

PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

**PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT

FIRST SESSION

Thursday, 1 March 2007

(Extract from book 3)

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By authority of the Victorian Government Printer

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FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT — FIRST SESSION

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Mr E. N. BAILLIEU

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

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Mr P. J. RYAN

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Thursday, 1 March 2007

The SPEAKER (Hon. Jenny Lindell) took the chair at 9.34 a.m. and read the prayer.

RULINGS BY THE CHAIR**Members: pecuniary interests**

The SPEAKER — Order! Yesterday during debate on the Parliamentary Legislation Amendment Bill the member for Gippsland East sought clarification as to whether the direct pecuniary interest provisions would apply to some members on the passage of that bill.

There are two principal requirements in relation to direct pecuniary interests. Firstly, under the Members of Parliament (Register of Interests) Act 1978 a member of Parliament is required to make full disclosure to the Parliament of any direct pecuniary interest they have in or in relation to any matter upon which they speak in the house. Secondly, under standing order 170 a member must not vote in the house on any question in which he or she has a direct pecuniary interest.

Part 3 of the bill makes amendments to the Parliamentary Salaries and Superannuation Act 1968, and I assume it is in relation to those provisions that the member for Gippsland East has raised the issue of direct pecuniary interest applying to some members.

I can advise the house that section 4 of the Members of Parliament (Register of Interests) Act 1978 specifically excludes any remuneration received by a member under the Parliamentary Salaries and Superannuation Act 1968 from the definition of financial benefit. In my view this means that the direct pecuniary interest requirements of that act do not apply to debate on this bill.

I would also point out that at the time of the passage of the bill the committee memberships had not been established so there was no likelihood of knowing which members would be entitled to a benefit under that bill.

DOCUMENTS**Tabled by Clerk:**

Mount Hotham Alpine Resort Management Board — Report year ended 31 October 2006

Planning and Environment Act 1987 — Notices of approval of amendments to the following Planning Schemes:

Campaspe — C45, C53

Glenelg — C33

Greater Bendigo — C80

Latrobe — C44

Manningham — C46.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE**Adjournment**

Mr BATCHELOR (Minister for Victorian Communities) — I move:

That the house, at its rising, adjourn until Tuesday, 13 March 2007.

Motion agreed to.

MEMBERS STATEMENTS**Water: government advertising**

Ms ASHER (Brighton) — I wish to draw to the house's attention the fact that the government is using taxpayers money to fund an advertisement which is misleading. An advertisement currently running seeks to counter the community feeling that the government's water-demand reduction policy unfairly targets households and does not bind business. The taxpayer-funded ad states that households use 60 per cent of water. If you look more closely, you see that the claim is about 60 per cent of Melbourne's water system. This is a dishonest claim, because it is analysing one water system rather than the whole of Victorian water use.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, across the whole of Victoria households use 8 per cent of Victoria's water consumption. It is bad enough that we have to put up with a \$13 million taxpayer-funded advertising campaign run through Shannon's Way telling households to reduce consumption. What we have now is taxpayer funds being used to try to counter a political debate the government is losing. That in itself is reprehensible enough, but even more reprehensible is the fact that the government is using figures which do not convey the truth.

Again I would refer the government and the water minister to Australian Bureau of Statistics catalogue 4610, which clearly states that households use 8 per cent of Victoria's water, not the 60 per cent the government is falsely claiming in taxpayer advertising. It is disgraceful.

Sport and recreation: Active Girls awards

Mr MERLINO (Minister for Sport, Recreation and Youth Affairs) — Victoria has an abundance of young female sporting talent, and over the past month I have had the privilege of recognising the efforts of nine teenage girls who were the recipients of the 2007 Active Girls awards. These awards were established in 2002 from a proposal developed by the Victorian government, which linked the Leader community newspapers annual Sports Star awards and the Victorian government's Active Girls program.

Each year over 1000 sportspeople are nominated for the Leader community newspapers Sports Star awards. From this large group nine young women who have enjoyed outstanding success in their chosen fields are selected to receive the Active Girls awards. This year's award winners are a very dynamic group of talented sporting stars: Brydee Moore, athletics; Rosie Moul, basketball; Natalie Argiro, swimming; Danielle Byrnes, athletics; Niki Duckstein, cricket, AFL and tae kwon do; Renee Caruso, karate; Gulcan Koca, soccer; Diana Sher, fencing; and Angela Dunn, golf. These girls all received a certificate, a cheque and an invitation to attend the Active Girls breakfast as role models. The breakfast, which will be held later this year, will attract over 600 secondary schoolgirls and over 80 sporting role models.

On a local note, I congratulate Melissa Duncan, who won the *Free Press Leader* Junior Sports Star Award. The Upwey High School student is one of Victoria's most promising 400 and 800-metre runners and performed exceptionally well at the Australian Youth Olympic Festival in Sydney last month.

The achievements of all these young women have been highlighted in their respective local newspapers, further helping to promote women's sport, which is often underrepresented in the mainstream media.

Rail: Shepparton–Melbourne line

Mrs POWELL (Shepparton) — I have received numerous complaints about V/Line's train and bus services from Shepparton to Melbourne and return. Many travellers are angry at the downgrading of the train service with the cancellation of the 4.00 p.m. passenger train from Melbourne each day.

The Shepparton district Probus club has written to me asking me to assist in having that service reinstated. When the new timetables come into effect this month, there will be no train or bus service running from Melbourne to Shepparton between 2.30 p.m. and

6.30 p.m. This last train will not get into Shepparton until about 9.30 p.m. — far too late for many travellers.

I will read from a letter I received from the Shepparton RSL:

Many of our veteran World War II members like to travel to Melbourne for the Anzac Day march and service, which gives them a chance to spend this important time with their comrades from Melbourne and other parts of Victoria. They usually travel on public transport from Shepparton to Melbourne and return.

With the recently announced changed timetables for train and bus services from Melbourne to Shepparton, this will cause them a long wait to return to Shepparton, eventually arriving home late in the evening.

We seek your support, hopefully in arranging a bus for them to return home earlier.

Other complaints include air conditioning on trains not working, overcrowding, breakdowns and trains continually running late. V/Line's recent performance results show that the Shepparton line has the highest percentage of late train arrivals in the state. Constituents have told me they have only praise for the local V/Line staff, who have tried to be helpful.

I urge the government to rectify the problems with the Shepparton–Melbourne service. The people of Shepparton district deserve public transport that is safe, comfortable reliable and responsive to their travel needs, not a second-class service.

Queenscliff Maritime Weekend

Ms NEVILLE (Minister for Mental Health) — On Saturday I was very pleased to participate in the blessing of the fleet and to formally open the Queenscliff Maritime Weekend and cousta boat regatta.

This great event commenced five years ago, and I have enjoyed being part of it since its inception. Saturday was the 72nd blessing of the fishing fleet in Queenscliff. It is the birthplace of the cousta boat, and the weekend is a great celebration of the maritime history of Queenscliff and also an opportunity to reflect on the important role the cousta boats played in the development of the town. Again we had the pleasure of the blessing of the fleet by the famed barefoot fisherman, Louis Ferrier. The 82-year-old is the town's last remaining cousta boat fisherman and a real gentleman who has an extraordinary knowledge of Queenscliff. He has participated in almost all of the 72 blessings, which commenced in 1935.

The weekend event has grown over the last five years in a partnership between the Cousta Boat Association, Queenscliff Lonsdale Yacht Club and the Sorrento

Sailing Couta Boat Club and is secured as one of the highlights on the Bellarine Peninsula's calendar of events.

I offer my congratulations to all those who have been involved, especially Richard and Carmen Bell, Andrew Scorgie, the various schoolchildren who participated, the local Sea Scouts and the maritime museum. I also want to acknowledge Scott Crisp for his hospitality on the day. This is a great event, and I would encourage other members to participate next February.

Crime: Malvern electorate

Mr O'BRIEN (Malvern) — Recent revelations of the secret pre-election deal between the Labor government and the police union only confirm the political expedience of the Bracks government. But sadly, our front-line police are still understaffed. In my electorate, the proof is in the crime figures.

Examining the police's own statistics for Malvern, crime has increased by 4.8 per cent over the last financial year. This represents 232 additional offences committed in that period. In Stonnington serious crimes, crimes against the person and drug offences have each rocketed by over 10 per cent for the same period. It was hardly surprising to read the article in the *Herald Sun* of 18 August 2006 headed 'Patrols vanish in "black hole"'. This article starts:

Police patrols have been secretly cut while the Bracks government has been telling Victorians more police are being put on the beat.

It also reports that while the number of violent crimes in the last two years has increased by 5500, the number of general duties police has been slashed by 748.

We have tremendous police in Malvern. I know from personal experience that they are absolutely dedicated to their job, and this is why they are frustrated by this government's underresourcing. It is well past time for the government to support our police with decent front-line staffing to allow them to do their job and uphold the right.

Australia Day: Yuroke electorate awards

Ms BEATTIE (Yuroke) — I rise to acknowledge my local constituents who were recently awarded Australia Day honours. I congratulate them on the worthwhile contributions they have made to their communities.

The Very Reverend Fr Victor Rophael of Gladstone Park was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for dedicating his life to helping Melbourne's

immigrant community and for the establishment of the first Coptic Orthodox Church in Melbourne.

Alena Karazija of Tullamarine was also awarded an OAM for her work with the Lithuanian community. At 84 years of age and still working, she is an inspiration to us all. For over 50 years she has been involved in the promotion of cultural activities, such as plays, concerts and lectures. Alena also assists Lithuanian residents with interpreting, reading and writing of letters.

Keith Herring is a well-known figure within the Craigieburn community and a deserving recipient of the Ambulance Service Medal. Through his membership of the Craigieburn and District Ambulance Committee, Keith was instrumental in the development of the Craigieburn emergency response team, the first of its type in Victoria and since 1996 a model that has been replicated throughout Victoria. His ongoing commitment to the provision of emergency services in the region — Craigieburn in particular — and his overall work within the community are greatly appreciated by everyone who has been the beneficiary of Keith's time and efforts.

Youth: mental health services

Ms WOOLDRIDGE (Doncaster) — I rise to express my concern at the current state of youth mental health services in Victoria. Under this government investment in mental health has overwhelmingly focused on those suffering acute episodes. While the rest of the health system moved to a preventive approach years ago, mental health has lagged behind. The case for a move to early intervention, especially for young people, is compelling. At least one-third of young people have had an episode of mental illness, and an estimated 75 per cent of mental health problems occur before 25 years of age.

There is a light on the hill. Last week the Minister for Mental Health acknowledged that we have been able to develop the evidence that shows the more we invest early, the better the outcomes. However, the government's commitments to early intervention under the 2006 Council of Australian Governments action plan total barely one-sixth of its overall investment, and its 2006 election commitments failed to even mention prevention and early intervention. This underinvestment is despite the fact that the Boston Consulting Group report of last year, which was commissioned by the Premier and hailed by the government as a considerable achievement, argued that there has been limited investment in early intervention with many children and young people not receiving

support designed to forestall or avoid the escalation of mental illness.

In its 2005 annual report the ORYGEN Research Centre states that there are serious levels of unmet need for care for young people with emerging mental disorders. The Liberal Party put forward an innovative mental health package at the last election. In the interests of the many young people who suffer from mental illnesses the minister must read our policy and get serious about investing in early intervention programs for young Victorians.

Beach soccer: Torquay

Mr CRUTCHFIELD (South Barwon) — On Saturday last I had the pleasure of playing in the inaugural Hayden Real Estate Victorian beach soccer championships held at Cosy Corner in Torquay. Whilst my soccer prowess was most definitely not a drawcard and my team of all stars was beaten by the Geelong Advertiser Hacks, the day itself was a resounding success. For uninitiated beach soccer watchers, I can state to the house that the game is physically taxing to play but offers spectators a wonderful opportunity to see a host of the game's most exhilarating skills.

Twenty teams played over 50 games in championship competitions for men, women, boys, and girls. The championships featured two Victorian women's premier league teams, along with teams of players with cultural backgrounds originating from all parts of the globe. Surf Coast Soccer Club took out the under-16 girls championship in a thrilling penalty shoot-out, and the open men's championship with a 4-1 victory over Heidelberg United. The Geelong Rangers reigned in the under-16 boys championship, also beating a team from Heidelberg.

The event received extensive coverage in regional and local media and drew excellent crowds — a clear sign beach soccer is now on Victoria's sporting map. The 2007 event was a precursor to the full Victorian beach soccer championships to be held at Torquay in summer 2008. The 2008 championships will be held in conjunction with a planned multicultural festival on the foreshore, which will feature food, music and dance.

I thank the current president of the Surf Coast Soccer Club, Joe Taylor, past president Richard Dunn, and Michael Pocklington, Peter Bradley, Chloe Messner, Rory Flanagan and Gail Russell. Well done on a great initiative!

Water: Big Buffalo dam

Mr JASPER (Murray Valley) — I would like to pay tribute to the resilience and ingenuity of the people of Wangaratta, who are persevering through an extreme shortage of water, stage 4 water restrictions and the difficulties this is imposing on business, industry and ordinary families. The shortage of water is also being experienced by people living in the Ovens and King valleys. This is highlighted by the limited flows in the streams above Wangaratta and almost no flow downstream of Wangaratta to the junction of the Ovens and Murray rivers at Bundalong.

I see great examples of the residents of Wangaratta trying to maintain their households; some are bucketing water to gardens while others are seeking relief by installing water bores. I see the ingenuity of organisations such as the Wangaratta golf club, the bowling clubs, the football clubs and other sporting organisations whose members are carting water from dams and bores in an effort to maintain their facilities until the rains come and the drought is broken.

The massive problem for these people in north-eastern Victoria is the limited capacity of Lake Buffalo and Lake William Hovell. They really only hold a cupful of water each and are now at extremely low levels. The answer is to build Big Buffalo dam and extend Lake William Hovell. I call on the Premier and the Minister for Water, Environment and Climate Change to respond to my representations and allocate funds to commence the process of building this dam and extending this lake. The work was planned many decades ago — the plans are all there waiting to go — and would underpin water availability for the Ovens and King valleys, the rural city of Wangaratta and beyond.

Fr Nguyen Van Ly

Mr DONNELLAN (Narre Warren North) — In March 2006 I went to Vietnam specifically to visit political dissidents, one of whom was Fr Nguyen Van Ly in Hue. I have been informed over the past couple of days that Fr Ly was recently arrested by 60 Communist thugs. They went into the Nha Chung building in Hue, took away six computers and some mobile phones and placed Fr Ly under house arrest. They have not placed him in jail this time, as they usually do. He is on a hunger strike.

What disappoints me more than anything else about this is the Vietnamese Prime Minister recently visited the Vatican. I understand that the Vietnamese Prime Minister, Nguyen Tan Dung, told His Holiness Pope

Benedict XVI that Vietnam was free and tolerant and respected the religious and democratic rights of its people. It is plainly obvious it does not. It is plainly obvious Vietnam does not like dissent. Fr Ly is one of the highest profile dissidents in the country. All he is calling for is basic religious and democratic freedom. He, along with Fr Loi, has been writing an underground paper for many years. He has now been arrested, after spending 10 years of his life in jail under this thuggish Vietnamese region.

The SPEAKER — Order! The member's time has expired.

Marlborough Primary School: maintenance

Mrs VICTORIA (Bayswater) — Recently I had the pleasure of presenting badges to the hardworking house captains at Marlborough Primary School in Heathmont. Marlborough has a fantastic community feel about it, with parents, teachers and students eager to extol the virtues of their school. However, while I was there I had a good look around the school and was surprised to find out just how desperately the facilities needed upgrading. Assemblies are held in an outside asphalted area because the school population, although not large, does not have a single indoor space capable of housing it. Needless to say general assemblies are a struggle during the winter months. Many sections of the asphalted play area have lifted due to trees, and in some areas it is too dangerous for children to play, so those areas cannot be utilised. The toilets can only be described as an occupational health and safety minefield, with leaking roofs which lead to decaying walls.

These proud people deserve better. These students are our future, and this government is not demonstrating that it acknowledges their worth by giving them the facilities in which to work and grow. Over the coming weeks I will highlight further serious problems within some of my schools, and I hope the Minister for Education looks at the history of each of those schools and realises that the maintenance component of their strategic results project is inadequate, at best.

Water: biofiltration

Mr LUPTON (Prahran) — The Facility for Advancing Water Biofiltration is an environmental project funded by the Bracks government under our science, technology and innovation initiative. Research is being carried out at Monash University. The team, led by chief executive officer Dr Tony Wong, in association with Ecological Engineering, based in Prahran, is conducting tests on combinations of soil

types and soil depths and varieties of plants to find the best examples for use as biofilters. Biofilters are the soils and plants which are used to naturally filter pollutants from stormwater. That water can then be recycled and reused and levels of run-off can be managed.

Recently I visited the facility at Monash University. The work being done by the team is very impressive. The Bracks government is incorporating that environmental work into our urban planning and design and landscaping around Melbourne as part of its policy to make Melbourne a water-sensitive city. I congratulate Dr Tony Wong and the team at the Facility for Advancing Water Biofiltration, because the work they are doing will make a significant contribution to Melbourne's being an environmentally friendly city, a city that uses less water and a city that recycles more of its water, and overall it will add to the attractiveness and urban landscaping potential of Melbourne.

Public transport: service standards

Mr MULDER (Polwarth) — In the *Age* on Monday the Minister for Public Transport was reported as hinting that the government might further relax the current 6-minute allowance that suburban rail operator Connex enjoys before a train is counted as officially late. The minister was also reported as saying that Melbourne commuters were obsessed with train punctuality. I say to the minister: whether in Melbourne or rural Victoria, travellers have to get to work, home or hospital appointments on time.

In January, 2038 suburban trains were cancelled and 15.2 per cent of trains on the Frankston line ran at least 6 minutes late, many of them in peak hour. On the Pakenham line, it was 15.6 per cent; Cranbourne, 13.6 per cent; and Sandringham, 10.2 per cent. There were 219 cancellations on the Frankston line, 215 on the Sandringham line, 290 on the Lilydale line and 134 on the Alamein line. In rural Victoria, V/Line's performance was terrible, with as many as 39 per cent of trains to Albury and Shepparton running at least 11 minutes late or more.

The minister must not give Connex or Yarra Trams even greater allowances before trains and trams are recorded as officially late, and the minister must not increase running times on train or tram timetables, as the minister has with V/Line, which from Sunday will have the timetables for 670 services stretched. The reluctant Minister for Public Transport must not be allowed to lower standards and put Victoria in the slow lane.

Schools: Ballarat Link Up program

Mr HOWARD (Ballarat East) — I wish to bring to the attention of members the Link Up education program, now in its third year in Ballarat. This program, which operates mainly from the Ballarat Learning Exchange, is aimed at reconnecting school non-attendees and other young people identified as not fitting into the traditional school system and in need of special support. The project has been driven by Keith Peters, who has shared this vision with so many teachers and other people for many years until it has become a reality. I congratulate him and I congratulate Ballarat Secondary College for auspicing the project, and the other secondary schools in the region as well. I also congratulate Ballarat City Council and the many other groups that are now helping to support the program in one way or another.

This year the staff are supporting more than 150 students by providing literacy and numeracy support and linking them into a broad range of skills and other activities. Not only are they helping to provide skill development support for these young at-risk individuals, helping them to rebuild their lives, they are also giving them a sense of self-confidence and self-esteem and an opportunity for a positive future. Well done, Keith Peters! I congratulate you and your team of something like eight people now working there.

This is a great program, and I hope it continues for many years to come, providing great opportunities for the young people who are going through it.

Health: Albury-Wodonga services

Mr TILLEY (Benambra) — I rise to condemn the Bracks Labor government for the lack of progress in advancing the integration of health services for Albury-Wodonga. In 2002 a memorandum of understanding between the Victorian and New South Wales Labor governments was signed. More than four years have passed and an integrated health service is no closer than it was.

I take this opportunity to recognise the tireless efforts of the members of the board of Wodonga Regional Health Service, the staff of the hospital itself and in particular the chief executive officer of the Wodonga Regional Health Service, Dr Andrew Watson, who has held the job for the last 14 years. Dr Watson was selected to oversee the integration of border health services over the previous five years. Dr Watson has tendered his resignation to the hospital board and the Department of Human Services, indicating that he will leave on 31 March 2007. The decision by Dr Watson was taken

not solely because of the integration not going ahead or not being achieved in the foreseeable future but also because of the major difficulties he experienced in securing funding from this Labor government.

The unwillingness and inability of this Labor government to recognise a tremendous opportunity to participate in and create the largest hospital campus between Geelong and Canberra is just another example of how incredibly out of touch it is with the demands of country Victorians. The loss of Dr Andrew Watson's leadership, wisdom, vision and ability to manage Wodonga Regional Health Service on a shoestring budget will be felt for many years to come.

I call on the government to release the Duckett report and make it public, and I wish Dr Watson well with his future.

Ashburton: street festival

Mr STENSHOLT (Burwood) — I would like to commend to the house the excellent street festival we had in Ashburton last Sunday. Between 10.00 a.m. and 5.00 p.m. the Ashburton shopping centre was transformed by a festival atmosphere that was experienced by thousands of people as they poured in to enjoy what was happening on the day.

The festival, which has been running for many years, was sponsored by the Ashburton Traders Association in concert with the City of Boroondara. I congratulate the shopping centre coordinator and festival organiser, Liz Webb, for the great job she did with the festival. I also congratulate Ken Douglas, the chair of the traders association, and his committee on their support of the festival.

There were rides for the kids, singers and dancers on the main stage, wandering minstrels and entertainers, and stalls of all kinds. Members of local sports clubs such as the Eastern Willows Cricket Club and St Mary's Football Club, as well as the Boroondara Gardiners Creek Lions Club, cooked sausages and served food. Local schools and preschools sold cakes and other goods, as well as providing information on their programs. The scouts were there, as well as people from the community health centre, the neighbourhood houses and many other organisations. A team of face painters raised funds for The Edge Community Fund, which assists local kids in Ashburton.

The day was capped off by a jazz concert supported by the City of Boroondara. The festival was opened by Cr Mary Halikias-Byrnes. A great day was enjoyed by

everybody, and long may we have great festivals in Ashburton!

Lifeline Gippsland: funding

Mr NORTHE (Morwell) — I rise to support Lifeline Gippsland and its fundraising efforts to pursue improved facilities in Morwell. The current facilities are totally inadequate not only for the many volunteers who assist in providing many essential services but for members of the community in general wishing to seek personal assistance. The proposed new building will not only ensure a safer, cleaner working environment for the hardworking staff and volunteers of Lifeline Gippsland but provide the capability for the organisation to expand on the services it currently provides to the community.

Lifeline Gippsland has already submitted its funding applications for this \$1.9 million project to the Minister for Victorian Communities, and we urge the minister to recognise the importance of such a project. Lifeline Gippsland currently offers a vast array of services, including a suicide crisis support program, face-to-face counselling, a 24-hour telephone counselling line and, pertinent to our region in recent times, bushfire and drought support.

Part of Lifeline's objective is to raise \$500 000 of its own funds, which will be contributed to the new building. Consequently the fundraising launch will commence tomorrow, Friday, 2 March, and the member for Narracan and I will participate in that. The launch is part of the annual Lifeline community leaders sleep-out, which aims to raise \$30 000 with assistance from local business, local community and local community leaders. I ask those in the house willing to donate any funds to this worthy organisation to think of me and the member for Narracan sleeping out tomorrow evening in extremely harsh conditions. There are donation forms here!

On a serious note, Lifeline Gippsland has continually raised a significant proportion of its own funds to provide vital services for Gippslanders, and we ask the Minister for Victorian Communities to fully support its funding submission as a matter of priority.

Florence Lewis

Ms MARSHALL (Forest Hill) — The date 7 March is significant in history: in 1926 the first successful telephone conversation was held across the Atlantic; in 1933 it was the launch of the board game Monopoly; and it also marked the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. But by far one of the most important events that

occurred on 7 March exactly 100 years ago was the birth of Florence Charlotte Emily Lewis.

This Saturday, surrounded by family and friends, I will join Mrs Lewis to celebrate this most significant of birthdays. This milestone is not easily achieved and the rarity of such celebrations is testimony to that. It requires good genes and the smart choices which Mrs Lewis has successfully made. Mrs Lewis has made a wonderful contribution to our community, enriching all of our lives. She is a proud and happy member of the Inala Village. Like many others I would like to wish her a very happy 100th birthday and congratulate her on this wonderful achievement.

Mount Martha: beach renourishment

Mr MORRIS (Mornington) — The issue I raise this morning is the rapidly deteriorating state of the Mount Martha North Beach. For many years it was one of the bay's premier beaches, wide and sandy and a great place for children. Sadly, it has now become a classic example of this government's neglect of the Mornington Peninsula.

Winter storms devastated the beach in 2000, and it has never since returned to its former state. Instead it has fluctuated between being almost adequate and barely there. It has now become both a major environmental concern and a major safety concern. Rocky outcrops line the shore, but without the sand to support them they are starting to collapse. The adjacent cliffs are also in danger of slippage. It is just plain dangerous. By mid-January over a metre of sand was lost in a few weeks. A decent storm this winter will wipe it out, and probably for good.

What has been the government's response? Not much! Residents have had to get together and hire a consultant to investigate. Preliminary investigations and schematic design works will cost about \$16 000. In yet another case of buck passing, the Department of Sustainability and Environment is prepared to help, but only if the locals contribute — heavily. Both the federal member and I have written to the Premier. More than six weeks later a response still has not been received. Meanwhile the destruction continues. When is this Bracks government going to stop procrastinating and act to protect our precious beaches?

Victorian school sports awards: Yan Yean electorate

Ms GREEN (Yan Yean) — Today I offer my congratulations to the winners of the Victorian school sports awards. The annual Victorian school sports

awards recognise outstanding achievements across all categories of school sports in Victorian government schools. The awards are presented to students, coaches, parents and volunteers who have excelled or made an outstanding contribution to school sports.

I am delighted to advise the house that four of these talented athletes hail from schools in my electorate. We are punching above our weight in Yan Yean! Amazingly, three of these talented young athletes attended Apollo Parkways Primary School. They include Casey Hammond, who achieved an award for hockey — and as the no. 1 ticket-holder for Greensborough Hockey Club, I am well aware of Casey's talent. At age 12 last year he won the best and fairest award for the men's team he plays with. Greensborough Hockey Club has a number of current and previous national representatives and we expect big things from Casey in the future.

Also from Apollo Parkways, Matthew Haynes was one of four statewide winners in the athletics category, and Emma Wallmeyer was one of two winners in the netball category. I look forward to offering my personal congratulations to these students and the school next week when I do my pleasurable annual presentation of their leadership badges.

I also want to congratulate Michael Hill of Diamond Valley College, a promising bowler who has already represented the state, as one of four winners in the cricket category. Schools in the Diamond Valley have very low rates of obesity and a greater participation in sports, and these awards are a tribute to that.

The SPEAKER — Order! The member for Brunswick has 30 seconds.

Brunswick: festivals

Mr CARLI (Brunswick) — Last week I had the great pleasure of launching the 19th Brunswick Music Festival, which is a great festival of folk and world music, including music from Australia — obviously Australian folk music — and from the British Isles, Italy, Greece, the Middle East and a whole lot more. This Sunday we also have the Sydney Road festival, when we will close Sydney Road and celebrate the diversity of the Brunswick area.

The SPEAKER — Order! The member's time has expired.

PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES

Membership

Mr BATCHELOR (Minister for Victorian Communities) — I move:

That:

Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee

Ms Barker, Mr Morris, Mr Delahunty, Mrs Maddigan and Mr McIntosh be members of the Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee.

Education and Training Committee

Dr Harkness, Mr Herbert, Mr Howard and Mr Kotsiras be members of the Education and Training Committee.

Electoral Matters Committee

Ms Campbell, Mr O'Brien, Mr Scott and Mr Thompson (Sandringham) be members of the Electoral Matters Committee.

Environment and Natural Resources Committee

Ms Duncan, Mrs Fyffe, Mr Ingram, Ms Lobato, Mr Pandazopoulos and Mr Walsh be members of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee.

Family and Community Development Committee

Ms Beattie, Mr Dixon, Mr Perera, Mrs Powell and Ms Wooldridge be members of the Family and Community Development Committee.

Law Reform Committee

Mr Brooks, Mr Clark, Mr Donnellan and Mr Lupton be members of the Law Reform Committee.

Outer Suburban/Interface Services and Development Committee

Ms Green, Mr Hodgett, Mr Nardella, Mr Seitz and Mr Smith (Bass) be members of the Outer Suburban/Interface Services and Development Committee.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Ms Graley, Mr Scott, Mr Stensholt, Dr Sykes and Mr Wells be members of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

Road Safety Committee

Mr Eren, Mr Langdon, Mr Mulder, Mr Trezise and Mr Weller be members of the Road Safety Committee.

Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee

Mr Brooks, Mr Carli, Mr Jasper, Mr Languiller and Mr Smith (Warrandyte) be members of the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee.

I will speak briefly to the motion by way of explanation. It takes the pre-existing joint parliamentary

committee structures and appoints members from this chamber to those committees. The nominations of the members who are being appointed today have come from those individuals or through their representatives, and it is an agreed position of this chamber to appoint these members to the 10 joint parliamentary committees. By way of explanation, members will recall that after debate in this chamber yesterday we amended the names of two committees. They will therefore be established as new committees once the legislation has passed both houses and been given royal assent. For those who are mathematically attuned, that is why this first motion only deals with 10 committees. The remaining two parliamentary committees will be dealt with by the second motion, which I will move in a moment.

