amazing job, and this budget responds to their increasing workload.

We are continuing our support for those Victorians that have been affected by these catastrophic weather events, with \$301.5 million to help them rebuild and recover. This includes repairs to schools, roads and other infrastructure, as well as temporary accommodation relief payments and mental health support for residents who need help with the aftermath.

We are continuing our Local Sports Infrastructure Fund, backing local communities and local clubs with funding to improve their facilities, from ovals to pavilions to change rooms and scoreboards. One example is the Balmoral bowling club, who will receive \$220,000 towards the delivery of a new synthetic bowling green. We also know that sport is at the heart of the community in Portland, and that is why the Labor government is investing \$100,000 towards upgrades at the Portland BMX club. I am thrilled at this announcement. The BMX club is well organised and advocated strongly to build a new start hill for their growing club. The start hill will meet BMX standards, which means that more competitions will come to Portland – great for Portland and encouraging other youth to potentially join the vibrant club. Each investment is an investment in the people of western Victoria because this is a budget and a government dedicated to helping families, and I fully support it.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (16:50): I rise today to speak on the state budget. I thought last year's state budget was bad, but this year it is even worse. After a decade of financial mismanagement under Labor, Victoria's net debt has risen from \$21.8 billion and is set to be close to \$188 billion by 2028. We have the highest debt of any state in Australia – more than Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania combined – and due to Labor's financial mismanagement we are currently paying \$15 million every single day in interest. That is soon going to be \$18 million every single day in interest. I would love to do the calculations and just look at the clock and think for a moment how many thousands of dollars are just going towards paying off interest, because that is going to be \$26 million every single day by 2027–28. It is very hard to imagine. I do not think Labor know how to imagine it, because they certainly do not know how to manage money and they do not know how to manage projects.

The Treasurer referred to a disciplined budget, but it is far from it. Labor has no plan to repay the debt. If you ran a business like that, you would be going broke in no time. Victoria's annual interest bill is set to reach \$9.7 billion by 2027–28. That is close to 9 per cent of the government's total revenue spent paying interest on our state debt instead of going towards vital services.

The Premier's track record speaks for itself. Her Commonwealth Games were cancelled – \$600 million wasted – and Jacinta Allan was responsible for now close to \$40 billion of cost blowouts on major projects providing overpaid jobs for the CFMEU. So you go around Melbourne and you see the massive flags on the signs, and we have read in the papers of people holding stop signs that are earning \$200,000. It is absolutely extraordinary. I have seen up to 10 ambulances ramped at Bendigo Hospital, and I have spoken to constituents in the Premier's electorate that have called 000 for an ambulance and been told that they will have to take a taxi.

Again, Labor cannot manage money, and Victorians are now paying the highest taxes in Australia. Labor continue to raise taxes because their priorities are all wrong and they keep wasting money on projects like the Suburban Rail Loop. It is a project that is very conveniently located in marginal seats. It was taken to two elections, but not surprisingly missed out on funding in the recent federal budget. If only people were aware of the lack of detail and lack of a business case that was put into that project, they may have voted very differently indeed.

When Labor were elected to government they promised not to introduce any new taxes. That was a decade ago, but over that last decade they have introduced now more than 55 new or increased taxes.

The cost of living just keeps going up, as Labor has increased both the fire services and the waste management levies in this budget. The role of the state government is to deliver key services. Labor keep raising taxes, but they cannot seem to find the funds in this budget for vital services. In Northern Victoria many projects have been delayed and unfunded.

In education we see in the budget Labor promised upgrades to 29 schools, including the White Hills Primary School, Broadford Primary School and Wangaratta High School in my electorate of Northern Victoria, but they missed out on funding in this budget. Labor love to get the big media headlines. They promised to deliver 50 government-operated early learning centres; now there is a five-year delay. Likewise the free kinder program got plenty of coverage, but it is now delayed another four years, until 2036. The government sought to get media headlines again with a \$400 payment to families in public schools. But the cost of living hits everyone, and the state government should treat all Victorians fairly and consistently, regardless of which school they send their kids to. I received a letter from a family in my electorate of Northern Victoria that highlights the injustice:

If the rationale behind this decision was means testing, I would understand and accept it as fair. However, it is deeply troubling to witness families in better financial positions than mine receiving benefits while we are left out. This discrepancy only serves to fuel feelings of frustration and injustice within the Catholic school community.

When you look at the state budget, health services in regional areas are also impacted. Key hospital upgrades in Swan Hill and Maryborough have been delayed, and now the government is talking about amalgamating regional hospitals, which will further reduce healthcare facilities in regional communities. We saw in this budget \$207 million being cut from public health on top of millions cut from dental services, aged care, ambulance services, health workforce training and maternal and child health.

I was also stunned to see a 75 per cent funding cut to the Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre, the VCCC. Cancer affects so many families right across Victoria, including mine, and that is an issue that has been raised by constituents in my electorate. The number of Victorians diagnosed with cancer is increasing, and the Liberals and Nationals have called on the government to reverse this appalling decision. The centre has provided cutting-edge cancer research and been responsible for many groundbreaking therapies. The momentum that they have gained over the last 30 years will be lost, as the funding cuts will slash vital research programs. They will lead to a loss of talent, as trained personnel will consider looking overseas, and impact support for patients and their families who are going through a very difficult time.

When you look at roads in our budget, and if you drive on regional roads – I have to drive on many regional roads, as does Wendy Lovell. Northern Victoria is over 100,000 square kilometres, so there are certainly a lot of roads. I can tell you it is like driving in a washing machine sometimes. You feel like you are just bouncing around or dodging cars trying to miss potholes. The government's own survey last year rated 91 per cent of roads as in a poor or very poor condition. That is extraordinary. The state of our roads will deteriorate further following a 90 per cent reduction in road repairs this financial year. We saw in this budget road maintenance funding has been slashed by 16 per cent compared to 2020, and the budget also reveals that delays are likely to continue with the Kilmore bypass too, as a lack of clarity about its funding and construction continues for yet another year. I was also interested to see the statistics that almost 2000 Victorians have lodged claims due to vehicle damage due to the appalling condition of the roads in the past three years.

Now, emergency services: when you look at the budget, the CFA and SES have done incredible work, and the majority are volunteers. But despite one of the worst bushfire seasons in decades, upgrades for our CFA tankers have also been pushed back by another year. I have also received letters from many people in relation to the Victorian State Emergency Service requesting sustainable funding to support these services. The SES has over 4900 volunteers who provide assistance during emergencies, including floods, storms, landslides and road crashes. The SES rely on volunteer-led fundraising to procure vital equipment, maintain facilities and replace end-of-life fleet assets, and this year's budget

provided very little. It is clear that revenue raised from the fire services levy is not just going to our emergency services; it is being diverted off elsewhere. Victoria needs to catch up with other states and provide a fairer and more sustainable distribution of funds for our volunteer emergency services.

While regional areas have faced further cuts, the public wages bill keeps going up. When Labor first came to office, the wages bill was \$18.8 billion. This financial year it is \$36.5 billion. Wages blew out by \$600 million this year, and in the last decade the wages bill has doubled. But in some good news – I will not be all negative – it was good to see that Labor reduced the amount of money that they are spending on advertising in this budget. We know how much this government absolutely love boosting it up on social media and every other channel that they can.

Victorians cannot afford any more of Labor's waste and increased taxes. I was very interested to read this article in the *Age* yesterday. It is entitled 'Pallas puts \$12 b on his ballooning "credit card"'. It states:

A little-known fund has handed Treasurer Tim Pallas a \$12.1 billion "credit card" to spend on policy promises not listed in the budget and not scrutinised through parliament.

According to a final tally of the 2022–23 –

financial year's –

budget, Victoria's so-called Treasurer's Advance has ballooned to more than 33 times its size a decade ago, when it was about \$365 million.

The article goes on to say:

The Treasury's final financial report for the 2013–14 financial year shows that during its final full year in office, the former Coalition government used the advance to cover 19 policy decisions, worth a total of \$364.6 million. It has since had a 3200 per cent increase in 10 years.

That is a reflection on this government. They do not like transparency, and a change of government is desperately needed to restore transparency and get our state back in the black and back on track.

Labor has absolutely got Victoria into a mess, and they are not going to be the ones to get us out of it. I am counting the sleeps until the November 2026 state election. There about 900 of them to go, or 130 weeks. We need to see a change of government because Labor cannot manage money and they cannot manage projects, and Victorians are paying the price.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:02): I also rise to speak today on the 2024–25 state budget, a budget that makes sensible decisions, good decisions, and continues to deliver the services and the infrastructure that Victorians need and want – Victorians in the regions, in the cities and indeed in the outer suburbs. This is a budget that responds to the capacity constraints and the inflation that we are experiencing not just at home but abroad as well. We are doing this in a way that is investing in Victorians – investing in our workers and investing in our future generations through the school saving bonus. These measures in this budget are contributing towards continued supports for people right across the Victorian community.

I think at the outset it is important to have a brief look at the context in which this budget has been handed down. Victorians are experiencing significant cost-of-living pressures, and this is a budget that responds to those pressures. We are putting Victorians at the very heart of what we are doing in this budget. In particular we are putting Victorian families, such as those in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region, at the heart of what we are doing. They are the ones in our mind as we put these budgets together.

It is important, though, despite those challenges, to note some of the other context that we find ourselves in with this budget. To start with, Victoria's unemployment rate has been at or around 4 per cent since early 2022, which is a figure not seen since 50 years prior. Unemployment is even lower in regional Victoria, at just 3.7 per cent. The Victorian Skills Authority has forecast 10,000 new registered nurses will enter the workforce by 2026. I add to comments I made on a previous motion

yesterday: we are seeing huge numbers of nurses and doctors from overseas, particularly the UK, coming to our shores, which is very good to see. Employment in this state is forecast to grow by a total of 225,000 over the four years to 2027–28. More than 560,000 jobs have already been created in Victoria since September 2020. That has been the highest jobs growth in the nation. For every job that has been created in Australia since that time, one in every three of them have been created here in Victoria. As I have also said this week, for a state with a population of around about a quarter of the nation's population, for one in every three jobs to be created in this state shows the success of this government's broader economic strategy. More than 170,000 of these jobs have been created in regional Victoria over the past nine years, with more people now employed in regional Victoria than at any other point.

Net debt as a percentage of gross state product is forecast to stabilise and then decline within the forward estimates from 25.2 per cent in the 2026–27 financial year to 25.1 per cent in 2027–28. This is a demonstration of the fact that Victoria will achieve the fourth step of the government's fiscal strategy as we come out of the COVID pandemic, which will stabilise net debt as a percentage of GSP. Deloitte Access Economics is also forecasting that Victoria's economy will outpace all other states over the next five years. As we have seen, and as we continue to see, business investment in Victoria is leading the nation, with our growth being almost 6 per cent higher than the national average.

Whilst we can look at the big picture, it is also important to look at our local communities as well. For the local communities I represent, this is another budget which will deliver for them. I spoke earlier today about the extension and expansion of the route 800 bus service from Dandenong to Chadstone. Again, I note my congratulations to Peter Parker, the advocate who has been forcefully pushing forward for improvements on that bus route. We have also seen – though strictly not in the budget – through the growth areas infrastructure contribution process a number a new and expanded routes across outer metropolitan Melbourne. The ones I am particularly excited to see in the south-east are the extensions of routes 798, 831, 925 and 928.

Also a new announcement in this budget is we are seeing two new schools for Clyde North. That is of course on top of the three new schools we are currently in the process of building and several other schools that have already been built just in that suburb, one of Victoria's fastest growing suburbs. We have announced the Clyde Creek north primary and secondary schools – that is the interim name – which will add to Clyde North secondary school, Clyde North primary school, Thompsons West primary school on top of Topirum Primary School, which opened just this year, and other schools before it. This is a government that is continuing to invest to make Victoria the Education State. The initiatives in this budget will round out the 100 new schools figure that we committed to when this government first came into office – an ambitious figure for sure but one that we are meeting. We are achieving that figure, just as we exceeded our target for the number of level crossing removals, having now removed 77 level crossings across the state.

As part of that as well I will mention the school saving bonus. That is going to be \$400 for every family with a child in a government primary school in the state of Victoria. That is going to be a significant help for families at a time when they need it the most. As I said at the outset, this is a government that is focused on Victorians first, that is focused on Victorian families first, and this initiative, the school saving bonus, is demonstrative of that.

There are also other local improvements and upgrades we are seeing. I am delighted to see that the intersection of Stud Road and McFees Road in Dandenong North will be upgraded and signalised with traffic lights. It is a very busy area. Stud Road is a very busy road. The Dandenong basketball stadium is across the road, and understandably there is a lot of cross traffic from pedestrians crossing those roads, currently in very unsafe conditions. These traffic lights will make a huge bonus for safety. I would also like to particularly, in welcoming this announcement, congratulate the amazing mayor of Greater Dandenong Cr Lana Formoso, who has been so diligently campaigning for this. She shares in this victory. It is wonderful to see this announcement made.

We also seeing \$1.76 million in funding for Viv's Place, a service which provides wraparound support for women and children escaping family violence. We are seeing \$227 million invested in this budget to upgrade classrooms and facilities at 25 existing schools as well. The budget includes \$250 million for school maintenance and \$187 million for the relocatable buildings program. Some of the schools in the south-east to receive the benefit of these upgrades include Cranbourne Secondary College, Seaford North Primary School, Mulgrave Primary School, James Cook Primary School and Endeavour Hills as well.

We know that this is a budget that delivers for Victorians, because this is a state government that delivers for Victorians and will continue to do so. On top of the school saving bonus program, there is also additional support through the tripling of the size of the free Glasses for Kids program, as well as \$6 million to extend the Get Active Kids vouchers program. We have also seen an expansion of the free early morning school meals for primary school students, which is wonderful to see. Every government school is now eligible under the expanded funding to have this service in their school. The best thing for a child at the start of the day – one of the absolute best things – is to have a full stomach, and this budget is ensuring that our kids have exactly that.

We are also continuing to deliver essential investment into our healthcare system, having already invested more than \$11 billion into the system and \$1.7 billion in hospital and health facility upgrades to meet the future health needs of Victorians. That includes \$8.8 billion of funding for hospital upgrades, new hospitals and extensions. We have also seen \$146 million to maintain Ambulance Victoria's ability to respond to the growing demand for ambulance services, additional funding for blood products at Victorian hospitals under the National Blood Agreement, \$38 million for palliative care services and aged care facilities as well as other investments. As part of this we are also seeing upgrades to, amongst others, the Austin Hospital and the Northern Hospital. We are seeing investment into the Monash Medical Centre redevelopment as well, which is a terrific project to see. We are also seeing a rescoping of the hospital projects in the Parkville precinct, taking advantage of the fact that a recent change in the building floor limitations set by flight paths has significantly increased them in the Parkville area. Taking into account the electromagnetic interference at the Arden precinct as well, this relocation of the project – the same project, on the existing Parkville site – will ensure that we will continue to be able to deliver the vastly improved and expanded services at both the Royal Melbourne and the Royal Women's hospitals at their Parkville campuses, just as we had committed to do – except now it will all be in the one site.

We are also taking responsible actions to address the labour force shortages across numerous sectors of the state's economy and we are committed to continuing to build the workforce of the future through significant new investments, including \$425 million for access to vocational training and free TAFE to retain workers for industries and sectors in need, such as disability support, both helping workers and ensuring that industries have the skills they need for in-demand jobs. We are also investing \$117.3 million to continue supporting the TAFE network as Victoria's trusted public provider of choice to meet Victoria's current and future skills requirements, as well as further support for mental health graduate placements.

With transformational projects such as the Metro Tunnel scheduled to open next year – a full year ahead of schedule of course – we are also seeing investments to put that last stage of works into the timetabling and the operational requirements to ensure that when the Metro Tunnel opens we have got everything switched on. We will be running trains right from my region, the Pakenham and Cranbourne lines, through the brand new Metro Tunnel out to the west through to Sunbury, which is going to be a fantastic thing for constituents in my region. On the Pakenham and Cranbourne lines, commuters will benefit from direct access through to precincts such as Anzac and such as Parkville, as well as going straight through the CBD through those new stations at Town Hall and State Library. We are also going to see Frankston line trains return to the city loop, which is going to provide more coverage for commuters in my region on the Frankston line.

The Metro Tunnel is a significant city-shaping project. It is one that this government got straight into action on when we came into government in 2014, unlike those opposite, who dithered for four years and tried to change the route repeatedly, until the project that they were putting forward would have become a basket case that would have sent Frankston trains halfway out to Port Melbourne before they even went into the city, which would have meant cumulatively many more hours for commuters in that corridor before they would even get anywhere close to the city on their daily commute. This is a wonderful project that is going to have transformational benefits to our entire city's rail network. Coming on top of those level crossings removals that we have seen and more and more lines becoming level crossing free, the Pakenham line will be level crossing free by the end of the decade. Indeed the Cranbourne line will be very soon as well, on top of the Lilydale line, which is in fact going to be level crossing free in just a matter of months. These things will cumulatively add to and support our public transport network, allowing us to run those additional services and build those structures in place for our growing city as well. All of this will of course be augmented by the Suburban Rail Loop, which remains a priority of this government, because this is a government that recognises that Melbourne is continuing to grow and we must invest in the infrastructure that our growing city needs.

For generation after generation in this state we have seen complaints about a lack of infrastructure for our growing city. This is a government that in the last 10 years has continued to invest and is continuing to invest in that infrastructure so that people can have those services – so that if you are in Clyde North you have a range of government primary and secondary schools to choose from, from the schools that are already open to the ones we are currently in the process of building. We have done the road upgrades as well, the hospital upgrades and of course those city-shaping public transport projects, which supported by the bus route improvements, will make our communities more livable, more sustainable and frankly more viable in the face of growing population growth. We are working as hard as we can to deliver those services and those improvements to the Victorian people right across metropolitan Melbourne and indeed regional Victoria. We have seen every single regional rail line upgraded under this government as well.

As I say, this is a budget that continues to deliver for all Victorians. It makes sensible decisions, it makes tough decisions, but it does so with one thing at its heart, and that is the Victorian public and that is Victorian families. This is a government that will continue to support those Victorian families as we continue to be in a very difficult cost-of-living situation. I commend the budget to the house.

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (17:17): I rise to speak on this take-note motion on this year's state budget. Coming out of the pandemic it has been a difficult few years for Victorians. The soaring cost of living and a hostile housing market are causing a spiral of wealth and generational inequality. Many people were looking to this budget for some reprieve, but on the issues that really matter Labor is letting down those struggling with the cost of living and housing affordability. Once again Labor is completely failing to address the scale of the housing crisis – no new money for housing, nothing for renters, nothing to rein in the cost of groceries, axing of sick pay for casuals and stalling of mental health and kinder reforms.

Budgets are about priorities, and this budget has revealed Labor's priorities once again. Labor has failed to tax wealthy corporations to fund desperately needed social reforms. Instead, it has sided with the big banks, the real estate industry and the price-gouging grocery stores, which under this budget will continue to profit off the hardships of Victorians unimpeded. Renters, young people with a mortgage, the 120,000 people on the public and community housing waitlist – they will all have to keep struggling. The families who are fighting to put food on the table while keeping a roof over their heads will just have to keep struggling too. This budget does absolutely nothing for them.

Under the guise of fiscal responsibility Labor has delivered a meagre budget with no help for those doing it tough. It reinforces the bureaucratic path they are forging further and further to the right on with every passing year. This budget will not make life easier for those that cannot afford the basic necessities, and it will hurt people into the future – those who may never be able to leave housing insecurity and stress. The choices Labor has made are devastating.

Let us talk about the specifics, starting with housing. The private rental market is pricing people out at an astronomical rate. If you are on youth allowance, not a single home currently on the market is affordable to you. If you are on a minimum wage, less than 1 per cent of homes are affordable to you. The rental vacancy rate is around 1 per cent. As our housing stock grows at a snail's pace, rents keep getting higher and higher. In fact people are having to pay on average \$200 more rent a week than they did before the pandemic. In the past if you were priced out of the private market you could turn to public housing. Public housing made up 4.9 per cent of the total housing market in 1981. Now, just 40 years later, it has dropped to 3.8 per cent. By comparison, Canada's proportion of households in social housing is 13.5 per cent and England's is 17 per cent. The public and community housing waitlist is currently over 120,000 people long in Victoria. If you are on the priority waitlist fleeing family violence, your wait time for a house is almost two years. If they are not on the priority list, frankly some people will not be allocated housing in their lifetime.

What does this budget say it will do? Has Labor committed to building the huge number of public homes that are needed to address the housing crisis? Far from it. Last year the government added only 1554 houses to the public and community housing stock. It knocked down or sold off 1296 homes. That is right – in the middle of a housing crisis the government is knocking down about as many homes as it is adding to public and community housing stock, and this year the government intends to build even fewer houses than it did last year. At this rate it will take no less than 31 years to clear the public and community housing waitlist, assuming the waiting list does not grow, but of course we know that it will.

Governments of the past knew their crucial role in building and maintaining public housing. They knew that something as fundamental as housing could not be left to the whims of the private market and property developers. Other countries and cities have taken this role seriously over the years, and through proper investment they have built and accumulated significant public housing stock. This creates more housing stock and a safety net as well as setting a minimum standard for housing, which means people are not thrown to the wolves if they cannot afford rent on the private market. Labor has turned its back on this core responsibility of government. They are choosing now to demolish 44 public housing towers in the middle of this housing crisis and privatise the land without producing a cost analysis. They are handing over public land to property developers, who stand to profit at the cost of Victorians, especially those on the waiting list. This cements Labor's privatisation agenda further.

Let us now talk about family violence. Women are among the most affected by the housing crisis, especially those who are experiencing family violence or have limited income due to caring responsibilities. Currently for people fleeing from violence who have been given priority on the public and community housing waitlist the wait time is almost two years. Imagine you are fleeing family violence, you have nowhere to go, nowhere to keep you and your children safe – in the current conditions you will be waiting two years before a permanent public home becomes available. The dismal state of things means that women are having to choose between sleeping in their cars and sleeping under one roof with their abuser.

Communities are consistently reeling from the impact of the shocking family violence incidents which take place every day in this country. The scale of this issue can be hard to comprehend. What we know is that demand for specialist family violence programs is up and that services are not meeting this demand. They are having to turn away women and children seeking help, and they are having to turn away perpetrators who want to change but do not know how, yet this budget contains no new money for specialist services providing frontline support.

In the past few months Labor warned that the budget would be tough everyone, that services should not expect much. Services were anticipating the loss of uplift funding, which has become core to their programs' offerings. They advocated fiercely against this loss, because without it they cannot continue doing their vital work. The government could not ignore the collective voices of the sector so they decided to extend this funding, but only for another two years. This is simply not good enough. Family

violence services need more funding and they need it for the long term. By providing short-term funding arrangements only, the government is limiting the ability of services to deliver the long-term, sustainable reforms recommended by the Royal Commission into Family Violence. They are placing these crucial services in precarious positions, resulting in women and children falling through the cracks, overworked staff and a hamstrung sector.

This budget has failed to adequately fund men's behaviour change programs, which are essential. This budget came with a statement on gender-responsive budgeting. While the government's intent is commendable, in reality many women will continue to do it tough as a result of this budget. We remain concerned that the government is not doing enough to support culturally diverse communities grappling with family violence. Many community organisations remain unfunded despite being at the front line of the family violence crisis. Many organisations are run by volunteers and on the goodwill of people who want to support those in need. These organisations desperately need funding as Victoria's migrant population continues to grow, yet there is no new funding earmarked for multicultural organisations and no sign of any multicultural strategies to guide the government's approach.

There is still no commitment to culturally specific women's refuges. It is really important the government takes this ask seriously from the community. Many women from diverse backgrounds do not feel included in mainstream services, and it can mean the difference between seeking safety or staying in an abusive, violent situation. At the same time the demand for refuge beds continues to accelerate, with the budget revealing that only about 1000 refuge requests were able to be met. In the coming year the government is only aiming to support 60 per cent of people who seek shelter at a refuge. What is going to happen to everyone else? We are hearing that many women and children are spending months on end in unsuitable hotel and motel accommodation because we do not have enough family violence refuges in Victoria. This must be fixed, and it must be funded.

Another area of concern in this budget is young people and the justice system. The Yoorrook Justice Commission made very clear recommendations about raising the age of criminal responsibility and about bail reforms. The criminal justice system is no place for children. Children and young people should have care and the support of their community, so it is disappointing that this budget does not seem to earmark any funding towards the alternative service model that the government has promised ahead of raising the age of criminal responsibility. It is devastating enough that Labor has rejected Yoorrook's recommendation to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14 without exception, despite all the evidence and international law, but now this government seems to be falling behind on even its more conservative commitment to raise the age at all. Instead they have invested in ankle bracelets and electronic monitoring of young people on bail.

The choices made in this budget are a troubling and telling indication of Labor's desperate attempts to look tough on crime and their allegiance to the police. While Labor attempts to court conservative voters, First Nations children will continue to be overpoliced and criminalised. It is pretty easy to become disheartened with politics given budgets like these, but it is important to keep fighting for better budgets, better policies and better governments.

The Greens are firmly in the corner of everyday Victorians who we are hearing from daily about how tough things are out there for them. We are fighting for the rights of renters and a rent freeze. We are advocating for a real increase in public housing stock to take pressure off the private market. We are advocating to regulate the price gouging by supermarkets and grocery stores. We are standing staunchly in support of our Palestinian community and allies as this country's major parties continue to support the potentially genocidal actions of the state of Israel.

The Greens have a vision that will see profiteering corporations pay their fair share of tax. We want big corporations to do their fair share – pay tax and stop price gouging and profiteering off people's misery. We want big property developers to build genuinely affordable housing, and we want the

government to do what good governments would be doing – building more public housing and not letting property developers write housing policy.

Budgets allow people to peel back the layers of spin and rhetoric spouted by governments to reveal what they really care about. This budget lays bare Labor's priorities. They have essentially told Victorians to suck it up and hope for the best. Considering Victoria is a wealthy state in a wealthy OECD country, it is simply not good enough. Victorians want a fair budget. They should have a government that is compassionate and acts with conviction on the things that matter the most. The Greens are offering an alternative vision on how things could be – a future which prioritises people over profit. I hope that the Labor and Liberal parties are listening to the community, because that is what they want too.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:29): I move:

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

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

Bills

Local Government Amendment (Governance and Integrity) Bill 2024

Introduction and first reading

The PRESIDENT (17:29): I have received a message from the Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council 'A Bill for an Act to amend the **Local Government Act 2020** in relation to governance and integrity matters and to make other miscellaneous amendments, to amend the **Local Government Act 1989** to reflect machinery of government changes, to make consequential amendments to the **Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal Act 1998** and for other purposes'.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (17:29): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I move, by leave:

That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Statement of compatibility

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (17:30): 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 Local Government Amendment (Governance and Integrity) Bill 2024.

In my opinion, the Local Government Amendment (Governance and Integrity) Bill 2024, as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with human rights as set out in the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

Overview of the Bill

The Bill amends the *Local Government Act 2020* (**LGA 2020**) to:

- provide for ongoing mandatory training for councillors and mayors;

- provide for the suspension and disqualification of individual councillors who have been found to have created a serious risk to health and safety at a council or are preventing the council from performing its functions;
- enhance the enforcement powers of the Chief Municipal Inspector, including through the ability to issue infringement notices for certain offences under the LGA 2020;
- make improvements to the councillor conduct framework including by creating a power to introduce a model councillor code of conduct and increasing the severity of sanctions available for councillor misconduct; and
- improve the operation of provisions relating to Ministerial oversight, appointment powers and the councillor conduct framework.

Human Rights Issues

The human rights protected by the Charter that are relevant to the Bill are:

- The right to privacy and reputation (section 13);
- The right to freedom of expression (section 15);
- The right to take part in public life (section 18);
- Property rights (section 20);
- The right to a fair hearing (section 24);
- The right to the presumption of innocence (section 25(1));
- The right to protection against self-incrimination (section 25(2)(k)); and
- The right not to be tried or punished more than once (section 26).

Eligibility, standing down, suspension and disqualification of councillors

The Bill amends the LGA 2020 to allow for the suspension and disqualification of individual councillors who have been found to have created a serious risk to health and safety at a council or are preventing the council from performing its functions (**Adverse Report**). Specifically:

- Clause 7 inserts new section 34A, which permits the Governor in Council, on the recommendation of the Minister, to disqualify a person from being a councillor for eight years from the date of dismissal if they were dismissed from office and were subject to an Adverse Report;
- Clause 31 inserts new section 229A, which permits the Minister to suspend a councillor for up to one year if they were subject to an Adverse Report, and inserts new section 229B, which provides that a councillor suspended under section 229A is ineligible to hold the office of Mayor or Deputy Mayor or chair a delegated committee of the council for the remainder of the council's term.

Clause 6 further inserts a new eligibility exclusion criterion into section 34 of the LGA 2020, where a person with more than one adverse decision made against them within a period of eight years is not qualified to be a councillor for a period of four years from the making of the second adverse decision. The Bill defines an adverse decision as a finding of serious misconduct under section 167 or a suspension from office under section 229A of the LGA 2020.

These amendments may engage the right to take part in public life (s 18) which is further discussed below.

Clause 30, which substitutes section 229 of the LGA 2020, provides that if a councillor is charged with an offence that if convicted they would become ineligible to hold office, they are automatically stood down from their office of councillor until proceedings in respect of the charge are finally determined. The principal effect of this amendment is to:

- remove the need for the Chief Municipal Inspector to make an application to VCAT for an order to stand down the councillor;
- remove the requirement for VCAT to consider the nature and circumstances of the charge before a councillor is stood down.

The repeal of a statutory provision does not itself affect a person's rights unless it effects a deprivation of property, and a councillor does not have a vested right to be suspended only in accordance with a specified procedure. Further, as new section 229 operates to automatically suspend a councillor from their office on being charged with a criminal offence, there is no 'civil proceeding' which would engage the fair hearing

right in section 24(1). Nevertheless, the nexus between a criminal charge and the suspension of a councillor engages:

- the right not to be punished more than once for the same offence (s 26) and to have a criminal charge decided by a court (s 24);
- the right of presumption of innocence (s 25(1));
- the right to take part in public life (s 18); and
- the right to property (s 20).

The right not to be punished more than once for the same offence (s 26) and the right to have a criminal charge decided by a court (s 24(1))

Section 26 of the Charter provides that a person must not be tried or punished more than once for an offence in respect of which they have already been finally convicted or acquitted in accordance with law. Relevant to the concept of punishment, and following recent decisions of the High Court concerning the constitutional validity of schemes involving ‘legislated punishment’, it may be suggested that the section 24 right to have a criminal charge decided by a court implies a principle that a person may only be punished as a result of a charge being proven in a criminal proceeding.

In my view, new section 229 does not engage these rights as the standing down of a councillor by reference to potential involvement in criminal conduct is not to be characterised as imposing a form of punishment, for the following reasons.

- The mere fact that a law operates to directly impose a detriment on a particular person does not make it punitive. Rather, what the authorities show is that the *criteria* by reference to which the detriment is imposed, and also the *purpose* for which it is imposed, are central to determining whether the imposition of a particular detriment is properly characterised as punitive. The intention of the provision serves a protective purpose, to ensure the integrity and good governance of the council and to safeguard the public trust and confidence in the council and its councillors.
- The effect of being stood down is to prevent a person from performing the functions or duties of, or exercising the powers of, a councillor. It extends to prohibiting a person’s attendance at council meetings and premises. It is ultimately aimed at preventing the functions of the council from being influenced by a person whose eligibility has come into question.
- The nature of the detriment being imposed, being ‘stood down’ from an official position and having allowance withheld, is not of a nature traditionally associated with a criminal sanction. No conviction flows from this outcome nor is a person liable for subsequent sanctions of a criminal nature, such as a fine or imprisonment. While a person’s allowance is also withheld, it does not impose any personal liability on a person.
- The suspension is temporary, and a person is restored to their role upon a relevant charge being withdrawn or being determined in a manner that does not result in a conviction.