Motion agreed to.

Membership

Mr BATCHELOR (Minister for Victorian Communities) — I move:

That contingent upon the coming into operation of the Parliamentary Legislation Amendment Act 2007 —

Rural and Regional Committee

Mr Eren and Mr Northe be members of the Rural and Regional Committee.

Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee

Ms Campbell, Mr Crisp and Ms Thomson (Footscray) be members of the Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Ms Munt be a member of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

This motion deals in a contingent way with matters that flow from the debate yesterday concerning minor changes to the joint parliamentary committees. Two committees had their names changed. The first intent of this motion is to appoint this chamber's nominations for those two committees, contingent upon the legislation being passed. The second intent of the motion is to appoint an additional member to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee over and above those who were appointed by my first motion. This is a contingent arrangement because the changes we made yesterday to the Parliamentary Committees Act expanded the number of members Parliament could appoint to the PAEC. The appointment of the additional member mentioned in this motion is contingent upon those changes being passed by both houses and receiving royal assent.

Motion agreed to.

References

Mr BATCHELOR (Minister for Victorian Communities) — I move:

That under section 33 of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 the following matters be referred to the joint investigatory committees specified:

Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee

- (1) To the Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than 30 November 2007 on the misuse/abuse of benzodiazepines and other forms of pharmaceutical drugs in Victoria with particular regard to:
 - (a) examining the nature, extent and culture of the misuse/abuse of benzodiazepines and other forms of pharmaceutical drugs;
 - (b) examining the short and long-term consequences/harms of the abuse/misuse of benzodiazepines and other forms of pharmaceutical drugs;
 - (c) examining the relationship between benzodiazepines and other forms of pharmaceutical drugs and other forms of licit and illicit substance use;
 - (d) reviewing the adequacy of existing strategies for dealing with benzodiazepines and other forms of pharmaceutical drugs misuse/abuse;
 - (e) recommending best practice strategies to address the issue of benzodiazepines and other forms of pharmaceutical drugs, including regulatory, law enforcement, education and treatment responses; and
 - (f) examining national and international legislation, reports and materials relevant to the issue.
- (2) To the Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than 30 June 2008 on justice and crime strategies in high-volume crimes such as breaking and entering, which often involve young people —

and the committee is to recommend on:

- (a) strategies that will reduce high-volume crimes with particular emphasis on residential burglaries being committed by young people; and
- (b) strategies that are effective because they change the environment in which these offences are likely to be committed.

Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee

- (3) Contingent on the coming into operation of the Parliamentary Legislation Amendment Act 2007, to the Economic Development and Infrastructure

Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than 31 December 2007 on the key competitive advantages underpinning the performance and growth in Victoria's financial services sector, particularly with regard to the sector's presence interstate, and recommend strategies to:

- (a) maintain this growth;
- (b) maximise employment opportunities from the sector's further expansion;
- (c) ensure the benefit of the sector's growth and operation are shared across the state; and
- (d) identify likely risks and impediments to the sector.

- (4) Contingent on the coming into operation of the Parliamentary Legislation Amendment Act 2007, to the Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than 31 March 2008 on mandatory ethanol and biofuels targets in Victoria —

and in particular the committee is required to:

- (a) report on the merits or otherwise of a mandated target for alternative fuels including biofuels and ethanol;
- (b) report on whether a mandatory target should be 5 per cent by 2010, 10 per cent by 2015 or otherwise;
- (c) report on the measures required by government to facilitate an alternative fuels industry in Victoria for transport and non-transport applications; and
- (d) report on how to maximise the regional economic development benefits of a mandatory biofuels target including jobs growth and investment potential.

Education and Training Committee

- (5) To the Education and Training Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than 31 March 2008 on dress codes and school uniforms in Victorian schools, in particular:
- (a) the benefits and costs of mandatory school uniforms;
 - (b) the views of school communities about dress codes and school uniforms;
 - (c) the most cost-efficient and practical uniform procurement arrangements;
 - (d) matters which need to be considered to ensure dress codes and uniform policies are consistent with antidiscrimination legislation and health promotion policies;
 - (e) appropriate enforcement and sanctions;
 - (f) appropriate exemption criteria and processes; and

(g) national and international trends.

- (6) To the Education and Training Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than 1 March 2008 on effective strategies for teacher professional learning with particular regard to:
- (a) the relationship between ongoing professional learning for teachers and teaching expertise;
 - (b) which factors will support high-quality professional learning for teachers, including learning methods and environments for the development of professional knowledge, and the pedagogy relevant to professional development of teachers;
 - (c) national and international trends regarding ongoing professional learning for teachers and report on innovative initiatives;
 - (d) determining how best practice in ongoing professional learning for teachers can be delivered into schools and learning communities;
 - (e) examining the potential for greater cross-sectoral links between industry, training institutions and schools in the delivery of ongoing professional learning for teachers;
 - (f) examining gender issues in the delivery of ongoing professional learning for teachers.

Electoral Matters Committee

- (7) To the Electoral Matters Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than 30 June 2008 on the conduct of the 2006 Victorian state election and matters related thereto.

Family and Community Development Committee

- (8) To the Family and Community Development Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than 1 March 2008 on the involvement of small and medium-size businesses in corporate social responsibility and, in conducting the inquiry, the committee is to:
- (a) investigate current Australian initiatives where small and medium-size businesses have developed innovative ways of working with governments and community groups to support communities;
 - (b) examine the international context and emerging trends with overseas initiatives relevant to corporate social responsibility amongst small and medium-size businesses aimed at tackling social disadvantage;
 - (c) investigate how small and medium-size businesses could play a role in tackling disadvantage in local communities and making communities stronger, particularly how they can partner with government and community groups to work in the areas of most need;

- (d) determine the barriers and the drivers for small and medium-size businesses to become involved in social responsibility initiatives and options for addressing those barriers and increasing the drivers;
- (e) examine the barriers to sustainability of business and corporate social responsibility initiatives for small and medium-size businesses.

Law Reform Committee

- (9) To the Law Reform Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than 30 September 2008 on the effect of vexatious litigants on the justice system and the individuals and agencies who are victims of vexatious litigants —

and the committee should:

- (a) inquire into the effectiveness of current legislative provisions in dealing with vexatious litigants;
 - (b) make recommendations which better enable the courts to more efficiently and effectively perform their role while preserving the community's general right of access to the Victorian courts.
- (10) To the Law Reform Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than 31 March 2008 on property investment and property marketeers with particular regard to:
 - (a) reviewing the regulatory framework for the provision of property investment advice, with the objective of establishing how best to control the exploitation of Victorians in the context of keeping the burden on business as low as possible;
 - (b) the commonwealth's role in regulating financial advice, and the ongoing work of the Ministerial Council on Consumer Affairs in considering regulation of this area.

- (11) To the Law Reform Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than 30 June 2008 on:
 - (a) the reach and use of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms, including government-established ADR schemes and restorative justice schemes, so as to improve access to justice and outcomes in civil and criminal court jurisdictions and to reduce the need, where possible, for contact with the court system, particularly in marginalised communities;
 - (b) whether a form of government regulation of alternative dispute resolution providers is appropriate or feasible so as to ensure greater consistency and accountability for Victorians wishing to access alternative dispute resolution.

Outer Suburban/Interface Services and Development Committee

- (12) To the Outer Suburban/Interface Services and Development Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than 30 September 2008 on issues

relating to strengthening communities through local economic development initiatives in outer suburban areas —

and in particular the committee is requested to:

- (a) examine existing local economic development programs being carried out by municipalities in outer suburban areas;
- (b) identify the barriers to local economic development and the ways in which these can be addressed;
- (c) investigate and recommend incentive arrangements for industry and the respective responsibilities of each tier of government;
- (d) investigate the role of council local economic development units and the types of assistance they provide;
- (e) examine and report on ways in which councils and government at all levels can encourage economic development, enhance and promote employment opportunities and attract new investment;
- (f) identify export-based operations and opportunities in outer suburban areas and recommend options to encourage their growth;
- (g) identify new and emerging sectors and how they can assist economic development in outer suburban areas, including innovative examples of business incubators, home-based businesses and social enterprises.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

- (13) To the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than the last sitting day in 2007 on the options for the next phase of strengthening government and parliamentary accountability in Victoria —

and in particular the committee is required to consider:

- (a) parliamentary committees;
- (b) question time procedure;
- (c) standards of parliamentary behaviour;
- (d) overseas travel by members of Parliament;
- (e) modernisation of Parliament including the permanent abolition of wigs and other archaic practices;
- (f) reform of the process of dealing with petitions.

Road Safety Committee

- (14) To the Road Safety Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than 30 September 2008 on federal-state road funding arrangements —

and the committee should:

- (a) review current arrangements in Australia;

- (b) assess the current arrangements in Australia in respect of economic efficiency and equity;
 - (c) make recommendations for improving federal-state road funding arrangements in Australia.
- (15) To the Road Safety Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than 31 March 2008 on vehicle safety —

and the committee should:

- (a) identify and prioritise those vehicle safety technologies that have the most potential for reducing the number of crashes and/or the seriousness of injuries sustained in crashes;
- (b) compare the level of safety provided by these leading-edge technologies with the minimum regulated standards (Australian design rules);
- (c) compare the rate of fitting of these leading-edge technologies in Australia with that of other developed economies including Europe, the United States of America and Japan and identify any impediments to encourage their adoption;
- (d) review the level of manufacturers/importers de-specifying (decision not to fit) vehicle safety technologies commonly available overseas to vehicles imported and sold in Australia;
- (e) seek advice from high-volume local vehicle makers and vehicle importers as to when the vehicles in their product ranges will have these high-priority vehicle safety technologies; and
- (f) recommend strategies for encouraging vehicle manufacturers to fit leading-edge vehicle safety technologies to vehicles sold in Australia and for increasing the public's knowledge and demand for these technologies.

Rural and Regional Committee

- (16) Contingent on the coming into operation of the Parliamentary Legislation Amendment Act 2007, to the Rural and Regional Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report no later than 30 September 2007 on the potential economic impacts to Victoria's rural and regional businesses and communities as a result of the proposed changes to the taxation arrangements for managed investment schemes (non-forestry), which have been recently announced by the commonwealth; of particular interest are the impacts on investment, job creation, exports and resource use (water and land) —

and to this end the committee should consider the core issues of the:

- (a) investment, job creation and exports which have occurred over the past three years in rural and regional areas as a result of managed investment schemes;

- (b) investment, job creation and exports, which is occurring in rural and regional areas following the planned transition period;
- (c) net economic impacts on Victoria's rural and regional areas over the next five years;
- (d) impacts on northern Victoria's irrigation water markets; and
- (e) anticipated structural changes and the new industry opportunities in rural and regional areas —

and the committee should make recommendations on any necessary or desirable actions that could be taken to assist Victoria's rural and regional businesses to adapt to the proposed changes in order to limit the potential negative impacts of the changes.

Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee

- (17) To the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee — for inquiry, consideration and report by the last sitting day in 2008:

- (a) in conjunction with chief parliamentary counsel, make recommendations on —
 - (i) acts of Parliament and provisions of acts of Parliament which are unnecessary or redundant; and
 - (ii) legislative instruments made under an act of Parliament and provisions of legislative instruments made under an act of Parliament, which are unnecessary or redundant; and
 - (iii) acts of Parliament and provisions of acts of Parliament which are unclear, ambiguous or should be redrafted; and
 - (iv) legislative instruments made under an act of Parliament and provisions of legislative instruments made under an act of Parliament which are unclear, ambiguous or should be redrafted;
- (b) the implications of the national corporations regulatory framework and whether as a consequence of the referral of corporations powers to the Parliament of the commonwealth any Victorian acts should be repealed and if so whether any existing provisions should be saved by inclusion into other appropriate legislation; this consideration should include:
 - (i) Companies Act 1961;
 - (ii) Companies Act 1975;
 - (iii) Companies (Application of Laws) Act 1981;
 - (iv) Securities Industry Act 1975;
 - (v) Securities Industry (Application of Laws) Act 1981;

(vi) Marketable Securities Act 1970;

(vii) Collusive Practices Act 1965 —

and in the conduct of this inquiry the committee is requested to pursue the primary objects of reducing the number and complexity of Victorian acts and legislative instruments, and ensuring that acts and instruments are clearly expressed in accordance with modern drafting practices.

This motion appoints references to both the ongoing or pre-existent committees and in a contingent way the renamed committees. When I gave notice of this motion yesterday there was one additional reference that is not included in the list. Members who are arithmetically astute will have noticed that 18 references were mentioned yesterday and 17 references are being moved today.

An honourable member — How can you do that?

Mr BATCHELOR — I am about to explain the intent and how I can do it. It is achievable under the standing orders. You can change a notice of motion by writing to the Clerk, which is what I did late last night. The effect of that is that the motion I have moved this morning does not include a reference to bushfires. The purpose of explaining that process is to indicate to the house that Parliament will be giving a reference on bushfires. Members may recall that the Leader of The Nationals raised this matter, I think by way of a question to the Premier, in an earlier parliamentary session, and since then it has been the subject of broader discussions.

The form of words contained in my notice of motion yesterday will be changed essentially to take into account the issues put forward by The Nationals. We are happy to accommodate those, and I am sure the Parliament will find that that is a useful process and will deliver a better outcome. In that context we are not moving the words I gave notice of yesterday, but I can give an assurance that this does not mean that either the government or The Nationals — but they can speak for themselves — do not want to proceed with an examination of bushfires. We will. Once those issues have been resolved the Parliament will proceed to give that refreshed reference, if you like, to the parliamentary committee.

In that context the motion as it now stands and which we are debating today provides a comprehensive sweep of work for those parliamentary committees. It not only deals with all of those committees but also enables a whole range of important issues to be considered by members of this chamber and the other chamber jointly and together — and it will enable those reports to come

back. We await the results of the deliberations by these committees with great interest.

Mr CLARK (Box Hill) — In the limited time allowed to me by the agreement between the parties I want to comment on three aspects of the motion. First, I urge a speedy determination of the terms of reference for the bushfire inquiry. We hear the reasons given by the Leader of the House, but clearly the recent bushfires were devastating for many Victorians and caused an enormous range of damage. People are rightly wanting answers to the many aspects of the way the bushfires were handled and the many other implications of those bushfires, including what can be done to mitigate and improve the situation for the future. So resolving and getting on with that inquiry urgently is vitally important. Hopefully there will be the absolute minimum of further delay.

The Leader of the House said in moving the motion that it was intended to give, if I may paraphrase him, a broad range of important references to the committees. In relation to the Law Reform Committee I would say that the references set out here are virtually designed to keep the committee well way from the most burning issues that are facing the administration of justice in Victoria at present. There are three references given. One is extremely minor indeed in relation to vexatious litigants, and another is a very niche issue in relation to property spruikers and other marketeers. The third one, on alternative dispute resolution, is so vague and open in a very fluid situation that it is going to be very difficult for the committee to tackle. What is manifest is that the really important issues about the administration of justice are not being referred to the committee.

There are chronic court delays in Victoria. Recently I highlighted in the house a case of an occupational death which had been waiting almost three and a half years to come to trial and which had been adjourned for a further year. There is no reference being given to this committee to inquire into the reasons for, and how to remedy, the chronic delays in the court system that Victoria faces.

There are important issues about the independence and standard of judicial appointments that ought to be examined — in particular the issue of acting judges and the very strong opposition that the Victorian Bar Council has to the Attorney-General's move to appoint acting judges due to the potential threat to the independence of the judiciary.

There are major issues about the administration of the court system in Victoria, such as how the new arrangements between the department and the judges

are going; to what extent the standards and performance of the courts are measured, the ongoing loss of jurisdiction and in many respects regard for the efficiency of our mainstream courts, and the diversion of jurisdiction to the tribunal system and to federal courts. Last, but absolutely not least, is freedom of information and the government's continued suppression of and refusal to make available documents that should be made public, and what should be done to improve the administration of freedom of information.

I also want to comment on the amazing reference proposed to be given to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I am honoured to have been a past member of that committee, and I am proud of a number of reports that committee has tabled. In regard to the reference that has been made to the committee, I do not want to decry the importance of the reform of the Parliament in matters such as the restricted time limits that are imposed, the inability to effectively bring supporting documentation into the debate, the limited role for public participation, the failure to use technology to improve the standards of debate and public involvement in this Parliament, and the fact that we are in effect using the same techniques for debate that were being used 300 years ago.

It is bizarre that this reference is being given to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and on such distorted terms of reference. The only reference to modernisation contained in the terms of reference is focused on the trivial example of wigs, whereas all the broad issues I have mentioned do not even get a look in. The reference seems rather designed to stymie the functioning of the committee, to give the government members of the committee an excuse not to initiate other own-motion references so as to avoid looking at matters such as the continued secrecy in relation to public-private partnerships; the need to improve performance measurement and service standards; the potential for greater disclosure of financial and management information; and the crucial need for better forward planning for infrastructure and service improvements.

One has to ask whether this reference in fact represents an expression by the government of no confidence in the President of the other place and the Speaker of this house, who were appointed by a motion of the government. Question time, standards of behaviour, petitions and the modernisation of the Parliament are all matters that are normally expected to be led by the Speaker or President in conjunction with the Standing Orders Committee of the relevant house, yet this motion appears to demonstrate no confidence in the current Speaker and to be a very strong adverse

reflection on the previous Speaker by charging these matters to a committee with responsibility for far broader financially oriented responsibilities. I express great concern about each of these matters contained in this motion.

Mr RYAN (Leader of The Nationals) — It is my pleasure to join the debate on this motion. I refer first and foremost to the Environment and Natural Resources Committee and the reference which at the present time is absent — on the face of it at least. That is to do with the fact that some two weeks ago I questioned the Premier about the preparedness of the government to conduct an inquiry the nature of which The Nationals have proposed. I moved a motion the same day to that effect, and there has subsequently been discussion about it with the government.

My colleague Peter Hall, the Leader of The Nationals in the other place, moved a motion reflective of that which I moved in this chamber a couple of weeks ago. That motion is now listed on the notice paper in the other place for debate on 14 March. What has since transpired is that the motion, as it appears on the notice paper in the other place, has been modified to a slight degree to expand the matters under consideration, but I understand that motion will be debated on 14 March in the other place. Therefore the Environment and Natural Resources Committee will have its reference by that mechanism, and we will have the opportunity to investigate the issues pertaining to the bushfires that are of particular concern to all Victorians.

As the member for Box Hill quite rightly observed, this is something we need to do expeditiously. We have been down this path before, in the sense of having had major fires in Victoria which have been the subject of different forms of inquiry. What The Nationals have proposed is a narrower based inquiry than those which have been conducted previously.

We have done this because, as I have toured the state and gone to the different areas affected by the fires, moving in and out of the communities that have been subjected to them, the single most outstanding issue of conversation has been preventive burning. People in our communities are furious that the preventive burning arrangements in Victoria are simply not appropriate to the needs of the state. They want something done about it; they want answers to it. So the focus of the reference to the Environment and Natural Resources Committee will be around the issue of preventive burns.

Looking at it from a multitude of aspects — and I will not go through them all now in the interests of time — broadly the matters for consideration will be in the

nature of those that were contained in the motion which I originally gave notice of and which is now reflected in the notice paper in the other place. People want to know why it is that the government sets a target, for example, of preventive burns of 139 000 hectares — I think that was last year's figure — when in fact we have been able to achieve only 49 000 hectares in circumstances where three years ago about 1.1 million hectares of Victoria was burnt. And over the course of the fires which commenced on 1 December last year and which have only relatively recently been contained, about 1.2 million hectares of Victoria has been burnt.

Arising out of all this there are many issues around the question of preventive burns, and when the reference goes to the committee there will be an opportunity for fulsome consideration of the important matters around that pivotal point. The other benefit of having this form of inquiry is that the whole of the Parliament will have ownership of it and, very importantly, we will be able to do it quickly. There is no reason why this needs to be protracted. People with a point of view will be able to put that point of view. I am confident that the committee will hold sessions in country areas to enable country Victorians to make a contribution. I am also confident we will get answers, for a start, coupled with constructive suggestions as to what can be done in the future to better contain bushfires in Victoria.

I refer also to reference 16 to the Rural and Regional Committee dealing with managed investment schemes. We have misgivings about that reference, and we will have further discussions with the government about it. This is essentially an issue of a federal nature with federal implications as to the operation of the schemes. Apart from anything else events have overtaken us, because the federal government has now moved several initiatives in relation to the way managed investment schemes operate within Victoria. Therefore we think the notion of this investigation being undertaken in all the circumstances is not appropriate.

We would much prefer that the committee examine an issue which is very contemporary in the minds of country Victorians, and that is the state of one of our major industries, being tourism, which has been utterly decimated because of the bushfires. In a longer term sense it has also suffered terribly because of the issues surrounding the drought. As a party we have over the past several weeks proposed a variety of initiatives to assist the industry to get back on its feet and to do what can be done from a future prospective to ensure that this great industry is able to flourish in country Victoria. It seems to us that something of that order is much more appropriate for the considerations of that committee.

Finally, I refer to the references to the Education and Training Committee. It seems to me that we should be able to do better than this, particularly in the context of country students. I would have thought the minister would be interested in examining issues arising from the last year's examination results of our senior classes in schools across country Victoria. We have a problem in particular with the vast difference between the proportion of country-based students who are able to go from year 12 into some sort of tertiary education and the proportion of those who are able to take that path from a metropolitan perspective. I think in the country it is about 34 per cent of the students; in the metropolitan area it is something like 43 to 45 per cent of students. There is a vast gap there, and the government needs to have this properly investigated. I would have thought it would be an admirable thing for the Education and Training Committee to do.

It would be a much better use of the committee's time than for it to tear around the state talking about whether or not we need school uniforms. That is not to say that issue does not have its place for examination in the scheme of things. Indeed as I speak we are in the presence of a number of school students, and perhaps the best way for the committee to deal with this is to interview them all as they leave the Parliament today to see what they think, because after all it seems to me it would be pretty well-informed opinion.

In any event I am conscious of the time constraints that have been agreed between the parties, so rather than addressing other issues which readily come to mind I will limit my comments accordingly. I am pleased to report that I will be the only speaker on behalf of The Nationals on this issue, so I will allow what I think are to be three speakers from the Liberal Party to continue their contributions.

Mr ANDREWS (Minister for Gaming) — I am pleased to rise to make a brief contribution in support of the motion moved by the Leader of the House. This is a great suite of references for the joint investigatory committees, and I want to pick up on a couple of them which I think will be of particular benefit. Obviously they all have merit, as the Leader of The Nationals commented.

Reference 1 to the Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee relates to benzodiazepines and other forms of pharmaceutical drugs, and there are a range of emerging issues in that particular sector. I know from my dealings with the Pharmacy Guild of Australia and others in a previous role that there are very challenging issues in the way we regulate their use and maximise consumer protection, along with a whole range of

associated issues. That will be an important piece of work for the committee, following on from the work it did in the last Parliament in relation to alcohol.

Reference 7 relates to the Electoral Matters Committee. I think that committee was formed a year or two ago, but this will be the first time it will meet to look into the conduct of the 2006 state election. I think that is a very important process. There is a lot of money involved in the conduct of elections, and they are obviously fundamental to our democratic system. Inquiring into what worked well and what did not in a mechanical sense and whether the systems and processes in place gave people access and provided an open and transparent democratic system is an important area of its work.

The Law Reform Committee, under reference 10, will be investigating a matter which I am particularly concerned about in relation to property investment and property marketeers and how we can best protect Victorian consumers from predatory practices in that environment. Last night I spoke in the house about a range of consumer protection issues in relation to March being National Scams Awareness Month. Again these are important matters, and the government takes them very seriously. I am sure this joint investigatory committee will take these matters seriously as well.

Whilst my electorate is not considered to be outer suburban, I have a sense of the issues that dominate those parts of Melbourne. Reference 12 to the Outer Suburban/Interface Services and Development Committee will allow that committee to look at existing opportunities for economic development in outer suburban interface communities as well as any barriers that might exist. It is an important issue to inquire into in order to provide advice and develop policy in that space, given the pressure and sheer magnitude of the development out in the growth corridors.

Finally, I would like to mention reference 14 to the Road Safety Committee, which was very clearly detailed in the discussion on the matter of public importance yesterday, ably led by the Minister for Roads and Ports. It relates to the shameful arrangements whereby Victoria receives such a small fraction of road funding compared to our overall contribution to commonwealth revenue. That will be an important area to inquire into to ensure that we closely examine why Victoria is not getting its fair share. This is a great suite of references for joint investigatory committees, and I commend the motion to the house.

Mr WELLS (Scoresby) — The reason the Liberal Party argued for a non-government or Independent

person to chair the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee was to ensure that we had proper scrutiny of executive government. When we see the motion today, we can understand why the Liberal Party wanted to push so hard to have an independent or non-government person as chair of that committee. The Bracks government promised to be open and transparent, but it has proved to be no doubt the most obstructive government ever — just look at the freedom of information process.

If you look at what the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee has been set up to do, you see that it is to look at:

... any proposal, matter or thing concerned with public administration or public sector finances;

the annual estimates or receipts and payments and other budget papers and any supplementary estimates of receipts or payments presented to the Assembly and the Council; and

audit priorities for the purposes of the Audit Act 1994.

This motion has been designed to be a time-wasting exercise for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. That is why it has been brought in — as a time-wasting exercise. It is going to take up valuable time investigating whether we should have wigs or not in this chamber instead of investigating the financial dealings of the executive government. I have to say that the government will be held accountable for doing this. I just do not understand why government members would want to have an investigation into wigs.

The reason for this motion is that the ALP has no confidence in the Speaker, the member for Carrum. If the ALP had confidence in the Speaker, the government would not have had to put forward these sorts of motions, because it is the Speaker who is responsible for parliamentary committees; it is the Speaker who is responsible for question time procedures; and it is the Speaker who is responsible for standards of parliamentary behaviour. If a committee wants to go overseas, its members have to write to the Speaker to get permission. The modernisation of Parliament, including the removal of wigs, is the responsibility of the Speaker. The process of dealing with petitions, again, is in the domain of the Speaker.

Had the Speaker referred matters to the Standing Orders Committee, the Privileges Committee or the House Committee, that would have been a proper way of dealing with Parliament. If the Acting Speaker at the moment, the member for Keilor — I read the other day about the rising star, in the newspaper — had become the Speaker, I wonder whether this motion would have been brought forward. Maybe government members

would have had confidence in the member for Keilor if he, rather than the member for Carrum, had been Speaker. I am just wondering what the concern is.

Can the house see the stupidity of this motion? Rather than an investigation into the financial dealings of the executive government, we are going to have an investigation into wigs. That is how stupid this motion is. It has been put forward by the finance minister and the Treasurer, and it is a very carefully worded time-wasting motion to ensure that the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee spends all its time on this sort of thing rather than investigating the dealings of the finance minister and the Treasurer.

Mr INGRAM (Gippsland East) — I would like to speak on the motion before the house. Looking at the notice that was put forward yesterday by the Leader of the House, I was a bit surprised to see that there had been a change overnight, particularly regarding the reference to the Environment and Natural Resources Committee in relation to the conduct of prescribed burning and bushfire risks in country areas. When I looked through that reference I thought it would be a good reference for the committee to have a look at, because it concerns one of the very important issues in my electorate and in country Victoria generally. I just make the point that that reference is an important one for the committee to examine, but it has been removed from the notice. It is very important that it be referred as soon as possible.

I know that the reason given was that there were some negotiations on changing the motion. If you look at a similar notice of motion put forward by the Leader of The Nationals in the other place, Peter Hall, you see that there is not a lot of difference between the two proposed references. To have the reference removed from the notice means the issue cannot come forward this week, because there has to be a day's notice before it can be moved — unless we were to get leave — which means it cannot be put up until the next sitting week. That means the committee cannot get on with the job of investigating, and basically there is no work for it to do.

I think it is disappointing that this question could not have been resolved and worked out here today with the reference being put forward. That reference should go through both houses of Parliament. It is such an important issue that surely the parties could have got together and agreed on it. Whilst I probably would not have worded the reference as the government has worded it, there could have been some slight tweaking or agreement broad enough to cover most of the issues that are out there and are of great concern. Why

governments over the last two decades have not met 50 per cent of their fuel reduction targets is the issue most people want to have addressed. They want to have the opportunity to put that question to a parliamentary committee or an independent committee.

There are a number of other issues. One of them regards the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee — and I am not going to focus just on the wigs. We had some discussion of this yesterday. This is a reference to a parliamentary committee that will allow members of Parliament to decide on pay, perks, overseas trips and things like that, but the public is not going to accept that members of Parliament could give an honest assessment of whether the state is getting good value out of overseas committee trips.

If they are done properly and for the right reasons, overseas committee trips are an important function of committees. But if you have a group of politicians asking for submissions from the public, trying to determine whether the state is getting good value out of committee trips and overseeing a report on the topic, the public will say, 'Oh yeah, here we go again — another bunch of politicians justifying what they are doing'. I do not necessarily know whether this is something that is a good use of the committee's time, because no matter what the finding is, I do not think the community is going to accept it as a good outcome.