Accordingly, as the standing down of a councillor charged with a specified offence is not a punishment, it does not amount to double punishment for the purpose of section 26, or engage the determination of a criminal charge pursuant to section 24, and these rights are therefore not limited.

The right to be presumed innocent (s 25(1))

Section 25(1) of the Charter provides that a person charged with a criminal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to law. The High Court has described this right as incorporating the fundamental requirement that ‘the prosecution in a criminal case has the burden of proving guilt’, that is, that a conviction can follow only where every element of an offence has been proved by the prosecution beyond reasonable doubt.

While the right has been found to only apply to criminal proceedings (and not, by contrast, to other proceedings such as disciplinary proceedings, civil liability or bail applications), it does afford an accused a right to have the benefit of the doubt, and to be treated in accordance with this principle. It is suggested that the right incorporates duties on others to refrain from prejudging the outcome of a trial – including to abstain from actions that affirm the guilt of an accused.

While Victorian case law has yet to consider in more detail the broader application of this right beyond criminal proceedings, there is a reasonable argument that new section 229 of LGA 2020, which provides for the standing down of a councillor by reference to charges laid – but not yet proven, constitutes a limit on the presumption of innocence. This is because the provision could be characterised as effecting an act of pre-judgment of an accused, or at least depriving them of their right to the benefit of the doubt.

Consequently, it is necessary to consider the proportionality or justification of the limitation on this right, by reference to its purpose. Section 7(2) of the Charter provides that Charter rights may be subject under law only to such reasonable limits as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom, taking into account all relevant factors.

It is my view that the automatic standing down of a councillor when charged with an offence in section 229(2) of the LGA 2020, is reasonably justified pursuant to the factors listed in section 7(2) of the Charter.

The nature of the right

The right of a person (charged with a criminal offence) to be presumed innocent until proved guilty is considered one of the most fundamental rights in the Charter, and accordingly, will require a sufficiently important objective to justify being limited.

The importance of the purpose of the limitation

The purpose of the limitation must relate to 'pressing and substantial' social concerns, and be aimed at achieving legitimate values and interests, in order to be sufficiently important to justify limiting a Charter right. The more pressing and substantial the purpose, the greater the limitation it will justify.

The purpose of the limitation on a councillor's right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty is aimed at safeguarding the appropriate exercise of statutory powers and undertaking of public functions by councillors and maintaining public confidence in the standing and reputation of councillors. There is a strong public interest in this purpose.

The nature and extent of the limitation

I consider the nature of the limitation on the right to be limited in that the automatic standing down of a councillor pending the finalisation of the proceedings in respect of the charge, does not involve a determination or prejudgment of guilt, rather, the standing down of the councillor until the court has finalised the proceedings, is on a suspicion of guilt, rather than a finding of factual guilt.

Further, the automatic standing down of a councillor pending the finalisation of the proceedings in respect of the charge is not punitive in its purpose but protective, seeking to ensure the integrity and good governance of the council and to safeguard the public trust and confidence in the council and its councillors. Moreover, the automatic standing down of a councillor is limited to serious offences specified in section 229(2) of the LGA 2020, that reasonably puts into question, the councillor's suitability (and potential eligibility) to hold the office of councillor.

The period for which a councillor is stood down is limited to the period between the charges are laid against the councillor and the finalisation (or withdrawal) of the proceedings in respect of which the charge laid.

The relationship between the limitation and its purpose

There is a clear and direct relationship between the limitation and stated purpose – the automatic standing down of a councillor until proceedings in respect of a charge are finally determined directly correlates to the stated purpose of ensuring that the councillor cannot continue to perform their functions and duties and exercise their powers as councillor where doing so may adversely affect public confidence.

Any less restrictive means reasonably available to achieve the purpose

The final factor relates to a consideration of not just the actual limitation that is sought to be justified, but other potential means by which the stated purpose of the limitation could be achieved.

In the current circumstances, it may be said that the current procedure set out in section 229 for the standing down of a councillor – involving an application to VCAT, where the member must have regard to the nature and circumstances of the charge and the fair hearing obligations attached to Tribunal proceedings – is a less restrictive means reasonably available to achieve the purpose that the limitation seeks to achieve.

However, the current procedure, involving the Chief Municipal Inspector making an application to VCAT for the standing down of a councillor, is in practice not a reasonably available means because the timeframes associated with VCAT hearings often leads to applications not being determined before the finalisation of the criminal proceedings. This renders the application for the councillor to be stood down in the interim redundant, and ultimately obstructs the legislative intention being achieved.

The right to take part in public life (s 18)

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

The scope of section 18 has not yet been thoroughly examined by Victorian courts. It is not clear whether section 18(2)(b) will be engaged by the ‘stand down’ provision (new section 229), the disqualification and suspension of councillors on the basis of an Adverse Report (new sections 34A and 229A), or the amendment rendering councillors ineligible for office on the basis of past adverse decisions (clause 6).

In order for section 18(2)(b) to apply, a person must be an ‘eligible person’. The term ‘eligible person’ is not defined in the Charter. The commentary suggests two possible interpretations: either that persons are ‘eligible’ under section 18(2)(b) if they are eligible under the current law of Victoria, or alternatively that ‘eligibility’ takes on an independent meaning in the context of the Charter that is not confined to the conditions of eligibility under existing law. Under the former construction, section 18(2)(b) would not be engaged where a person has, in accordance with section 229 of the LGA 2020, become ineligible to continue to perform their functions and duties and exercise their powers as councillor until proceedings in respect of the charge are finally determined.

If ‘eligible person’ were to take on an independent meaning in the context of section 18(2) of the Charter, the commentary suggests that it would mean an adult person with the relevant connection to Victoria, such as citizenship or residency. If this interpretation is adopted, the right of a person (councillor) to have access to public office without discrimination would apply irrespective of whether that person (councillor) meets the eligibility criteria in section 34 and new section 229 of the LGA 2020, and section 18(2)(b) may be engaged.

If section 18(2)(b) is engaged, that right will nevertheless only be limited where the eligibility criteria gives rise to ‘discrimination’ on the basis of an attribute within the meaning of the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* (EO Act). Section 229 automatically standing down a councillor charged with an offence specified in section 229(2) of the LGA 2020, does not discriminate against the councillor as being charged with, or convicted of, a criminal offence, is not a protected attribute within the meaning of the EO Act. Similarly, given that the conduct that is the subject of an ‘adverse decision’ or Adverse Report is not a protected attribute within the meaning of the EO Act, new sections 34(2A), 34A and 229A, which impose a limit on the right to take part in public life on the basis, do not constitute discrimination within the meaning of the EO Act. It follows, in my view, that the right to take part in public life is not limited by the proposed new sections of the LGA 2020.

The right to property (s 20)

Section 20 of the Charter provides that a person must not be deprived of their property other than in accordance with law. While the Charter does not define ‘property’, case law indicate that the term should be interpreted ‘liberally and beneficially to encompass economic interests’. This right requires that powers which authorise the deprivation of property are conferred by legislation or common law, are confined and structured rather than unclear, are accessible to the public, and are formulated precisely. Existing authority also suggests that the laws that permit or require a deprivation of property should not operate arbitrarily. Accordingly, an assessment of compatibility will depend upon the extent to which a deprivation of property does not operate arbitrarily, and is sufficiently clear and certain to be considered ‘in accordance with the law’.

In providing that a councillor charged with an offence in section 229(2) is to be stood down and their allowance withheld until the proceedings in respect of the charge are finally determined (including any appeal) or the charge is withdrawn, clause 30 could be said to authorise the deprivation of the councillor’s property (ie their allowance) and engages the right to property.

Similarly, sections 27B and 33B of the Bill (inserted by clauses 40 and 43 respectively) introduce provisions that respectively mandate the withholding of the allowance of a Mayor, Deputy Mayor or Acting Mayor and councillor if they do not undertake mandatory Mayoral training or professional development training and make a written declaration to this effect. These provisions could also be regarded as engaging the right to property.

That being so, the deprivation of property will be ‘in accordance with the law’ where the law providing for the legal authorisation for the deprivation is ‘publically accessible, clear and certain’. The authorisation to deprive a councillor of their allowance pending the finalisation of the proceedings is conferred by section 229 and thereby is publically accessible. The provision is also drafted in clear and precise terms, authorising the allowance to be withheld in specified circumstances and for specified time periods (either until such time that the proceedings in respect of the charge are finally determined or the charge is withdrawn). The provision further provides that where a conviction is appealed, the allowance will be withheld until the finalisation of such appeal.

As the new provision has no regard to the nature and circumstances of the criminal charge, and makes no provision for natural justice, there could be an argument that the provision may function in an arbitrary manner so as to limit the right. However, to the extent that any limitations result, I consider any limits to be justified, on the basis that it is not in the public interest for a person to continue receiving an allowance while suspended and no longer performing the duties of councillor. Further, the deprivation of property is only temporary, in

that an allowance is no longer withheld upon a suspension being lifted and the person resuming their duties. In the event that a person is convicted, they are now ineligible to hold the office and have no continuing entitlement to receive the allowance.

Investigation powers

Right to protection against self-incrimination

Section 25(2)(k) of the Charter provides that a person charged with a criminal offence is entitled not to be compelled to testify against themselves or to confess guilt. This right is at least as broad as the common law privilege against self-incrimination. It applies to protect a charged person against the admission in subsequent criminal proceedings of incriminatory material obtained under compulsion, regardless of whether the information was obtained prior to or subsequent to the charge being laid.

The Bill promotes the right to protection against self-incrimination in respect of the existing powers of a Commissioner to serve a written notice to a person to appear before the Commission of Inquiry and give evidence or produce specified documents. Clause 24 provides that a person on whom written notice is served under section 206 of the LGA 2020 may make a claim to the Commission of Inquiry that they have a reasonable excuse not to comply with the notice, such as that compliance would tend to incriminate them or make them liable to a penalty in relation to an offence with which the person has been charged and for which a proceeding is on foot, or a proceeding that is on foot for the imposition or recovery of a penalty.

Information sharing and confidentiality provisions

The Bill amends the LGA 2020 to provide for and clarify information sharing powers of the Principal Councillor Conduct Registrar (**Registrar**), council and other integrity bodies. These amendments are intended to enable councillor conduct matters to be dealt with by the appropriate body and limit the risk of a councillor being subject to separate applications in respect of the same conduct.

Clause 58 amends section 149(3) of the LGA 2020 to enable the sharing of information related to Councillor Conduct Panel processes. Specifically, it permits:

- the Registrar to request information from a council or another person or body that is necessary for determining whether the matter would be more appropriately dealt with by another person or body; and
- the Registrar to disclose information to a Commission of Inquiry or a Municipal Monitor or other body to enable that body to deal with the application.

The Bill further includes reporting provisions to ensure that Councillor Conduct Panel processes can be communicated to the Minister to enable the Minister to determine whether a matter has been dealt with through the councillor conduct framework.

New section 220A of the LGA 2020, inserted by clause 26, permits a Commission of Inquiry to include in a report to the Minister a finding that a councillor is creating a serious risk to the health and safety of other persons or is preventing the council from performing its functions, which may have an impact upon the person's work, their relationships and their reputation generally.

Further, new section 199AA of the LGA 2020, inserted by clause 21, permits the Chief Municipal Inspector to give each House of the Parliament a report on the examination or investigation of any matter relating to a council's operations or elections, electoral matters, or any possible breach of the LGA 2020, which includes a comment or opinion that is adverse to any person.

Finally, clause 19, which inserts new section 181B, permits a Municipal Monitor to disclose information provided to them and to which client legal privilege applies if the disclosure is made to the Minister or to an integrity body. This amendment may also engage the rights to privacy and reputation under section 13 and to a fair trial under section 24(1).

To the extent that the information disclosed under the above new provisions contains adverse opinions, comments or findings in relation to a councillor, these provisions may also affect the person's privacy, relationships and reputation. Accordingly, these provisions may engage the right to privacy and reputation in section 13 of the Charter.

Right to privacy and reputation (s 13)

Section 13(a) of the Charter provides that a person has the right not to have their privacy, family, home or correspondence unlawfully or arbitrarily interfered with. An interference will be lawful if it is permitted by a law which is precise and appropriately circumscribed, and will be arbitrary only if it is capricious, unpredictable, unjust or unreasonable, in the sense of being disproportionate to the legitimate aim sought.

Section 13(b) of the Charter relevantly provides that a person has the right not to have their reputation unlawfully attacked. An 'attack' on reputation will be lawful if it is permitted by a precise and appropriately circumscribed law.

While these amendments are likely to interfere with a councillor's privacy and adversely affect their reputation, I do not consider these interferences to be unlawful or arbitrary for the following reasons.

Firstly, the new information sharing provisions in section 149(3) are necessary to determine which body should deal with a particular misconduct application and enable that body to do so. The reporting powers under sections 181B, 199AA and 220A are for the purpose of strengthening the integrity, accountability and good governance of local government and to enable the above statutory officers to exercise their powers and functions under the LGA. I consider any interference occasioned by these provisions is not arbitrary given that the scope of these powers are appropriately prescribed and proportionate to the legitimate aims of the LGA 2020. For example, section 220A only permits the reporting of a finding that a councillor is creating a serious risk to the health and safety of other persons or is preventing the council from performing its functions. These powers go no further than is necessary to enable the Commission of Inquiry to exercise their investigation functions and to enable the Minister to determine whether or not to suspend that councillor. Further, the reporting powers only authorise the disclosure of matters associated with a councillor's performance of their public duties, rather than their personal affairs, such that a councillor would have a diminished expectation of privacy in relation to these matters.

Accordingly, I consider that these provisions strike an appropriate balance between protecting the privacy of councillors while ensuring that investigation bodies have sufficient information to perform their functions. In my view, the information sharing powers are proportionate to the purpose of the limitation and, therefore, will not be an arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy.

Secondly, in relation to investigation findings, I consider that the procedural safeguards provided for in the Bill ensure compatibility with the rights to privacy and reputation. New section 181B of the LGA 2020, which permits the Municipal Monitor to report to the Minister investigation findings that are adverse to a person is subject to the following procedural fairness safeguards (which function as an effective mechanism at protecting against arbitrariness):

- new section 181C(1) of the LGA 2020 requires the Municipal Monitor to give a person details of, and an opportunity to respond to, the proposed adverse finding;
- new section 181C(2) of the LGA 2020 requires the Municipal Monitor to consider the person's response before including the proposed finding in a report to the Minister; and
- new section 181C(3) of the LGA 2020 requires the Municipal Monitor to fairly set out any response provided by the person about whom adverse findings are included in a report to the Minister.

Similarly, if including an adverse opinion or comment about a person in a report to Parliament under new section 199AA, the Chief Municipal Inspector must provide the person with a reasonable opportunity to respond to the adverse comment or opinion; and fairly set out each element of the response in the report.

To the extent that new section 181B, which would permit a Municipal Monitor to disclose information to which client legal privilege applies to the Minister or to an integrity body, may interfere with the privacy of persons the subject of the disclosure, the interference will be neither unlawful nor arbitrary. The interference will be prescribed by law, and the Act otherwise prohibits the disclosure of information to which client legal privilege applies by the Municipal Monitor. Therefore, as any interference with privacy and reputation will be authorised under legislation and is subject to appropriate safeguards, I consider the Bill does not amount to an arbitrary interference with these rights.

Additionally, there are limits on the extent to which information may be disclosed to Parliament. For example, new section 199AA(3) precludes the Chief Municipal Inspector from giving including in such a report any information that would identify a person who is not the subject of an adverse comment or opinion (unless it is in the public interest to do so), or is likely to lead to the identification of a person who has made a disclosure.

Immunities relating to investigations

The Bill introduces a number of immunities from liability in relation to conduct investigations. Clause 19 inserts new sections 181A and 181E of the LGA 2020, which respectively provide:

- immunity from any criminal, civil, administrative or disciplinary proceeding to persons who have provided information to a Municipal Monitor on request; and
- immunity for the Municipal Monitor for anything done or omitted to be done in good faith in the exercise of a power or discharge of a duty under the LGA 2020 or in the reasonable belief that the act or omission was in the exercise of such a power or duty.

Clause 24 similarly inserts section 206(1F), which provides immunity from criminal, civil, administrative or disciplinary proceeding to any person who has provided information to a Commission of Inquiry in response to a written notice.

Right to property (s 20)

Insofar as a cause of action may be considered ‘property’ within the meaning of section 20 of the Charter, these provisions may engage the right. However, even if these immunity provisions could be considered to deprive a person of property, any such deprivation will be ‘in accordance with law’ and will therefore not limit the Charter right to property. These provisions are drafted in clear and precise terms. In addition, any deprivation of a cause of action is reasonably necessary to achieve the important objective of ensuring that the Municipal Monitor can effectively perform their advisory, monitoring and investigation functions without the threat of significant personal repercussions. It further serves the objectives of the councillor conduct framework by enabling persons to provide information to the Municipal Monitor without fear of legal retribution or exposure to personal liability, which is similar to witness immunity in court proceedings. As such, there are no less restrictive means of achieving the Bill’s objectives of strengthening integrity and councillor conduct. Accordingly, the relevant immunity and protections are, in my view, appropriately granted. They are also limited in scope to good faith actions or omissions.

Further, section 181E does not prevent a person from bringing a claim for liability, as new subsection (2) shifts any liability resulting from an act or omission by a Municipal Monitor to the council. Accordingly, an individual could still initiate legal proceedings against the council for actions of a Municipal Monitor. As such, the right to property is not limited by this provision.

Publication of personal interests*Right to privacy (s 13(a))*

Clause 48 proposes minor amendments to section 135(3)(a), requiring a summary of councillors’ personal interests to be published within 45 days of the returns being lodged. This provision requires the divulging of information that would otherwise be private in nature, thus engaging the right to privacy. However, any impacts on the right to privacy and reputation are not arbitrary or unlawful and can be balanced against the need to ensure the transparent and accountable operation of councils, the integrity of council decision-making and prevention of the misuse of public positions. The role of councillor is a role to which special duties and responsibilities attach, and in this regard, a councillor has a reduced expectation of privacy with regards to this type of information. Further, the provisions are subject to certain safeguards. Interest returns of councillors published under section 135 are only made public in summary form, ensuring more sensitive details about a councillor remain private. As such, to the extent that the publication of the above information will interfere with privacy, any such interference will be lawful and not arbitrary, and will therefore be compatible with the right to privacy.

Right to participate in public life (s 18)

The requirement for councillors to disclose their private financial affairs could be seen to have a chilling effect on the freedom to participate in public life. Although the right to take part in public life is a significant right that is fundamental to a democratic system of government, the right is not absolute, and it may be subject to reasonable limitations. In this case, the purpose of the limitation is to ensure the integrity and good governance of the sector and public trust and confidence in those elected or appointed to relevant positions. The provisions do not go any further than is necessary to achieve this purpose. Any limitation on councillors’ rights is appropriately balanced against the strong public interest in preventing corruption and conflicts of interest and maintaining public confidence in the integrity of impartial decision-making by councillors. I therefore consider that any limitation imposed by these provisions on the right to take part in public life is demonstrably justified in accordance with s 7(2) of the Charter.

Repeal of review rights

Clause 70 repeals section 170 of the LGA 2020, which enabled a person affected by the decision made by a Councillor Conduct Panel (CCP) to apply to VCAT for a review of that decision. Clause 46 inserts new section 43A, which prevents a council from indemnifying a councillor, who is a party to an internal arbitration process or CCP process for any legal or other costs connected with these proceedings except in limited circumstances. In depriving affected persons of their review rights, and indemnification, this provision may engage the right to a fair hearing.

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

The fair hearing right provides an entitlement to a civil proceeding to be determined by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal established by law. Removing a right of review could be characterised as removing a person’s right of access to a tribunal. However, the whole decision-making process needs to be considered, including the conditions under which the original decisions is made, to determine if the right to fair hearing is limited. I consider the CCP model itself affords sufficient independence and fairness at first instance such that there is no need to remedy any perceived lack of independence of the CCP at the VCAT review stage.

However, to the extent that the removal of this entitlement is considered a limit, it serves a legitimate objective.

The purpose of this amendment is to remedy identified abuses of the current framework where persons affected by a decision of a CCP hearing have exercised their right of review and relied on indemnification for legal costs to unduly prolong proceedings. This practice has had the unintended effect of undermining the purpose of the councillor conduct framework, which is to ensure that councillor conduct issues are dealt with quickly and fairly. Therefore, the need to remedy these abuses and provide for an efficient and less litigious councillor conduct resolution process is a reasonable justification for reducing the scope of the fair hearing right.

Finally, despite this amendment, parties affected by a decision of a CCP hearing remain able to seek judicial review of a decision to the Supreme Court, including in relation to grounds that a decision was unlawful, unreasonable or did not afford procedural fairness. Given this, I consider any limitations on the right to fair hearing to be demonstrably justified in accordance with section 7(2) of the Charter.

Hon Lizzie Blandthorn MP
Minister for Children
Minister for Disability

Second reading

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability)
(17:30): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Ordered that second-reading speech be incorporated into *Hansard*:

It is with great pleasure that I rise to speak in support of this Bill, a Bill which will improve accountability, councillor conduct and governance across the local government sector.

Good governance is critical to ensure councils make sound decisions and deliver the services their communities need.

Since the last council elections in October 2020, there has been an increase in councils that have required governance interventions, including the appointment of municipal monitors to eleven councils (compared to four councils in the previous council term) to guide good governance. One council has also been dismissed following a Commission of Inquiry and one council suspended.

In the same period, the Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission's (IBAC) *Operation Sandon Special Report* has been released. Also, several examinations of councils have been carried out by the Local Government Inspectorate and the Department of Government Services highlighting areas for improvement in relation to council governance.

If left unaddressed, recurring governance and conduct issues can undermine public trust in the sector, hinder effective decision-making, and impede the delivery of essential services to local communities.

We must set a high standard for the sector. In so doing, councillors must be afforded suitable training that ensures they understand their role and responsibilities and enables them to confidently deliver on their statutory obligations.

For those councillors that choose to engage in misconduct of any kind, intervention should be timely and proportionate, observe procedural fairness, and deliver and enforce an appropriate penalty.

As we head towards the 2024 elections in October, I am committed to delivering reforms that will continue to improve the sector. These reforms will provide confidence and assurance to local communities that their elected representatives are capable and focussed on addressing local priorities.

It is also timely, as we look to the forthcoming local elections, that we ensure our system of local government supports newly elected councillors and provides clarity about their roles and responsibilities.

This Bill will deliver three broad outcomes: strengthened council leadership, capability and councillor conduct; an effective dispute resolution process that provides for early intervention in conduct issues; and additional oversight mechanisms to enable targeted and effective resolutions that support good governance.

The Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission's (IBAC) *Operation Sandon Special Report* made a number of recommendations to improve council governance which the government has accepted in principle. Seven of these recommendations will be implemented through this Bill.

In early 2024 the local government sector had the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed reforms via the Local Government Reforms Consultation Paper. I am pleased by the many contributions received, the majority of which are supportive of these reforms.

The Bill also provides an extension of the local government electoral process timelines to account for the increased scale and complexity of local government elections. This will support their effective delivery and ensure continued confidence in our local elections.

Strengthened council leadership, training and councillor conduct

Councillors play an important role in their communities, making local decisions that collectively impact on the day-to-day lives of all Victorians. All councillors must understand their role on council and have regular opportunities during their term to develop their knowledge and understanding.

The Bill will require all councillors to complete mandatory annual professional development training and mayors and deputy mayors will be required to undertake additional training within one month of being elected to these roles, to support effective council leadership.

Poor conduct by a minority of councillors is an ongoing challenge for the local government sector. This Bill will introduce a Model Councillor Code of Conduct that all councillors must observe.

A breach of the Code will be classed as misconduct, and grounds for an application to an internal arbitration process.

A Model Councillor Code of Conduct will provide a consistent approach across all councils and ensure that the expectations of councillors are clear as well as the required responsibilities and obligations of their role.

There is strong support for this reform from the local government sector. During sector consultation on the report, 71 per cent of responses were supportive of this reform. The sector supports a consistent and uniform standard of behaviour, through the establishment of the Model Councillor Code of Conduct, that will increase accountability and raise the professional standards across all councils.

The Model Councillor Code of Conduct will be designed and developed in consultation with the local government sector. Councils will be able to supplement the Model Councillor Code of Conduct by adopting supporting policies that reflect their local circumstances.

Early intervention and effective dispute resolution

Where intervention into the inappropriate conduct of a councillor is necessary, it is in the best interests of all parties that this is undertaken quickly, procedural fairness is maintained, and an appropriate resolution is achieved.

To address increasing concerns that councillor conduct processes are being unnecessarily drawn out and sanctions delayed due to the multiple appeal avenues, the Bill will remove the process of seeking a review at VCAT for councillors that have had a finding of serious misconduct made against them by a Councillor Conduct Panel. This process has been used to re-litigate the same matters – protracting proceedings and placing an additional burden on all parties.

The removal of the VCAT review process for serious misconduct findings, was supported during consultations and aligns with the internal arbitration process under the *Local Government Act 2020*, where no VCAT review exists. Procedural fairness is maintained as affected parties retain the ability to seek judicial review of a decision at the Victorian Supreme Court.

The majority of sector responses provided through consultation were supportive of this reform, as it will streamline existing dispute resolution processes and ensure that review processes are not politicised.

It is appropriate that those councillors who engage in misconduct and disrupt the business of council are held accountable for their actions.

The Bill will prevent councils from indemnifying a councillor for legal costs relating to internal arbitration processes and Councillor Conduct Panel hearings unless an order has been made granting leave to have legal representation. Importantly, this reform will allow councillors to be indemnified by Council resolution or where an arbiter or councillor conduct panel considers that legal representation is necessary to ensure that a hearing can be conducted fairly. This will address concerns from the sector about the system becoming too legalistic, reduce the resultant delays and minimise costs to councils, and ultimately rate payers.

The sanctions for misconduct have been reviewed and the powers of an arbiter will be enhanced. The Bill will increase the length of time that an arbiter can suspend a councillor for misconduct, from one month to three months.

Two new additional sanctions will also be introduced enabling an arbiter to direct a councillor not to attend or participate in a council meeting, and direct that a councillor is ineligible for the office of Mayor or Deputy Mayor, for a period up to 12 months.

The Bill will make several administrative improvements to the councillor conduct framework to provide procedural clarity and ensure the framework operates effectively.

Oversight mechanisms

In circumstances where an individual councillor is creating a serious risk to the health and safety of others, or is preventing the council from performing its functions, it is appropriate that their suspension or disqualification be considered.

The Bill will enable the Minister for Local Government to suspend a councillor for up to 12 months. This would apply only when a report from a municipal monitor or Commission of Inquiry make such findings against a councillor.

Further, in instances where a councillor has also been dismissed by an Act of Parliament, the Minister can recommend to the Governor in Council the disqualification of that person from being a councillor for eight years.

Before the suspension or disqualification proceeds, the individual must be notified of the Minister's intention and given an opportunity to respond.

The Chief Municipal Inspector (CMI) reports to the Attorney General in respect to powers derived from the *Local Government Act 2020* (the Act). The Bill will enable the CMI to provide advice, in relation to a council, to any Minister administering a provision of the Act and to table a report in Parliament. This will ensure that, as Minister for Local Government, I can be advised of any governance concerns that the CMI identifies in the course of their investigatory work.

In addition to the CMI's existing investigative and prosecutorial powers, the Bill will provide the CMI with the power to issue infringements to anyone who has committed an offence against the Act.

Currently the CMI can apply to VCAT to stand down a councillor, if charged with an offence that, if convicted, would disqualify them from being a councillor. The Bill will ensure that councillors are now automatically stood down in these instances. This will provide administrative efficiencies and is appropriate given the serious nature of these offences.

Municipal monitors play a fundamental role in supporting good governance in local government. The Bill will strengthen the ability of municipal monitors to perform the functions of their role, including the new functions I have outlined.

Extending the timelines for the local government election process

Local Government elections will be held on 26 October 2024. In anticipation of this, and in consideration of the increased scale and complexity of local government elections, the Bill will extend the date for the close of the electoral role to ensure the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) can effectively carry out its duties.

This change will enable the timelines for the local government elections to be amended through the regulations to support the administration of the election process and ensure that elections are conducted fairly.

Conclusion

These reforms will ensure councillors are equipped with the necessary training and skills to effectively perform their roles, and provide assurance to communities that local decision making is being undertaken by competent councillors, who understand their role and responsibilities.

In cases where councillors engage in misconduct, these reforms deliver expedited resolutions and more robust sanctions, ensuring community accountability.

I commend the Bill to the house.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (17:30): I move, on behalf of my colleague Mr Davis:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Sustainable Forests (Timber) Repeal Bill 2024*Introduction and first reading*

The PRESIDENT (17:30): I have a further message from the Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council ‘A Bill for an Act to repeal the **Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004**, to abolish VicForests, to amend the **Conservation, Forests and Lands Act 1987** and the **Forests Act 1958** in relation to forest management and to consequentially amend other Acts and for other purposes’.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (17:31): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I move, by leave:

That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Statement of compatibility

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (17:31): 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 Sustainable Forests (Timber) Repeal Bill 2024 (the **Bill**).

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

Overview of the Bill

The Bill supports the Victorian Government’s commitment to end commercial native timber harvesting and makes the necessary legislative amendments to repeal the framework that authorised commercial native timber harvesting in Victorian state forests under the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004* (**SFT Act**). The Bill will:

- Abolish VicForests and transfer its property, rights and liabilities to the Crown;
- Repeal the SFT Act to remove the framework under that Act that enabled commercial native timber harvesting operations in Victorian state forests;
- Insert an offence provision into the *Forests Act 1958* (**Forests Act**) that prohibits the cut and take of timber in state forests for the primary purpose of sale;
- Insert key compliance and enforcement tools from the SFT Act into the Forests Act to support a graduated enforcement framework for unauthorised native timber harvesting in state forests;
- Align the penalties for various Forests Act offences with the higher penalties for equivalent offences in the SFT Act;
- Insert into the *Conservation, Forests and Lands Act 1987* (**CFL Act**) provisions from the SFT Act that relate to sustainable forest management and are expected to remain relevant after commercial native timber harvesting ends; and
- Insert a regulation-making power into the Forests Act that enables regulations to be made to establish matters that the Minister must consider before deciding to issue licences and permits relating to forest produce.

Human rights issues

By repealing the SFT Act and abolishing VicForests, the Bill formally ends commercial native timber harvesting in Victorian state forests under the SFT Act. In so doing, the Bill supports the protection of Victoria's natural environment, including native habitat, flora and fauna.

While the Bill does not directly impact Traditional Owners, they have significant rights and interests in Victorian forests. Accordingly, by protecting state forests from native timber harvesting, the Bill is compatible with the cultural rights of Traditional Owners under s 19(2) of the Charter, which includes the maintenance of their distinct spiritual, material and economic relationship with the land and waters and other resources with which they have a connection under traditional laws and customs.

While the Bill repeals the SFT Act and the framework that enabled commercial harvesting of native forests under that Act, elements of the enforcement and compliance mechanisms in the SFT Act are maintained, such as enforceable undertakings and the compulsory production of documents, where they pre-dated the repeal of the Act.

The Bill also amends the Forests Act to insert compliance mechanisms from the SFT Act, including the power for authorised officers to issue directions, suspension notices, and require the production of documents. The Bill also extends the current power in the Forests Act to seize items where there are reasonable grounds to believe that they may be about to be used in the commission of an offence against the Forests Act.

New offences for the cut and take of timber in state forests for the purpose of sale which aims to prevent unauthorised commercial timber harvesting, and for the contravention of a production notice and provision of false or misleading information have been added to the Forests Act. Existing Forests Act offences have had their penalties increased to bring them into line with the equivalent penalties in the SFT Act. In the case of the offences of 'hinder or obstruct' or 'threaten or abuse' an authorised officer, a term of imprisonment has been added.