As to standards of behaviour, we could all argue that the behaviour of members of Parliament in question time should be improved. But as to the recommendations of this committee, it really comes down to the members and how the Chair conducts the Parliament. Looking at that reference, maybe it is something that could have been resolved without being referred to the committee. I think there are some other reasonable references there, but there are some that will not necessarily be the best use of the committees' time and the committee system.

I would encourage the government to make sure that the reference to the Environment and Natural Resources Committee is resolved as soon as possible, because the issue of bushfires is one of the most important issues in my electorate and in a lot of other areas around the state. We have had two extremely large fires over the last four years, and the community wants the opportunity to put its point of view to the committee, to Parliament and to the government.

Mr MULDER (Polwarth) — I would like to talk to reference 14 to the Road Safety Committee, that being to report no later than 30 September 2008 on federal-state road funding arrangements. I do not

believe the Road Safety Committee has in the past ever been used as a political tool by any government of the day. When you look back at the subjects of some of the inquiries this committee has undertaken — walking safety, driver distraction, the country road toll, crashes involving roadside objects, improving safety for older road users, rural road safety and infrastructure, Victoria's vehicle roadworthiness system, incidence and prevention of pedestrian accidents, motorcycle safety, and it goes on and on — the issue is that the Road Safety Committee has always been used to inquire into matters that relate to community safety and in particular to road safety.

I find it offensive that we are now being asked to head down a 'Let's help Kevin Rudd get elected as the Prime Minister of Australia' path, using the Road Safety Committee to carry out this work. I know what the government's intention is — that we be herded off around Australia and lined up in front of Labor councils, where all their Labor mates will be dragged in to give evidence. It will be an absolute media circus, and each and every little bit of information that can be dragged out to attack the federal government will be. That is what this entire process is about.

At the same time we have issues such as the number of level crossing accidents. Despite the lack of lights and any form of protection at about 1500 rural level crossings, announcements are made that works will be delayed, sometimes for over a year. Why could we not be looking at issues such as that? They go back to the heart of the Road Safety Committee's work, which is looking at issues that deal with community safety.

This particular reference is going to turn into an absolute witchhunt. I am also concerned about the committee's role. As I understand, the factional warlord of Geelong, the member for Lara, has been successful in rolling his parliamentary colleague, the member for Geelong, for the chairmanship of this committee. I can see what is going to happen with that, given that we have these factional tensions on the Road Safety Committee. Now we are also being asked to undertake an absolutely blatant political reference in the lead-up to the federal election.

It is totally wrong that we are being asked to undertake this type of work. But if the government wants to play the game, we ought to have a look at the funding arrangements between the state and federal government. Perhaps we should revisit the Scoresby freeway situation and look at the half a billion dollars in funding that this government signed up to with the federal government but then turned around and handed

back — and then it started screaming, saying 'We don't get enough assistance from the federal government!'

Perhaps we should have a look at the situation with the Geelong ring-road. Prior to the last state election the Premier came out and announced that the government was going to start stage 4 of the ring-road, which no-one had heard about before, that it would commit \$62.5 million to it and would be looking for funding from the federal government to make up the balance, and that if that did not happen the state government would go ahead and do it itself. What sort of planning is it and what sort of budgeting is it to say, 'Here is half the money. If we haven't got the rest to complete the project, we will go ahead and do it ourselves.'? The way that project has been handled shows an incredible lack of planning, a lack of thought and a lack of a decent approach to the federal government.

In the past the committee has worked extremely well. We have had members of The Nationals and the Liberals on it, and we have had Labor people on it. It has been very disciplined, and we have come up with great recommendations. That goes back not just to the previous Parliament but to the one before that and the one before that, as far back as you would like to go. The Road Safety Committee has always delivered.

I think it is going to be an absolute disaster, and not just with this reference. It is going to cause tension within the committee, and it is going to ensure that further reference work given to the committee starts off on a very poor footing.

Mr DELAHUNTY (Lowan) — I want to comment on the Environment and Natural Resources Committee, whose work I believe is very important. My area was heavily impacted on by fires the season before last, so we need to look at bushfire prevention and preparation, including fuel reduction burns, access to water and, importantly, the protection of local adjoining land-holders.

The Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee is looking at the production and use of biofuels, and I welcome that. I want to make sure that we do more work in relation to having the 8000 government vehicles hooked into ethanol. We need to make sure government transport gets hooked into biofuels.

Getting access to ethanol is a problem we have across Victoria. For example, I believe there is only one outlet for biodiesel in Victoria. The committee needs to look at that and also at support for this industry, which is a

growing industry in my area — and that includes support for local growers.

The other quick comment I want to make is about the Rural and Regional Committee and the proposal to give it a reference to look at managed investment schemes. This is a major issue for my area. There are concerns being raised about the detrimental impacts of managed investment schemes on local agricultural industries, in particular whether the investors in these schemes receive any advantage or disadvantage over independent or family agricultural enterprises.

Managed investment schemes have been welcomed as they put a floor price on the land and give equity to other land-holders, but many people are now concerned that the entry of the schemes may be detrimental to other agricultural enterprises and to the community. If this reference gets up — and I know there is talk about whether or not it will be changed — I want to make sure that that committee comes to western Victoria to view the impacts and the benefits of managed investment schemes.

Ms CAMPBELL (Pascoe Vale) — I want to briefly mention the Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee. The member for Lowan has left the door wide open for me to talk about biofuels and some of the exciting work that is being referred to us in this motion. There are two great references, the first being the inquiry into and consideration of mandatory ethanol and biofuel targets in Victoria. In the last 24 hours I have taken a great personal interest in getting onto the Net and finding out quite a bit about biodiesel and biodiesel sources, where we have a great opportunity to look at blending petrol with sustainable, inclusive components.

We also have a great opportunity to refresh our minds and recall some of our chemistry lessons all those years ago. The references that have been allocated to the Economic Development Committee are really interesting. We will learn a lot, and I believe we will also add a lot to Victoria's economy, biodiversity and sustainable fuel practices.

The second reference is in relation to the competitive advantages underpinning the performance and growth of the financial services sector. This is an area of great interest to me in relation to venture capital banks, superannuation funds, financial planning and so on. Since the Bracks government was elected, Victoria has made a significant improvement in the financial services sector. We did not accept that the financial services sector should be abandoned by Victoria. Not to let the government's record lay where it currently is,

which is very impressive, we have been charged with the responsibility of further maintaining this growth and further maximising employment opportunities.

With those few words I wish to commend the motion to the house. Great results will be delivered for Victoria as a result of our parliamentary committee references, and I look forward to those reports and to speaking to them in the future.

Mr BATCHELOR (Minister for Victorian Communities) — I would like to thank all those members who have contributed to this debate. It demonstrates that the work of parliamentary committees is valued and appreciated and that the members of this chamber from all sides, including the Independent member, take their references seriously. We ask all members to continue that attitude as they fulfil their obligations as members of those committees.

Motion agreed to.

PAY-ROLL TAX AMENDMENT (BUSHFIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICE) BILL

Second reading

Debate resumed from 15 February; motion of Mr BRUMBY (Treasurer).

Mr WELLS (Scoresby) — I rise to join the debate on the Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill and indicate that the Liberal Party will be supporting the bill. On 5 January the Bracks government made a media announcement that it was going to provide some compensation recognition through payroll tax exemptions, backdated to 1 November 2006, to employers who release employees to assist as volunteer firefighters or respond to other emergencies.

The main provisions of the bill amend the Pay-roll Tax Act 1971 to provide an exemption from payroll tax for wages paid or payable to employees who are away from work whilst performing duties as volunteer firefighters or in other volunteer emergency service roles. The bill retrospectively backdates the payroll tax exemption provisions to 1 November 2006, which was the applicable date of the current Victorian bushfire season.

Two new paragraphs will be inserted into section 10(1) of the Pay-roll Tax Act. Paragraph (ja) exempts wages paid or payable to employees for any period they take part in bushfire fighting activities, as defined within the

meaning of the Country Fire Authority Act 1958; and paragraph (jb) exempts wages paid or payable to employees for any period they take part as a volunteer emergency worker, as defined within the meaning of the Emergency Management Act 1986.

Whilst paragraph (ja) explicitly details bushfire fighting activities, the bill does not necessarily restrict the payroll tax exemption provisions to only those incidents of bushfire activity. I thank the Treasurer for providing the department bureaucrats who were able to clarify that particular point, because initially we had concerns that if the Country Fire Authority volunteers were only restricted to go and fight in bushfire activities what happens to those CFA volunteers who are out fighting house fires or industrial fires. We thank the Treasury officials for clarifying that point.

Paragraph (jb) is an all-encompassing provision that could apply to any incident deemed to be an emergency requiring a coordinated response in which an employee performs duties as a volunteer emergency worker. The original media release of 5 January mentioned that the payroll tax exemptions would apply to volunteers of the CFA and State Emergency Service responding to fires and other emergencies, such as storm damage, flooding and search and rescue.

The bill provides that payroll tax exemptions will also apply to other volunteer emergency workers, including St John Ambulance, Red Cross and volunteer coastguards and lifesavers who assist in a coordinated response under the state emergency response plan. As we interpret the bill, it would include organisations such as the Southern Peninsula Rescue Squad, which is in the member for Nepean's electorate and does an excellent job. If they are called out as part of a coordinated response by Victoria Police, they would be part of the all-encompassing emergency service workers, and if the employer allowed them to leave and be paid for that, then they can claim the exemption for that.

The bill provides payroll tax exemptions only where employees are not already on official leave, such as annual recreation leave or sick leave. We obviously have some concerns. The payroll tax exemptions are restricted only to employers who pay payroll tax — that is, those employers whose total gross payrolls already exceed the current threshold on the Victorian exemption level of \$45 833 a month, or \$550 000 over a full year.

Many volunteers are either self-employed or work in small businesses; a lot of them are farmers in rural Victoria. We are not sure how many CFA volunteers,

or in turn their employers, will be beneficiaries of this provision. It is an important point that we are trying to encourage as many employers to allow their employees, who are members of volunteer organisations, to assist in emergencies, but we have concerns of just how many will benefit.

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria believes the provisions do not go far enough and that they leave out the provision of any financial compensation or incentives to a large number of volunteers, as I have mentioned. It also believes a reduction in WorkCover premiums or some other financial incentive for employers may be more beneficial. That is something we lay on the table, but we know it would be very difficult to implement.

Mr Holding interjected.

Mr WELLS — That is what they say. In many instances the amount of payroll tax saved in terms of monetary benefit will add a certain amount of accounting expense, but we have been assured by Treasury officials that it will be a self-assessment on a monthly or an annual basis and employers will calculate the amount of hours that have been expended and put that number in the exemption box.

We are supporting this important piece of legislation. We are still very suspicious and have doubts about how effective it will be. I am not sure how much the cost to Treasury will be — I think it will be very small — but at least it is being seen to be doing something to assist the volunteers. Trying to pay or reward volunteers is a real problem, and it is something that the Liberal Party has to deal with when looking at its policies. I notice that this issue has been raised over and over again in letters to the editor of the *Herald Sun* over the last couple of months. One letter from Paul Bannan of Yea states:

We CFA volunteers go not for reward or glory but because the job has to be done.

We do not expect payment or to have someone demand that we be paid.

He says he gets official leave of three days, and if there is a shortfall in leave he uses his annual leave. Such is the dedication of these CFA volunteers.

Another letter from Darren Martin of Narre Warren, a CFA volunteer for 20 years, states:

As a volunteer I do not expect to be paid, but to enable myself and other volunteers to continue to fight major fires, the government should be looking at ways to compensate all employers of volunteers.

It goes on to state:

I am not against having firefighters from overseas here, but what person really needs \$600 a day in expenses?

The bushfires we have just had have been phenomenal. Growing up in Bairnsdale, bushfires were a yearly problem. In those days as soon as the fire sirens went off, fathers would leave and head off for a couple of days to fight fires, and it was a difficult situation. Victoria has had 1.25 million hectares burnt out. When I was on holidays overseas it was the main news story there, and the footage was incredible. The fires burnt for more than 50 days, and a lot of the CFA volunteers had to leave their families and leave their work to go up there to fight those fires, which shows the fantastic spirit that we have among our CFA and State Emergency Service volunteers and the other emergency services personnel.

Around 14 500 participating volunteers were up against it this summer fighting fires which had been burning for more than 50 days. Unfortunately there was one death, but when you compare that to the number of deaths in previous years, it is clear that the way the CFA, the emergency services and the government coordinated their fire response placed a lot more focus on the protection of human life.

It is interesting to note some of the comments made by Neil Bibby, the chief executive of the CFA, about the issue of paying volunteers and how it should be handled, which was an issue addressed in an article in the *Age* of 20 January. The reality is that if we had to pay for CFA volunteers, the state simply could not afford it. I have been to a number of CFA annual dinners where it has been stated that if we were paying CFA volunteers, we would be looking at a figure around \$500 million a year, which is totally unrealistic and something that could not be done. The article states:

Bibby, the CFA chief executive, performs a back-of-the-envelope calculation: 7000 firefighters would cost about \$500 million and still leave much of the state exposed ...

The problem is, who do you pay? Do you pay people who are away for two or three days attending bushfires? What happens to the CFA volunteer who leaves for an afternoon or gets called out at 2 o'clock in the morning? How do you calculate payment of those volunteers? If you pay 1, then you have to pay 2, then you have to pay 4 and then you have to pay 16, and it makes it very difficult.

Gary Lyttle, the president of Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, says that perhaps the most remarkable thing

about CFA volunteers is they simply do not want to get paid and they do it in the interests of the community, which is something we respect.

What bothers me is that the government has made this effort to support the CFA volunteers by rewarding their employers, but I think there is a bigger issue arising with regard to CFA volunteers, and it will be interesting to see how the government deals with it. I maintain that a deal was struck between the government and the United Firefighters Union prior to the election, and we will wait to see how that pans out. If the government were really committed to the CFA volunteers, then it would make sure that that agreement with the UFU and the volunteers is sorted out as a matter of priority. That is the real heart of the issue. It all went very quiet over the bushfire season, and we all respect that, but when the bushfires are put out and we get back to a certain amount of normality, will the government support those 58 000 CFA volunteers or will it back its UFU mates? There will be a certain amount of political payback, and we will see how that pans out.

Let us look at some of the impacts that the UFU has on volunteer firefighters, the first being the issue of vehicles. A new vehicle cannot be part of the CFA fleet unless it is ticked off by the UFU. What sort of stupid system is that? We are talking about a bill that will give benefits to volunteers through their employers. I also want to talk about what the UFU and the CFA volunteers are doing and about what benefits the government can give the CFA volunteers. My point is that it is ludicrous to have a system in which only the UFU can tick off what vehicles can be accepted into the CFA fleet. The government will not stand up to the UFU — it never stands up to the UFU.

The second issue is uniforms. This issue has been going on for two or three years now, and yet before uniforms can be accepted into the CFA, the UFU has to accept them. The government says, 'We don't give a damn about the volunteers; we want to make sure that the UFU is happy first', and the government will not stand up to the union.

This bill is all about how the government can assist the CFA volunteers through the employers. I will give another example of how the CFA volunteers are being shafted by this government. It is hard to believe, but a person might be the very best trainer of CFA volunteers available but not be accepted unless they are a member of the UFU or are UFU approved. What sort of rot is that? That is all about backing your UFU mates and not the 58 000 volunteers.

Mr Holding interjected.

Mr WELLS — The finance minister has just interjected and said that we have to move on. You can see the writing on the wall. They are going to back the UFU to the hilt and stuff the CFA volunteers — that is what will happen. I reckon that in March Len Foster will sign off on the agreement, because the Minister for Police and Emergency Services will say, ‘Mate, you’re going to have to do it’, and the deal between the UFU and the Labor Party will be resolved. The police minister will be signing off on it; you can be sure that will be the situation.

The best person available to train a CFA volunteer — it might be a university expert — cannot do it unless they are approved by the union. The volunteers of course want that part of the deal scrapped, and I think most people in the community would say, ‘Yes, that sounds fair. Get the best person. They should not have to be approved by the union’. That is one thing we will continue to fight for, because we on this side of the Parliament are here to support the CFA volunteers in their every move.

I was disappointed by the now Minister for Finance, WorkCover and the Transport Accident Commission because he had his chance when he was the Minister for Police and Emergency Services to stand up and back the volunteers. He allowed things to go dead quiet during the bushfire season — there are reasons for that — but as soon as the bushfire season is over you can count on the CFA volunteers being shafted. The UFU will get exactly what it wants in regard to instructors, training, equipment, vehicles and uniforms. That is very disappointing. However, I can assure the CFA volunteers that we will be supporting this bill and we will support them in their fight with the UFU.

Dr SYKES (Benalla) — I rise on behalf of The Nationals to speak on the Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill. I indicate that The Nationals will be supporting the bill. I would like to spend my time discussing the provisions of the bill, noting that it has a relatively small impact on volunteers and identifying a potential limitation which may have been addressed as a result of some recent correspondence. I would also like to put the impact of this bill into the context of our major reliance on volunteers and our need to recognise and appreciate their efforts.

As the member for Scoresby said, this bill provides for the exemption from payroll tax of wages paid or payable to employees who are absent from work on volunteer firefighting or emergency service duty. As indicated previously, the bill is retrospective in that it applies from 1 November 2006 to take into account

people engaged in firefighting activities during this last summer firefighting season.

As was mentioned by the member for Scoresby, the first of two new paragraphs to be inserted by the bill, paragraph (ja), addresses the involvement of Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteers in firefighting activities. Proposed paragraph (jb) addresses the involvement of more broadly classified volunteers in emergency service activities. These broader volunteer groups may include the State Emergency Service (SES), St John Ambulance, the Red Cross and the many other groups that step up when the need arises in our communities.

The limitation I had a concern about relates to the wording of the bill and the reference to ‘engaging in emergency activities’. In the Emergency Management Act an ‘emergency activity’ is defined as including:

... performing a role or discharging a responsibility of an agency in accordance with DISPLAN or the state emergency recovery plan ...

Having some background in disaster management, my interpretation was that this meant you had to implement Displan prior to an employer being eligible for this payroll tax exemption. However, at 10.43 a.m. today I received an email from Alison Currie, an economic adviser to the office of the Treasurer. In it she indicates that the definition of emergency activity has tended to be interpreted quite broadly so as to apply to local emergencies where only one agency is involved. I believe this email provides an assurance that in situations where the local SES unit goes out and is involved, often for many days, in removing trees that have been blown down in a windstorm — as has occurred in Mansfield and the Alpine shire in the past 12 to 18 months — the employers of the people involved would be covered.

If we look at the impact of this payroll tax exemption, we see that it is very small. According to my calculations, if an employee is on an average wage of about \$820 a week, with associated on-costs the total cost to the employer adds up to a bit over \$1000. This payroll tax exemption will result in a reduction of costs to the employer of \$50. We have the government kicking in \$50 to help that volunteer to be out there looking after our community assets and the employer is kicking in \$1000. I think a little more needs to be done to assist employers in contributing to the community effort. Equally, employers with a payroll of less than \$550 000 per year are already exempt from payroll tax, so there is no benefit there. Self-employed people also obtain no benefit. Further, as has already been mentioned, volunteers who take recreation leave or

leave without pay achieve no benefit. The net result is there is a benefit in this bill, but it is quite small in monetary terms and quite restricted in the breadth of its application.

I will now broaden my commentary to look at the context in which this payroll tax exemption has been put forward. I believe everyone recognises our very significant reliance on volunteers. It has been calculated that the 59 000 or so CFA volunteers provide about \$500 million worth of voluntary work each year. I am sure in a year such as this, with the campaign fires, that contribution will be much more significant. The SES, the Red Cross and our other volunteers are always there in an emergency. I know this from experience as in December I had a small fire at my place and eight units turned out within 10 minutes. They just turned out. Some of them had been up fighting the campaign fires but they were back and they were there within minutes to help nip in the bud what could have been a serious situation. I would like to record in the Parliament my appreciation of my neighbours and my friends — the volunteers who came out and helped me.

We have a high reliance on volunteers. That reliance and our expectations are extended greatly when we go into campaign fire-type activities or major disasters such as an exotic disease outbreak, which I had experience of in my previous career as a veterinarian. At that stage we are asking people to make commitments of days and weeks rather than hours or days. We need to separate that off and recognise that commitment. How can we recognise it? We can do it through the public acclaim and public recognition we have given. That has been very broad. I know that locally the Tolmie pub has a sign up saying, 'Tolmie thanks the fireys'. Whitfield and Cheshunt are the same. The community is very publicly saying thank you. We are also having community events and inviting the fireys and the other volunteers along and expressing our gratitude. That is happening.

I was at a community event at the hall in Cheshunt in the King Valley. The appreciation of the fireys and the other volunteers and the emotions are still running high. There are still people breaking into tears as they express themselves. When they mention the name of Merv Holmes, fire captain in that area, he is spoken of in reverent tones — I think he is lining up for sainthood. He made such a fantastic contribution as a front-line firefighter and a decisive, well-respected leader. Other people like Robert Cook also worked very hard. Robert is a fellow in his 60s with 50 years experience in firefighting. We appreciate their efforts. We have had official recognition and appreciation with the Mansfield shire, for example, naming all 12 CFA brigades in that

shire joint citizens of the year. That was public recognition. Members of Parliament have recognised their work, and in the second-reading speech for this bill the government recognised their fantastic contribution. That is official acclamation, and that is fine.

However, we also need to look at the issue of meeting their costs. This payroll tax amendment addresses some of the costs to the employer, but the cost to the volunteers can be quite substantial. There is provision for reimbursement of direct costs incurred in fighting fires, but there are ongoing issues in relation to community and volunteer input into the funding of equipment for local brigades. In the last sitting week I mentioned the public reporting of the efforts of the Goughs Bay, Maindample and Tolmie communities, whose CFA brigades have all been out rattling the tins to fund another vehicle, a slip-on or some other piece of equipment to ensure that they can protect their communities. The *Mansfield Courier* this week reports a donation from the IGA supermarket to the Mansfield brigade. That is not fair. We need a much greater contribution of state government funds going into the brigade equipment side of things and into generally supporting the staff.

That raises the issue of where much of the funding for equipment comes from. It comes from the fire service levy (FSL), which in my opinion and that of many people is unjust. It taxes the people who take out insurance, and it means that people who fail to take out insurance fail to pay a levy. Just recently I had correspondence from a local insurance broker, who said:

They are at it again. We understand that effective from 23/2/07 Victorian fire service levy will be amended as follows:

Fire [and] consequential loss will go up to 47 per cent —

that is, up from 43 per cent —

for farm sheds, fencing, hay, livestock, farm machinery et cetera.

Householders will go down from 22 per cent to 20 per cent.

Again they are hitting the poor old farmer.

My colleague the member for Lowan received similar correspondence from an insurance broker in his area who said it is not fair, adding the comment that:

We need this brought to public attention. As a volunteer we give our time and get nothing back and also get slugged FSL, the highest in [the] country.

He pointed out that the fire service levy in New South Wales, which is the other state that has one, has gone down to 34 per cent from 36 per cent, whereas ours has gone from 43 to 47 per cent. The funding of fire services needs to be reviewed. There is a solution, and that is a property-based approach, which has been applied successfully in Western Australia.

Picking up on the need to recognise volunteer input, and knowing that the vast majority of volunteers do not want to be paid, there is another solution. Leon Storer, a firefighter and resident of Tolmie, who along with his wife suffered emotional pain and physical stress with the fire damaging a lot of their property, is quoted in an article in the *Mansfield Courier*:

... Mr Storer said this season has been very tough and many people have suffered both financially and emotionally while helping neighbours, communities, as well as tackling fires on government land.

He said he spoke out of concern for fellow firefighters when he said some financial recognition was warranted, considering sacrifices made during this horror season.

'This season has been so intense ... if we gave CFA firefighters who've been there for three years —

of active service —

registration for cars and third-party insurance ...

That would not be too much to offer. The policy of The Nationals is to consider providing free motor vehicle registration for active CFA and emergency services volunteers. We ask the government, when it is considering recognition of the efforts of emergency services volunteers, to revisit what can be done to broaden that support. The Nationals consider that the payment of motor vehicle registration for active emergency services volunteers would be an appropriate strategy.

Another thing that was touched on by Leon Storer is that a lot of volunteers had their own buildings and property damaged in the fires. I got a letter from Brendan Mahoney at Barjarg, who is quite frustrated by the lack of financial support provided to him as a volunteer, for example, and to farmers in the area who have been affected. Basically there was an option of building containment lines in the bush, which would have run into bulldozer costs of maybe \$50 000. The Mahoneys actually had the dozers and could have done it, but they considered it to be a more appropriate use of public money to establish a containment line on private land and back-burn from that containment line.

They did that, and in their opinion they saved the government tens of thousands of dollars, only to find

that when it came to offsetting those costs, the government said that it would pick up the tab for the fences damaged on the containment line, which was a few metres of fencing, but that the cost of replacing the kilometres of fencing burnt by the back-burn and the paddock feed lost in the back-burn would be borne by the farmer. They have been able to obtain some money, about \$15 000, from Rural Finance, but they are still out of pocket by tens of thousands of dollars.

In another situation, another person who was burnt out and lost about 4.5 kilometres of fencing has discovered that he fails to qualify for any form of assistance because he has off-farm income and the assistance measures he was looking at require that more than 50 per cent of income come from the farm.

There have also been problems with the basic frustration felt by our volunteers. I remind members that those people were out there protecting community assets, often at the same time as their properties were at risk or getting burnt. In relation to the policy on who pays for what fencing repairs, they have said that getting clear advice from the government has been like trying to nail jelly to a wall. I thought that was a dryly humorous way of describing things. I should say that country people are remarkably resilient.

People in the King Valley have been flogged pretty hard. Back in 2003 they had smoke damage to their grapes, which had a big economic impact. This year they have seen the cessation of the tobacco industry, which is impacting on them; they have had the drought and severe frosts; and now they have had severe smoke damage to their grapes again. I should say that now we are looking at having black and putrid water coming down the King Valley. At this stage there is no form of help for people who rely on taking water from the King River to assist them in getting clean, potable water. At the meeting at Cheshunt last week that issue was raised with me. People were saying, 'Why can't we have some assistance with putting in tanks so that when it rains we can actually collect the rain that falls on our roofs and have that for drinking water? Why can't we have access to the tank rebate that is available to people in the cities on reticulated water supplies?'. I ask the government: why can the people of the King Valley and those in other areas who are crying out for clean, potable water not have the tank rebate?

It is equally so across the Divide. I see from today's *Stock & Land* that during the week there was very severe rainfall at Licola, where again there is a problem with access to potable water. On the front page it says:

So far no government body has offered any form of help to the community with regard to water.

I ask the government to address that situation immediately. We do not live in a Third World country. We live in Australia — a great place to live, work and raise a family — and people in country Victoria who have been devastated by the fires should have the right to access potable water. I ask the government to help with that.

Another thing about the recognition of volunteers is the need to listen to them. The government should let them know that they are being listened to. The key issue that people put to me, which has been raised by other members, is the maintenance of permanent containment lines in the forest. The government has taken an initiative in relation to protecting the Thomson Dam, a Melbourne water catchment, and I understand that some trial work has also been done in the Otways. On behalf of the people whose land borders the fire-affected country — the people who went in there and fought the fires — the call from The Nationals is to keep the containment lines throughout the bush. Yesterday The Nationals member for Eastern Victoria Region in the upper house made a call on behalf of his constituents for the government to cease the rehabilitation of containment lines until it has worked out which are the most appropriate to be maintained long term and which need to be closed over to ensure protection against erosion.

Another issue on which people wish to be heard and which has been raised by The Nationals in relation to the terms of reference for an inquiry is the ongoing issue of fuel reduction burns. During December we saw a lot of proactive fuel reduction burns. Some pretty massive back-burns went on — and following the signing off by regional management, 10 000 hectares went up. But we struggle to have controlled burns in quieter times such as autumn. I acknowledge that there are difficulties with windows of opportunity.

As a land manager I am aware that I have the responsibility to manage the land under my control and to provide the appropriate resources. If we accept the principle that global warming is with us and that with it comes an increased risk of major fires, that alone should be sufficient stimulus for the government to make a much greater commitment to fuel reduction burning and to getting the risks reduced, particularly around our private assets. One last thing that people want to be heard on is the need to use more air power to get in there and squash or quell those fires immediately.

Finally, in the last 40 seconds of my speech I would like to emphasise the broad impact of the fires, on top of the droughts, on my electorate. We have a broad range of businesses being affected. We have the

15 Mile Creek Camp, an education camp, almost going into extinction because people have cancelled their visits to what is a fantastic camp. We have the Whitfield caravan park running on a shoestring and we have, as I said, the King Valley people badly affected by smoke damage to their grapes.

So people are hurting out there. I ask the government to continue to increase the input into the fire recovery strategy so that the people that are hurting — —

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr K. Smith) — Order! The member's time has expired.

Mr DONNELLAN (Narre Warren North) — It is an honour today to be speaking on the Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill. Firstly, let me address some comments made earlier by a couple of people which suggested that the government does not really do much for the Country Fire Authority (CFA). That is a pretty ridiculous proposition that has been put here today by a couple of members. If you look at the budget figures for the years from 2000 to 2007, you see that the operating budget of the CFA has increased by 99 per cent. I do not know how much more we could have increased it. It is ridiculous to have people in this chamber saying that the government does not care about the CFA, that we do not do anything about the CFA or that we do not respect the volunteers or anything like that. It is absolute bunkum.

Honourable members interjecting.

Mr DONNELLAN — I was talking specifically about comments from the Liberal Party.

You cannot really do much more than increase it by 99 per cent. Let us look at the record of the Liberal Party when it was in government. Did it put forward a payroll tax exemption for employers? No, it did not do anything. The Bracks government has provided a further 100 per cent; the Liberals did nothing. And now Liberal members are coming into the chamber saying the government does not care, it does not respect the volunteers and it does not treat them well, which is absolute rubbish. The government has increased the budget by 99 per cent.

Let us look at what the federal government does for the CFA. It runs fancy ads, marvellous fancy ads. That is great, isn't it! So we get ads run on TV by the federal government for the CFA. I do not know how that particularly helps. And we get ads run for the surf lifesaving service. So what? Does that actually help those organisations operating on a day-to-day basis? Probably not. It is just trying to steal a bit of thunder for

the federal government — as if it really cares and really does much. It does not do much.

At the end of the day we have got a state Liberal Party that did not do anything when it was in government telling the Bracks government that we have done nothing when the government has increased the CFA budget by 99 per cent. Then we have got a federal government that just wants to run ads. More smoke and mirrors — marvellous! The federal government is very good at running ads. Let us get real. Let us be very specific about the Liberal Party's commitment, which does not exist. There is no commitment.

Now I will get on to the bill and deal with the real issues of substance. The government is providing an exemption which no other government has to date provided, except for New South Wales. The government is actually harmonising Victorian legislation with New South Wales legislation, which is a good idea. It is part of the national reform agenda. The government would like to see harmonisation across the states, and the Victorian government is driving it. It is not being driven out of Canberra, it is being driven out of Victoria, because the Labor Party is committed to reform. Labor originally introduced reform with Hawke and Keating. No-one is going to accuse Costello of being a brave warrior on reform and no-one is going to accuse Howard of being a brave warrior on reform. They have done nothing.

There is nothing to actually look at. They have tinkered with industrial relations; the GST — not much really. At the end of the day it is a government that has collected taxes hand over fist —

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr K. Smith) — Order! Does the member think he might be able to get back onto the bill?

Mr DONNELLAN — The bill is here; it is what I am talking about. I am talking about taxes and payroll taxes, and what I am saying is that this government is harmonising this with New South Wales, and that is a good thing — a harmonious environment.

The good thing about it is that the government has also backdated it. We have backdated this bill to 1 November 2006. I was a little bit horrified the other day when I heard a radio host ranting and raving and having a go at the government because we had not introduced payroll tax exemptions for CFA volunteers and people like that. Funnily enough I sat on the phone for an hour trying to get through to the radio station. I spoke to the producer of this particular show to highlight that it had gone off half-cocked — it had got it

wrong! At the end of the day it still did not correct the record, which disturbed me immensely.

An honourable member interjected.

Mr DONNELLAN — For fear of retribution I will not highlight which particular radio station it was, but it certainly got it wrong.

Mr Dixon interjected.

Mr DONNELLAN — That is exactly why I will not specify which radio station. It got it wrong and it did not correct the record even after we highlighted to the producer that we had introduced this on 5 January. We are genuinely committed to doing something for employers who allow their staff to go away and fight fires to protect us all.

The exemption is there to at least help employers, who usually pay payroll tax, get some recompense for losing their staff for some time. The exemption will apply to more than just the people working as volunteers with the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the State Emergency Service (SES). It will also involve people working with St John Ambulance, Australian Red Cross, the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard Association and Life Saving Victoria. As mentioned previously by the member for Benalla, it can be a localised emergency. It only requires a single agency response, so it can be any one of those particular agencies which come to the assistance of people; it does not have to be two, three, four or more.

The exemption is not only for bushfire fighting activities; it applies to storm damage, flooding and search and rescue. There were some concerns that the administrative complexity would be incredibly high but, as mentioned, it could be included in the payroll tax end-of-year return, in the column-of-exemptions section, or it could be quarterly or monthly. It is not a difficult proposition for employers to claim the exemption monthly.

The cost to the budget, from what I understand, is unpredictable, because at the end of the day you cannot predict the number of emergencies and the number of employees who will be volunteers, and subsequently the number of employers who would be eligible for the grant and who currently pay payroll tax. In many ways it is just part of our ongoing reform agenda in dealing with taxes at a state government level.

Looking at our record since we came to government, we see the taxes that we have reformed are payroll tax, which we have reduced substantially; land tax; stamp duty on property; duty on non-residential leases;

financial institutions duty; duty on quotable marketable securities; duties on unquoted marketable securities; duty on mortgages; bank account debits tax; and business rental duty. We have done a whole lot when it comes to tax. This year the current rate of payroll tax has been reduced to 5.05 per cent. It previously sat at 5.75 per cent, and it will drop to a clear rate of 5 per cent in July 2008. We have increased the threshold from \$515 000 to \$550 000, and Victoria now has the second lowest payroll tax in Australia.

We have increased the land tax threshold from \$85 000 to \$200 000; we reduced the top rate of land tax from 5 per cent to 3 per cent in 2007, which is two years earlier than we proposed previously; and we have substantially cut middle rates of taxes. For properties of many values we are the cheapest in Australia. We will also allow appeals on land tax values when they arrive, which will probably make it easier for people to appeal if they believe their property has been unfairly overvalued. I suspect if it has been undervalued they will not be half as concerned because they will not worry about it.

We have reduced stamp duty on properties. We have reduced the 6 per cent marginal rate to 5 per cent for the purchase of a principal place of residence valued between \$115 000 to \$400 000, and we have reduced it by \$2850 for home purchases valued between \$400 000 and \$500 000. We have worked very hard to reduce taxes, whereas if you look at federal taxes, you will see that they have increased monstrously during the federal government's term in office.

This is a very appropriate amendment to the Pay-roll Tax Act. It addresses what is recognised to some extent as the enormous contribution that employees make by getting out there as volunteers, and it also recognises that there is a sacrifice obviously made by employers. It is appropriate we do it in these circumstances and it is appropriate for us to bring it into line with New South Wales so that companies who are across the border will not end up having two different systems to deal with. I commend the bill to the house.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr K. Smith) — Order! I call on the member for Nepean, a great friend of the Country Fire Authority.

Mr DIXON (Nepean) — Thank you Acting Speaker. I rise to support the bill and remind the house that I, and all members of the Liberal Party, support the Country Fire Authority and the CFA volunteers. I make the point that support is not just about money but how you treat organisations and volunteers, how you show your respect for them and how you work with minority

groups like the United Firefighters Union, which may want to encroach on the work of our volunteers. It is not just about money. It is about real support, and that is why we support this bill.

The bill is largely symbolic, because in reality it is not going to affect a lot of employers of CFA volunteers. I will refer to a few specific examples in my electorate a bit later in my contribution. Our volunteers deserve recognition. Because of the huge fires we have had recently there has been a rise in the level of recognition of not only the work of the volunteers but also the sacrifices they make in their working and family lives, as well as a recognition of the sacrifices made by the employers of volunteers. Some employers will receive some recompense through this legislation, but it will really only be a minority of those employers. It will be a very interesting exercise in 12 months to look at the number of volunteers and what percentage of them and their employers received a benefit through this legislation. I do not think it will be many in the end, mainly because of the trades, jobs and occupations CFA volunteers hold down.

A number of volunteer organisations from my electorate have been called out to statewide incidents, not just fires. I think the house recognises that volunteers do not just work in their own communities — they are often called out to wider incidents. We have seen examples of that. Crews from my electorate have gone through rotations. Luckily we have had no fires, but our crews have fought fires in Gippsland on behalf of the communities there.

We have had a couple of major local incidents while I have been the member. There was the 1997 fire at Arthurs Seat — a lot of local volunteer organisations were involved in that — and we had a major search and rescue operation around the same time when three young children drowned at Gunnamatta Beach, which was a major incident that involved a lot of volunteers over a number of days.

All our volunteer agencies make both a local and a statewide contribution. The Sorrento State Emergency Service unit is based in Rosebud, and my electorate has CFA brigades at Sorrento, Rye, Rosebud, Boneo, Dromana, Red Hill, Main Ridge, Shoreham and Flinders, and they do a fantastic job. St John Ambulance is often called out to attend major incidents. The Red Cross in my area — not just the auxiliaries — is often called out to major incidents, especially for catering. That is its expertise, and it can be called anywhere in the state to work on that. There is a coastguard at Safety Beach and major lifesaving clubs at Point Leo and Gunnamatta — and the Gunnamatta

lifesavers have to put up with the sewage at the Gunnamatta sewage outfall — Sorrento, Portsea and on the bay at Dromana and Rosebud.

My electorate also has a very interesting and, I think, unique emergency rescue operation, the Southern Peninsula Rescue Squad, which the member for Scoresby mentioned in his contribution to the debate. It receives no government funding for its operational expenses, although it receives grants occasionally. It runs a large helicopter with all the infra-red and search equipment — you would not believe it. It has winch equipment, a huge rescue boat and a radio van that is used throughout the state as well. It is an incredible organisation that does a lot of work. I am pleased to note that under the provisions of this legislation when it is called out by the government — specifically by the police, as is usually the case — the employers of the volunteers who man the rescue squad, many of whom are doctors and nurses, will receive some recompense.

Volunteers in my electorate fit into two main categories: they are basically self-employed or retired. When I say 'self-employed', I mean they and their spouse are basically the business. Very few of them are employed by companies that pay payroll tax. I do not think there are any organisations that would pay payroll tax in my electorate other than large supermarkets and the local shire, so very few volunteers and employers would be affected by this legislation. A huge number of the volunteers are self-employed. A lot of volunteers are tradesmen working for building companies, plumbers or what have you. Usually there are only a few employees in those businesses. The volunteers are in a position to leave the job and have flexible working hours, but they will not be helped in any way.

I pay my respects to the huge number of retired people — my electorate has a large retired population — who are still very active in voluntary organisations. The volunteers need to be recognised, especially the self-employed people and those who work for small companies. I would welcome any government initiative to recognise their contribution, and I would certainly support it.

I would like to finish by making three points that volunteers have expressed to me. These points have been especially on their minds following the recent bushfires in Victoria. First of all, volunteers want to remain volunteers. They do not want to be paid for what they are doing. They do it for their love of the community, their sense of community and their desire to contribute something to their local community. They do not want to be paid for it. I know there were a lot of calls for that throughout the fires, especially when

overseas firefighters came in and were paid, but every volunteer I have talked to wants to remain a volunteer — they do not want to be paid for it.

One thing they do not want — and it is increasingly part of their lives — is onerous red tape. Training is one thing — they have no problem with that. They need to be well trained to protect themselves and their colleagues. However, a lot of the red tape and paperwork that has to be filled out is incredible. You hear about how a lot of office-bearers in the CFA have a sort of accountability they have not signed up for. That is a growing trend. I have a lot to do with my local CFA brigades, and it is something they complain about.

The final point I want to make regards a disturbing trend — I hope some of this is discussed in the wash-up from the bushfires — I have heard a lot of anecdotal evidence about: that is, not putting any volunteers, especially volunteer firefighters, into danger. There is a certain amount of danger you sign up for when you become a CFA volunteer, especially when you go to fight a bushfire. It is a disturbing trend, since a lot of the work that can be done — preventive work and hitting new fires hard — is not being done because the situation is deemed dangerous. That is frustrating a lot of volunteers, because they see fires getting away from them.

There is a lot of anecdotal evidence of fires where volunteers have not been allowed to go in and therefore the local farmers and citizens who are not members of brigades have been left to their own devices. In many cases they have successfully put out the fires and saved a lot of property — not only their own but other property as well. I think most CFA volunteers would be more than happy to put themselves in a position to do that, but they are not being allowed to. They are finding that very restricting, because it is not what they signed up for.

In conclusion I fully support this legislation. It is a small step, and I hope there will be a lot more steps along the way to recognising the volunteers and their employers.

Mr STENSHOLT (Burwood) — I rise to support the Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill. In that context I would like to join with other members of Parliament and honour the work of our emergency services, particularly the Country Fire Authority volunteers, in this taxing, trying, very difficult and severe bushfire season.

This bill is a small but meaningful recognition of the great work which is being done. It provides some

support for employers, through payroll tax relief and exemptions, for wages paid to employees who are absent from their paid work in order to go out and fight bushfires or else be involved in some emergency situation. They have done a magnificent job this year. Our hats are off to them here in Parliament, as we have said earlier. I want to reinforce our respect for the work of the people fighting the fires, including the CFA.

Clause 3 inserts new paragraph (jb) in section 10(1) of the principal act and talks about other emergency activities within the meaning of the Emergency Management Act. This of course covers the State Emergency Service (SES), which I pay tribute to and which has a centre in my electorate in Box Hill South. It also covers organisations like St John Ambulance, which has a centre in Ashwood hall in Ashwood, the Red Cross, Volunteer Coast Guards and Life Saving Victoria, as well as other organisations whose activities fall within the meaning of the Emergency Management Act 1986.

They are often called out, as we all know, not just in the country but also in the cities. If there are severe thunderstorms, sometimes they receive hundreds of calls in one night. If there are high winds and floods — and we hope to get some more water, but we remember February last year or the year before, when we had some severe storms and the SES came out at very short notice — they do a wonderful job, particularly in my area but also through other parts of Melbourne. They also do that job right throughout Victoria, as does the CFA. I want to reinforce that. We cannot do that enough in order to thank those people for the work they do.

I also note in this context that the Bracks government has done a magnificent job with respect to the CFA and the firefighting services. As we have recorded this year in Parliament, there has been an increase of nearly 100 per cent in the funding that has gone to the CFA since 1999–2000. I am sure the member for Yan Yean will agree with me, because she has experienced this firsthand. There has been an 87 per cent increase in funding for the metropolitan fire service as well. We have funded about 400 firefighters not only in the CFA and the metropolitan fire service but also in the Department of Sustainability and Environment. We recognise the marvellous work that the people working in the department have done in respect of bushfires. Their contribution has been terrific this year.

We have also provided increased resources. More than \$200 million has been invested to improve bushfire management. A new communications system has been set up, and \$80 million has been spent on upgrading

stations and 50 Victorian State Emergency Service units. There have been some in my local area — I have been there to see the trucks — and we are really appreciative of the work they do. The trucks are great, and I have even had a drive of one of them! The people really appreciate the additional equipment that has been provided to enable them to do their work — and I mean the fighting trucks as well as the tankers. We have put \$28 million towards other equipment and vehicles. We have reinvested in this area.

I know that we have serious problems with regard to bushfires and that we can expect this to continue, but we have invested to make sure that we are better prepared than we have ever been to manage this. The CFA centre in East Burwood does a magnificent job, and I want to praise the work that is done there in the command centre. The way the people involved have managed that this year — probably ‘season’ is the right word, because it includes last year and this year — has been terrific. The funding that has been put in is really paying off, right around the state. We have the fastest response time in Australia in the metropolitan area, and in rural areas we have enhanced the ability of people to go out and fight the fires.

This exemption continues the great work that the Bracks government has been doing in respect of payroll tax. As has already been mentioned by the member for Narre Warren North, payroll tax has come down from 5.75 per cent to 5.05 per cent, and it is heading even further south to 5 per cent by July 2008. The threshold has been raised to \$550 000. We have made extraordinary reforms here in Victoria in terms of taxes on business. We have cut payroll tax, land tax and stamp duty on property. We have abolished the duty on non-residential leases; the financial institutions duty; the duty on mortgages — we are the first state to do that, by the way, and we are leading in that regard; the bank accounts debits tax; business rental duty — we lead the way on that as well; and the duty on quoted and unquoted marketable securities.

We have done more than our fair share in terms of the abolition of taxes, even though we only get 88 cents in the dollar back in GST. We have taken a lead in providing and promoting relief for business. This can be seen in the economic record here in Victoria. We might not have a great resources boom such as they have in Western Australia and Queensland, but our economy is really well managed. It is a leading economy — so much so that a third of potential migrants want to come to Victoria. Payroll tax is a very important aspect of the economy, and cuts in payroll tax help promote jobs in Victoria. The fact that we have a sound economy also means that employers can

release employees so that they can get out there and help in emergency situations. This bill provides further support for them to do that.

The system we have for paying bills is also quite good. With payroll tax, assistance is provided so that changes or payments can be done online — 90 per cent of people can make changes to, seek an exemption from or pay their payroll tax online. It is going to be a self-assessing tax that people can pay on a monthly basis if they like or via their yearly return. There is flexibility in the arrangements, which is very important for small businesses. There are two things small businesses like. Firstly, they want to make sure they know what they have to do, because being assured about where they stand is very important. Secondly, they like a bit of flexibility in the way things are managed, rather than having them wrapped up in red tape. That is also very important. The way this system is going to be run will provide that flexibility in applying for the exemption and dealing with it online, and paying on a monthly or yearly basis.

As I have said, this is good for employees, and it is an incentive for employers to release their staff. I commend this bill to the house. It is sensible legislation, and it is a very good bill in terms of supporting our firefighters and emergency workers.

Mr CRISP (Mildura) — I rise to support the bill and to welcome any measures that will assist volunteerism in Victoria. Emergency volunteers play a vital role in Victoria, and hoping for the best while planning for the worst is their motto. I commend this legislation, because it addresses a wide range of emergency workers in the Country Fire Authority (CFA), the State Emergency Service (SES), St John Ambulance, the Red Cross, the Australian Volunteer Coastguard (Victorian Squadron) and Life Saving Victoria. I am however concerned that volunteerism appears to be declining in Victoria, a place where volunteerism is a cultural feature, and that therefore our volunteers are ageing. This legislation will address one of the imposts on employers who support volunteerism for emergency services.

However, there is a particular problem that CFA volunteers have at the moment — in fact, they have had it for some time and have raised their concerns with me. It relates to the enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) between the CFA and the United Firefighters Union (UFU). I acknowledge up-front that much of the EBA does not affect the volunteer base of the CFA. The CFA volunteers feel that when matters affecting them are discussed, they do not have an equitable say. On matters related to country firefighting, the UFU has a

veto over any proposed change, thus dismissing the contribution of the volunteers. Against this background CFA volunteers, particularly prospective volunteers, feel undervalued. Their arms and legs are wanted, but any other contribution is not so welcome, so why bother?

During emergencies we are quick to praise our volunteers. In fact much has been said here, in the other place and beyond about the contribution they make, but then we deny them an equitable say on matters that will affect them. What many do not realise is that our emergency volunteers undertake extensive training. Gone are the days of just turning up and helping. You need to have done a course on everything, and you need to demonstrate your ability on an ongoing basis. Much of this training is concerned with how to be effective and safe and work in any situation — something that has value in the workplace.

In an increasingly sensitive occupational health and safety world, I urge the government to go further than this bill does and recognise volunteers skills in the workplace by offering employers a reduction in WorkCover premiums based on the skills these volunteers have acquired. CFA volunteers are continually reporting to me that the training is extensive, an imposition on their family and recreation time, and thus a large sacrifice. The commitment is onerous, and all the other stuff that goes on about being listened to is just too hard. It makes volunteers feel undervalued, and thus community members drop out of this vital service.

As I said, I commend the bill and I urge the government to address the EBA issue which means we have too few CFA volunteers to do a job that Victoria depends on.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr K. Smith) — Order! Short and sweet! I call on the member for Yan Yean, who is a CFA volunteer in her own right.

Ms GREEN (Yan Yean) — Thank you, Acting Speaker. It is with great pleasure that I join the debate on the Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill. This legislation reflects just one small part the state government can play in recognising the enormous contribution the almost 60 000 Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteers make in this state, as do the State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers — and not just for fire activities but also for flood and other emergencies, of which we have seen a number over recent years.

I welcomed the announcement of this measure by the Premier and the Treasurer in January, and I was also

pleased to offer clarification to St John Ambulance volunteers and to assure them they were covered by this legislation. They are one of our very important partners in emergency and disaster management, as are members of the Red Cross, the Volunteer Coastguard and Life Saving Victoria. I am in the privileged position of having been appointed by the Premier as Parliamentary Secretary for Emergency Services and I have responsibility for dealing with all those agencies. In my discussions with not only the executives of those services but also the volunteer associations and the members themselves I have found that they welcome this initiative.

In my contribution to the debate I want to respond to some of the things that other members have said in their contributions. I welcome the fact that the Liberal Party and The Nationals are supporting this bill, and that is appropriate. In times when disaster management is required it is important that the community sees some unanimity among their political leaders. It is quite disappointing that the member for Scoresby and others have used the opportunity for debate on this bill to make spurious allegations, to kick the United Firefighters Union and to promote division between the paid staff and the volunteers.

Over the 69 days of the major fires this year we saw fantastic cooperation between all the agencies that I mentioned before, but in addition between the Department of Sustainability and Environment as well as our sister organisations in other states and other countries. We have to manage the fire threat that we now see ourselves under every year — and it is not just a one-off event. Increasingly with climate change this looks like it is going to be the norm. It is not just about a break in the drought. The fire conditions I saw out on the fire ground in the member for Benalla's electorate show that the humidity is not dropping at night, and it is incredibly risky to fight fires in those types of environments. Across the world it is recognised that we have a very good fire service with our combination of paid staff and our surge capacity with volunteers. I reinforce what other members have said, which is that volunteers do not want to be paid for what they do. We take great pride in what we do.

Mr Hardman interjected.

Ms GREEN — I hear the member for Seymour making a comment. He is also a volunteer with the Country Fire Authority, as is his wife Gail. The members for Benalla and South Barwon are also CFA volunteers. Many members of my family have been CFA volunteers for a long time and I think we just reflect the broad base of people across the community.

There was some criticism from opposition members who said this is a very small contribution. That might be the case, but we say it is important. We are matching what New South Wales does, and I call on the federal government to have a look at its taxation regime to see how it could offer relief to our fantastic volunteers, not just in Victoria but across the country. I talk to CFA volunteers and they say, 'It would be really great if we were to be able to claim some of our personal vehicle use in getting to turnouts'. The volunteers in my Diamond Creek brigade respond to about 200 calls a year. There is also all the training, which other members have talked about. It would be fitting if there could be some income tax deductions allowable in the future, and I call on the federal Treasurer and the Prime Minister to look at that.

The member for Narre Warren South, who is the Parliamentary Secretary for Treasury and Finance, pointed out that one of the minimal contributions from the federal government has been to put a few spurious advertisements on the television. It takes more than advertisements to offer support to our volunteers. The federal government ought to take seriously its recognition of the 69 days during which our volunteers fought the fires in north-east Victoria and Gippsland. Let us be quite clear; we are still in the peak of the fire season. During last year's fire season we still had total fire ban days in May.

The member for Nepean criticised the amount of red tape faced by brigade management teams. That includes dealing with the GST and the costly and time-consuming reports that brigades have to fill in — and that is volunteer time. The members for Mildura and Nepean both criticised the time taken up for training. The member for Nepean said volunteers complained about not being sent into dangerous situations. In the CFA firefighter safety is paramount and the priority. We have seen dreadful circumstances in our past, and in our fairly recent past, where volunteers have died on the job on the fire ground. I was on the fire ground only 12 months ago when the captain of the Campbells Creek brigade lost his life in the fires at Highlands, which is north of Yea. I can tell members that you never want to be in that situation. I heard over the radio the terrible news that a tanker had turned over and the captain had lost his life.

A number of years ago a crew from Geelong West was lost during the Linton fires. The members for Geelong and South Barwon are in the chamber, and I know the member for South Barwon was then a permanent CFA firefighter. The training regime for volunteers was changed at that time to put priority on safety. I defy any calls by the members for Nepean or Mildura for a less

onerous training regime. The training regime is in place not only to ensure we have a skilled firefighting service, but also to allow firefighters to keep themselves safe and ensure they return home to their families after they have done an important job on behalf of our community.

The CFA is one of the largest registered training organisations in the country. Not only does it contribute to a great and skilled firefighting service, but the volunteers can use some of the skills in their day-to-day jobs. Not only do employers make a contribution — and we are recognising that in this bill — by allowing their staff time off work to volunteer to fight fires, but they are also getting back more highly trained and more skilled staff because of the training the CFA offers them.

The member for Mildura said we have an ageing cohort in our CFA membership. We are attracting a lot of new volunteers, and I commend the CFA for winning a national emergency management award for its youth recruitment and development activities. The CFA takes seriously the issue of an ageing cohort and has a program of replacement of our older volunteers.

In terms of the claims by the member for Nepean that the administrative burden is onerous, the CFA has introduced Brigades Online, which makes it easier for brigade management teams and branch brigade secretaries to undertake their important work. Recordkeeping is very important in terms of registering the number of call-outs by brigades as well as keeping up to date with training and skills.

In conclusion, this is an excellent piece of legislation. I commend the bill to the house and wish it a speedy passage. I call on the federal government to look into its own backyard for our volunteers.

Mrs FYFFE (Evelyn) — I am pleased to speak on the Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill which provides exemption from payroll tax for wages paid or payable to employees as volunteer firefighters, or in other volunteer emergency service roles. Its measures are retrospective. It is pleasing that it covers first service agencies such as St John Ambulance, the Red Cross and volunteer coastguards and lifesavers.

Although the bill is welcome and supported I feel it is perhaps a token gesture that will cost Treasury very little. Fortunately history shows us that we rarely have an emergency event which lasts 69 days, which is what the last bushfires have taken, and that most of the volunteers are away for a maximum time of maybe five

days or one week. The compliance with any reporting requirements and proof of volunteer service by employers in order to get relief from payroll tax may actually outweigh the savings they are able to get because the majority are on computerised systems, and amendments to all the systems cost time and money. It might have been better if the government had looked at cuts in WorkCover premiums or a rebate on WorkCover premiums.

The majority of firefighters and volunteers in my electorate come from small companies or are in fact self-employed. They generously give freely of their time on so many occasions. I have much to say about my local Country Fire Authority brigades, but before I do I want to make special mention of the Red Cross volunteers who not only man the evacuation centres and provide endless cups of tea and food but also give emotional support, especially during that awfully long waiting period when the community is waiting to see which way the fire will go and how big it is going to be.

I distinctly remember the Ash Wednesday fires in 1983 when, from my front lawn, we saw a fire flare up on one mountain and then saw, in horror — before our very eyes — a fireball go across the sky and hit another mountain. We did not know which way the fire was going or where it was going to go. I remember the call-out to everyone; some of my own staff went out. We opened the restaurant to provide emergency facilities to those who needed some cooling, to have a drink or just to have a quiet rest.

Powelltown itself was surrounded by bushfires; there was no way in or out. In fact at one stage the fire cut across the road in the middle of Powelltown. The town at that stage had no mains water; it had only tank water. It was only saved by the selfless dedication of all the volunteers in that town, who fought hard to put out those fires.

The next fires I experienced firsthand were in 1987, when we had fires once again in the Upper Yarra Valley. These again were fires that moved rapidly, and we did not know which way they were going to go. Fortunately for us our property was not in the path of the fire. We almost lost a large stock of our wines, which were stored in a cool store where we had put them to make sure we had a consistent, even temperature. The bushfires came very close — within 100 metres — to that cool store, which could, of course, have been disastrous.

When I first came to Australia, I had only been here a few months when the Lara fires happened. They were appalling. I remember reading in horror the reports of

people trapped in their cars on the Princes Highway as the fire jumped across it, and there was again the selfless dedication of all the volunteers who rushed to help them.

After the Ash Wednesday fires and the 1989 fires, my next close experience was in the 1997 Dandenong Ranges fires. They were horrendous, because they were deliberately lit and because they were lit at the bottom of the hills — and fire travels so fast uphill. We lost 44 houses and, sadly, three lives in those fires. As a commissioner with the Shire of Yarra Ranges, I was very involved with all the things that were happening. I remember standing in the shire offices looking out at the road and seeing the fire trucks that were coming from Country Fire Authority units all over Victoria to help the people in the Dandenongs. I remember just reading the names on those trucks; those people had dropped everything to respond to the call for help. It was very frightening, because the Dandenongs are heavily populated. People live in the ranges because of the beauty of their trees, but of course a lot of people did not have fire plans in those days.

Everybody was pouring in to help. We had the Red Cross, we had St John Ambulance and we had the Salvation Army manning the emergency centres. I was at the Upwey centre where the donations were flooding in. I remember the member for South-West Coast, who at that time was the Minister for Youth and Community Services, arriving with no entourage and no announcements to the press. He just arrived —

Mr Wells — As you would expect.

Mrs FYFFE — Yes, he just arrived to see what he could do to help. He walked in, had a look and said to me and a couple of the shire staff who were organising things there, ‘Whatever you need, just ask me. Just tell me and I will make sure it happens’. He then spent the rest of his time there comforting a dear old lady whose husband we could not locate at that time — he had dementia. She was terribly distressed, and the member for South-West Coast comforted her for about half an hour, quietly sitting with her until we were able to locate her husband, which was quietly and efficiently done.

We had equipment arriving, and fire victims who had lost their homes were helping to sort out the donations that were coming in to the centre. The Red Cross was fantastic in supplying cups of tea and food, as was, as I mentioned, the Salvation Army.