The following rights are relevant to the Bill:

- Right to freedom from forced work (s 11)
- Privacy and reputation (s 13)
- Freedom of expression (s 15)
- Property (s 20)
- Presumption of innocence (s 25(1))
- Protection from self-incrimination (s 25(2)(k))

Right to freedom from forced work

Section 11 of the Charter provides that a person must not be held in slavery or servitude, or made to perform forced or compulsory labour. 'Forced or compulsory labour' does not include court-ordered community work as a condition of release from detention, work or service required because of an emergency threatening the Victorian community or a part of that community, or work or service that forms part of normal civil obligations.

Directions and suspension notices

Clause 21 of the Bill inserts new s 57NA into the Forests Act, which allows an authorised officer to give a direction to a licence holder or their representative, in respect of the conduct of certain activities permitted by the licence, namely the thinning, cutting or removal of timber from State forests. Clause 21 then inserts new s 57NB into the Forests Act which empowers an authorised officer to issue a notice to a licence holder or their representative to suspend the activity if there has been a failure to comply with a direction issued under new s 57NA, and if the continuation of the activity would cause imminent environmental damage or pose a serious risk to safety. New s 57ND provides that a suspension notice may also include directions regarding the measures to be taken to remedy any damage, risk, matter or activity to which the notice relates.

The compulsion to undertake an activity or to 'do' something as required by a direction in new s 57NA, or a direction contained in a suspension notice, may interfere with the right to freedom from forced work, specifically the prohibition on compulsory labour in s 11(2) of the Charter. I am of the view, however, that the right is not engaged as any work required by a direction issued by an authorised officer would fall within the scope of the exception to the prohibition in s 11(3) of the Charter, namely work or service that 'forms part of normal civil obligations,' as the directions can only be given to licence or permit holders (or those acting on their behalf) who are engaging in a regulated activity and have voluntarily assumed associated responsibilities and obligations. Additionally, the directions serve a preventative or remedial purpose, being to stop, mitigate or remedy environmental damage or safety risks.

If the exception in s 11(3) does not in fact apply, and the right is engaged, I am of the view that it is not limited by these provisions. New s 57ND allows an authorised officer to offer a person to whom a direction is issued in a suspension notice, a choice of ways in which to remedy the damage, risk, matter or activity, so that the person is not necessarily compelled to undertake work in a specific way. Even where a direction does compel a person to undertake specific work or labour such that the right may be limited, I am of the view that any limit is reasonable and proportionate to the legitimate aims of protecting Victorian State forests from unauthorised native timber harvesting and environmental degradation more generally, as well as ensuring the safety of those that may work within them.

I have also considered whether the directions and suspension notice schemes interfere with the right to privacy and the right to a fair hearing. I am of the view that the right to privacy is not limited, as the directions will fall outside of a person's private sphere and therefore the scope of the right, and where suspension notices prevent a person from working and forming relationships at work, such that the right may be interfered with, the interference is minimal, and is not arbitrary, as it is in accordance with a law that is proportionate to a legitimate purpose. The fair hearing right will not be limited by the suspension notice mechanism because procedural fairness safeguards have been included in the Bill, with new s 57NC requiring that the suspension notice include reasons for the decision, and new s 57NG providing a right of appeal to the Magistrates Court against a suspension notice. On appeal, the Magistrates' Court must inquire into the circumstances relating to the notice, and may affirm, modify or cancel the notice.

Accordingly, I am satisfied these provisions are compatible with the Charter.

Right to privacy and reputation

Section 13(a) of the Charter provides that a person has the right not to have their privacy unlawfully or arbitrarily interfered with. An interference will be lawful if it is permitted by a law which is precise and appropriately circumscribed, and will be arbitrary only if it is capricious, unpredictable, unjust or unreasonable, in the sense of being disproportionate to the legitimate aim sought.

Section 13(b) of the Charter provides that a person has the right not to have their reputation unlawfully attacked. An 'attack' on reputation will be lawful if it is permitted by an appropriately circumscribed law.

Production of documents

Clause 14 of the Bill is a savings provision that maintains the validity of a production notice for documents and its associated compliance requirements under Part 8B of the SFT Act, where such production notice was in force prior to the repeal of the SFT Act.

Clause 22 of the Bill inserts a similar compulsory production mechanism into the Forests Act with new s 75A empowering an authorised officer to issue a production notice requiring the production of a document pursuant to a production order issued by a Magistrate under new s 75B. New s 75E outlines an authorised officer's powers on production of the document, including to inspect, make copies or take extracts, or to retain the document for various purposes outlined in new s 75G(3).

The production of documents provisions to be inserted into the Forests Act may interfere with the right to privacy, given they can compel the production of documents that may contain personal or sensitive information. However, in my view, any resulting interference will be lawful and not arbitrary, for the following reasons.

First, any interference in a person's private sphere will be limited by the scope of the powers, which only require production of documents relevant to monitoring compliance with the Forests Act (for example to prevent unauthorised native timber harvesting), and are therefore less likely to contain private or sensitive information, such as health information.

Secondly, the production of documents framework serves the important purpose of ensuring compliance with the Forests Act, including preventing the unauthorised harvesting of native forests. Additionally, the production of documents is subject to judicial oversight by the Magistrates' Court, which is a key safeguard in ensuring that any interference with privacy by the requirement to produce documents is reasonable and proportionate.

Further safeguards embedded in the Bill include new s 75F which requires that an authorised officer provide a receipt for any documents that are retained, and new s 75G which requires return of any documents within 30 days or as soon as the purpose for retention of the document no longer exists.

Finally, the production of documents under the changes to the Forests Act is subject to a range of confidentiality and information sharing restrictions in the *Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014* in relation to how private information is collected, handled and disclosed. These requirements impose additional safeguards to ensure that personal information collected through a document the subject of a production notice is dealt with appropriately.

I therefore consider that the production of documents provisions in the Bill are compatible with the right to privacy.

Requirement to provide name and address

Clause 23 of the Bill increases the penalties for offences in s 95A(3) and (5) of the Forests Act, which relate respectively to the requirement to provide a person's name and address to an authorised officer upon request, and to provide proof of that name and address if requested. While these requirements may interfere with the privacy right, I am of the view they do not limit it. The offences themselves are not new, and the increase in penalties is from 5 to 20 penalty units. As such, the Bill simply brings the penalties into line with the penalties in the similar offence provisions in the SFT Act.

The requirement to provide name and address details to an authorised officer is also not an arbitrary or unlawful infringement of privacy; the requirement and related offences for noncompliance seek to ensure the enforcement of the Forests Act which has the important purpose of, among other things, mitigating environmental harm to Victorian state forests from threats such as unauthorised native timber harvesting. It is a necessary pre-requisite for the proper discharge of monitoring and enforcement powers that a person's identity can be ascertained and verified. The legislation is proportionate to this aim and is precise and accessible and therefore not arbitrary. Accordingly, I consider that clause 23 is compatible with the right to privacy.

Publication of failure to comply with court orders

Clause 13 is a savings provision that maintains the validity of enforceable undertakings made under the SFT Act, which includes the power to publicise a failure to comply with a court order in respect of an enforceable undertaking. Clause 22 inserts new s 75M into the Forests Act, which allows for the enforcement of an undertaking given to the Secretary pursuant to new s 75L, by a person who has allegedly contravened s 96AA(1A) of the Forests Act as amended, that is they have cut, removed etc timber in a State forest for the primary purpose of sale or processing and sale. New s 75M allows the Secretary to apply to the Magistrates' Court for an order to enforce an undertaking if they consider that a person has contravened the terms of an undertaking, and a failure by that person to then comply with the court order may be publicised (new s 75M(5)(b)). New subsections (6) and (7) also allow for contempt of court proceedings to be initiated against a person who has contravened a court order, and if a contempt finding is made against them, their failure to comply with the order may also be publicised.

While publication of a person's failure to comply with a court order may interfere with the right to privacy (including the right not to have one's reputation unlawfully attacked under s 13(b) of the Charter), in my view there would be no limitation of this right, as the publication of the contravention of the court order that might constitute an 'attack on reputation' is pursuant to a properly circumscribed law, following appropriate judicial oversight of the person's non-compliance with an enforceable undertaking. Further, the law aims to protect Victorian native forests and the publication of non-compliance with relevant court orders is necessary and proportionate to fulfil this important purpose.

Right to freedom of expression

Section 15(2) of the Charter provides that every person has the right to freedom of expression, which includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds. However, section 15(3) provides that special duties and responsibilities attach to this right, which may be subject to lawful restrictions reasonably necessary to respect the rights and reputations of others, or for the protection of national security, public order, public health or public morality.

Offence to 'hinder or obstruct' or 'threaten or abuse' authorised officer

Clause 26 of the Bill increases the penalty in the Forests Act for the offence of 'hinder or obstruct authorised officer'. The penalty units have been doubled from 60 to 120 and a term of 12 months imprisonment has been added.

Similarly, clause 27 increases the penalty for the offence of 'threaten or abuse authorised officer' in the Forests Act to 120 penalty units or 12 months imprisonment.

The increase in penalties for these offences, in particular the addition of a term of imprisonment, might be considered to amount to an increased interference with freedom of expression, in particular, the right to impart ideas or engage in expression of political beliefs. However, this right is qualified in that it may be subject to restrictions that protect public order, health and safety or the rights of others. In this case, the Bill brings the relevant penalties into line with the equivalent offences in the SFT Act, and seeks to protect authorised officers from abuse or violence, and allows them to undertake their roles safely. This serves the broader purpose of managing and protecting state forests.

Right to property

Section 20 of the Charter provides that a person must not be deprived of their property other than in accordance with law. This right requires that powers which authorise the deprivation of property are conferred by legislation or common law, are confined and structured rather than unclear, are accessible to the public, and are formulated precisely.

Production of documents

As outlined above, clauses 14 and 22 relate to the power of authorised officers to compel the production of documents in certain circumstances. Clause 22 for example, inserts new s 75E into the Forests Act pertaining to an authorised officer's powers upon production of documents. New s 75E(c) allows an authorised officer to retain a document or part of a document for as long as is reasonably necessary to fulfil the purpose for which it is required. This risks interfering with property rights under the Charter.

However, I am of the view that the right is not limited, because the production of documents powers are conferred on authorised officers by legislation that is properly and precisely formulated, and which represents an important compliance and enforcement mechanism in respect of the Forests Act, to protect Victorian state forests, particularly from unauthorised native timber harvesting. The legislation contains safeguards, including that reasonable steps must be taken to provide a receipt for retained documents within 30 days (new s 75F) and that documents must be returned within 30 days, or as soon as the purpose for which it was retained no longer exists (new s 75G). Where an authorised officer cannot return a document after taking reasonable steps to do so, the document is forfeited to the Crown (new s 75H).

Accordingly, I consider that the Bill is compatible with the right to property under s 20 of the Charter.

Power to seize items

Clause 24 of the Bill amends the current power in the Forests Act of an authorised officer to seize items. The amendment gives an authorised officer the additional power to seize any item they believe on reasonable grounds is about to be used to commit an offence against that Act or its regulations. Previously an authorised officer had the power to seize an item they believed had been or was being used to commit an offence against the Act.

The power to seize items may infringe property rights under s 20 of the Charter, however, clause 24 merely extends a power to seize items that is already in force, and the power to seize items is conferred by precise legislation that contains various safeguards. Current s 95F of the Forests Act requires an authorised officer to provide a receipt for seized items, and current s 95G pertains to their return, while current s 95H provides for the recovery of, or compensation for, the seized item, where it has not been returned, and proceedings for an offence under the Act have not been instituted, or the person has been found not guilty for such an offence.

Accordingly, the seizure power that is amended by the Bill is 'in accordance with law' and in my view does not interfere with the property right under s 20 of the Charter.

Right to be presumed innocent

Section 25(1) of the Charter provides that a person charged with a criminal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law. The right is relevant where a statutory provision shifts the burden of proof onto an accused in a criminal proceeding, so that the accused is required to prove matters to establish, or raise evidence to suggest, that they are not guilty of an offence.

Offences to contravene production notice and to provide false and misleading information

Clause 22 in the Bill inserts new ss 75I and 75J in the Forests Act, which create offences that contain a 'reasonable excuse' exception. The offences respectively are to contravene a production notice, and to provide false or misleading information in response to a production notice. The 'reasonable excuse' exception risks placing an evidential burden on the accused which may interfere with the Charter right to be presumed innocent.

By creating a 'reasonable excuse' exception, these offences place an evidential burden on the accused, in that they require the accused to raise evidence of a reasonable excuse. However, in doing so, this offence does not transfer the legal burden of proof. Once the accused has pointed to evidence of a reasonable excuse, which will ordinarily be peculiarly within their knowledge, the burden shifts back to the prosecution to prove the essential elements of the offence. I do not consider that an evidential onus of this kind limits the right to be presumed innocent.

Right against self-incrimination

Section 25(2)(k) of the Charter provides that a person charged with a criminal offence is entitled not to be compelled to testify against themselves or to confess guilt. This right is at least as broad as the common law privilege against self-incrimination. It applies to protect a charged person against the admission in subsequent

criminal proceedings of incriminatory material obtained under compulsion, regardless of whether the information was obtained prior to or subsequent to the charge being laid.

Production of documents

As outlined above, clauses 14 and 22 pertain to the power of authorised officers to compel the production of documents from a person in certain circumstances, most relevantly where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that the person has contravened the Forests Act. The compulsory production of documents may interfere with the right against self-incrimination, as a person might be forced to provide documents to an authorised officer, that might contain incriminating material.

At common law, the High Court has held that the protection accorded to pre-existing documents is considerably weaker than that accorded to oral testimony or to documents that are brought into existence to comply with a request for information. The compulsion to produce pre-existing documents that speak for themselves is in strong contrast to testimonial oral or written evidence that is brought into existence as a direct response to questions. Accordingly, any protection afforded to documentary material by the privilege is limited in scope and not as fundamental to the nature of the right as the protection against the requirement that verbal answers be provided.

Importantly, new s 75K of the Forests Act inserted by clause 22 of the Bill states that protection from self-incrimination is a sufficient reason for a 'reasonable excuse' defence for the relevant offences in clause 22 of the Bill, such as for contravention of a production order or providing false or misleading information in response to a production notice. Accordingly, a person may decline to provide documents or give information where doing so would tend to incriminate them.

In view of the protection against self-incrimination offered by new s 75K and given the limited protection afforded to pre-existing documents such as those that might be subject to the production of documents powers in the Bill, and the safeguards referenced above, including the oversight of the powers by the Magistrates Court, I am of the view that the right to self-incrimination is not limited by clauses 14 and 22 of the Bill.

Hon Gayle Tierney MP
Minister for Skills and TAFE
Minister for Regional Development

Second reading

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability)
(17:31): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Ordered that second-reading speech be incorporated into *Hansard*:

The purpose of this Bill is to make immediate priority reforms to implement via legislation the government's decision to end commercial native timber harvesting in State forests in 2024. The Bill will repeal the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004*, abolish VicForests and preserve important tools currently under that Act for regulating and managing activities in State forests in other legislation.

Victoria's State forests are important to Victorians from all walks of life. The connection that Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities have with Country and cultural landscapes – including Victoria's forests – is core to their culture and wellbeing. Our forests are vital for biodiversity conservation and climate change mitigation, provide tourism and recreational opportunities for Victorians to use and enjoy the great outdoors, support local jobs and industries, and have spiritual and cultural value for many communities.

In recent years, Victoria's timber industry has been impacted by repeated bushfires and court decisions limiting the supply available to harvest. To bring certainty to the sector, in May last year the government decided to accelerate plans to end commercial native timber harvesting in State forests from 2030 to 1 January 2024.

This change creates significant opportunities to maintain resilient, healthy forests, advance Traditional Owner self-determination in land and fire management, and achieve environmentally sensitive economic development and employment from Victoria's forest estate.

The government acknowledges the strong commitment and pride of local communities and businesses maintaining healthy forests and keeping Victorian communities safe from bushfires as part of native timber harvesting and forest management operations.

The government released an expanded and expedited transition support package for workers, their families and businesses to support the rapid transition away from native timber harvesting. The government has invested over \$1.2 billion in the forestry industry, management and transition. This includes plantation investment, targeted business and worker support and active forest management.