The other people who work so hard and give up their time in such situations are the staff of the State

Emergency Service, which provides backup support for firefighters, whether that be removing fire-damaged trees, delivering firefighting vehicles — as in the latest bushfires, traffic management or transport of materials and food to firefighters. We hear very little about this even as the SES staff dash all over the state to supply these things. The Lilydale SES spent many hours on the road transporting firefighting vehicles that were sent down by train from Darwin to help fight the bushfires throughout Victoria. They were on the road for hours delivering those vehicles. The St John first aid volunteers were attending to myriad injuries to both firefighters and residents.

There were also the timber contractors and our wonderful timber workers. This is a much maligned industry, and yet its members, every one of them, were out there helping to fight the fires. I have to say we did not hear much about the anti-timber industry people helping to fight the fires and save the trees out there, but the timber contractors were there helping to save the bush they love. Local contractors from the Yarra Ranges took \$4 million worth of excavators and skidders to help fight fires at Woods Point.

I would like to make a special mention of Peter McConachy, who lost over \$1 million worth of his equipment in the fires and was not fully covered by insurance. When I called Peter soon after he had lost this equipment he was not bitter or angry; he was just very concerned for his employees, who would not have any work, and also for the timber mill workers, who would not have the timber that he had been delivering to them. Peter did not even know he had lost his equipment for a couple of days until he came back from firefighting; he thought it was safely stored away.

The timber workers know the bush. They are the skilled operators, and they really put their lives at risk as they clear back-burn areas so that other people are saved.

Unfortunately some fires are deliberately lit. It is 10 years since the Dandenong Ranges bushfires and, once again, 10 years later, arson is suspected as the cause of the fires around Ferny Creek. It is very sad that people who are as sick as this are deliberately lighting these fires and putting volunteers at risk.

There is so much I could say about this matter. I would just like to quickly talk about the fire at Yarra Junction two weeks ago. I attended the public briefing by the Country Fire Authority and the Department of Sustainability and Environment, and I have to say the quiet, efficient and country-humorous way the meeting was run was impressive. One hundred and fifty people came, and the briefing was fantastic. We had

180 people fight that fire, and no property was lost. It was not a big one by other standards — only 47 hectares — but the management and the teamwork of everyone involved is to be commended.

Mr TREZISE (Geelong) — Like all members in this house I am pleased to be speaking in support of this bill because it truly highlights the Bracks government's commitment to not only the thousands of volunteers who contribute their time and service to this state but also their employers, who sacrifice their businesses in many ways to ensure their employees can provide service to this state in a time of emergency.

We are not just talking about the Country Fire Authority; we are also talking about the State Emergency Service (SES), St John Ambulance, Red Cross, the coastguard and Life Saving Victoria, all of whom make a magnificent contribution to many communities across the state, including my electorate of Geelong.

There have been some questions today as to the Bracks government's commitment to, for example, the CFA. In Geelong alone we are seeing a multimillion dollar rebuild of the Geelong fire station that will be occurring in the coming 12 months to two years. We will also see the relocation of the Geelong West Fire Brigade. You, Acting Speaker, mentioned the Geelong West brigade, which I have been very pleased and proud to be working with over the last number of years. The Geelong West Fire Brigade, as you mentioned, Acting Speaker, had the tragedy of the Linton bushfire a number of years ago. The Geelong West brigade will be relocating out of its present cramped conditions in the heart of Geelong West across to a new site on McCurdey Road. I can assure the house that the CFA has a major commitment from the Bracks government in my electorate of Geelong.

The SES unit in Geelong, which I have also been working with over the last 12 months, is currently on a site owned by Barwon Health. This site will be required for car parking for Barwon Health employees and patients, and the state government, in partnership with the City of Greater Geelong and the SES, is working with the unit to ensure that it is relocated to a new site in the coming months. I can assure the house that in Geelong alone we are seeing a major government contribution and a significant commitment to emergency organisations such as the CFA and the SES.

As you are well aware, Acting Speaker, the Geelong CFA brigade is staffed by many volunteers. We have families who have contributed enormously to many of these organisations. One family that comes to my mind

is the O'Tooles, who over three generations have continued to contribute to the Geelong — —

Mr Wynne — Is that the woodchopping O'Tooles?

Mr TREZISE — No, it is not the woodchopping O'Tooles, it is the Geelong Country Fire Authority O'Tooles — just as famous and just as committed. I pay tribute to those types of families. I should not single out just one family, but the O'Tooles have contributed significantly to the Geelong CFA.

Of course we are not just talking about volunteers here. The legislation before us today recognises the employers of these dedicated people, who contribute significantly by allowing their employees time off to serve the people of this state in a time of need or emergency. The fires of recent months have highlighted not only to this Parliament but to the Victorian community the importance of ensuring that our emergency service volunteers and their employers are supported to ensure the ongoing strength of those organisations into the future. It is absolutely vital that we as a government continue to work with organisations such as the CFA, the SES and the other organisations I have mentioned to ensure that their volunteer numbers are not only maintained but are increased as we grow as a state. I am sure that with our commitment as a state government we will see the numbers within those organisations continue to grow.

The bill before us today takes important steps in ensuring that these volunteers are given every opportunity to make themselves available with the agreement of their employers whilst they are required to work. This bill, by introducing a payroll tax exemption, not only encourages employers to allow their employees to be available but also rewards the employers by recognising their commitment to allowing their workers time off in the case of an emergency. It is important that we recognise this significant contribution made by employers, because the absence of even one employee, let alone a number of employees — that does occur, especially in regional and rural areas — really does severely disorganise a business, especially a small business.

Acting Speaker, we all know that volunteers sacrifice much personal time, and you are well and truly aware that volunteers sacrifice much personal time and time away from their loved ones when they are serving their communities in a time of emergency, but I think it is also important that we recognise the significant contribution and the sacrifice made by their employers in making arrangements to release their workers. This is especially so for small business operators, who can

really feel the pinch when even one employee is absent from their job.

The payroll-tax exemption that is being proposed under this legislation will also benefit to a large degree many businesses in other regional and rural areas of Victoria, as it will in my community of Geelong. For example, a close acquaintance of mine runs his own small business — he is a CFA volunteer himself — and two of his six employees are also volunteers at the local CFA. I know they will greatly welcome the bill before us today. It will not eliminate the need for employers to reorganise or reschedule their business operations at a time when a bushfire, for example, is occurring, but it will provide a financial reward for the contribution to the community.

As I said, the bill is not only limited to the CFA, although it of course would be the largest organisation affected by this legislation. Importantly the bill also assists employers who have workers volunteering in organisations such as the SES, St John Ambulance, Red Cross, the coastguard, which is another magnificent organisation in Geelong that does great work, and of course the surf lifesavers down along the west coast of the Greater Geelong area. The thousands of hours provided by volunteer lifesavers is deeply appreciated and recognised by the community of Geelong.

We are not just talking about bushfires here today; we are also talking about rescue, flood, search and water-based emergencies. This is important legislation. It highlights the fact that the Bracks government is committed to and fully supports the work of volunteers. It also recognises the fact that the Bracks government supports employers by providing this reward through payroll tax exemption. It is important legislation, and I therefore wish it a speedy passage through this house.

Mr BURGESS (Hastings) — I am pleased to speak on the Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill. In Victoria our emergency service organisations rely on tens of thousands of volunteers to deliver a range of services. Volunteers underpin these organisations. In turn, the state government is dependent on the volunteers to deliver services to their communities.

Some of the more obvious benefits provided by the volunteers to our community include a reduction in loss of life and injury, less property damage and a greater sense of safety and community. However, the lot of a volunteer is getting harder by the day. If people stopped volunteering, the state government would find it impossible to afford to offer a comparable level of service to the community. In fact according to a 2001

paper prepared for Emergency Management Australia's national summit on volunteers, the extra cost of funding Victoria's Country Fire Authority (CFA) alone would escalate to \$470 million.

It is also crucial to recognise that a very large percentage of our volunteers are only able to be volunteers because of the continuing generosity and community mindedness of their employers. While the risk to life and limb is, of course, much lower, the contribution to volunteerism made when an employer allows his or her staff to be absent from work to volunteer with an emergency service is nonetheless a volunteer service to the community. There are many situations and circumstances that conspire to make it harder for our volunteers to volunteer and for their employers to support them. This bill is a welcome step down the path of addressing the imbalance that has developed; however, it is a long path and this bill is a small step.

From the perspective of our volunteers, social changes in Australian communities have increased the pressures of family life and the demands on their personal time. It is becoming increasingly difficult for volunteers to maintain their commitments in the face of, among other things, the escalating requirements for training, which are set to meet the ever-rising occupational health and safety demands and the need to come to grips with the increasingly sophisticated technologies used in emergency services. Increasing population and urban sprawl also contribute to the expanding demand for the services of volunteers.

From the perspective of the employer, the need for industry to be competitive in the global economy, combined with policy changes at both the state and commonwealth levels, has instigated structural changes in the Australian economy. These changes have brought about increased pressures on the very employers that currently make it possible for a large number of their employees to be volunteers. It is becoming harder and harder for employers to let their staff volunteer.

From all of this members will readily recognise that the roles of the volunteer and the employer of the volunteer are critically interdependent. They will also understand that urgent action is required if we are to successfully preserve the excellent numbers and quality of our volunteers.

What is the Bracks government's considered response to these issues? It is common ground that direct payments for volunteering services would be unwise. Direct remuneration could endanger the essential

component of the volunteer culture. Service given freely without the expectation of financial or other tangible rewards is a prime motivator of the majority of volunteers. Therefore, other ways have to be found to encourage volunteers to keep volunteering and for employers of volunteers to keep allowing their employees to volunteer. The Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill is the Bracks government's attempt to be seen to be doing that for the volunteers and the employers.

Any effort to make it easier for our brave CFA men and women to volunteer to keep our community safe from fires is welcome. When all is said and done, the bill provides some small recognition for the sacrifice made by the employers of the volunteers. However, it does not go far enough.

Payroll tax exemptions offer a miserly exchange rate for the generation of all the manpower necessary for coordinated responses to emergency events, including fires, storm damage, flooding and search and rescue. The Bracks government must recognise that it costs the employee dearly to be a volunteer and that it costs the employer dearly to employ a volunteer.

What does the bill really do, and for whom? Let us look at the facts. There are 312 000-plus businesses in Victoria, 300 000 of which are small businesses. Payroll tax is paid by businesses that have annual wage bills of more than \$550 000. I emphasise that to qualify for any benefit at all, the employer must pay payroll tax. Of Victoria's 312 000-plus businesses, only 23 000 pay payroll tax. So less than 7 per cent get over the initial hurdle to qualify for a benefit under the bill! Of these 23 000 businesses, a much smaller number again employ CFA volunteers.

The bill also specifically denies the employer any exemption where the employee is on annual leave. Interestingly enough a report published less than four months ago by the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum and entitled *The Cost of Volunteering — A Report on a National Survey of Emergency Management Sector Volunteers* identified that a significant number of volunteers did their volunteering by taking leave. This means that from step one the legislation simply does not apply to 93 per cent of Victorian businesses. This bill proceeds to further reduce its application to the employers of volunteers.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms Green) — Order! I am sorry to interrupt the member for Hastings' contribution, but he is not supposed to be reading his speech. Referring to notes is acceptable, but the speech needs to be more off the cuff.

Mr BURGESS — Payroll tax becomes payable when a company reaches a monthly wage bill of \$45 800. The Victorian payroll tax rate is 5.15 per cent, and payroll tax is only payable on the percentage of the wage bill that goes over the threshold. The average wage in Victoria is around \$40 000. The daily wage paid to an employee on an average wage is \$167 per day. The payroll tax payable on that amount — the exemption for the employer — is \$8.60. We have a community of volunteers who are under pressure and a community of employers of volunteers who are under pressure, but this means that we are saying to employers that while we continue to need these volunteers, in return our recognition is going to be \$8.60 per day.

I commend the effort that is being made in the bill, as far as it goes. However, I recommend that the government have a closer look at what can be done to encourage the employers of volunteers and to give them some incentive to allow our volunteers to continue doing the wonderful job they do for our state.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms Green) — Order! I call the member for Seymour — another CFA volunteer contributing to the debate.

Mr HARDMAN (Seymour) — I am barely cutting my teeth as a CFA volunteer, Acting Speaker!

The Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill is a very important bill, because it starts the process, I hope, of the government recognising the significant sacrifice that is made not only by the volunteers and their families who fight fires but also by their employers.

The bill provides a payroll tax exemption for employers when firefighters go off to fight fires or respond to other emergencies, effective from 1 November 2006. It is a really great start. It applies to employees who are not on official leave and compensates, in small part, for the loss of paid work time that occurs if employees are forced away from their workplaces to respond to emergencies.

I know from talking to local employers in the Seymour electorate that they will see this as a step in the right direction. When they are away a volunteer can obviously cause a great deal of difficulty for a local employer who has to employ someone else to come and do their job. The employer loses that employee's corporate knowledge for that period of time and maybe risks their being injured and off work for an even longer period. It is quite a burden for the local employer.

One of my local employers recently allowed one of his staff to go and fight the fires in the north-east. The employer would not allow his staff member to take annual leave but said he would pay him for the time he spent up there and did not want him to lose his annual leave because of it. I thought that was a marvellous gesture. However, at the same time that employer would like to see greater recognition from government. I will be happy to inform him that this payroll tax exemption is a move in that direction.

When you go around to the different brigades you see that the Bracks government has done a lot of work in making sure that the Country Fire Authority (CFA) is a safer place for volunteers. We are also rebuilding fire stations and providing brand-new equipment. The community safety emergency support program has allowed brigades to replace equipment without having to raise 100 per cent of the cost, as they would have had to do in the past. It has been an important incentive for brigades. They know they can do what they volunteer for — that is, be a CFA volunteer — and not spend all their time fundraising. However, fundraising is an important part of the CFA, as it is of any other organisation. The CFA finds that as a rule communities are very generous in their donations and their support of local brigades when they are asked for assistance.

The CFA needs to look very carefully at the fact that a number of its volunteers are small businessmen or farmers. They are called out for periods of time and when they are away their sheep may not be being fed or they may have to pay someone else to come in and feed the sheep. Their clients are not being serviced in that time. If they are plumbers, they might have to put off some jobs. Obviously that takes some sort of a toll on their businesses.

An area in which I think the CFA could assist — this has been brought to my attention only recently — is where crews go out to fight a fire for several days at a time, particularly if there are lightning strikes. It can be weeks at a time if there are large bushfires such as the ones at Yea in 2006 and Glenrowan in 2002 or 2003. They have to patrol and go through all of the stumps and the roadside trees to ensure that the fire will not start up again on the next total fire ban day or period of extreme weather. This involves an incredible number of man hours. It is important that the CFA looks at how it can address that situation and ensure people are not put out.

One of my local volunteers was recently up in the ranges fighting some lightning strikes. It was a local fire but it took 1¼ hours to get there because of the terrain and having to go slowly. Then there is the walk

from where you leave the truck. I know a dump of water from a helicopter costs a lot of money but it could have meant those people spending a lot less time away from their businesses and places of employment. That cost needs to be balanced. I would like to see some of those systems and processes looked at in the future.

During the last election campaign, as part of the promises to the Seymour electorate, we promised the Badger Creek fire brigade a new shed. I am very pleased about that. Badger Creek has been on the shortlist for the 7 years I have been in government, and I believe it was for another 7 or 10 years before that. They have now been told that in this term of government they will have a new fire station. They deserve it. They protect a very important state resource in the Healesville Sanctuary, not to mention other rural areas around there. They also get involved in all of the different events that take place in an area like Healesville. It is fantastic that Badger Creek will have a great station.

Christmas Hills North is in the electorate of the member for Yan Yean. However, it is just outside the Seymour electorate and people who are part of that brigade would be living in the Seymour electorate. It is another fantastic brigade.

We are also building a big, brand-new station in Wallan in this term. That is on top of the replacement of the Kilmore station with a much larger and better station, and the Seymour fire station has been rebuilt. There are a number of other smaller stations in my electorate.

In addition, a number of trucks have been replaced. New four-wheel-drive vehicles have been brought on board for quick fills and command vehicles. Our firefighters, like our State Emergency Service volunteers, have much better equipment to wear so they are safer. The standard equipment is really great. That cost money and the budget has been increased by 99 per cent since 2000. The government is not just about uttering platitudes. It is fair dinkum in putting its money where its mouth is. I am proud to be part of the Bracks government which does that.

The fires we are seeing now are quite big and they are burning in different conditions than we have faced before. The extra Department of Sustainability and Environment firefighters we have employed and the extra funds we have been putting into firefighting equipment have gone a long way to making sure that the losses of life and property in Victoria are far smaller than they would have been without those resources.

I commend this bill to the house. It is great to see the government recognising the importance of employers in our emergency volunteer system. I wish the bill a speedy passage.

Mrs POWELL (Shepparton) — I rise to speak on the Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill. We understand that the main purpose of this bill is to amend the Pay-roll Tax Act 1971 to provide an exemption from payroll tax for wages paid or payable to employees who are absent from work on volunteer firefighter or emergency service duty.

The Nationals will be supporting this bill. We note that the legislation has some retrospectivity in that it takes effect from 1 November 2006. While The Nationals do not always support bills with a retrospective element, in this case we think it is an important part of the bill and we understand why the bill has been made retrospective. It is to allow the legislation to apply from the start of the bushfire season and include the Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteers and emergency service firefighters who are fighting the bushfires now and have done so in the past.

However, the exemption does not include those volunteers who are on recreation leave, long service leave or sick leave. An issue I would like to raise and perhaps seek some clarification of is whether this exemption can be applied to CFA volunteers who are involved in training for a length of time.

As well as volunteer firefighters and State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers, the exemption also applies to other volunteer organisations. I was really pleased to see that, because when we talk about fires, floods and emergency services, there are a number of other organisations in the state which also contribute their time. They include St John Ambulance, the Red Cross, the Australian Volunteer Coastguard and Life Saving Victoria. It is important to recognise and pay tribute to those other great emergency service organisations in Victoria.

We have a number of these bodies in the Shepparton district. We have our St John Ambulance brigade, which works on a weekly and a daily basis on local issues and provides its service free of charge. We also have an SES unit, a great volunteer organisation which is based in Tatura. In 2005 it received new premises. I have been to a number of its nights when it tries to encourage other service volunteers. As with other organisations membership is declining because many of its members are ageing.

It is great to see a number of members of Parliament have become members of the CFA. I applaud that. It is great for people to do that and to contribute to their communities.

We understand from the legislation that it is not just about fires, it is also about search and rescue. We have a search and rescue squad in Shepparton and there is one in Echuca. These are the only two search and rescue squads in Victoria which are supported by the government. The Shepparton Search and Rescue Squad, which was established in 1971, is a great group of volunteers who have community support. I expect those two squads also to be included in this legislation.

I was pleased to see that floods are also covered by the provisions of the bill. As the shire president of the then Shire of Shepparton I was very much involved in the 1993 floods and saw firsthand the great work of our emergency service volunteers. That work was contributed by the volunteers over a length of time, not just for days but sometimes weeks and in some cases months.

In my area the CFA has many brigades, and I meet with many of them. I am aware that, while we did not have bushfires in the Shepparton electorate, many of our volunteers fight fires in the north-east and have done so in recent years as well as fighting fires in Gippsland. I am really pleased to see that the bill will support those volunteers as well.

Unfortunately the bill does not go far enough, although it is a step in the right direction. We need to be making sure that it assists a number of employers. For example, it does not assist small businesses that are under the threshold for the exemption from payroll tax. Earlier I heard a speaker saying that the 7 per cent of businesses that pay payroll tax will be getting the benefit of the provisions of the bill.

Another issue relates to self-employed volunteers. In small communities, including farming communities, a lot of the people in small business consider themselves to be very much part of their small community. When that fire bell goes, they just down tools, whatever they are doing, and go out and fight the fires. Whether it be a house fire or a grassfire, they are out there making sure that the community does not suffer. I know that employers in small businesses suffer some disadvantage. When I was a member for the then North Eastern Province in the other place, the only staff member I had, Diane Bethell, was a member of the CFA. I remember that once she came in very tired and at the end of the day I asked her why she was so tired and whether she had had a late night. She told me that

she had been called out to a fire and had spent about 4 hours at the fire scene. She was very tired, because she went to bed at 5 o'clock and had to be up again at 6.30 to start work.

She did not complain, and had I known and been able to, I probably would have sent her home. We had a particularly busy day that day, and while I felt a lot of sympathy for her, with one staff member I would not have been able to relieve her of her duties. As I said, she did not expect me to do so; she just carried on. I know that many of our volunteers do that. They go out, spend a lot of time at a fire front and then go in and do a day's work at whatever they have to do. Members must be at mindful of the effect of volunteering on employers as well. As I said, while I would have loved to have relieved her from her duties, it would have very difficult because she was needed on that day.

A policy that The Nationals went to the last election with acknowledges that volunteers do not want payment and that that is why they are called volunteers — they are there to support the community. We looked at ways we could reduce the costs to active emergency service volunteers. We consider that the way to do that is to provide free vehicle registration and compulsory third-party insurance. The policy requires that to be eligible they have to be active emergency service members and the brigade captain or unit leader will be required to sign the exemption form so that the volunteers do not have to pay vehicle registration and third-party insurance. Again that is voluntary: if people do not want that to happen, that can be the case. I know the Leader of The Nationals went right around rural and regional Victoria talking to people in brigades to hear whether that was something they supported. Most said they supported the policy, although a few did not, saying that they wanted to be classed very much as volunteers.

When the fire season is over The Nationals will be calling on the state government to undertake a thorough investigation into the role of emergency service volunteers. The types of things we would like to have looked at in that investigation could include whether the exemption on payroll tax set out in this bill actually provides the type of benefit employers need, whether it adds value to businesses that release their staff to go and fight the fires and whether the government can provide some further support to either small businesses or self-employed CFA volunteers. Particularly in some isolated rural areas a lot of people are called on to be volunteers because members of their families have previously been volunteers.

I know that you, Acting Speaker, have talked about your family's active involvement. This is actually the case in a lot of rural areas: where mum or dad has been a volunteer, their son or daughter has become a volunteer. That is just the way it has been, and many people are very proud of their heritage of firefighting. Members need to know how we can better support our volunteers, who do put their lives on the line. They do not do that for sympathy; they do it because they want to do that duty to make sure their community is not at risk and to protect the community.

Maybe those conducting the investigation can also consider the need to make sure that there is an exemption of some sort when volunteer firefighters go away for training. As members heard, since the Linton fires minimum skills are now required, and that needs to be addressed. All firefighters must make sure that they have those skills. Undertaking training means time away from their families and their businesses, so members need to consider whether the government can support firefighters during their training. Obviously their team mates rely on volunteers to back them up and have to make sure that they have the obvious professional skills required. In supporting the bill I take the opportunity of paying tribute to our great firefighters and emergency service volunteers.

Ms CAMPBELL (Pascoe Vale) — I rise also to speak on the Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill and do so with pleasure. Whilst I do not have vast numbers of Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteers in my electorate, the first thing I want to do is pay tribute to those who give volunteer services to the community in such an important way. Whilst they actively support their own communities, quite frankly in listening to the member for Shepparton I could not help but think that I am going to Anglesea for the long weekend and I know that the CFA volunteers there have kept that area safe and have protected it — so a city resident can appreciate the work of the many volunteers.

In my contribution to the debate I will highlight a couple of points. The first is that I congratulate the Minister for Water, Environment and Climate Change, who, as Acting Premier, on 5 January announced that payroll tax exemptions for businesses that have employees away from work as volunteer firefighters would be the subject of some debate in this house. When that comment was made, little did we know the extent of the firefighting efforts that would proceed throughout January and February. It is important for us collectively in our own small way to do what we can to help the CFA. The payroll tax exemption for businesses is one significant point.

A factor that should not go without mention is that between 2000 and 2007 the Bracks government has increased the CFA's operational allowance by 99 per cent. That was the subject of some discussion in the estimates process during the last Parliament. It was clear that that 99 per cent increase in funding to CFA operations has made a significant positive contribution to the authority's very productive work.

Another point I pick up is one made by the member for Hastings. I sat here and listened to the contribution from the member for Hastings. He said, 'But this applies to only 7 per cent of employers because the rest of them don't pay payroll tax'. I could not help but wonder whether he is seriously going to suggest to this house that the government wants to extend payroll tax. That is an absolutely ludicrous proposition. He also said that employers who are paying payroll tax are paying it at the rate of 5.15 per cent. Again he was wrong. He failed to acknowledge the fact that effective from 1 January the Bracks government dropped payroll tax to 5.05 per cent, something that has been acclaimed throughout the business community. Further, from 1 July 2008 payroll tax will drop to 5 per cent.

When we are debating in this house we have to be clear about our facts and we have to be absolutely honest in presenting our cases. The fact is that payroll tax has dropped under the Bracks government.

Sitting suspended 1.00 p.m. until 2.03 p.m.

Business interrupted pursuant to standing orders.

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Police Association: pre-election agreement

Mr BAILLIEU (Leader of the Opposition) — My question is to the Premier. I refer to the Premier's answer yesterday in this house, when he confirmed receipt of a letter from the police union that culminated in the secret pre-election deal with the union, and I ask once again: will the Premier make that letter from the police union public, or will that too remain secret?

Mr BRACKS (Premier) — I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question. The opposition leader referred to a secret deal. No such secret deal occurred. The reality is that, like every other party during a campaign, we made commitments to a stakeholder, and those commitments were also reflected in our policy. That is how it should be.

Police: organised crime

Mr LUPTON (Pahran) — My question is to the Premier. I refer the Premier to the government's efforts to support and resource Victoria Police to deal with organised crime, and I ask the Premier to update the house on the recent successes achieved by Victoria Police in its battle with organised crime.

Mr BRACKS (Premier) — I thank the member for Pahran for his question. I had the opportunity today, along with the Minister for Police and Emergency Services, to be with the Chief Commissioner of Police —

Mr Wells interjected.

The SPEAKER — Order! I warn the member for Scoresby!

Mr BRACKS — and with the Deputy Commissioner and the Purana task force to congratulate them on what has been a four-year crime fight against organised crime in the state — when you think that over 400 charges have been laid over the last four years and when you think that the back of organised crime has been broken. Of course the fight goes on, and eternal vigilance will be the hallmark of the fight against organised crime in the state. Where there is money there is always going to be some organised crime, and of course those who perpetrate misery on other people through peddling and pushing drugs and manufacturing drugs will always see an opening for themselves. It is very important therefore to continue the fight against organised crime.

Nevertheless, I am very pleased and proud of the fact that some years ago, when the Chief Commissioner of Police and police command sought extra resources to fight organised crime, those extra resources were forthcoming. We provided more than \$70 million to our police, the courts and the prison system to enhance their capacity to fight organised crime. We provided more specialist investigators, which we saw the result of today of course in the successful prosecution of those who came before the courts — and in the case of Carl Williams, of course, admitting guilt to several murders which have been under investigation by the police.

New crime fighting technology has been funded out of that \$70 million. It has meant more resources for police stings; state-of-the-art security upgrades for the Barwon and Port Phillip prisons, acknowledging that of course they need to accommodate high-risk prisoners as a result of this work; boosting security transport vehicles

to take offenders to and from the court; and specialised prosecuting teams.

I can say that the team that has been working on this for the last four years, the Purana task force and officers from the Office of Public Prosecutions, who were also there, are extremely proud of the work they have undertaken. They were under extreme difficulty: they knew there was success, but because of suppression orders — understandably, because cases were ongoing and guilt or innocence needed to be proved and those cases could not be prejudiced — they were restrained from saying publicly how successful they had been. Now that those suppression orders have been largely but not totally lifted, we are able to see the result of the successful work of the attack against organised crime in this state.

I think this state wants to pay tribute to the police for what is probably the most successful fight against organised crime in this state and arguably one of the most successful fights against organised crime in this country. It is a great credit to the Chief Commissioner of Police, Christine Nixon; it is a great credit to Simon Overland, the assistant commissioner for crime at Victoria Police; and it is a great credit to the team, to the courts, to the Office of Public Prosecutions and to all those who have made sure that after a four-year fight we are seeing people being brought to justice and those matters coming before the courts — and in some cases of course, guilt is being admitted. This is a significant breakthrough. Victoria today is a safer place than it was before the Purana task force began its work.

Donald-Swan Hill Road: safety

Mr RYAN (Leader of The Nationals) — My question is to the Minister for Roads and Ports. I refer to the tragic accident which claimed seven lives on the Donald-Swan Hill Road in September 2006. I also refer to the Premier's promise on 27 September 2006 to make the intersection safer:

We will upgrade that intersection. VicRoads will upgrade that to a T-intersection.

I ask the minister why the work has not even started, almost six months on.

Mr PALLAS (Minister for Roads and Ports) — I thank the Leader of The Nationals for his question and join with him in expressing concern about the loss of life on our roads. Any loss of life is, of course, tragic. This government is committed to implementing safety initiatives. We have put \$597 million into road safety initiatives; we have put in place systems that address over 2000 road safety projects across this state. The

intersection the Leader of The Nationals referred to is a matter the government is committed to rectifying. The work is in progress in terms of planning, and the government remains committed to implementing the Premier's undertaking.

Transport: east–west link

Ms MUNT (Mordialloc) — My question is to the Premier. I refer the Premier to the government's commitment to planning for Victoria's future transport needs and ask the Premier to detail for the house the most recent example of the government delivering on that commitment.

Mr BRACKS (Premier) — I thank the member for Mordialloc for her question. Today I announced the details of the study into the east–west alternative road link, public transport link and freight link, which we indicated in May last year in the *Meeting Our Transport Challenges* document would be a needs study undertaken by Sir Rod Eddington. Today I was able to announce that that will be proceeding, with public submissions accepted until 31 May this year.

We have already in Meeting Our Transport Challenges committed as part of that to a \$1 billion upgrade of the Monash and West Gate freeways — adding an additional lane, making sure traffic on the on and off ramps are moving more smoothly and therefore reducing traffic congestion on that route by something like 50 per cent. We are taking immediate action that will have a significant benefit over the next 20 years, but we have to plan for the future. We have to plan for the very thing that was reported yesterday — that is, the population growth we are seeing in Melbourne and Victoria. It is higher than in any other state in Australia because people want to come to Victoria. People find our state an attractive place to live, to work and to raise a family. Maintaining the livability of Melbourne and Victoria as we grow our population is very important for our future. That is why, over and above the Monash and West Gate freeway arrangements, I am very pleased that this work will be undertaken, with a report received by the government at the start of next year.

It will be a comprehensive report. The study will examine public transport opportunities such as rail and bus upgrades as an alternative on the east–west link. It will examine enhanced freight access, because this link also includes the port of Melbourne and some of our rail transport infrastructure, and a more seamless interchange between rail and port infrastructure will be very important in the future. The study will also look at expanding road capacity, park-and-ride facilities and other options.

This is a needs study. It is not a feasibility study where the government says, 'We have a project'. It is saying, 'We want to assess the needs after we, obviously, fix the West Gate and Monash freeway issue and examine what is required and needed for the future, planning ahead for the next 15 or 20 years, planning for population growth in this state and planning for the livability of Melbourne and Victoria as part of that'.

I am very pleased that we are able to commit \$5 million to this east-west needs study. I am very pleased that Sir Rod Eddington is undertaking that work on behalf of the government. He has just completed a much larger piece of work for the UK government. He has great credentials in the transport industry worldwide and in Australia, and I am looking forward very much to receiving his report on what is good, long-term planning to make Victoria a much more livable state in the future. We expect to receive that report early next year.

Police Association: pre-election agreement

Mr McINTOSH (Kew) — My question is to the Premier. I refer to his secret pre-election deal with the police union, which, amongst other items, promised the completion of a resource allocation audit by 1 March, and I ask: will the Premier keep the audit secret, like his pre-election deal, or will he make it public?

Mr BRACKS (Premier) — I thank the member for Kew for his question. There have been a few occasions in this house when the member for Kew has misfired. He has misfired again. He may have missed the point that the Chief Commissioner of Police has already released the resource allocation model. The Chief Commissioner of Police has already indicated where police have gone and in which region, and she has indicated that every region in this state has received an increase in police numbers.

As we committed to a resource allocation model, I want to congratulate the Chief Commissioner of Police for undertaking that work and also — —

Honourable members interjecting.

The SPEAKER — Order! I have already warned the member for Scoresby.

Mr BRACKS — It also provides a base for the new commitments we are making for 350 police in the future.

Public transport: fares

Mr HUDSON (Bentleigh) — My question is to the Minister for Public Transport. I refer the minister to the government's commitment to cutting the cost of public transport fares, and I ask her to detail for the house how the government is delivering on that commitment.

Ms KOSKY (Minister for Public Transport) — I thank the member for Bentleigh for his question and indeed for his great interest in public transport. This Sunday will be a great day for Victorians and for public transport, because this Sunday we will see the implementation of a commitment that we announced during the election. This Sunday will see the abolition of zone 3, and that is very important — —

Honourable members interjecting.

The SPEAKER — Order! The member for Bass and the member for Evelyn! The constant interjecting is not acceptable.

Ms KOSKY — We will see the abolition of zone 3 this Sunday. From metropolitan train stations such as Berwick, Noble Park, Ferntree Gully and Croydon transport will become more affordable. Thousands of bus commuters as well will gain the benefit of this very popular policy. The cost of a trip to the city from Belgrave or Frankston will be cut from \$7.20 to \$5.20. That is a significant reduction. For yearly ticket-holders in the current zone 3, the saving will be \$366. It is a very significant benefit for those using public transport.

Consistent with our commitment to govern for the whole state, we also made a commitment to reduce V/Line fares by up to 20 per cent. We did not see the opposition with a commitment to V/Line passengers at all or to country Victoria and public transport — there was not a mention in the opposition policy. But we made that commitment because we want to govern for the whole of the state. V/Line fares this Sunday will be slashed by an average of 20 per cent. It is the biggest reduction in more than 30 years. The fare from Southern Cross station, for instance, to Ballarat will be cut from \$17.30 to \$13.90. For a Monday coach trip from Mildura to Melbourne, the saving will be \$33.20. That is a demonstration of our commitment, and I am sure the member for Mildura will be very happy about that.

This Sunday we will see not only a lot more — —

Honourable members interjecting.

The SPEAKER — Order! The member for Yan Yean and the member for Forest Hill!

Ms KOSKY — This Sunday we will see commuters with more money in their pockets as a result of these commitments we have made, but we will also be encouraging all Victorians and visitors to our state to use public transport to take up this benefit.

I ask all members of the house, those opposite as well, to promote these fantastic initiatives, because I know that Victorian commuters are very keen on these initiatives — and we will see even more people travelling on our public transport system in the future.

Public transport: fares

Mr MULDER (Polwarth) — My question is to the Minister for Public Transport. I refer to the government's belated move to implement Liberal Party policy and abolish zone 3 as of this weekend, and I ask — —

Honourable members interjecting.

The SPEAKER — Order! The Minister for Sport, Recreation and Youth Affairs and the Deputy Premier!

Mr Haermeyer interjected.

The SPEAKER — Order! I warn the member for Kororoit!

Mr MULDER — Now that the minister is undertaking a program to adjust fare zones, will she also move Aircraft railway station in her own electorate to zone 1, as she has previously demanded?

Ms KOSKY (Minister for Public Transport) — I thank the member for finally having a question and demonstrating an interest in public transport. This side of the house has a great interest in it. I would just like to reiterate that we are in fact abolishing zone 3 on Sunday, and it will be a great financial benefit for those travelling from the outer suburbs into Melbourne.

If the station that has been referred to — Aircraft station — were in fact moved from zone 2 into zone 1, it would no longer be called Aircraft station!

Geelong ring-road: funding

Mr CRUTCHFIELD (South Barwon) — My question is to the Minister for Roads and Ports. I refer the minister to the government's commitment to the Geelong ring-road, and I ask the minister to advise the house of the potential impact on this project of the approach taken by the federal government.

The SPEAKER — Order! The Minister for Roads and Ports should address his answer to state government business.

Mr PALLAS (Minister for Roads and Ports) — I thank the member for South Barwon for his question and for his strong advocacy for road projects for Geelong and the Surf Coast community.

Last November the Bracks government announced that if re-elected it would commit half the funds to begin the first part of stage 4 of the Geelong ring-road — that is, half the \$125 million for the Anglesea Road overpass. We said then that if the federal government persisted in playing politics with this road and would not match our funds, we stood ready to build this important overpass for the people of Geelong and the Surf Coast.

Yesterday we finally received a reply from the federal government, via a rather unconventional route, which makes it clear that it will not help to build the Anglesea overpass — hard to believe, really — nor would it fund any future connection between the Princes Highway and the Surf Coast Highway. We will now go it alone, and we will fund the full \$125 million to see the overpass completed.

The federal government has also indicated that it is unlikely to help fund stage 4. This is a crushing disappointment for the people of Geelong and the Surf Coast. The federal government has let them down again. If the federal government refuses to help fund stage 4, then it is unlikely that we could afford an additional and more westerly link to the Princes Highway. It is time for those opposite and their federal counterparts, like the federal member for Corangamite, Stewart McArthur, to look out properly for Victorian interests and to lobby their mates in Canberra to jointly fund stage 4. This stage should be funded by the federal government.

The people of Geelong and the Surf Coast will not be forgotten by this government like they have been by the Prime Minister. Stewart McArthur's proposal, implicitly supported by the Prime Minister for further study, will take longer, cost more and fail to deliver traffic benefits. It would leave up to 10 000 more cars travelling through Geelong. It would wreck Waurn Ponds valley.

Dr Napthine — On a point of order, Speaker, I think the minister is reading his answer, and I ask him to table the document from which he is reading.

The SPEAKER — Order! Is the minister reading his answer?

Mr PALLAS — Speaker, I am referring to my notes.

Honourable members interjecting.

The SPEAKER — Order! I warn the member for Polwarth!

Mrs Fyffe interjected.

The SPEAKER — Order! I warn the member for Evelyn!

Mr PALLAS — Further referring to my notes, it would wreck Waurn Ponds valley, as it would require a bridge as high as the West Gate Bridge. It would cost over \$100 million more to build, and it would take two more years to build in order to get the appropriate planning and construction arrangements in place. Finally, it would fail to provide a link to the Surf Coast Highway. The government remains committed to proceeding with the route determined by the independent panel, because it is environmentally safe and sound and provides traffic efficiency.

This project will provide our state's second-largest city with the infrastructure it needs for decades to come, and it will provide a link with the Surf Coast Highway. You can understand —

Dr Napthine interjected.

The SPEAKER — Order! I give the member for South-West Coast one final warning. If he utters one more word this question time, I will ask him to leave the chamber.

Mrs Fyffe interjected.

The SPEAKER — Order! I repeat that warning to the member for Evelyn.

Mr PALLAS — You could understand this government's disappointment at reading in the Prime Minister's letter, and I quote:

The commonwealth funding is specifically targeted to projects which provide the greatest national benefit.

What does the federal government consider of greater national benefit than the welfare of Victoria's second-largest city and the Surf Coast? Is it the proposed \$2 billion Goodna Highway, crossing three marginal Queensland seats, or perhaps a new project for another marginal seat, the Bennelong bypass?

Mr Thompson — On a point of order, Speaker, the minister referred directly to a quote. I wonder if he

could table the document from which he has been reading.

The SPEAKER — Order! Was the minister quoting from a document?

Mr PALLAS — I was referring to a letter from the Prime Minister to the Premier, which the opposition is in possession of.

The SPEAKER — Order! Will the minister make that letter available to the house?

Mr PALLAS — I will.

Mr Mulder — On the point of order, Speaker, the minister quite clearly said he was quoting from the document he was reading from. I therefore ask that he table the document.

Mr Batchelor — On the point of order, the matter had been resolved by the Speaker. The member for Polwarth is seeking to take a political point. The Minister for Roads and Ports has indicated that he will make the letter available. Members of the opposition had it yesterday, apparently, but nevertheless the minister will make it available to them again.

The SPEAKER — Order! I had ruled on the point of order. I do not uphold the further point of order, and I ask the minister to conclude his answer.

Mr PALLAS — The federal government plays games while it pilfers \$4 out of every \$5 in fuel levies that it does not return to motorists and while it continues to underfund Victorian roads to the tune of over \$255 million. They do not want John Howard's expensive white elephant in Geelong, they want a genuine accessible ring-road — and that is what the Bracks government is delivering.

It is not just another in a long line of failures by the federal government —

Honourable members interjecting.

Mr PALLAS — It is just another in a long line of failures by the federal government to give Victoria its fair share in road funding. Over the last five years —

Mr Baillieu — On a point of order, Speaker, the minister is clearly reading. I invite you to reconsider the earlier point of order and ask him to table the document from which he is reading.

The SPEAKER — Order! The minister has already clarified the point and said that he is referring to notes. I will ask him again whether he is reading or has copious

notes. I will take advice from the Clerk, but my understanding is that that is where my authority takes me.

Mr PALLAS — Finally, Speaker — —

The SPEAKER — Order! Is the minister referring to notes or quoting from a document?

Mr PALLAS — I am referring to notes, Speaker.

The SPEAKER — Order! The minister, to conclude his answer.

Mr PALLAS — Finally, I indicate that this government remains committed to standing up for the interests of the people of the Surf Coast and Geelong. Importantly we recognise that spending Victorian money on Victorian roads saves Victorian lives.

Water: goldfields super-pipe

Mr RYAN (Leader of The Nationals) — My question is to the minister for water — —

Honourable members interjecting.

The SPEAKER — Order! I did not hear which minister the member was referring to.

Mr RYAN — The Minister for Water, Environment and Climate Change.

The SPEAKER — Order! A little bit of silence, or even gentle quietness, from both sides of the house would help me in my job.

Mr RYAN — I refer to an article in the *Yarrawonga Chronicle* of 21 February quoting the minister's media adviser, Geoff Fraser — and I have the clipping here — who confirmed that the government has no alternative plan in place in the event that there are insufficient willing sellers to supply water to the Bendigo pipeline, and I ask: will the minister guarantee Goulburn Murray irrigators that it will not under any circumstances compulsorily acquire irrigator entitlements in order to provide water for the goldfields super-pipe?

Mr THWAITES (Minister for Water, Environment and Climate Change) — I thank the Leader of The Nationals for his question and indicate that the relevant water authority, Coliban Water, has already purchased the water for the super-pipe. The government is getting on with the job of delivering the super-pipe to give security to the people of Bendigo, something that The Nationals and the Liberal Party clearly do not care about.

Film industry: government initiatives

Mr LIM (Clayton) — My question is to the Minister for Innovation. I refer the minister to the government's commitment to making Victoria an international filmmaking destination, and I ask him to detail for the house how the Victorian economy is benefiting from this commitment.

Mr BRUMBY (Minister for Innovation) — I thank the honourable member for his question regarding the Victorian film industry and indeed the success of the Victorian film industry. As I have pointed out in this house before, when the Bracks government was elected in 1999 it inherited a film industry in this state which was literally on its knees. Our share of national productions declined through the 1990s under the former government. We were losing some of our best people in the state, and we lost the leadership and the authority that Victoria had always had as a film state back in the 1970s and 1980s.

We set about rebuilding the film industry in this state. We have virtually doubled funding for Film Victoria. We committed funding, of course, to the Melbourne Central City Studios, and we have been aggressive in seeking out major international film investments for our state. The consequence is that in the last financial year the state which topped Australian film production, with 36 per cent of total national production, was the state of Victoria.

Mr Donnellan interjected.

The SPEAKER — Order! I warn the member for Narre Warren North!

Mr McIntosh — On a point of order, Speaker, in relation to the previous answer given by the Minister for Roads and Ports, I wonder whether we could have a copy of the document he was quoting from. He said he would make it available to the house.

The SPEAKER — Order! I do not uphold the point of order at the moment. The Minister for Innovation is in the middle of answering another question. The point of order can be raised after the minister has finished his answer.

Mr McIntosh — On a further point of order, Speaker, the Minister for Roads and Ports said he would make available the document he was quoting from. It is a simple request. Could he give a copy of the document to the Clerk and make it available to the house?

The SPEAKER — Order! I do not see that that is a different point of order from the one that I have already ruled on. The Minister for Innovation is in the middle of answering a question. I will continue to hear the minister, and we can discuss the point of order at the end of the minister's answer.

Mr BRUMBY — We are going to have to make some funds available for a parliamentary training program. In my 12 years in this place I have never seen anything like that.

The SPEAKER — Order! The Minister for Innovation should answer the question.

Mr BRUMBY — In a period when there has been increased international competition and a declining national film production take in Australia, Victoria has topped the national production figures, with 36 per cent of all production across Australia. We have gone out of our way to attract major international films to our state, and I think we have been extremely successful in doing that.

Nicolas Cage's film *Ghost Rider*, which was largely filmed in Victoria, prominently features many Melbourne locations, including the Docklands and the Treasury Gardens. It opened last month in the United States of America on what is called President's Day weekend, and I am delighted to advise the house it was the no. 1 film released in the US on that weekend. Indeed I have been sent information that suggests that in this decade it is the fourth most successful film to be released on President's Day weekend in the US. In fact in its opening weekend it took \$65 million — —

Ms Asher interjected.

Mr BRUMBY — The shadow minister hates success! Not only was the film industry on its knees in the 1990s, so was the tourism industry — and who was the minister? Small business was also on its knees, and who was the small business minister?

The SPEAKER — Order! The Minister for Innovation should address his remarks through the Chair.

Mr BRUMBY — The film took \$65 million in its opening weekend in the US, and it has now grossed over \$150 million worldwide. The children's classic novel *Charlotte's Web* was also filmed largely in Victoria and has now grossed more than US\$122 million at the box office.

The director of *Ghost Rider*, Mark Steven Johnson, said recently:

It was the economics that got us here but really ... we got here and it was a great city and had a fantastic look — we were really blown away by —

Melbourne. The producer of *Charlotte's Web*, Jordan Kerner said:

Living in Melbourne for the last few months has been a joy.

The reason why I mention these two films is that obviously they have been successful internationally, but their contribution to the Victorian economy has been extraordinarily strong. In the case of *Ghost Rider*, some \$90 million went into the Victorian economy, the audited figures showing the buying of goods and services from 2137 Victorian companies and the creation — again on audited figures — of 1716 full-time equivalent jobs. *Charlotte's Web* — —

Honourable members interjecting.

Mr BRUMBY — There are standing orders against continuous interjections! *Ghost Rider* has been more successful than envisaged. It took a Labor government — —

The SPEAKER — Order! The Minister for Innovation would know there are standing orders against acknowledging and responding to interjections.

Mr BRUMBY — *Ghost Rider* and *Charlotte's Web* would not have happened without the investment that has been made by the Bracks government. The film industry in this state was great in the 1970s and great in the 1980s, but we lost it in the 1990s. The Bracks government has rebuilt it. We have funded the studios, we have doubled the funding of Film Victoria and we have attracted major international productions — we topped international production in the last year. This is an industry that is generating great jobs and great opportunities for the people of Victoria.

Mr McIntosh — On a point of order, Speaker, I would ask that the document which the minister said he would make available to the house, the precise document he was quoting from, be made available to the house.

Mr Batchelor — On the point of order, Speaker, this is just a joke; it is a storm in a teacup. The minister has made the copious notes he was referring to available to Hansard. We have just retrieved them from Hansard and made them available to the Clerk as requested.

The SPEAKER — Order! The house does not make my role any easier when I continually cannot hear the words a minister is saying. I heard the minister say

that he was quoting from a document. On request he said he would make that document available, and he has now done so. I believe that is the end of the matter.

**PAY-ROLL TAX AMENDMENT
(BUSHFIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICE)
BILL**

Second reading

Debate resumed.

Ms CAMPBELL (Pascoe Vale) — The matter we were discussing prior to the luncheon adjournment was the Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill, and I was highlighting the errors of the member for Hastings. The member for Hastings claimed in this house that the Victorian payroll tax rate is higher than it is. I wanted to put on record that it is the Bracks government that has lowered payroll tax. The previous payroll tax rate was 5.15 per cent, the rate the member for Hastings referred to, but in fact this year the rate is only 5.05 per cent. I further point out to the house that the rate will drop yet again in the not-too-distant future — to 5 per cent on 1 July 2008.

The member for Hastings was also lamenting the fact that only 7 per cent of Victorian employers will benefit from this wonderful legislation. Gee whiz, the reason it is only 7 per cent is that 93 per cent of employers do not pay payroll tax. What I want to know is whether the member for Hastings wants payroll tax to be extended to more employers so that we can have more of them exempted by this wonderful legislation. I do not think that would be something any member in this house would be wildly enthusiastic about — except the member for Hastings. Where are you, Rosy!

It is also significant, as we discuss the Country Fire Authority, to note that the Bracks government has increased funding to the CFA by 99 per cent since 2000. Thus over the last seven years there has been a massive increase in the allocation of funding to the CFA. I note that the exemption in this legislation is backdated to 1 November 2006, and that is something we on this side of the house applaud. I am pleased to say that the member for Shepparton also applauded the fact that the provision was backdated to 1 November 2006 to enable employers to be exempt from payroll tax during this bushfire season. Given the wonderful, significant and long contribution by so many CFA and other volunteers to the bushfire effort, this is good legislation in that regard.

I want also to pick up a point made in a contribution preceding mine. The point, which relates to training, was raised by the member for Shepparton, who sought clarification on whether training for CFA volunteers would be covered by this legislation. Given that I was the speaker following her, I had the opportunity to check, and I have been advised that volunteer training for those involved in such work is covered by the bill before us. Clause 3, headed 'Exemption for volunteer firefighters and emergency service volunteers' will amend section 10(1)(j) of the Pay-roll Tax Act of 1971. The bill will be inserting into that section new paragraphs (ja) and (jb), which will cover 'an employee in respect of any period during which the employee was taking part in bushfire fighting activities'. I was advised that 'bushfire fighting activities' cover the training that is required to carry out bushfire fighting activities.

What is absolutely fantastic is that now we are insisting on training and, as a result of that wonderful training we now thankfully have less injuries and fatalities. That is something of which we on this side of the house are particularly proud, and I am sure that is something members on the other side would also acclaim. I again refer to clause 3, which inserts new paragraphs (jb) and (ja). Paragraph (ja) provides for an exemption of wages paid to an employee where an employee has engaged in emergency activities within the meaning of the Emergency Management Act as a volunteer emergency worker. I was heartened to hear that and I am sure others would be also.

In the few remaining seconds available to me I want to place on record yet again that it is the Bracks government that has assisted the Country Fire Authority, its volunteers and employers, and I am particularly proud to have spoken on this legislation. I thank them all for their contributions to our safety.

Mr BLACKWOOD (Narracan) — I am pleased to make a contribution to this debate today. I support the bill which gives payroll tax exemption to employers who have staff who are members of the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Victorian State Emergency Service.

Finally we are heading in the right direction in encouraging those who support and fight for the protection of Victorian communities. The Country Fire Authority and the Victorian State Emergency Service volunteers respond to many emergencies — not just fires, but road accidents, storms and other events of nature. And what a fantastic job they do. Let us not forget at this time the unsung heroes of tragic events like wildfires. There are others in the community who contribute equally as much, especially when it comes to

fighting wildfires. There are people in our community who place themselves at great risk and danger, leaving their families and their work behind to go off to fight fires. They do this out of their own selflessness and their own care for their fellow human beings. These people ask for no thanks and expect nothing in return.

Around this state you will find many members of the community who fought the recent fires. It should be noted I have not labelled them firefighters. They are not members of the CFA; they just know that in some way they can help and they will. They will bashfully tell you, if you persuade it out of them, the contribution they actually make to the firefighting effort and to the safety of Victorian communities.

As a regional Victorian I am very grateful to all those tireless workers, who have worked not just over this summer period but whenever their assistance has been required. I would firstly like to commend the timber harvesting contractors. Many of these contractors shut down their own businesses to make their equipment available to help in the firefighting effort. They put that equipment into many dangerous situations in an attempt to construct firebreaks and containment lines. They put at risk their own work contracts to make their machinery available. They do not receive any tax exemption or any compensation. They do it out of the goodness of their hearts and their love and respect for the land and humankind.

Let us also remind ourselves of the farmers who lose stock and pasture in a wildfire event. They have their livelihoods wiped out and also on many occasions their dams are sucked dry by Elvis and other aircraft that need water to fight nearby fires. These farmers often have no choice. They accept that their water must be used and made available for firefighting. They do not get to voice their concerns about the impact it will have on their livelihoods once the fire has passed. As people on the land often do, they just grin and bear the situation and get on with the job.

This time, however, that is not so much the case. Farmers are starting to get frustrated with the government's farm dams water refill project. There seems to be no consultation with farmers about any form of compensation. It is all very well that farmers know they have done a good thing and their dam water has been used to save neighbouring properties. However, what is a farmer on his farming land without water for his stock and without water for irrigation? His livelihood has gone, and once again he suffers long after the fire has passed.

We must also acknowledge the tourism industry and the impact that wildfire has on that industry. Whether the fire was in that particular area or not, often the tourism operators suffer for a long time once the fire has passed. It is important that this government do everything in its power to assist the tourism industry and to help it get back on its feet. The ravaging bushfires we see often on the news each night are not stories that make up an action film. They are real-life events in people's lives. They consume people's lives, and it is a tragic tale of people fighting to keep their heads above water.

With full thanks to our volunteers, the situation is nowhere near as bad as it could have been. The list could go on and on of the people who assist in a wildfire event. People who deserve to be recognised are from the Lions, the Country Women's Association, Red Cross, the lady down the road who opened up her home for those in need of a bed, the next-door neighbour who helped out with child care and the firewatchers. The list is endless.

The true meaning of community spirit really shows under the strain of the bushfire season. I commend the Bracks government for starting the process of compensating and reimbursing Victorians in a small way for the large contribution they have made to the safety of our state. We must remember, however, that those large numbers of small business employers who have a payroll of less than \$550 000 per year will get no assistance from this payroll tax exemption. This bill is the first step in the right direction. I believe the more we can encourage employers to allow their staff to take the time required away from work to fight bushfires and other emergencies, the better off our communities will be.

Let us hope the government will continue to be approachable so that we can now raise with them other issues regarding compensation that have been highlighted during this devastating bushfire season. Let us hope the government can find a similar way to assist those who do not work for the large organisations that will benefit from the payroll tax exemption. Let us find a way to help all those I have mentioned today — the farmers, the self-employed, the everyday people who had no choice but to fight for their lives. Let us remember that these are the people who are still doing it tough long after the flames have been extinguished.

Mr LIM (Clayton) — This bill is great news for our emergency service volunteers and for Victorian employers. It shows the very real support that the Bracks government is giving to local communities as they fight bushfires and respond to other emergencies.

I would particularly like to pick up the point that the member for Narracan made regarding the effect of the bushfires on regional tourism. This government is probably one of the very few that has responded well to the call and understands the effect that bushfires have had on regional tourism. As someone who has had much to do with tourism in Victoria, I feel profoundly about the effect that the bushfires have had on regional tourism. This bill will go a long way to assist and benefit regional tourism employers. It recognises the role they have played in sustaining tourism in Victoria.

We depend on the dedication and commitment of our fellow Victorians who not only protect us from bushfires but also from other emergencies, such as storms, floods and other natural calamities. Many emergency service personnel respond out of selfless commitment, as has been mentioned by many other speakers in the chamber. In their role as volunteers there is often a great deal of personal cost, and also a cost to their employers.

We have heard from TV programs and publicity in the media about how much they spend in terms of their commitment to being effective volunteers just to protect our assets in country Victoria. We owe them a debt of gratitude. As many speakers before me have already mentioned, these volunteers cannot be regarded as unsung heroes, for they are indeed living treasures, and in that regard I have enormous respect for their contribution in helping us during times of emergencies.

The bill we are debating today will exempt employers from payroll tax on wages paid to employees who are absent from work in responding to certain emergency activities. It is a significant and practical way of supporting employers who are in turn supporting their local communities and workers. It means that any businesses or employers who support their workers by releasing them to fight bushfires and other emergencies but continue to pay their wages will not have to pay that payroll tax while the workers are away.

I wish to highlight two important features of the bill. Firstly, the support we are giving today is not just for firefighters. It is for the many other volunteers from, for example, the Victoria State Emergency Service, St John Ambulance, Red Cross, the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard Association and Life Saving Victoria, on whom we depend to protect our lives and property when they respond not only to bushfires but also to storm damage and other emergencies, such as flooding and search and rescue operations.

Secondly, as we are all acutely aware, Victoria has been experiencing prolonged bushfires for some months. In

recognition of this the Bracks government has decided to backdate the payroll tax exemption to 1 November 2006. This is a further way of supporting employers and businesses who are supporting their communities.

Our volunteer firefighters and other volunteers make an enormous contribution in defending us. Often they do so not only at personal financial cost but also by putting their own safety and wellbeing on the line. Tragically a few pay the ultimate price. We have a responsibility to support them as they protect us. This legislation is one way of giving our support. I congratulate those employers who are playing their role. I thank our firefighters and other volunteers and wish them a safe return to their homes and families.

I hope that the bill will also reach out and touch the diverse employers from ethnic backgrounds and that we will see more volunteers of a different face and different colour coming to share this responsibility. I come from a background where there is no such tradition of volunteering. Now, as I spend more of my life in this country and in this tremendous state of Victoria, I see how volunteering is very much a part of this state's tradition. I hope this bill will reach out to those employers from different backgrounds and encourage them to in turn encourage their employees to volunteer, so that the state can benefit from having volunteers from diverse backgrounds. I commend the bill to the house.

Dr NAPHTHINE (South-West Coast) — I rise to speak on the Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill. Victoria is blessed by having a multitude of volunteers who literally drop everything and respond magnificently in an emergency. It does not matter whether it is fire, flood, search and rescue or a road accident, the emergency service members who make up our volunteer network respond to the crisis and often put aside their own self-interest, their own financial interests and often their family interests to look after their fellow man and their community. Often they look after those people whom they have never met but for whom they have great love and respect as members of the community in which they live.

I want to use this opportunity to pay tribute to those volunteers across Victoria, particularly in my electorate of South-West Coast, in the Country Fire Authority (CFA), the Victoria State Emergency Service (SES), Surf Life Saving Australia, St John Ambulance, Red Cross, the Country Women's Association, the Salvation Army and the myriad of other organisations that make up the volunteer network that makes the community as great as it is.

I support this legislation because it is a step forward in providing some assistance to our volunteers and the volunteer network. It is a very small step, and I will outline why I say that. There are other things that the government and the community can and should do to assist our volunteers, and that does not necessarily mean financial assistance. The volunteer networks say to me that there are a number of things that are of a higher priority to them than any direct or indirect financial benefit.