I recognise the impact the decision to end commercial native timber harvesting has had on VicForests' employees and the regional communities where timber harvesting has been prominent. I would like to take this opportunity to recognise the significant contribution and dedication of VicForests employees to the management of our native forests for over 20 years.

This Bill will remove the framework under the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004* that permitted large scale commercial native timber harvesting in State forests. The Bill will abolish VicForests, the State body that managed the harvest, sale and regeneration of timber resources in State forests on behalf of the State. The amendments made by this Bill will also bring across important tools for regulating and managing activities in State forests, such as compliance and enforcement activities and public reporting on forest health, into other legislation. These tools will be preserved to support the ongoing protection and sustainable management of State forests for all Victorians.

This legislative reform will be followed by consideration of further reforms for the management of forests, including through work currently underway to renew public land legislation.

I turn now to the key features of the Bill.

Repeal of the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004* and abolition of VicForests

This Bill will repeal the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004* to remove the framework under that Act that permits commercial native timber harvesting in State forests. This Bill will also abolish VicForests in legislation and transfer its property, rights and liabilities to the Crown.

VicForests was established in 2003 as a public body under the *State Owned Enterprises Act 1992* to manage the harvest, sale and regrowing of native timber in State forests on behalf of the Victorian Government. Over time, additional functions were added to VicForests' remit, such as resource modelling, research and development, community forestry, and road and infrastructure maintenance.

Given the decision to end commercial native timber harvesting on 1 January this year, VicForests' primary function to manage commercial native timber harvesting on behalf of the State is no longer required.

Other important forest management functions that VicForests delivered previously, including forest management planning, spatial mapping, seed collection and forest regeneration, will continue to be critical for Victoria's future forest management. These important functions are being integrated into the Victorian Government's broader forest and fire management program and will be delivered by the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action from 1 July 2024.

In addition to repealing the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004*, the Bill provides that the Allocation Order made under that Act will cease to have effect. The Allocation Order vests property in allocated timber to VicForests and allows it to harvest that timber. This is how VicForests is given the right to access timber in State forests to carry out commercial timber harvesting and associated activities. Through this Bill, property in timber currently vested in VicForests via the Allocation Order will be revested in the Crown.

Removing the Timber Harvesting Safety Zone scheme

Timber Harvesting Safety Zones were inserted in the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004* in 2014 for the purposes of increasing public safety and reducing disruptions to lawful timber harvesting operations by unlawful protest activities.

These provisions will be repealed as they are no longer required with the end of large-scale commercial native timber harvesting and the diminished public safety risks from the use of heavy machinery. There is no longer a need to use these zones to exclude the public from timber harvesting operations.

Retention of forest management tools

This Bill retains provisions of the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004* that remain useful for sustainable forest management. Those provisions will be transferred into the *Conservation Forests and Lands Act 1987*.

The Bill retains provisions for the development of criteria and indicators to assess the condition of all Victorian forests. It also retains provisions for reporting on those indicators and for those reports to be audited. Those provisions underpin Victoria's scientifically robust, and transparent forest monitoring and information reporting. They facilitate the Government's ability to report on the state of Victoria's forests in both the State and National State of the Forest Reports. Retaining these tools will continue important public monitoring and reporting on the health of our forests.

The Bill will also retain the ability for the Minister for Environment in consultation with the Minister for Agriculture to create a fit for purpose Sustainability Charter in the future. This Charter would outline objectives for the sustainability of forests.

New regulation-making power for licences under the Forests Act 1958

Victoria's forests make an important contribution to local jobs and industries. They are also central to many Victorian Traditional Owners aspirations for self-determination on Country. Section 52 of the *Forests Act 1958* allows relevant Ministers to issue permits and licences for activities in State forests. Those licences can be issued to support a broad range of activities including cutting and removing timber. However, they are also issued to support access to a range of other forest products, including grass trees, eucalyptus leaves, soil and rock. They also support important seed collection for revegetation purposes and forest research activities.

The Bill will insert a new regulation-making power into the *Forests Act 1958*. That power will enable regulations to be made setting out matters that must be considered by the relevant Minister before deciding to grant a licence or permit under section 52. Those criteria can be directed toward managing the scale and impact of activities authorised by a section 52 licence. We will also work with Victorian Traditional Owners to ensure cultural values are appropriately managed. Broader environmental legislation and subordinate instruments will continue to apply to provide environmental protections alongside the new proposed regulations, including the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Commonwealth) and the *Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014* (Victoria).

Regulating unauthorised commercial timber harvesting

This Bill will introduce a new offence provision into the *Forests Act 1958* directed to the unauthorised commercial cut and take of timber from State forests. That offence will carry strong penalties to appropriately deter and punish the unauthorised cut and take of timber for the purpose of sale and financial gain.

The unauthorised taking of timber is the single largest category of offending observed across public land in Victoria – often in the form of the unauthorised take of firewood. It is expected that systematic and repeated unauthorised removal of timber from State forests for financial gain will continue in the future. There is currently no provision in the *Forests Act 1958* directed to the unauthorised take of timber for the purpose of sale, outside domestic firewood collection areas. This Bill will address that gap, and effectively deter and punish the unauthorised commercial take of timber from State forests to protect Victoria's natural environment.

This reform will give the Victorian community confidence that there are appropriate safeguards in place to deter unauthorised activities in State forests, and that there are meaningful consequences for breaking the rules commensurate to the potential environmental harm.

Retaining compliance and enforcement tools

The Bill will transfer a range of important regulatory and compliance tools from the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004* to the *Forests Act 1958*.

The tools to be retained include enforceable undertakings, which provide a collaborative mechanism to address non-compliance with the offence for the unauthorised cut and take of timber for the purpose of sale. Directions and suspension notices will also be retained, which can support a reduction of environmental harm where licences are issued for the cut and removal of timber in State forests. These tools support a graduated enforcement model that allows the regulator to respond proactively and proportionally depending on the risk of environmental harm.

This Bill also aligns the penalties for certain offences relating to the powers of authorised officers in the *Forests Act 1958* with the penalties in the *Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004*. Authorised Officers can be investigating unauthorised native timber harvesting in remote locations and possibly in threatening situations. The availability of higher penalties is essential to provide for the safety of officers and deter non-compliant behaviour by offenders. It brings the *Forests Act 1958* penalties into alignment with other land and environmental legislation.

I commend the Bill to the house.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (17:31): I move:

That the debate on this bill be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation Repeal and Advisory Councils Bill 2024*Introduction and first reading*

The PRESIDENT (17:31): I have a further message from the Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council ‘A Bill for an Act to repeal the **Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation Act 2011**, to abolish the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation, to amend the **Gambling Regulation Act 2003**, the **Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission Act 2011** and the **Liquor Control Reform Act 1998** and for other purposes’.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (17:32): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I move, by leave:

That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Statement of compatibility

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (17:32): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

Opening paragraphs

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 Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation Repeal and Advisory Councils Bill 2024.

In my opinion, the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation Repeal and Advisory Councils Bill 2024, as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with human rights as set out in the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

Overview

The Bill repeals the *Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation Act 2011* and abolishes the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation.

It amends the *Gambling Regulation Act 2003* to establish the Gambling Harm Response Fund and abolish the Responsible Gambling Ministerial Advisory Council and the Liquor Control Advisory Council.

It also amends the *Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission Act 2011* to transfer certain functions to the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission.

Finally, it amends the *Liquor Control Reform Act 1998* to abolish the Liquor Control Advisory Council.

The Bill does not affect the rights of any natural person.

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

Hon Lizzie Blandthorn MP
Minister for Children
Minister for Disability

Second reading

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (17:32): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Ordered that second-reading speech be incorporated into *Hansard*:

On 16 July 2023, I announced Australia's most significant package of gambling reforms.

The focus of those reforms was on the 'how' and 'when' people gamble, making sure patrons have adequate protections when they sit down at an electronic gaming machine at their local hotel or club.

These reforms include mandatory carded play and pre-commitment, increasing and standardising closing times, reducing load up limits and slowing spin rates.

At the same time, I announced the functions of the current Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation would be transferred to other parts of government to better enable joined up service delivery and service integration.

These gambling harm prevention reforms are around the 'what' – what we can do as government to prevent and reduce gambling harm across our communities.

Gambling harm prevention and response services need to take a public health approach to ensure people experiencing, or at risk of experiencing gambling harm, are supported.

The focus of these important programs is not on the location or activity of gambling; rather making sure that wherever people are in Victoria, they are aware of the risks and have a place to seek support should they experience gambling harm.

The Victorian Government is committed to maintaining the important functions currently delivered by the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation.

However, it has been some years since this model was developed and there is an opportunity to build on these foundations for a more integrated service that is built around how gambling harm is experienced.

This Bill makes important changes that update the gambling harm prevention and response model and will enable better integration and delivery of gambling harm prevention and support in Victoria.

This Bill also dissolves the Responsible Gambling Ministerial Advisory Council and Liquor Control Advisory Council to modernise the governance arrangements for casino, gaming and liquor engagement.

Gambling Harm is often experienced at the same time as other social or health issues

Each year, more than half-a-million Victorians experience gambling harm – whether it be related to their own or someone else's gambling.

Gambling harm can present as feelings of regret, shame or guilt; irritability; depression; anxiety; increased use of alcohol and other drugs; and family violence.

Because of these significant comorbidities, gambling harm can fall through the cracks in primary care settings when a person seeks treatment for other co-occurring issues.

A 2017 study commissioned by the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation found that up to 30 per cent of people presenting to primary care, alcohol and other drugs and mental health services are experiencing problems with gambling.

The Victorian Government has long focused on improving service integration and referral pathways across our social service system.

This focus is grounded in best practice, as well as findings from major inquiries including the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System and Royal Commission into Family Violence.

And that is why the Victorian Government has developed a new gambling harm prevention and response model which aims to embed a more holistic approach to addressing gambling harm.

New Gambling Harm Prevention and Response Model

In the development of this model, the government consulted widely.

We have met with Gambler's Help providers, gambling harm stakeholders, researchers and academics, government agencies, regulators, people with lived and living experience of gambling harm and the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation staff to inform the design of this new model.

Through this consultation, we heard:

- It remains essential that a public health model for addressing gambling harm is maintained.
- there are opportunities to better coordinate services, especially with mental health, community health, alcohol and other drugs, financial counselling, family violence and family services.
- the current clinical governance framework, as well as contracting mechanism, is outdated and needed updating.

- There are opportunities to leverage the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission's enhanced focus on gambling harm and connections with all gambling licensees to improve the reach of prevention and awareness raising campaigns.
- That there were benefits from research and evidence being more closely linked to policy and regulatory development.
- There are opportunities to elevate the insights of people with lived and living experience in a new model.

Drawing on this stakeholder engagement, as well as the evidence regarding how and where gambling harm presents, the Victorian Government has developed a new model for gambling harm prevention and response:

- Prevention and programs functions, including Gambler's Help, will be transferred to the Department of Health to enable better service integration with community health and clinical mental health expertise.
- Gambling harm awareness and prevention functions, including public campaigns, will be transferred to the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission (VGCCC), building on their enhanced focus on gambling harm minimisation.
- Policy, research, and evaluation functions will be transferred to the Department of Justice and Community Safety, including the Lived Experience Consultative Committee, to ensure the function can be performed across the portfolio.

Gambling harm prevention and response activities will continue to be funded through the Community Support Fund which draws from revenue generated from electronic gambling machines – which will be delivered through the newly established Gambling Harm Response Fund at the determination of the Minister.

This legislation enables this model through the dissolution of the *Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation Act 2011*, the establishment of the Gambling Harm Response Fund, and embedding the awareness and prevention functions into the gambling regulator's legislation.

I am confident the new model of gambling harm prevention and response will make better use of the strengths of other service delivery agencies funded by the government, while building on the experiences and knowledge the Foundation has generated since its establishment.

Updating gambling and liquor governance

This Bill removes two historical engagement mechanisms from legislation, the Responsible Gambling Ministerial Advisory Council and Liquor Control Advisory Council.

We are committed to engaging with the wide range of stakeholders across the Casino, Gaming and Liquor portfolio and an updated stakeholder governance model will be established to replace these entities.

This includes embedding the voices of people with lived experience of gambling or alcohol related harm, along with community and industry stakeholders.

As stakeholder engagement mechanisms evolve over time, having historical structures in place in legislation can reduce the opportunities to update and refine them.

For example, the importance of engaging with people with lived and living experience was not considered when the Responsible Gambling Ministerial Advisory Council and Liquor Control Advisory Council were established.

There is a need to be flexible around stakeholder engagement to ensure it is fit for purpose for the times. As such, the replacement governance model will not be legislated.

Conclusion

In concluding, I wanted to acknowledge the work of the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation staff and Board. The Foundation has changed the way Victorians and Australians understand gambling harm, and this legacy will be built on as we implement the new gambling harm prevention and response model.

I want to thank the former members and Chairs of the Responsible Gambling Ministerial Advisory Council and Liquor Control Advisory Council and look forward for your insights to be provided in an updated way, more reflective of best practice.

I commend the Bill to the house.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (17:33): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

*Rulings from the Chair***Constituency questions**

The PRESIDENT (17:33): There was a point of order from Ms Bath on Mr McIntosh's constituency question that Mr McIntosh did not link his constituency question to his electorate. I uphold the point of order. I just remind everyone that there has been the odd occasion where a similar constituency question has been let through, so I will be mindful to listen to constituency questions when they are put to the chamber.

Adjournment

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (17:34): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Workplace safety

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:34): (930) My adjournment matter is for the Attorney-General. The action that I am seeking is for the minister to advise on what measures the government will take to address the reported rise in violence, abuse and harassment directed at retail and other customer-facing workers. Reported instances of abuse and violence targeted towards employees in retail have consistently increased during and after the pandemic. These instances of violence and abuse have remained at elevated levels during the ongoing cost-of-living pressures. Surveys by the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association, the union for retail and fast-food workers, found that more than 88 per cent of surveyed members experienced verbal abuse from a customer in the past year, 15 per cent experienced physical customer violence, 11 per cent experienced sexual harassment or abuse, 39 per cent had been sexually harassed in the last five years and 36 per cent of harassment was perpetrated by customers.

Just over a week ago the Premier announced that this Labor government will change the law to address these attacks against frontline workers, such as those in retail and hospitality and bus drivers and the like. A worker protection consultation group that will be established will consider potential new penalties or offences and how existing offences could be expanded or strengthened to protect these vulnerable workers. We heard the Premier talk about her own experiences with her very first job in a supermarket in Bendigo and dealing with occasions of customer abuse. We also heard a very moving story about one of my constituents, a retail worker in the Dandenong area who works at a supermarket, who was assaulted by a customer with a knife. This sort of violence towards any sort of service workers is completely unacceptable, and that is why I am so proud to see this government take these steps.

As I mentioned earlier today, I have also personally had the privilege of representing exactly these frontline workers with their workplace grievances and all too often in situations where they themselves faced threats or abuse from customers, including an occasion where one such worker had to pay off a customer with \$50 so as not to be stabbed with a hypodermic needle. These sorts of instances of abuse and violence are all too common, and it is appropriate that we as a society stand clearly against them. It is why am very pleased to see this announcement made. Again, the action that I seek is for an update on what measures the government will be taking to address these reported increases in customer violence towards frontline services workers.

Housing

Samantha RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (17:37): (931) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Premier, and I ask her to take the housing crisis seriously and build urgently needed public housing. It is a well-worn path in this country – when things get tough some politicians start blaming everyone but themselves. It might start with blaming other levels of government, the community or past governments, and when they run out of people to blame they start blaming immigrants. It is lazy, dangerous and immoral, but that does not seem to stop the likes of Peter Dutton and now Labor too

going for the easiest scapegoat. While it is a path that has a history in racism and the White Australia policy, most recently it has been revived by the likes of Pauline Hanson. For many young people at the time like me who were growing up as migrants in Australia, it was a devastating blow to multiculturalism and feeling welcome here. So to see this kind of scapegoating, othering, demonising and blaming of immigrants for all the problems of the world ratchet up again has many of us reeling.