This bill, as outlined in its introduction, provides for an exemption from payroll tax for wages paid or payable to employees who are absent from work on volunteer firefighter or emergency service duties. In doing that we must see who misses out on benefiting from such a provision. There will be no benefit from this process for volunteers who are not in the paid workforce, including retirees and the self-employed. If we look at the volunteers in the CFA, for example, we find that many of them are farmers, tradespeople or self-employed, so they will not benefit. Many of the CFA volunteers who are employed in country Victoria are employed in small businesses that are below the payroll tax threshold, so there will be no benefit to their employer or to them. Only a very small number of employers — and, indirectly, their staff — will benefit from this.

That very small number of employers who will benefit have to go through the rigmarole of getting through an enormous amount of red tape to qualify. They will have to have record-keeping systems that record the hours that their volunteers are away. During an emergency they will have to record when their volunteers leave and when they return and have a process to calculate the cost of that in terms of wages and take that off their payroll tax. I suggest many employers will simply not bother to do that for the few dollars it might put back into their pockets. While the bill is good in theory, in practice I do not think it will deliver a significant boost to our voluntary services.

The other query I have is when will this exemption apply. I would like the minister to respond to that. Our interpretation from the briefings we were given suggests it will apply only when a volunteer firefighter is on firefighting or emergency service duty — that is, when the police determine there is an emergency and the volunteers are called. That is when the exemption will apply. It will not apply to volunteers who are involved in prevention activities such as burning off or spraying or slashing roadside vegetation. It will also not apply when the State Emergency Service, the Country Fire Authority or St John Ambulance are at a field day providing community education or perhaps recruiting new volunteers. Even though they will be doing a very

positive service for the community, the exemption will not apply in those circumstances.

I was also advised that the exemption will not apply when volunteers are involved in training. The member for Pascoe Vale has said that is not true, but my reading of the bill before the house and my briefings suggest that, if CFA members or SES volunteers are on a training exercise, this exemption will not apply. The member for Pascoe Vale says it will apply, and given the confusion I would ask the minister to clarify when summing up whether or not the exemption will apply in circumstances of training.

I now come to some of the real issues. This bill is a token gesture and a small step forward, but the CFA and other volunteers are telling me that what they really want is appropriate equipment to help them do their job. When they go out they want to be able to respond quickly and effectively. One of the things CFA officers and volunteers said they would love to have had at the recent fires in my region at Yambuk, Framlingham and Stoneyford was more slip-on units available at the fire shed that they could have quickly put onto a private vehicle or a brigade vehicle that could have gone out and responded early to those fires. We know those units carry only a small amount of water, but they can often do a tremendous amount of work in limiting a fire or even putting out a fire in the early stages. While we appreciate the support given through the fire services levy to the funding of tankers in country Victoria, I think we need greater flexibility and more slip-on units.

The other thing they have said to me, whether it be the SES, the CFA, the police or anybody else involved in emergency services, is that south-west Victoria needs a multipurpose emergency helicopter. It is fabulous — great! — that the Minister for Police and Emergency Services is at the table, because the minister has devastated the people of south-west Victoria. An article in the *Warrnambool Standard* of 1 March states:

WestVic said the government agreed to set up a joint working group in October to examine the demand for a multi-role chopper in the region.

While that was promised prior to the recent election, the Minister for Police and Emergency Services has now pulled the rug on it. He has broken his promise to the people of south-west Victoria, broken his promise to the south-west region emergency helicopter committee and broken a vow to the people of south-west Victoria, who have been working hard to get a life-saving helicopter. They have done studies that show that such a helicopter would be used 480 times-plus per year, and of those 130 — —

Mr Howard — On a point of order, Acting Speaker, I know we normally allow for free-ranging debates in regard to bills, but this is a bill about payroll tax exemptions as they relate to Country Fire Authority activities. I think the member is straying off the topic of the bill.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr Ingram) — Order! I uphold the point of order. I think the member's latest comments have strayed from the main point of the bill.

Dr NAPHTHINE — The bill is about providing encouragement and support for our volunteer services, and one form of encouragement is a payroll tax exemption. I am suggesting to the government that there are better forms of encouragement, such as providing appropriate equipment and support. When SES volunteers are involved in a cliff rescue or a search and rescue at sea, whether or not they would qualify for this payroll tax exemption is irrelevant. They would say, 'Don't worry about the payroll tax exemption, but give us the right equipment. Give us a helicopter that can save lives and give us a helicopter that can make sure that when somebody is injured in a car accident at Allansford they don't take 7 or 8 hours to get to the trauma centre but that they get there within the golden hour'. That is what they want.

Every other part of the state has a helicopter. The Minister for Police and Emergency Services has a helicopter at Bendigo, yet he is so uncaring that he will not provide a similar service in south-west Victoria. It is simply not good enough. They promise big before the election and do not deliver after the election, and south-west Victoria will never forget.

Mr Howard — On a point of order, Acting Speaker, I simply note your ruling that the member was straying from the bill. The member has continued to do so, but he seems to have now headed back onto the subject of the CFA.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr Ingram) — Order! The member has explained how his comments are relevant to the bill.

Dr NAPHTHINE — The other thing that CFA members have told me is that they want Parks Victoria and the CFA to do their job. There would be less need for people to fight bushfires if Parks Victoria met its targets for fuel reduction burning and if it kept its fire access tracks open. If it managed the Crown land, the parks and the state forests appropriately, then there would be less fire and less need for these sorts of exemptions from payroll tax. I support the volunteers, and I wish the government would do so too.

Mr PERERA (Cranbourne) — I rise to support the Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill. The bill introduces an exemption for employers from payroll tax on wages paid to employees absent from work when volunteering for firefighting or responding to other emergencies. This bill is about encouragement through the small mechanism of giving a payroll tax exemption to employers who appreciate their employees' participation in emergency work. The exemption will be backdated to 1 November 2006 to cover the whole bushfire season so that nobody will miss out. This bill is another step towards regularising the fantastic work carried out by not only the volunteers but also everybody who supports them, including their employers.

So far over 1 million hectares have been destroyed by bushfires during this summer. The below-average rainfall and increasing temperatures due to climate change have increased the fire risk across the state. The fire risk during summer periods will be a permanent feature in Victoria for some time. It is daunting but real. The volunteer firefighters have played an admirable role in the past, and they will be expected to play a vital role during summer periods in the future. The response of Victorians to this summer's bushfires has been extraordinary. The employers' understanding of the enormous task carried out by their staff during this long and hot bushfire season has been remarkable. Victoria needs more people to take up firefighting and take part in other emergency services to combat bushfires and other disasters in the future.

The bill is a sensible piece of legislation to exempt employers from paying payroll tax on wages paid for time lost due to their employees volunteering for firefighting and other emergency services. Over 25 000 employers are registered for payroll tax in Victoria, and I am sure they are employing a lot of firefighters and other emergency service volunteers. For individual employers the savings could be substantial. It is estimated that an employer who releases 10 employees with an average annual salary of \$40 000 to volunteer for firefighting for two weeks would enjoy payroll tax savings of \$792.

The exemption will apply not just to volunteers with the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the State Emergency Service (SES) but also to volunteer emergency workers with organisations such as St John Ambulance, Red Cross, the Australian Volunteer Coastguard and Life Saving Victoria. The exemption covers a range of emergency activities such as storm damage, flooding and search-and-rescue operations.

At present Victoria is the fastest growing state in terms of population. This increase is mainly due to migration from both overseas and interstate. These types of measures are important in highlighting to new residents of the state the importance of being involved in emergency services. As the member for Clayton mentioned earlier, a lot of migrants come from countries where volunteerism is not recognised, not just by employers but by the broader society. These measures stress the importance of carrying out voluntary tasks such as firefighting and other emergency services.

I am sure this legislation will motivate employers to encourage their employees to participate in such voluntary services as the CFA, the SES, St John Ambulance, Red Cross and the coastguard et cetera. This is good news for Victoria. I commend the bill to the house.

Mr WAKELING (Ferntree Gully) — I am pleased to stand and speak on the Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill and to support the position put for our side by the member for Scoresby in supporting the bill. However, as many members on our side of the house have said, the bill does not go far enough. We contend that this is more about front-page headlines than about providing genuine solutions for those who are involved in volunteering and supporting people and businesses throughout Victoria.

At this stage I would like to congratulate the wonderful Country Fire Authority volunteers throughout Victoria for the work they did in the recent fire period. In particular I would like to acknowledge the work done by the CFA brigades in my area, and I understand that some of them sent people to fight these fires. I acknowledge the Rowville, Ferntree Gully and Boronia CFA stations, as well as the many other volunteers from the Knox State Emergency Service unit and various other groups.

Members on this side of the house recently visited fire-affected areas of country Victoria. We thought it was important for us to get out there and see the impact this fire season has had in rural Victoria. It was very interesting. We saw firsthand the devastating effects of fire when you have not undertaken back-burning, something many people in country Victoria have been calling for. We saw the difference between a cold burn and a hot burn. When you have not done any back-burning and a fire goes through, the countryside is simply denuded of any vegetation. I read with interest an article about a CFA captain from the Gippsland town of Licola, which was affected by the last spate of

bushfires. I am happy to table this *Age* article of 29 January 2003, which states:

Captain Ralph Barraclough ... said the state's fire strategy was more about avoiding litigation than protecting land-holders.

He was quoted as saying:

To make matters worse, brigade members were incensed that the so-called fire strategy plan for Licola virtually ensured that if fire came into the valley, property would be burnt out that has been saved from fires since settlement in 1863.

I am quoting from an article published in January 2003. Fast-forwarding four years, we saw exactly what the captain of the local CFA brigade claimed would happen as residents of that township suffered property damage. It is a tragedy. Because the hot burn went through and the land was denuded, after 28 millimetres of rain the countryside just fell away and there was devastation. This captain, who spent most of his time trying to save his township, was rewarded for his efforts by having his house flooded. He was reported in the *Gippsland Times* of 27 February 2007 as having said that:

... the damage to his house was so bad it could not survive another similar flood.

So many people in country Victoria have been calling for this government to do something about back-burning, and four years ago the captain of a CFA brigade made those claims in the *Age* — but nothing has happened. It is a tragedy.

I am concerned about my electorate, which is bordered to the west and the south by the Churchill National Park, the Lysterfield State Park and the Dandenong Ranges National Park. Residents have come to me saying that as their houses abut these national parks they are looking at forests of weeds and blackberries, but the government is doing nothing about clearing out those areas. My residents have raised these concerns because they have seen on television what happens when you do not control environmental weeds and you do not do back-burning. They have seen the devastation suffered throughout country Victoria.

I come now to the bill. I would like to confirm that the position on our side of the house is that this is a cobbled-together piece of legislation which is more about appeasing the media than about providing real solutions. Given that this provides a payroll tax exemption, I point out that one of the main groups to be affected is industry. This government says it wants to govern for all. I would like to know which industry groups it has engaged in dialogue with.

I was talking to representatives of a major industry association about this bill just yesterday. They said they had had no dialogue with any member of this government or any member of the bureaucracy about this bill, even though it will directly impact on their membership. However, they said they were not surprised, because back in 2005 the government made significant changes to the Long Service Leave Act through an amendment bill and this organisation, which represents thousands of businesses throughout Victoria, put in a submission. What was the response? Not only did they not have an opportunity to speak to the minister concerned or a member of the bureaucracy about the bill, but they did not even get a letter acknowledging their contribution. This is the disdain with which this government treats industry throughout Victoria.

Looking at payroll tax, we on this side have said this bill will not provide any real benefit to business. However, you do not have to take the word of the Liberal Party on that. The member for Pascoe Vale confirmed this when she indicated in her contribution to the debate on this bill that 93 per cent of businesses will receive no direct benefit. What a tragedy that is! If we extrapolate that across the number of volunteers who would be entitled to benefit under this bill, we find that only 7 out of every 100 volunteers will get any direct benefit. It is more about spin and media advertising. It certainly is not about delivering any real benefits. Only businesses with payrolls in excess of \$550 000 per year are obliged to pay payroll tax. Many volunteers, particularly in rural Victoria, work in a small business or are self-employed. These are the people who give up work and put in the hard yards. If any of those people are in receipt of income from the business that employs them, that company or small business will receive no direct benefit from this bill.

We have said that if the government were serious and wanted to provide real benefits to business, it would have been looking at WorkCover or something else which would have provided a benefit to all and not just to a small group — 7 per cent, as indicated by the member for Pascoe Vale — of businesses.

Another interesting point in this bill is that new paragraphs (ja) and (jb) indicate that the payroll tax exemption will not apply in instances where wages are payable for recreation leave, annual leave, long service leave or sick leave. That is quite interesting, because division 5 of part 7 of the federal Workplace Relations Act provides for a range of leave, including personal/carers leave and bereavement or compassionate leave. These are not new provisions. They have not been cobbled together in the past

12 months; they have been around for years. The bill tells us that if an employee is sick and works on a major incident, their business cannot get a payroll tax exemption. But if they were at home caring for their sick child or if they were in receipt of paid leave to attend a funeral, the business could get a payroll tax exemption.

The bill certainly raises more questions than it answers. Its provisions demonstrate that this legislation has just been hurriedly cobbled together without any insight from business and without any discussion with Victorian industry. The government is interested only in trying to appease the community by giving it a perception that the government is trying to do something. Whilst members on our side of the house are supportive of the bill, we certainly believe a lot more could have been done. As the member for Pascoe Vale has pointed out so succinctly, only 7 per cent of businesses will receive any benefit from this bill.

Mr HOWARD (Ballarat East) — I will make a few brief comments on the Pay-roll Tax Amendment (Bushfire and Emergency Service) Bill. This is a clear indication by the government that it recognises the efforts that volunteers, particularly our Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteers but also those in the State Emergency Service (SES) and other groups, have put into providing emergency services. By providing some payroll tax support for employers the government is recognising that those employers have been dealing with losing their workers for emergencies, so this is an important bill.

In particular I am really pleased about the work of our firefighters in so many groups across my electorate. I have been very pleased over recent years to attend at the fire brigades at Wallace, Ballarat, Kingston, Tylden, Meredith, Ellam, Ballan, Napoleons, Hepburn Springs and other places. Their members are all doing a great job in looking after their own communities as well as being prepared to go to other parts of the state to support people in case of fire. I have also been very pleased to attend at those brigades to talk to their members about the support this government has been able to provide via the community safety emergency support program (CSESP) funding, an initiative of this government to help with the fundraising by those groups. Those volunteers are involved not only in fighting fires but also in fundraising for new equipment. CSESP has clearly helped them with gaining more equipment more quickly, which I have been pleased about.

As I mentioned recently, last November I also suffered a fire on my own property. It was fantastic not only to

have so many CFA brigades on the scene to put out the fire but also to know that, after the fire was put out, that night and the next day those brigade workers were still around my place ensuring the safety of our area and that the fire did not start up again. The work our CFA and SES volunteers have done is terrific. This bill goes some way towards recognising their services by encouraging employers to support that volunteer work. I am very pleased to support this bill.

Mr CAMERON (Minister for Police and Emergency Services) — On behalf of the Treasurer I thank the honourable members for Scoresby, Benalla, Narre Warren North, Nepean, Burwood, Mildura, Yan Yean, Evelyn, Geelong, Hastings, Seymour, Shepparton, Pascoe Vale, Narracan, Clayton, South-West Coast, Cranbourne, Ferntree Gully and Ballarat East for their contributions to the debate on the bill. I thank the opposition parties for their support of it.

While the scope of the bill was rather limited, the debate afforded an opportunity for many honourable members to make appropriate acknowledgement of the contribution of volunteers during the bushfire season. Acting Speaker, I appreciate that in your own area of East Gippsland the bushfire season has gone on for a long time, as it has in the north-east. While the fires are contained, we hope they remain that way, because we are still in a period of very high fire danger.

Volunteers in our state do a fantastic job. Honourable members have referred to individual volunteers in their particular electorates. Those around them are very tolerant and very supportive and they are people the government also thanks, as have other honourable members during the course of their contributions to the debate.

Post the 2002–03 fires and following the Esplin inquiry we have seen a significant increase in resources. In addition, during the terms of the Bracks government we have seen the budget of the Country Fire Authority doubled. Those things have been positive. We have seen tremendous cooperation, with the agencies working extremely well together over the course of the fire season. That level of cooperation on the ground and the work that has been done is something Victorians are all extremely proud of. After the fire danger period is over, of course there will be an appropriate acknowledgement of the tremendous work our volunteers do. I wish the bill a speedy passage.

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Consideration in detail

Clause 1

Mr CAMERON (Minister for Police and Emergency Services) — The opposition has raised a query about how the provisions of the bill will work in relation to training. Advice will have to be sought from the Treasurer's office so there can be discussions while the bill is between the houses.

Clause agreed to; clauses 2 to 4 agreed to.

Bill agreed to without amendment.

Remaining stages

Passed remaining stages.

GOVERNOR'S SPEECH

Address-in-reply

Debate resumed from 28 February; motion of Mr PALLAS (Minister for Roads and Ports) for adoption of address-in-reply.

Mr RYAN (Leader of The Nationals) — It is my pleasure to join the debate on the address-in-reply to the Governor's speech. I do so in circumstances where I have had the honour to represent the electorate of Gippsland South since 1992. I am humbled and very grateful for being returned to my role by the electors of Gippsland South. I will continue, as I have done over the years, to do my best to represent their interests in this Parliament. I have also had the honour to be re-elected by my own party to continue to be the leader. That again is an honour for which I am most grateful.

I congratulate the Governor, David de Kretser, and his wife, Jan, on the manner in which they continue to discharge their responsibilities. I have met them on many occasions as they have travelled country Victoria. I give great credit to them for the work they are undertaking. I pay appropriate tribute to the immediate predecessor of our current Governor — namely, John Landy, and his wife, Lynne. They did a magnificent job in the discharge of their roles. I remember John Landy telling me in the very early stages of his appointment that it was his intention to travel to every single municipality throughout Victoria. He did that, visiting all 79 of them, and on more than one occasion.

I further offer my congratulations to the member for Carrum on her election as the Speaker of the chamber. Acting Speaker, I would be grateful if you would

convey that sentiment to her on behalf of The Nationals.

The result of the election on 25 November last year was a tremendous one for The Nationals. It bears examination that of the 88 seats in the Legislative Assembly only 16 are not based on Melbourne, Bendigo, Ballarat or Geelong. Of those remaining 16 seats, The Nationals now hold 9. We are 20 per cent of a government in our own right, and we reckon that it is about the right odds, with the present government. We reckon we could run the show with the nine of us, given the chance, but such is life — we sit where we sit in this place.

We have seen the conclusion of three magnificent parliamentary careers in the form of the former member for Rodney, Noel Maughan, the Honourable Bill Baxter, a former member for North Eastern Province in another place, and the Honourable Barry Bishop, a former member for North Western Province in another place. Each of those members served their electorates and the Parliament well over many years.

In their stead we have added three new members to our parliamentary team. The member for Rodney is here despite the fact that Labor preferenced against him. They had it in for him. Despite the fact of preferences going against him, he still did it. He brings to this Parliament great knowledge in relation to the water industry in particular and agropolitics generally. His knowledge, together with that of the member for Swan Hill, who is the deputy leader of our party, probably represents the best source of information on the water industry and goes beyond the combined knowledge of the rest of us around here. They will bring much to this place, and I congratulate the member for Rodney for his success, seemingly against the odds.

Similarly the member for Mildura is here. What a great win that was! I am sure everybody, including yourself, Acting Speaker, agrees. It was an extraordinary achievement. We are delighted to see him in this place. He has only been here 5 minutes and look at his record. The toxic waste dump has gone; it is no more; it is finished. On top of that we have had a resolution, it would seem, to the managed investment schemes imbroglio. It has been a great outcome so far. We keep saying to him that even the good Lord rested on the seventh day, so he can pause for a little while. There is plenty of time to go over the course of the coming four years.

Then of course there is the member for Morwell. What a victory! The Labor Party held that seat for 33 years and now it is in the hands of The Nationals. Remember

this is the seat which encompasses the remains of the industrial heartland of the state of Victoria. This is the seat where a minister on behalf of the government tried to run a scare campaign in relation to WorkChoices. Here we have the industrial heartland of the state of Victoria now represented by The Nationals. The member comes here with a proud record of community service and an extraordinary record in terms of his achievements on the football field. He has a strong association with business and he also will bring much to this place. We are very pleased to have these three new members join us.

The Nationals, of course, now represent about two-thirds of the state, geographically. I ended up with a primary vote of about 42 per cent, which apart from that of the member for Morwell was the lowest achieved by our Legislative Assembly members. I was only fortunate enough to get an increase of about 10 per cent — I had to take a note to our first party meeting to explain myself. We were able to have our success without the need for Labor Party preferences — and as I said, we won anyway in Rodney, where Labor preferenced against us.

It has been a great victory for our party but more particularly for the people of country Victoria. We campaigned hard on their behalf. We campaigned around the slogan 'I'm for the country' and we campaigned around the other slogan of seeking a fair share on their behalf, and they delivered for us. Since 1917, when John Allan and four of his associates were elected to this place on behalf of the then Country Party, we have stood in this place on behalf of country Victorians as their voice. I am proud to say that we continue to be the third party in the Parliament of Victoria and we will continue to do what we have always done.

I listened to the speech given by the Governor — or more particularly I listened to the speech that had been written for the Governor, as the Governor read it — and I did so keenly, as did all other members who were present. There were aspects of the speech that were of enormous interest and other aspects of not such enormous interest, but be that as it may, the commentary about this government governing for all Victoria has become an absolute urban myth — it is no more than that. When you look at what happened at this election you see that this commentary by the government that we hear so often by way of a mantra is an urban myth. It has been wiped out of Gippsland politically. It lost the seat of Morwell to The Nationals, and it lost the seat of Narracan to the Liberal Party.

The Labor Party has no representation in the Legislative Assembly of the Victorian Parliament anywhere east of Dandenong. It has nothing by way of political representation in the Assembly beyond a radius of about 160 kilometres from Melbourne. The general statement about governing for all Victoria has gone absolutely pear shaped, and Labor will have to lift its game over the course of the next four years. People out there are saying that Labor looks tired, that it is out of ideas and that it has lost any of the inspiration it might have had when it came into this place as the government in 1999. People are looking for a better performance from it.

I will go through some of the areas about which people continue to express their concerns to us. The first is that people want the government to control its spending. It cannot control its own budgets. It consistently runs over the budgetary figures. Fortunately in the state of Victoria there is river of cash that comes to us in the form of the GST. The Treasurer was whingeing and whining about it yesterday in this place, but in fact it works out to about \$700 million every month which turns up in the letterbox, and that is on top of the extraordinary taxation regime that represents an ongoing burden to Victorians. The government must control its spending. Fortunately the amount of income over the past seven budgets has been greater than the excesses in the budgeted expenditure, but the worry always is what happens when the music stops. The government has to control its expenditure.

The government's management of public land is appalling, and throughout country Victoria people consistently make reference to it. The government has to do much better in its allocation of resources and the way it directs its capacities to handle public land. The notion of government being amongst the worst of neighbours is out there as a matter of fact amongst country Victorians. The government has to do better. Of course we are going to have the inquiry into the management of public land in the context of the prevention of fires, and that is an initiative that has been driven by The Nationals. We will be very interested to see that unfold over the course of the coming weeks and months.

The government's management of water has been terrible. It has taken \$1.8 billion in dividends out of the water authorities in the last seven years and we have got what we have got. As you look across the state and see the degree of difficulty in which people now find themselves, you realise that much of it can be sheeted home to this government. It cannot make it rain, I accept that, but it could have, and should have, done much more in relation to the management of water

issues. Water issues continue to be pivotal to the future of country Victoria.

In the area of education the government needs to lift its game. Our country students in year 12 are simply not able to achieve to a level anywhere near that which occurs in the metropolitan environment. Our students who are leaving country areas to come to tertiary courses in Melbourne or elsewhere are running at about 34 per cent, whereas in the metropolitan area it is about 43 per cent or 45 per cent — something of that order. The government must close the gap.

While I am on the issue of education, the government's undertaking to rebuild the school facilities over the course of the next 10 years is a dreadful admission that what it has done in the last seven years has never been up to the mark. To think that it has been awash with cash and that at this last campaign the Premier said the government was going to rebuild the whole stock over the next 10 years — it is a dreadful admission to have made on behalf of the government.

On the issue of roads, the government will have to lift its game. If you fix country roads, you save country lives. The Royal Automobile Club of Victoria reported on this and called for \$200 million a year for the next 10 years; the Parliament reported on this in 2005; the government responded by promising a strategy by the end of 2006, and it has not done anything about it. The government is obliged to put decent funding into our roads.

The issue of policing is uppermost in people's minds in a variety of respects. The government has got to settle this imbroglio between the police union and the Chief Commissioner of Police. It is the chief commissioner who should run the police force in the state of Victoria and should do it unencumbered. The government has got a problem much of its own making on its hands at the moment, and the issue has to be resolved. In so far as the Office of Police Integrity is concerned, we believe it should be dissolved and we should have a standing commission on crime and corruption in Victoria. It is not only police who should be subjected to the sorts of inquiries in which that office is involved, it should be of a broader nature. As is evident from what we are seeing in Western Australia at the moment, you need something like that structure for purposes of appropriate examination. It is occurring in other parts of Australia, and we need to have that here. We do not need a royal commission, we need a standing commission on crime and corruption.

The issues of health in country Victoria are pivotal to our communities. In my own electorate the government

has promised to do a rebuild of the hospital at Leongatha. People are watching anxiously to see that happen. The delivery of maternity services is a critical issue, as is the funding of accident and emergency services in many of our country hospitals. These are all things that are imperative for us.

The government has got to do more about stopping the drain of our youth away from country Victoria. We need more programs from it to achieve that result. The key to our future in many senses is having our young people come back and join us, whether they go from the country for travel, work or otherwise, the government has to do more to encourage them to return.

In the area of energy production the government should be planning now for the provision of a new baseload generator in Victoria. We should be hearing more about that. The member for Morwell represents the seat that powers Victoria. We want to make sure that the energy industry is looked after properly over the course of the coming years. The government is also lacking terribly in the area of planning. That is apparent particularly with wind farms and across the local government sector. There is gross confusion and the red tape is a constant nightmare. With the Regional Infrastructure Development Fund, the government must actually spend the money it has allocated. It should not just make commitments or fictional commitments to spend the money in time to come, it should actually be spent annually as it is allocated under the fund.

I will refer to the question of recovery from fires and drought in the very short time available to me, and I pay homage to the extraordinary people who have fought the fires over the course of the past few weeks and months. They are due all the credit they receive. In my final comments I highlight the amazing resilience of country Victorians. They are always being called on to be efficient, productive and globally competitive, and they contend with and survive natural hazards. Their resilience is amazing.

These are the benchmarks the government has to satisfy over the course of the next four years. If it is to win back the trust of the people — the trust that was invested in the government by many people in the lead-up to the 1999 election — it has to lift its game. We will be here to keep it up to the mark. The Nationals have been here since 1917: for the last 90 years we have been here proudly on behalf of country Victoria. Like the rest of my team, I am for the country!

Mr BATCHELOR (Minister for Energy and Resources) — I want to take this opportunity to contribute to the debate on the address-in-reply to the Governor's speech by spelling out the Bracks government's agenda for meeting Victoria's energy challenges. Energy policy has really taken centre stage in Victoria, nationally and even internationally in light of the widespread concern in the community about climate change. Right around the world people are concerned to know what is happening with climate change. We recognise the significant impact that climate change is having on the community, and in responding to this we are committed to making a smooth transition to a low-carbon future in the state's energy supply system.

This Labor government has a strong record in this area. Since coming to office in 1999 we have worked very hard to rebuild the energy sector and to attract new investment after the neglect of the previous period under the Liberal-National government. While much has been achieved, there is still more to be done. We need to continue to attract investment in the energy sector, including the renewable energy sector, and to ensure the Latrobe Valley's long-term future. That is why over the term of the government we will be promoting investment in jobs in the energy sector; leading the way on national reform; protecting customers who use electricity; meeting the greenhouse challenges that climate change is clearly imposing on the community; and keeping Victorian nuclear free.

Victoria has one of the largest reserves of brown coal in the world. This coal has been used to generate affordable electricity, which has underpinned the economy and buttressed growth in Victoria for decades. In that context it is interesting to note that more than 55 per cent of Victoria's greenhouse gas emissions come from brown coal electricity generators. To ensure that we can continue to use our brown coal reserves, we need to do so in an environmentally responsible way.

One way the Bracks government is doing that is by investing \$50 million in clean coal technologies such as a new 400-megawatt clean coal power plant to demonstrate the use of coal-drying and gasification technology. This \$750 million HRL project could reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 30 per cent compared to traditional coal technology. At the same time it is estimated that it will reduce water use by half. The HRL demonstration plant will also be carbon capture and storage (CCS) ready, meaning that once CCS — or geosequestration — is available, greenhouse gas emissions from this process will be completely stored underground, reducing emissions virtually to zero once the storage technology becomes viable.

We are also investing in updating the current kit of initiatives in the Latrobe Valley. We are investing \$30 million as part of a \$360 million project to retrofit one of the power generation units at the Hazelwood power station. This project will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by up to 30 per cent, saving some 800 000 tonnes of carbon each year.

Why is the government doing this? We want to position the Latrobe Valley for a low-carbon future. This is one of the key challenges we will face during this term of government. The Bracks government believes that by investing in a clean coal future in the Latrobe Valley we can remain a hub for energy and resource processing industries, and that could be the basis for a new wave of economic growth and prosperity. That is why we are investing just over \$7 million to establish a new Clean Coal Authority in the Latrobe Valley. We want to develop new clean coal industries for Victoria and to investigate technology to capture and store carbon.

Last week I visited Nirranda, near Warrnambool, to witness firsthand the drilling work supporting a major trial of carbon capture and storage in the Otway Basin. To assist members in understanding this technology, I seek leave to have incorporated in *Hansard* a schematic design of geosequestration.

Leave granted; see document page 653.

Mr BATCHELOR — The Bracks government has contributed \$4 million to Australia's first trial project to store greenhouse gases some 2 kilometres underground. This project is being run by the Cooperative Research Centre for Greenhouse Gas Technologies (CO2CRC). The project will make it possible to apply the technology and experience to other depleted oil and gas fields, particularly those in Bass Strait — right next door to our brown coal reserves. This will place Victoria in an ideal position to develop large-scale commercial carbon capture and storage.

Whilst visiting the south-west last week to see the CO2CRC test site, I also visited the Woodside gas plant at Iona, which is near Port Campbell. I saw the future site of the Mortlake gas-fired power station and I visited the Pacific Hydro wind farm at Codrington. All of this illustrated to me that Victoria is developing a new and emerging energy hub in the south-west of Victoria.

The opening of the Otway Basin gas fields, the proposals for new large wind farms and gas-powered stations, combined with the potential for coal seam gas and the emerging mineral sands industry of western Victoria, mean that the south-west has the potential to develop significant energy-dependent industries.

The government, in consultation with local communities, businesses, industry and councils, will develop a blueprint for growth in the south-west and the Latrobe Valley that will capitalise on the energy and resources boom and create more jobs and, importantly, more and new investment.

We are also creating more jobs and investment through continued investment in renewable energy sources. Through the Victorian renewable energy target (VRET) scheme we have mandated that energy retailers must purchase 10 per cent renewable energy by 2016. That came into effect on 1 January this year. VRET will cut greenhouse gas emissions by 27 million tonnes, which is the equivalent of removing every car off Victoria's roads for a period of two years. The importance of VRET can be measured by the fact that since its introduction there have been announcements on wind, solar and hydro projects in Victoria totalling more than \$2 billion worth of investment. More than 1000 megawatts of electricity have come forward as a result of these investment plans. That is the equivalent of about half the capacity of our largest single power station.

Building on the government's existing VRET scheme we hope to achieve 10 per cent energy production from renewable sources. We want to work towards achieving an even greater target of 20 per cent renewable and lower emissions power generation by 2020. We want to increase and stretch forward that target from 2016 and take it to a higher target by 2020.

At the household level we will also introduce a feed-in-tariff law to ensure households and small businesses that feed solar and other renewable energy back into the electricity grid are paid a fair price for the power they generate. We will legislate to require energy retailers to purchase power generated from small-scale renewables at a fair price consistent with the retail market price at the time of day. This will provide an incentive for small-scale renewables such as solar, mini-hydro and wind power which will reduce greenhouse gas emissions as well as reducing the need for more peaking power stations.

At the more macro level we have put \$50 million into what will be the world's largest solar power station to be built in north-west Victoria. Solar Systems is a Victorian company preparing to manufacture and construct a 154 megawatt solar power station in north-west Victoria. It will be the world's largest solar power station of its kind with more than 45 000 homes able to be powered by clean energy. The technology, which was interestingly designed to power satellites, is able to concentrate the sun's energy by over 500 times.

This new solar power station will be pollution free and will reduce Victoria's greenhouse gas emissions by 396 000 tonnes a year, which is the equivalent to permanently removing 90 000 cars from our roads. It will also stimulate investments of more than \$420 million and create more than 900 jobs during construction and 50 ongoing jobs during its operation.

In order to provide certainty for future investments in the energy industry we need to put a price on greenhouse gas emissions via a national emissions trading scheme. Last week the Energy Supply Association of Australia, representing 40 electricity and natural gas companies, joined the call for a national scheme. They now join with the Bracks government, all the states and territories, environmental groups, resource companies, consumer groups and energy businesses to call on the federal government to introduce a national emissions trading scheme.

Victoria has been the leader in the push for a national emissions trading scheme. Out of frustration with the commonwealth government's lack of initiative, the states have pledged to implement a scheme by the end of 2010 if the commonwealth refuses to do so. As well as leading the way on a national emissions trading scheme we will also continue to lead the way in national energy reform.

In addition we will continue to work with electricity retailers to ensure they provide competitive pricing structures for customers. From 2008 Victorian electricity customers will start to see the rollout of new smart meters. They will replace the traditional electricity meters. Combined with the new technology, in-house display units will give customers the ability to slash the cost of their energy bills and cut greenhouse emissions at the same time.

Easing the burden on family budgets as we make the transition to a low carbon future is also part of our agenda in this term of government. Appliances account for about 40 per cent of a home's greenhouse gas emissions and can cost a family around \$500 in energy bills. We are introducing a rebate program for installing insulation and replacing old fridges, heaters, coolers and other appliances with models higher in energy efficiency.

We will provide some 30 000 rebates each year to help families reduce energy bills and help fight climate change. Victoria's new one-stop-shop agency, Sustainability Victoria, will administer the rebates provided for helping households to be green.

We will also require energy retailers to help families reduce their greenhouse gas emissions through measures such as providing energy-efficient light globes, insulation, and efficient shower roses through the introduction of a new Victorian energy efficiency target (VEET) scheme. The VEET scheme will be a market-based scheme that will place an obligation on energy retailers to meet specific energy conservation targets. It will be designed to maximise benefits and minimise costs for households.

We will also continue to encourage energy conservation by raising awareness through the Black Balloons energy saving campaign. This campaign was given funding over two years as part of the \$200 million environment sustainability action statement. We will also put our money where our mouth is and increase the government's use of green power by 25 per cent.

This government will work constructively to ensure that we have an energy policy that looks after the environment and provides power.

Debate adjourned on motion of Mr LANGDON (Ivanhoe).

Debate adjourned until later this day.

Remaining business postponed on motion of Mr BATCHELOR (Minister for Energy and Resources).

ADJOURNMENT

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr Nardella) — Order! The question is:

That the house do now adjourn.

School buses: hearing-impaired students

Mrs FYFFE (Evelyn) — The matter I raise is for the attention of the Minister for Education in the other place. The action I seek is for the minister to reinstate the taxi service previously provided for hearing-impaired students from my electorate attending the Eastwood and Forest Hill primary schools.

Hearing-impaired students attend these schools in order to access the state government-funded deaf facilities. At the beginning of this school year the Minister for Education changed the system, introducing a bus service without consulting the parents and without informing the taxidriviers, who have also been shabbily treated. The taxidriviers were not told of the changes and turned up on the first day of term to pick up their

young passengers. The families were left to explain that their services were no longer required.

The bus service is having an adverse effect on the students whom it is supposed to service. The Forest Hill school students are consistently arriving late and are requested to leave their classes 15 to 20 minutes early each day to catch the bus. The students already have to leave standard classes to get special assistance in areas such as speech therapy. Deaf and hearing-impaired children already have considerable difficulties in maintaining averages with their hearing peers without having a shorter school day forced on them just so that this government can save a few dollars.

The starkest condemnation of this new bus service is that often students at the end of the run are forced to stay on the bus for over 2 hours, a direct contradiction of this government's policy that no child should stay on a school bus for more than 2 hours.

Another telling indictment is that many of the children rely on Auslan to communicate. The buses do not have a supervisor travelling with the driver, so what happens if there is a problem? Familiarity and consistency are important considerations for hearing-impaired children. Already this year there have been four different bus drivers, who in fairness do their best but are not trained in Auslan.

To highlight the unfairness of the situation, I will quote this sentence from a parent's letter to me:

One morning I noticed the driver calling over his shoulder to the children from his driver's seat to buckle up. Hello! These children are deaf and hearing impaired!

The bus service that has replaced the taxi service is totally ill conceived. It was not done in consultation with the transport working group, a lobby group set up to promote and advocate the right of hearing-impaired students to adequate transport to school. The transport working group comprises members of Deaf Children Australia and the Parents of Hearing Impaired Children (Victorian federation).

I urge the minister to take action and restore to these children their human right to a safe and stress-free journey to school.

Nylex: Mentone site

Ms MUNT (Mordialloc) — The matter that I raise this afternoon is for action by the Minister for Water, Environment and Climate Change. For many years Nylex has operated a factory plant on Nepean Highway, Mentone, in my electorate. It has provided a lot of local employment over that time. Recently,

however, Nylex decided to cease operations at its Mentone facility. This site is in the process of being cleared out at present. It is proposed that the site be developed for use as a homemaker centre along the Nepean Highway, with some residential development at the rear — subject, of course, to Kingston City Council's planning considerations.

It has come to my attention, however, that the site has some areas of localised contamination by organic chemicals. It is also my understanding that this site is currently the subject of an environmental audit, which is due for completion in late April 2007. This audit will advise whether the land is suitable for its intended use or advise what is required to make the land suitable for its intended use. Any clean-up measures will, I understand, have to be completed to the satisfaction of an environmental auditor before the audit is finalised. I therefore ask the Minister for Water, Environment and Climate Change to pass on this information to our independent watchdog, the Environment Protection Authority (EPA), so that it can oversee the clean-up of the site to the highest environmental standards.

Various methods of clean-up for the site may be contemplated, but it is my understanding that the EPA does not support land farming, which is the turning of soils periodically to allow volatile components to be freely discharged into the air. The community in my electorate would certainly not accept this process either. It is simply unacceptable, because it puts the contaminants directly into the air, to be absorbed by the human population through breathing. I am certain that the local residents would not be very pleased at all with this process. If the process is being contemplated, I am reassured that the EPA does not support it — and I understand the EPA is currently inspecting this site.

My community expects this site to be cleaned to the highest environmental standards, in line with its future use. This may include thermal desorption, immobilisation or proven biological treatment processes, as determined by the environmental audit due in April 2007. Our community has an opportunity to make use of a large piece of land on which to live and shop. Parcels of land of this size are now very rare in our middle-metropolitan area. We are now also much more environmentally aware. For their safety we owe it to present and future residents to get it right — right now.

4th World Congress of Rural Women: government support

Mr WALSH (Swan Hill) — I seek the Minister for Agriculture's financial support to provide at least

\$50 000 to assist a group of rural women to represent Victoria at the 4th World Congress of Rural Women in Durban, South Africa, in April this year. The conference will be chaired by Gracia Michelle, who is also known as Mrs Nelson Mandela.

Australian women founded the international Rural Women's Movement in 1994 by holding their first conference in Melbourne. Since then there have been conferences in Washington in 1998 and in Spain in 2002, both strongly supported by respective Victorian governments. I understand that a former agriculture minister, the Honourable Pat McNamara, fully funded 25 women to attend the Washington conference at an estimated cost of \$125 000, which was an outstanding contribution. Another former agriculture minister, the Honourable Keith Hamilton, followed up with a mere \$20 000 for the Spanish conference.

Each time competitive travel bursaries were offered and keenly sought. The rural women's division of the then Department of Natural Resources and Environment provided coordination and training for the chosen participants. This year there will be a special need for generous assistance. At a time of severe and sustained drought, women in farming families can only dream about the chance of representing their state.

Throughout Victoria women are leading the way on water, drought and community issues. Women's ability to form strong, nurturing networks to sustain them through good and bad times is part of the reason why our country communities are so strong, resilient and connected. Country women deserve the practical encouragement of their government. They repay the government's investment many times over by taking up positive leadership roles within the community or by stepping onto a larger stage and assuming high-profile leadership positions in local government or in statewide organisations.

The study tour in the week leading up to the conference is shared with women from all over Australia and is a powerful way to learn. The conference that follows the tour challenges our rural women to make a difference in their workplaces, their towns, their communities and their regions. In the past they have risen to the challenge brilliantly.

I urge the minister to give more women a chance to experience this life-changing experience. The time before the next conference in April is short. I ask him to urgently allocate a minimum of \$50 000 to support the attendance of rural women at the conference, and have his department begin the process by advertising widely to encourage as many women as possible to have a go.

Thornbury High School: accelerated learning program

Ms RICHARDSON (Northcote) — I raise a matter for the Minister for Education in the other place. I refer to the government's commitment to introduce a select entry accelerated learning (SEAL) program to Thornbury High School. The action I seek is to ask the minister to ensure that the select entry accelerated learning program is implemented in time for the start of the 2008 school year. The selection of Thornbury High School for the SEAL program comes on top of the range of educational improvements which the Bracks Labor government has made in the electorate of Northcote.

Since 1999 the full-time equivalent of teaching and administrative staff in the schools in the electorate has increased by 61, or 12 per cent. Since 1999 average prep to year 2 class sizes in Northcote schools has fallen from 25.3 to 21.9, a decrease of 13.4 per cent. The Bracks Labor government has also made significant investments in school infrastructure in the electorate. Northcote High School, Thornbury Darebin Secondary College, Thornbury High School, Preston South Primary School and Wales Street Primary School have all undergone significant improvements to and modernisations of their infrastructure, to the benefit of students and teachers.

The selection of Thornbury High School as a learning centre of excellence and proper recipient of the SEAL program is very welcome. Thornbury High School has a proud record of achievement for its students — for example, every Thornbury High School Victorian certificate of education student of 2006 who applied for a tertiary course received an offer from a university or TAFE college. Over 90 per cent of students received a first round offer and 80 per cent of those offers were either their first or second preference. For a third year in a row a student at the school won the Darebin Young Citizen of the Year award. Kim Nguyen won in 2005, Rein Kivivali won in 2006 and Anita Samardzija won in 2007.

The SEAL program addresses the learning needs of gifted and high-potential students. The students are capable of working at a significantly faster pace than their peers. The SEAL program seeks to develop their potential and commences as a single class in year 7. The Bracks Labor government has recognised the potential that a SEAL program can bring to students in the northern suburbs wishing to reach their full educational potential. I look forward to the implementation of the SEAL program and the obvious benefits it will bring to the student community in the

northern suburbs, and in particular to Thornbury High School.

Police Association: pre-election agreement

Mr McINTOSH (Kew) — I have a matter for the attention of the Minister for Police and Emergency Services. The matter I wish to raise relates to the secret pre-election deal entered into by the Premier and the former Minister for Police and Emergency Services with the police union. The action I seek from the minister relates to the public release of the resource allocation audit which was required by the police union. As a result of public statements made earlier today there seems to be some confusion about the allocation of the resource allocation model.

Of course everybody associated with police and emergency services understands that last February the Chief Commissioner of Police and the then police minister made a public statement about the police allocation model which related to taking police from low crime areas and moving them to more critical areas — from the city of Kingston to the city of Yarra is the only example where that took place. There was an enormous amount of public controversy at the time about taking police from Kingston and moving them to Yarra. As far as I am aware that is the only time that model has been implemented, and the idea was supported by the Liberal Party at that time.

The actual audit is quite different. The audit which was specifically required by the police union — and indeed we now find out it was entered into as part of the arrangement with the government and the police union — relates to an actual audit of where police are located in the state of Victoria. As you know, Acting Speaker, there has been some controversy in recent months about the lack of police — for example, in Bendigo, which is the subject of controversy and continues to this day. Similarly in Geelong 70 front-line police are apparently desperately needed and some 25 police are needed in Ballarat. The Police Association estimates that there should be some 600 extra police.

We also know that a number of the promises committed to by this government in relation to 24-hour police stations at Kilmore, Gisborne, Endeavour Hills, Bellarine, Rowville and Belgrave have never been met. They are only 16-hour police stations because of a lack of resources. This audit was to take place to demonstrate where these deficiencies occur. It was specifically required by the police union and indeed specifically agreed to by this government. It has nothing to do with the allocation model that was announced by the Chief Commissioner of Police. It is

an audit of where there are deficiencies in the police service.

As I said, this is something that the government should make available, because I am sure the people of Victoria would like to know where there are deficiencies in police services in the state.

Planning: Greensborough development

Mr BROOKS (Bundoora) — The matter I wish to raise is for the attention of the Minister for Planning in the other place. The action I seek is for the minister to provide detailed advice on the planning panel process in relation to Banyule planning scheme amendment C51 and to place a high priority on consideration of that amendment at the appropriate time.

Amendment C51 proposes planning scheme changes to allow for the redevelopment of the Greensborough principal activity centre, which is in my electorate. The Greensborough redevelopment is a council initiative that essentially involves the development of a new aquatic facility for the region, new public spaces, and new retail and office components that will obviously provide greater social and economic benefits not only to the people of Greensborough but also to the wider region of north-east Melbourne.

Amendment C51 is the planning scheme amendment that facilitates that development. It entails zoning changes, overlays, car parking provisions and the insertion of a number of design and development overlays into the Banyule planning scheme. The amendment was exhibited in November last year. After receiving 41 submissions the Banyule City Council considered those submissions and the amendment in February this year and referred the amendment on to an independent panel with changes.

I must say that when the amendment was originally exhibited I had some concerns about it, particularly regarding the height limits at the edges of the Greensborough principal activity centre. I surveyed the local residents and received 229 responses to the survey. The survey response was very clear. The majority of local residents support the concept of the Greensborough project. They can see the benefit of the upgraded central district of Greensborough, the new aquatic facility and a better layout of the eastern side of Greensborough. However, they were very concerned about the excessive height limits that were being proposed by the council at that time, and I am glad to say that the council in putting the amendment forward

to an independent panel has decided to reduce those height limits.

This planning scheme change, like most others, is about getting the balance right. It is about on the one hand providing development that ensures there is growth and there are better facilities for local people — and in this case for people throughout the region — while on the other hand providing some protection for the residents of the immediate area and for the character of the neighbourhood in which they live. That is the reason why I ask the Minister for Planning to provide advice on this particular planning panel process.

Sandringham: beach renourishment

Mr THOMPSON (Sandringham) — I seek the opportunity to lead a deputation of Black Rock and Sandringham residents to meet with the Minister for Water, Environment and Climate Change on the site of significant rectification works, costing what will now prove to be more than \$1.3 million, along the Sandringham Beach north of Red Bluff. Prior to Christmas the government completed a groyne there. Its original project was for a rock revetment, which would have undoubtedly destroyed the beach. Having advocated for sand renourishment to be part of the solution, the government has now installed a rock wall that one local resident has described as converting the beach into a prison yard. I quote from a recent newspaper article:

Frustrated foreshore residents have slammed a 100-metre rock groyne for ‘ruining’ their beach in Sandringham — and say the new view is like looking out across a Pentridge Prison yard.

According to a group of Southey Street beachgoers the massive million-dollar monstrosity — finished six weeks ago — has not only helped erode the beach, it has also completely obliterated views of Red Bluff cliffs.

Group leader Vicki Karalis said since work on the \$1.5 million rock outcrop — designed to protect the adjacent Royal Avenue beach — had finished in December, the once beautiful stretch of Southey Street beach had become spartan and rock strewn.

‘Six weeks ago this was a perfect beach, but directly due to the groyne, it has been destroyed’, Ms Karalis said.

In addition, in a letter in the following week’s local paper, Andrew Meier of Black Rock said that he is:

... alarmed to see the outcome of this public works (Southey Street groyne).

I walk in this area and along this beach almost every day.

I missed the walk when this area was closed off for the supposed rectification.

Now not only is the beach in parts disappearing, but the base of posts belonging to the fence dividing the beach from the foreshore is being exposed.

This is a critical matter from the point of view of local residents. It relates to one of the most scenic parts of Port Phillip Bay in metropolitan Melbourne. I reiterate that I seek a meeting with the minister on site so that he can see firsthand the impact of the works that have been undertaken. I ask him to work with the department and the Bayside City Council towards a constructive solution.

In his letter Andrew Meier further noted:

Surely in 2007 Bayside council and engineering firms can build infrastructure that gets this type of work right.

Not only is Royal Avenue beach still an issue, now we have another section.

Who is going to rectify this mess?

I ask if the minister could meet with the residents on site so that a solution which preserves one of the great beaches of Melbourne can be developed.

Consumer affairs: contact lenses

Mr SCOTT (Preston) — I raise a matter for the attention of the Minister for Consumer Affairs. It is the issue of safety relating to the use of non-prescription contact lenses. I ask that the minister take action to caution consumers about the dangers associated with using these lenses incorrectly and to encourage consumers to consult health professionals prior to using them.

Novelty or non-prescription contact lenses are worn in the same way as prescription lenses, but they do not enhance vision and are used solely to change the appearance of the eye. While these lenses do not require a prescription, they require the same cleaning, maintenance and health regime as prescription contact lenses. If novelty lenses are used inappropriately, they can lead to serious injury to the eye, including permanent damage and even blindness. It has been brought to my attention by one of my constituents that these novelty lenses are often sold on the internet or at markets or stores where no advice for their correct use is available and there is no opportunity to seek advice from an eye-care professional.

I am concerned that, without proper guidance on correct use, users may be putting their health at risk. By not following the correct procedures for cleaning and maintenance or by leaving lenses in overnight, users expose themselves to the risk of infections, cuts, allergic reactions or even blindness. Last month in New

Zealand a young man lost sight in one eye after his eye became infected from wearing a pair of novelty coloured contact lenses that he had borrowed from a friend. He had worn them for three consecutive days and developed an infection. By the time he sought medical attention his cornea had been perforated, and the emergency treatment failed.

The Bracks Government is committed to educating and informing consumers about their rights, as well as promoting product safety, and I ask the minister to take action to protect Victorian consumers.

Mount Erin Secondary College: Somerville campus

Mr BURGESS (Hastings) — I raise a matter for the attention of the Minister for Education in the other place. The action I seek is that the minister meet with the council of the Somerville campus of the Mount Erin Secondary College and also provide funds to purchase the 1.5-acre property known as Sinclair's land. This purchase would provide sufficient land to complete the building for year 11 and year 12 education at the Somerville campus.

The land to which I refer is known as the Sinclair property because it was a part of the parcel of land owned by the Sinclair family when some of that land was compulsorily acquired to build a primary and secondary college. The land currently has a school for years 7 to 10. The community expects and certainly deserves to be able complete the school by adding years 11 and 12 schooling when appropriate. There have been numerous approaches to successive Bracks education ministers by both local politicians and members of the community, who have asked that the land be secured by the state government so that the school can be completed in the future. Unfortunately those requests have fallen on deaf ears.

The reasoning provided by the state government for not purchasing the land in question was that the existing school land is already larger, at 9 hectares, than the standard size of a stand-alone secondary college in Victoria — 8.4 hectares. It has been repeatedly pointed out to successive ministers that a very large part of the existing land is unusable. A large area of the site has been classified — —

Ms Green — On a point of order, Acting Speaker, the member for Hastings is clearly reading. I think he needs to be only referring to his notes.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr Nardella) — Order! Is the honourable member for Hastings reading or referring to notes?

Mr BURGESS — I have copious notes.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr Nardella) — Order! There is no point of order.

Mr BURGESS — A very large part of the area has been classified as Aboriginal heritage land, and another large part of the area has been declared as wetlands. When you remove those areas from the existing site, it drops back to less than half the standard site.

The school is certainly needed in the area. Its completion is expected by the community, and certainly the community deserves to have its own secondary college. If we are unable to buy this land at this stage and secure it for the future and units are built there instead, the school will never be able to be completed, and that would mean that Somerville people would forever have to send their kids out to other towns to complete their secondary college education. I urge the minister to meet with the secondary college committee and to provide the funds to purchase the land.

Ambulance services: Whittlesea

Ms GREEN (Yan Yean) — I wish to raise a matter for the attention of Minister for Health. The action that I seek is the establishment of an ambulance station in the Whittlesea township to service the communities of the Whittlesea township, the Plenty growth corridor and Kinglake.

I have long been campaigning with the community for the establishment of an ambulance in the Whittlesea township. The community group working on this has correctly identified some issues in terms of reaching response times for code 1 emergencies. I was privileged, along with the member for Seymour, to table a petition on this some 12 months ago. On 9 February 2006 I hosted a meeting with the community representatives who had coordinated that petition, and I acknowledge the support of the Minister for Gaming, who is at the table, in his then role as the Parliamentary Secretary for Health. We met with the representatives and heard about their concerns and the need for that ambulance.

This government has a very good record in improving ambulance services. We know about the debacle that we inherited in 1999, and in the northern suburbs there were virtually no ambulance services at all. Since the Bracks government has come to power we have, in my own township of Diamond Creek, established an

ambulance service for the first time, and it is part of the Diamond Creek — —

Mr Andrews interjected.

Ms GREEN — Yes, an 112 per cent increase in funding across the state. The ambulance service is co-located with the police and fire services in Diamond Creek. We have also established new ambulance services at Craigieburn, Bundoora and Broadmeadows.

I strongly feel that the Whittlesea township should be the next cab off the rank. I know the Liberal Party tried to play politics with this in the lead-up to the election. After consultation with the community and discussions with the minister at the table and representatives of the Minister for Health's office, we made a firm, well-thought-out \$3.5 million election commitment to fund the ambulance station. Then we had a poorly-thought-out commitment to the electorate by the Liberal Party which was essentially just a bribe. The Liberal Party does not do its homework. It would have been like the pub with no beer. There was enough money for an ambulance station and some staff, but not for the actual vehicles — or there was enough money for the vehicles and the station, but not for the staff to operate it. It had made no allowance for recurrent funding.

I urge the minister to honour this election commitment early in this term and deliver a Whittlesea ambulance station.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr Nardella) — Order! Before I call the Minister for Consumer Affairs, I advise the honourable member for Bundoora that I will not rule his matter out today, but I want to remind honourable members that seeking advice or seeking detailed advice is not seeking action. An adjournment matter must ask for an action by a minister.

Responses

Mr ANDREWS (Minister for Consumer Affairs) — I thank the member for Preston for raising what is an important issue, and I also acknowledge his longstanding commitment to product safety and consumer protection issues more broadly. As the member for Preston knows, our government has a proud record of achievement in relation to product safety and acting to protect consumers, particularly in terms of educating them about potentially unsafe products.

Since coming to office we have become the national leader in product safety, with the seizure and banning of record numbers of unsafe products. Just before

Christmas last year we seized some 31 000 products, mainly toys, that were manifestly unsafe — and that was an important thing to do. Being vigilant in this particular area is important in terms of protecting not only vulnerable Victorians but Victorian consumers more broadly. We have a very well-coordinated approach to these matters, and education is an important part of it. It goes without saying that we will continue these efforts to ensure that consumers do not fall victim to dangerous and unsafe products.

As the member for Preston knows, there is a growing concern in the community, and in particular across the eye-care professional community, in relation to the use of non-prescription contact lenses — or plano contact lenses, as they are known — and their potential, if they are misused or not used appropriately, to cause serious injury and potentially permanent damage. If these novelty or plano contact lenses are misused, it can even lead to blindness.

It is therefore important, particularly in light of some recent examples — and one was quoted by the member for Preston — that we take action to inform consumers about the potential dangers of misusing these products. They are, I suppose, popular products, or at least they are being seen in the marketplace more often. Misuse can take the form of sharing them or swapping them between users as if they were some sort of fashion accessory. Again, practices like that can greatly increase the likelihood of infection and other related harm or damage to the eye.

I have approached my federal counterpart, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer, the Honourable Chris Pearce, who has responsibility for consumer protection matters in the commonwealth Parliament, to seek a uniform national solution to regulate the sale and supply of non-prescription contact lenses, and that has been done in good faith. We are committed to working with Mr Pearce on these issues and with the commonwealth government more broadly. In the absence of a national system, which will take some time to work up, it is important that we take action to warn consumers about the safety risks associated with the misuse of non-prescription contact lenses.

We will strongly encourage Victorian consumers to consult a qualified eye-care professional, either an ophthalmologist or an optometrist, in relation to the use of these products. I can advise the member for Preston that in regard to the direct request he made of me to take action to advise consumers, tomorrow I will issue a public warning notice about non-prescription contact

lenses pursuant to section 162A of the Fair Trading Act.

The member for Evelyn raised an issue for the Minister for Education in another place in relation to taxi services for hearing-impaired students.

The member for Mordialloc raised a matter for the Minister for Water, Environment and Climate Change in relation to future use of the Nylex site in her electorate.

The member for Swan Hill raised a matter for the Minister for Agriculture in relation to supporting rural women to attend an important conference in South Africa.

The member for Northcote raised a matter for the Minister for Education in the other place in relation to select entry programs at Thornbury High School.

The member for Kew raised an issue for the Minister for Police and Emergency Services in relation to policy commitments.

The member for Bundoora raised a matter for the Minister for Planning in the other place in relation to amendments to the Banyule planning scheme.

The member for Sandringham raised a matter for the Minister for Water, Environment and Climate Change in relation to a site visit in respect of the protection of local beaches.

The member for Hastings raised a matter for the Minister for Education in another place in relation to the Somerville campus of the Mount Erin Secondary College.

Finally, the member for Yan Yean raised a matter for the Minister for Health in relation to the establishment of an ambulance station in Whittlesea.

I will refer those matters for the attention and action of those ministers.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr Nardella) —
Order! The house is now adjourned.

**House adjourned 4.37 p.m. until Tuesday,
13 March.**