The issues people are dealing with in their everyday lives in Australia right now, whether it is struggling to put food on the table, finding an affordable home or not being able to access essential services, are squarely the fault of governments who are too beholden to corporations, their big donors and vested interests to take the kind of action that we urgently need. Let us talk about the causes of the housing crisis.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Dr Ratnam has got the call.

Samantha RATNAM: Since 2020 we have built 600,000 homes. Property investors purchased almost 600,000 homes. At the same time over a million homes sat empty and 300,000 new migrant households arrived. You do not have to be a maths scholar to see that something does not add up about this claim that immigrants are to blame for everything.

Let us talk about what is really going on here. Labor have been retreating from public housing, including here in Victoria, where they plan to demolish and privatise it. We continue to give big tax breaks to investors. We will not do anything to free up homes for renters, like a cap on short-stay accommodation or freezing rents to make them affordable. Governments refuse to ask property developers to build enough affordable housing through inclusionary zoning and instead continue to subsidise them.

Over 6 per cent of all public housing dwellings are sitting empty in Victoria right now while the waitlist is 120,000 long. Whole floors of luxury apartments are sitting empty while investors wait for their value to grow. Young people are left without hope of ever affording their own home. This is the housing system that Labor and the Liberals have delivered. Now they are turning around and blaming immigrants. The reality in this country is that the majority of us are migrants. Not only is blaming immigrants for problems they did not create socially and morally objectionable, it is also economically negligent. Most migrants arrive here with skills that we desperately need, especially in the regions. Migration is vital for productivity, and if we do not maintain a good ratio of working age to retired people, our country is headed for an economic cliff. When you misattribute blame for the housing crisis on to immigrants and when you demonise, generalise and stereotype, it is not just bad policy, it is racism.

Murray River sand slug

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (17:40): (932) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Water and concerns the Murray River sand slug. This is not a mystical creature but rather millions of tonnes of sand, which is very, very slowly but surely making its way down the river towards Adelaide. The sand appears to be a historical throwback. It is clear from the analysis of the surrounding riverbed and banks that it has come from further up the river, and it is probably the result of goldrush-era river use and land clearance. The sand slug – 13 MCGs worth of sand – is up to 4 metres deep and is now accumulating in a narrow section of the river at the Barmah Choke. This will be a very big problem indeed. In a previous study, capacity through that section of river had reduced from 11,300 megalitres per day in the 1980s to just 9200 megalitres, and the 2022 flood run-off has worsened the problem. Doing nothing is unthinkable. The risk of summer water rationing, which would devastate productive agricultural industry, is real. Worse than that, there is a serious consequent risk of flooding in the area of the choke.

The problem is that governments seem to be moving as slowly as the sand slug. It has been known for years that something must be done, yet we have still seen no action. Federal and basin state governments always manage to find other priorities, and it is no surprise that those whose livelihoods are threatened and who will face flooding are beginning to get nervous. Finally, last year \$2.35 million was committed by a joint meeting of ministers to addressing the problem. I have two issues with this. Firstly, it is clearly insufficient funding to actually address the problem. And secondly, has it actually yet achieved anything? I know there are environmental and cultural sensitivities, but I sincerely hope these are not preventing progress on the matter. The risk of flooding and drought further down the river cannot be ignored and must surely take precedence here.

The action I seek from the minister is an explanation of the timescale for delivery on the funding so far announced, an explanation of what is holding up the project and a commitment from the Victorian government that a full solution to the sand slug will soon be commissioned.

Financial counsellors

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (17:43): (933) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Consumer Affairs. Financial counsellors play an incredible role in supporting people in hardship across our state, whether they are dealing with telcos, banks, insurers or toll road operators. Any of us can find ourselves in hardship at any time. It is critically important that we have this service here in Victoria. Whether it be family violence or whether it is gambling, our rural financial counsellors are helping people across a myriad of issues. Indeed subsequent to the storms, where we have seen people who have suffered flood damage and other things, financial counsellors have been so invaluable to supporting people. Following on from Mirboo North, the financial counsellors were there in the days following. I spoke to them on the ground in Mirboo North, based out of Leongatha and surrounds, when they were supporting locals in the follow-on. The thing about financial hardship is that with a lot of the issues, particularly when we look at our rural financial counsellors, there is need for support over a long period of time.

That is why I am absolutely proud that the government enables legislation and puts in regulation that protect Victorian consumers – we know that the Liberal Party would never, ever look to do that. It is this side that protects Victorian consumers and supports financial counsellors to get the best outcomes for Victorians. I am proud of the millions and millions of dollars of investment in this budget, whether it is helping families across Victoria or the investment across the variety of financial counsellors that I spoke to before. The action I seek is: can the Minister for Consumer Affairs please update me on how these millions of dollars of investment to support financial counsellors will be allocated?

Disney theme park

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:45): (934) My adjournment matter is addressed to the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events. It has been reported that Disney company has \$60 billion to spend on new theme parks and resorts around the world. After doing exhaustive research into the best locations in the Southern Hemisphere for a new Disney theme park, I have narrowed it down to three potential outstanding locations, and they are so good I cannot easily split them. To prove it is a small world after all, it turns out the best locations are in my electorate: Dandenong, Cranbourne or Frankston. I am sure Mr Galea would like this too.

Unlike in other parts of Melbourne, Disney would be welcomed with open arms in south-east Melbourne. We have tens of thousands of families with kids who are looking for things to do and a great workforce who would love to live and work close to home. Crucially we have an airport at Moorabbin and plenty of open spaces connected by the Mordialloc Freeway, or as we like to call it, the TISM freeway. A Disney resort would attract millions of visitors to the south-east of Melbourne, and we would welcome every single one of them. My request for the minister for tourism is to contact Disney company and let them know every assistance would be given to them if they were to establish a theme park. They would be welcomed with open arms by the people of south-east Melbourne, and this is the only logical place for the happiest place on earth.

Stroke Foundation

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:47): (935) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Health, and it relates to advocacy requests from the Stroke Foundation of Victoria. I know many MPs have received this request and are highly sympathetic to the wishes of and very good deeds done by the Victorian stroke foundation. Indeed they quite often come into Parliament and provide us with a reality check on the impact that stroke has on thousands upon thousands of Victorians. In 2020 there were 7000 Victorians who had new, first-time strokes, and roughly 30 per cent of those, very sadly, perished.

The Stroke Foundation made some very modest requests from this government that were denied in the budget – moderate requests in order to prevent stroke in the first place, for early intervention for those suffering stroke so that people around them are upskilled in what to do if they see someone having a stroke and also for stroke survivors. They were very moderate requests. The action I seek is for the minister to dig deep and find \$250,000 per annum for four years for the FAST project, which is ‘face, arms, speech and time’. This is an evidence-based community education program and multimedia campaign to prevent deaths. The other part to this is the Navigator service, \$400,000 a year for four years. Again, it is small crumbs to the government, but this can make a huge difference on families having someone that will come home in the event of a stroke.

Some of the programs that we see from this Navigator service that are very important are for those people who are discharged from hospital, who are able to go home post stroke. There needs to be that coordination for stroke survivors for referrals to other services. We want better health care in this state. We need better health care in this state. We have a body that is respected; we all absolutely respect the Stroke Foundation. They have done good work over so many years. When I was at the Yarram Show at the start of this year, they had demonstrations that we participated in about how to prevent stroke and save people’s lives. I endorse the Stroke Foundation’s modest requests, and I ask the Minister for Health to find the money and support these initiatives.

Gendered violence

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:49): (936) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence and relates to gendered violence staff. These staff do incredibly important work on the front lines of our domestic and family violence crisis in our state. It is without question that these roles must be well staffed and well paid. That said, last year the federal government announced it would provide \$169 million over four years to fund 500 new frontline workers to assist those with experienced family, domestic or sexual violence. This commitment recognises that violence against women is a national crisis and must be addressed as a matter of urgency. In this arrangement, the states and territories are responsible for ensuring workers are hired. The national target is 352 positions filled by 30 June. There are concerns that this target will not be met. As of the start of this month only 30 of these positions have been filled. The Victorian government has refused to disclose how many staff it has employed so far and how many it is committed to hiring by 30 June. If other, more transparent, jurisdictions are anything to go by, the target of 352 positions filled by 30 June will not be met.

Some believe that the problems with staffing reflect deeper issues. Notably, these employees are salaried with no benefits. Superannuation, holiday leave, computers and cars are not provided within the funding package. This puts pressure on already underfunded services to provide extra funding for these staff. Beyond that, the salaries themselves are uncompetitive. So the action I seek is that the minister discloses how many frontline workers the Victorian government has employed so far and what its 30 June target is.

Suburban Rail Loop

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:52): (937) My adjournment matter is to the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. Home owners in my community are worried that the construction

of the SRL will lower the price of their houses. Constant construction works have left debris, torn up parks, permanently closed streets and caused traffic difficulties in our suburbs. Meanwhile the planned 40-storey building blocks in suburban streets and the removal of green and open spaces will add to worsening quality of living for families in Glen Waverley and Box Hill. Furthermore, homebuyers are now cautious about buying in the Suburban Rail Loop Authority planning zones as they are uncertain and scared about what the SRLA will do in their community. For many in my community their houses are a major component of their wealth. For the average Australian the value of the home makes up up to 79 per cent of their net worth. This is a considerable proportion. Clearly any reduction in house prices will place a heavy strain on home owners in my community who are already struggling.

We are facing a cost-of-living crisis. With rising interest rates, some first home owners are being forced to sell their property as they simply cannot afford to keep paying their mortgage. It would be terrible for them to sell for less. I have spoken to many residents in Box Hill and Glen Waverley who are considering selling their properties and moving elsewhere to avoid the chaos of the construction, the implementation of the SRL and the 40-storey tower blocks that come with it.

Given the scale of the SRL, I would imagine this government has conducted research and modelling on the impact of the SRL project in the short and long term on house prices in the planning areas. The information should be announced to provide transparency and certainty to those in my community. The transparency is needed and overdue. At present residents have no information about their houses and the expectations of the wider markets. Maybe this information is not available and transparent to residents because the member for Box Hill does not live in the SRLA planning areas, let alone the electorate.

These dedicated home owners have poured their sweat and savings into their home, their most important asset, and they deserve transparency and clarity on the government's plans and expectations for their cherished properties. Minister, will you provide clarity on whether you have done any modelling on house prices in the SRL planning areas, and if so, detail whether they are expected to increase or decrease given the ongoing construction and the uncertainty and lack of transparency around the issue?

Koonung Creek Reserve

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (17:54): (938) My adjournment tonight is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. An issue of significant concern in the Southern Metro Region is the permanent negative impact of the North East Link project on Koonung Creek Reserve. This is public land, an area of high biodiversity, and it is a green space which is deeply loved and frequently used by the local community. During the construction of the polluting North East Link approximately 60 per cent of the reserve will be occupied for the construction works. After the completion of the road widening the community is also devastated that there is going to be a permanent loss of 6.5 hectares, which is 25 per cent, of the reserve. The community has requested and Boroondara council has endorsed a design for the remaining 75 per cent of the public open space that will be returned to the community, and that design is laid out in the Koonung Creek Reserve master plan document.

The design shows the community's aspirations for the reserve post North East Link and includes features like mode-separated walking and cycling paths, a second public toilet, a second playground at the western end of the reserve, the relocation of the existing BMX and mountain bike skills track, large areas of planting for biodiversity and the return of trees and vegetation matching the pre-1750 ecological vegetation class.

The community is asking that with the remediation the North East Link project commit to planting mature trees in 27- to 40-litre pots, but instead we are currently hearing that the plan is to plant tube stock plants only as a means of getting enough plants in the ground; however, there are concerns about these surviving to maturity and realising the vision. The community is also asking the North East Link project to publicly commit to planting mature trees in Boroondara and other municipalities impacted

by the project and in accordance with their tree-related environmental performance requirements – EPR AR1.

As our population increases and densifies, our green spaces become ever more precious for our physical and mental health, for connecting with community and of course as the homes they offer to our local flora and fauna species. How we use those green spaces needs thoughtful reflection and community voices, which is how the Koonung Creek Reserve master plan was developed. The action I seek tonight is for the minister to direct the North East Link Program to deliver the community's vision for the reinstatement of the Koonung Creek Reserve as captured in the Koonung Creek Reserve master plan.

Economy

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:57): (939) My adjournment is for the Treasurer. Victoria now has more debt than New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania combined, and things are getting much worse. By 2028 the projected repayments on interest alone are going to be \$25 million per day. The action that I seek is for the Treasurer to outline exactly what actions he is taking to prevent this financial disaster.

From listening to the government and the way they talk about the state budget, you would think that they are doing incredibly well – and I am sad that they have all knocked off for the day so they cannot be here to hear this. They are in a constant state of celebration: celebrating themselves, patting themselves on the back about the incredible work they are allegedly delivering – although I have not seen it – and talking about all these plans for what they are going to do. From listening to them, you would think they are world-leading in education, health and the economy when in fact one in three kids in the school system cannot even read properly – and in my electorate that number rises to one in two. We have not got a hospital in Pakenham, because the government cannot afford to build one; it was meant to be opened this year, and they have not even started it. Once again the Warragul hospital has not had its funding commitments fulfilled because there is no money for it.

While the Labor Party are celebrating themselves, Victorians are suffering. This has a cost to all of us. It could be the Pakenham hospital, which has still not opened; every day people come into my electorate office and talk about how this is impacting them. It could be San Remo Primary School; they could actually have the upgrades that they were promised that were cut in this year's budget. It could be Koo Wee Rup Primary School, which should be getting upgrades, but again, that was cut in this budget – the same with the Drouin secondary and primary schools. In fact I was on the phone to somebody from Drouin Secondary this week, and they said when the announcement of funding came through Harriet Shing came to the school, did the announcements – there were all sorts of celebrations; she got a great photo and spread it around on social media – but when it was cut there was no such courtesy, just stony silence from the government.

Warragul hospital has not received its funding. Constituents have also expressed their concern to me about the cuts to cancer research, and I can understand why they are worried. Labor's financial management is hurting Victorians, and Victorians need to know what they are doing about it.

Medicinal cannabis

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (18:00): (940) My adjournment is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. We know that thousands of Victorians rely on medicinal cannabis to live functional lives. We also know that Victoria's manifestly unjust driving laws mean they must choose between taking their life-giving medication or driving, between taking their doctor's advice or breaking the law. The former Premier Daniel Andrews was very aware of this back in February 2023 when he stated that allowing unimpaired Victorians to drive after taking medicinal cannabis was a 'significant priority' for his government – a significant priority. He did not want anyone to avoid alleviating pain or other symptoms because they were too scared to take what had been prescribed to

them because we do not have updated drug driving laws. We were assured that this would be resolved in coming months.

Then in October 2023 there was the announcement of a world-leading trial on the effects of medicinal cannabis on drivers. With all the research and trials previously undertaken, coupled with this being a significant priority for the government, we were assured that this would be wrapped up by Christmas 2024. Reform was imminent. So you can imagine the shock, the sense of utter betrayal felt by medicinal cannabis patients on hearing that this trial will now not be completed until at best mid-2026, effectively meaning no change before the next state election. Medicinal cannabis patients have been waiting for eight years for this government to reform the drug driving laws and now must endure another three years of legal limbo. Where is the bold, progressive Labor government that led the way in 2016 by legalising medicinal cannabis? They seem to have lost their bottle, because this decision reeks of pure cowardice.

Let us be clear: the current laws are unjust and discriminatory. Unimpaired drivers on prescription medication who follow the directions of their doctor should be allowed to drive. It is how we treat every other prescribed medicine except for medicinal cannabis. It is not based on evidence, science or any harm reduction measures. It is arbitrary, and it is discriminatory. The government cannot simply kick the can down the road. I call on the minister to shorten the timelines so that this trial can be completed promptly, with meaningful reform introduced in the next year.

Sunshine Primary School

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (18:02): (941) On a lighter note, my adjournment matter is directed to the Minister for Education. Sunshine Primary School, founded in 1891, is a school that is over 100 years old and caters for 209 students from diverse backgrounds in my electorate. With all the maintenance of the buildings over the years, the school's old flagpoles have been removed by contractors without much notice. Following a recent school audit Sunshine Primary School has been directed to erect three flagpoles according to the guidelines set by the Department of Education. The school must install three flagpoles as per the guidelines of the department, and according to guidelines schools are to utilise their current funds from the student resource package for minor works such as flagpole installations. Due to the condition, the age and the situation of the school, it carefully utilises its student resource package for the upkeep and running of the school buildings and maintenance of the old playgrounds and to cater for the kids. I have been contacted by school staff seeking assistance.

My action for the minister is to provide some financial assistance on this particular occasion to Sunshine Primary School, in my electorate, to assist with the installation of three flagpoles so the kids can observe and celebrate certain days of the year, like Anzac Day, Remembrance Day and –

A member: Australia Day.

Trung LUU: Australia Day, and – what is this week?

Wendy Lovell interjected.

Trung LUU: NAIDOC Week – to be inclusive like the rest of the community. Please could the minister provide some more assistance to the school so the kids can celebrate and enjoy what they are entitled to and take some initiative in relation to what Australia means when we raise the flag and sing the national anthem.

Housing affordability

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:04): (942) My adjournment matter is to the Minister for Consumer Affairs, and the action that I seek is that she end unlimited rent increases to

prevent people like Leigh being pushed to the edge. Leigh contacted me recently, and with her permission I would like to share her story with you all:

I'm sure you get these daily. I am a single mum of 3 special needs daughters aged 15, 20 and 23. I am a midwife at Monash Clayton. I have 2 degrees, Nursing and midwifery. I work hard caring for our community, at a time that actually has a large impact on the future potential of individuals and their ability to contribute to society as a whole. Yet I feel I am not cared for, and this affects my ability to care for my own family.

Last year I had to move from the Nunawading area to Lilydale because my rent was put up \$200 a week. I am at max rent affordability at \$450 a week.

My current landlord did not renew my lease and so I am on a month to month system for unknown reasons, as he won't tell me why.

Living out at Lilydale I am 50mins to 1 hour 20 mins drive to work. Fuel and food, cost of living, I am barely surviving and have no capacity to save or move. I don't meet any criteria for support and I have no money for saving, or recreational activities.

Our life is ok, as we have a roof over our heads, although not secure in that as well, with no set lease.

I have tried to move but every application I put in is really for a place \$100 dollars above my limit, and I don't get approved anyway. Landlords and realtors demand proof of my savings, via bank statements, or they refuse to accept applications, I don't have any savings at all. I feel violated. They ask me if I have a guarantor which I don't as I am a 50 yo single mother.

I can't help but wonder if a well off landlord, if for a single moment would appreciate the feeling of uncertainty and of having the roof over their head taken away, if the person who sets the price of fuel cares about the fact that I choose fuel to get to work and then cannot afford to buy meat. If the fact the grocery stores would rather throw out food, than sell it at a price that people can afford.

For me to buy a bar of chocolate is to be extravagant.

Health services

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (18:07): (943) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, and the action that I seek is for the minister to abandon the government's plan to amalgamate Victorian health services, which would remove local oversight and management of health services. The Labor government have completely mismanaged the finances of Victoria, and now they are making desperate moves in an attempt to save money in the short term that will end up hurting Victorians in the long term. By 2028 the state is predicted to have \$188 billion of debt. Victorian taxpayers will be paying \$26 million every single day just in interest on our debt. The Labor government is trying to pay off the debt it has created by raising taxes on Victorians and cutting funding from critical services. It is hard to imagine a more destructive combination of policies.

One of their plans to save money is to force health services to amalgamate. Victoria currently has 76 health services across the state, each delivering tailored care to its local community. It has been reported that Labor is planning to reduce them down to 12 services – six regional and six metropolitan. This would result in health services having local oversight and management taken away from them and the control of the services transferring to managers in large hospitals far away. The amalgamation of health services will particularly impact smaller regional and rural health services and is deeply worrying to rural communities, who are seriously concerned about closures of local hospitals and cuts to local health care.

Victoria has many thriving regional and rural towns where residents' health is cared for by locally run health services that are responsive to the demographics and particular needs of the area. If local control is taken away from rural health services and they are managed by executives based in large hospitals far away, it is inevitable that rural services will not be as responsive to the local needs as they were in the past. If these mergers go through and centralised managers in large hospitals are forced to stick to impossible budgets, it is rural health services that will be on the chopping block.

There is a real danger that frontline care in small rural towns will be cut back, opening hours will be reduced, services will be centralised in larger hospitals and rural residents will be forced to drive long distances for treatments that they used to get closer to home. It is rural and regional services that

already struggle the most to attract and retain staff, and when rural healthcare workers are absorbed into a larger employment pool there is a real worry that rural services will miss out as the staff are moved around.

Reports suggest that an advisory committee is preparing a report on the government's planned amalgamations, but Labor is completely disregarding rural communities and has not consulted at all with rural and regional patients that will be affected by these changes. Rural voices deserve to be heard in rural health care.

Community safety

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:10): (944) I sense it is report card season really. It has a certain air to it at this time of year, and what better place to give a report card on the federal minister for immigration than in the chamber here in Victoria. Of course this has to be relevant to the state parliament, and it is relevant to the Minister for Police. In my local publication, the *Maroondah Leader*, my attention was drawn to a Facebook post:

PREDATOR ALERT. Victorian sex fiends aren't just sickos lurking in the dark.

They go on to make very visual expressions about the people we need to be worried about. I would like to know from the police minister of this state what information he has had from his federal colleagues in respect to the federal immigration minister's absolute cock-ups of the entire system. That is sadly what they are.

It must be said that the federal minister has recently taken the knife to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. This has some sort of irony to it, if not poetry – perhaps more poetry in a really Machiavellian sense. Let us never forget that the Administrative Appeals Tribunal as it currently stands is the love child of none other than Duncan Kerr. Duncan Kerr was the inaugural president –

A member interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: That is right, a former Labor member of federal Parliament –

Enver Erdogan interjected.

Nick McGOWAN: Well, he may be a great guy according to those opposite. However, Mr Kerr gave birth to this thing called the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, his love child as it were, to solve all problems. All administrative appeals would go there. This current government, the Albanese government, do not share that view in quite the same way. In fact they have now set up an alternate tribunal called the Administrative Review Tribunal – so it is the federal Administrative Review Tribunal with the unfortunate acronym of FART. It was a brain fart as it turns out from the minister, and the minister is now ruing the day he renamed the tribunal and set up its love child. It has gone from Mr Kerr's love child to the FART. What a dreadful state of affairs that is.

To add further complication to that, he gave direction 99. Direction 99, all jokes aside, is a serious, serious error. I have got it here and I could wax lyrical about it, but I will not. In short, and having been somebody who was eight years on the Administrative Appeals Tribunal applying the law, basically what this minister did was to lower the threshold. What this minister did was to actually give priority to the considerations of the very person who had offended here in this country and put that above all other considerations. It has real implications for the state of Victoria and, fart jokes aside, what this federal minister has done should worry every Victorian. He is not fit to hold that position. The Prime Minister should do what he ought to do and remove him during the winter break. He should have done that already. We all know that. I would ask that the police minister come back to this chamber and advise us what advice he has received from his federal colleagues in that respect.

The PRESIDENT: I am not too sure, Mr McGowan, if you have got around unparliamentary language or not. I will give you the benefit of the doubt. It was quite clever.

McIvor Highway–Mitchell Street, Axedale

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (18:13): (945) My adjournment is addressed to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety regarding the dangerous intersection at Mitchell Street and McIvor Highway in Axedale. Local residents have been advocating for changes to improve the safety of the intersection. Just last week I was actually driving along McIvor Highway through Axedale when suddenly a delivery van came across the intersection at Mitchell Street and hit a car on the opposite side of the road. I stopped as a witness and was standing on the side of the road, just moments later another large truck failed to stop at the intersection and a car had to slam on its brakes to avoid another collision.

The *Bendigo Advertiser* reported on another incident in January this year when two trucks collided. One failed to give way crossing the highway from Mitchell Street. In another accident just before Christmas, a family with five children got hit by a car that pulled out. Local residents have reported an average of one crash a month, and one local resident of 30 years has seen a lot of crashes on the corner, including two that have been fatal. Some local residents are opting to completely avoid the dangerous intersection.

I see on the Axedale Our Town – Our Future Facebook page that locals have been advocating for changes and they wrote to the Premier, as it is actually in her electorate. The Premier raised it with the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and works were due to be completed in March this year, but it appears as though little has been done to improve the intersection, and further works are still required. Local residents lodged a petition with the City of Greater Bendigo, and on 22 April council considered their petition, which called for safety improvements, namely flashing lights at the intersection. Council confirmed that the McIvor Highway is an arterial road managed by the Department of Transport and Planning on behalf of the state government, and the meeting also noted that the entire intersection, including warning signage along Mitchell Street, is the Department of Transport and Planning's responsibility. The city has written to DTP and the state government seeking their review of the intersection and identification of potential improvements. The council have also previously asked DTP to consider improvements at the intersection through the federal government's black spot program.

Under the Road Management Act 2004 DTP is responsible for the management of the entirety of the intersection. Given the responsibility for this intersection lies with the state government, on behalf of the residents of Axedale and all those who travel along McIvor Highway, the action I seek is for urgent works to improve the safety of this intersection, including the installation of flashing lights.

Medical research

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:16): (946) I want to draw attention tonight in the chamber to the plight of medical research institutes in our state and the absurd decision to cut funding to medical research in this budget and indeed in the budget before. I know Ms Crozier has already spoken about this, but particularly in the case of Peter Mac, as the one who funded and delivered the whole hospital and did the work to get this in place and have it actually come in on budget and on time. The vision for the VCCC, Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre, and Peter Mac being combined in a research hub was to bring the two together in a way where research was integrated with the medical treatment work that was going on. This set of cuts over the last two years, very significant cuts cutting deep into the available funding, is actually undermining that vision, undermining the intention of combining the medical research with the treatment facility and the treatment regimes. In a sense this is the worst cut that you could do because it undermines not just the research but actually the quality of treatment that is being provided.

I also make the point very strongly that Victoria's pre-eminence in medical research is being undermined. Our 13 MRIs – medical research institutes – are world-beating, and their future, the strength of those MRIs, is being undermined by this set of cuts. This is an area where the state does very well not just with philanthropic funding but matching that with the independent medical research institute funding that is provided by the state government and the operating funding but also the

specific grant funding from the federal government through the National Health and Medical Research Council nationally. We obviously punch well above our weight; more than 50 per cent of the NHMRC grants are provided to Victorian institutes and hospitals, and that is because of the unique model down here where medical research institutes, our health services and our universities are closely integrated.

What the government has done is pulled a brick out of that wall – a very important brick – and it has weakened the whole structure that has been a very foundational part of Victoria's success in the health and medical research area for many decades. I would ask that the Minister for Medical Research rethink this, actually sit down and rethink it, because the damage that is being done is profound and it is generational damage. It will undermine Victoria's position nationally and internationally.

Waste and recycling management

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (18:19): (947) My adjournment is directed towards the Minister for Water, and it concerns the illegal dumping of rubbish in the northern suburbs, which is rife in my community, particularly in the outer northern suburbs. I know it also happens in the inner city; my friend Mr McGowan was jogging through Richmond and found some rubbish on the footpath somewhere. But people contact me exacerbated about the government doing nothing about it – not the local council, the government entities responsible for the sites, or the state government. And because Labor cannot manage money, they have jacked up the municipal waste charge, putting in more barriers to legally dump rubbish during a cost-of-living crisis for my community.

A specific example of this is the massive illegal dumping going on outside a water-filling station on Mt Ridley Road in Craigieburn adjacent to the Hume Highway. For the minister's attention, it is just north of the footpath exiting Excelsior Heights. I am sure Mr Erdogan knows where that is as well. It is consistently used as a dumping ground for all manner of rubbish. There are fridges. There were a couch, nappies and off milk. Many locals actually believe it should be fenced off by the state government so that it is not used as a free tip. While locals do not believe it adds to local amenity, I am sure it is enjoyed by a large number of rats. Lots of people have said they have actually tried to send it on the Snap Send Solve app, but that is not going to do anything for a massive pile of waste, so I would like to thank Hume City councillor Jim Overend for bringing this to my attention.

I seek the action of the minister to investigate fencing off the site at the Yarra Valley water-filling station on Mt Ridley Road in Craigieburn. I also seek the action of the minister to come with me to this site so that she can investigate it herself, because it is really important that we get rid of this massive pile of waste. It is close by to the Merri Creek and a number of other creeks that flow through the beautiful northern suburbs, and what happens with large piles of waste is they seep into the ground. They will affect our waterways, so I am actually sick of the passing of the buck between the council, the state government and even the federal government. Because it is adjacent to the Hume Highway, some people think it is a federal government thing. No, it is outside of a water-filling station, which is where the fence is. It would be great if the fence could be moved to the road so that people could not use this site as a disposal ground for dumping rubbish.

Middle East conflict

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:22): (948) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, and the action I seek is that the minister provide funding to the Jewish community to support Israelis in Melbourne who were displaced from Israel following the 7 October Hamas atrocities. In the immediate aftermath of Hamas's 7 October massacre of Jewish communities near Israel's border with Gaza, between 200,000 and 250,000 Israelis were officially evacuated from their homes in the north and south of Israel along the borders with Lebanon and Gaza. As many as 100,000 are still displaced. Some of those that have been displaced are living with family and friends here in Melbourne. Of those 100,000 there are countless others who would gladly love to come to Australia if they could afford to do so.

The Allan Labor government is happy to provide funding for Palestinian communities but has nothing to offer the Jewish community other than evasive weasel words. Last night at the 76th birthday celebration of Israel, which the Premier attended and spoke at, she did not provide anything that was convincing to the Jewish community who were gathered there to celebrate the occasion, which has been done in a bipartisan manner for many, many decades. Compare that to the rousing speech that John Pesutto gave. He actually provided tangible solutions. He promised to crack down on hate in a number of areas by bringing back move-on laws that would crack down on the hateful protest mobs and allow Jewish students to safely attend university campuses; directing Victoria Police to take action on the rampant hatred and vilification of Jews; and ordering the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission to enforce the law to make sure that people and institutions provide a safe space and a place where people can congregate for the purposes of their education, recreation or social interaction. These were real actions that he said he would do, but we did not hear anything from the Premier. It was evasive and it was very disappointing for those Jewish leaders in the room, who have spoken out about their disappointment on an opportunity that she missed. So I again call on the minister to provide that support and funding, because the Jewish community knows that the time for sending strength is over and the time for action is now.

Autism

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) incorporated the following (949):

For the Minister for Education (or responsible for education infrastructure)

Many of my families in the west have young children with special needs and in particular, Autism. They are struggling to find places for their children in appropriate schools, but are faced with the fact that there are none within a practical distance from their homes or for example, the fact that currently Niddrie Autistic school only covers 4 years.

Can the Minister please provide a western metropolitan region-specific update on the Governments plans and progress towards achieving them, regarding new the location and completion date of any Autistic schools and education in general for autistic children in my region.

Responses

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice, Minister for Victim Support) (18:25): There were 19 matters raised today, from Mr Galea to the Attorney-General, Dr Ratnam to the Premier, Mrs McArthur to the Minister for Water, Mr McIntosh to the Minister for Consumer Affairs, Mr Limbrick to the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events, Ms Bath to the Minister for Health, Ms Payne to the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence, Mr Welch to the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Ms Copsey to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, Dr Heath to the Treasurer, Mr Ettershank to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, Mr Luu to the Minister for Education, Mr Puglielli to the Minister for Consumer Affairs, Ms Lovell to the Minister for Health and Mr McGowan to the Minister for Police. I might add, Mr McGowan, I did not call a point of order at that stage, but I am not sure if he is the relevant minister as it is a federal matter.

Members interjecting.

Enver ERDOGAN: I will forward it. I did not call a point of order, I said. I will forward it through. There were also Mrs Broad to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, Mr Davis to the Minister for Medical Research, Mr Mulholland to the Minister for Water and Ms Crozier to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. I will make sure that all those matters raised are referred to the relevant ministers for an appropriate response.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 6:26 pm.