

**PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA**

**PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

**FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT**

**FIRST SESSION**

**Tuesday, 8 March 2016**

**(Extract from book 3)**

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# HANSARD<sup>150</sup>



1866–2016

Following a select committee investigation, Victorian Hansard was conceived when the following amended motion was passed by the Legislative Assembly on 23 June 1865:

That in the opinion of this house, provision should be made to secure a more accurate report of the debates in Parliament, in the form of *Hansard*.

The sessional volume for the first sitting period of the Fifth Parliament, from 12 February to 10 April 1866, contains the following preface dated 11 April:

As a preface to the first volume of “Parliamentary Debates” (new series), it is not inappropriate to state that prior to the Fifth Parliament of Victoria the newspapers of the day virtually supplied the only records of the debates of the Legislature.

With the commencement of the Fifth Parliament, however, an independent report was furnished by a special staff of reporters, and issued in weekly parts.

This volume contains the complete reports of the proceedings of both Houses during the past session.

In 2016 the Hansard Unit of the Department of Parliamentary Services continues the work begun 150 years ago of providing an accurate and complete report of the proceedings of both houses of the Victorian Parliament.



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The Hon. P. L. WALSH

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McCurdy, Mr Timothy Logan	Ovens Valley	Nats	Wynne, Mr Richard William	Richmond	ALP

<sup>1</sup>Elected 31 October 2015

<sup>2</sup>Resigned 3 September 2015

<sup>3</sup>Resigned 3 September 2015

<sup>4</sup>Elected 14 March 2015

<sup>5</sup>Elected 31 October 2015

<sup>6</sup>Resigned 2 February 2015

**PARTY ABBREVIATIONS**

ALP — Labor Party; Greens — The Greens;  
Ind — Independent; LP — Liberal Party; Nats — The Nationals.

## Legislative Assembly committees

**Privileges Committee** — Ms Allan, Ms D’Ambrosio, Mr Morris, Ms Neville, Ms Ryan, Ms Sandell, Mr Scott and Mr Wells.

**Standing Orders Committee** — The Speaker, Ms Allan, Ms Asher, Mr Brooks, Mr Clark, Mr Hibbins, Mr Hodgett, Ms Kairouz, Mr Nardella, Ms Ryan and Ms Sheed.

## Joint committees

**Accountability and Oversight Committee** — (*Assembly*): Mr Angus, Mr Gidley, Mr Staikos and Ms Thomson.  
(*Council*): Ms Bath, Mr Purcell and Ms Symes.

**Dispute Resolution Committee** — (*Assembly*): Ms Allan, Mr Clark, Mr Merlino, Mr M. O’Brien, Mr Pakula, Ms Richardson and Mr Walsh. (*Council*): Mr Bourman, Mr Dalidakis, Ms Dunn, Mr Jennings and Ms Wooldridge.

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(*Council*): Mr Bourman, Mr Elasmarr and Mr Melhem.

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**Family and Community Development Committee** — (*Assembly*): Ms Couzens, Mr Edbrooke, Ms Edwards, Ms Kealy, Ms McLeish and Ms Sheed. (*Council*): Mr Finn.

**House Committee** — (*Assembly*): The Speaker (*ex officio*), Mr J. Bull, Mr Crisp, Mrs Fyffe, Mr Staikos, Ms Suleyman and Mr Thompson. (*Council*): The President (*ex officio*), Mr Eideh, Ms Hartland, Ms Lovell, Mr Mulino and Mr Young.

**Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Committee** — (*Assembly*): Mr Hibbins, Mr D. O’Brien, Mr Richardson, Ms Thomson and Mr Wells. (*Council*): Mr Ramsay and Ms Symes.

**Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee** — (*Assembly*): Mr Dixon, Mr Howard, Ms Suleyman, Mr Thompson and Mr Tilley. (*Council*): Mr Eideh and Ms Patten.

**Public Accounts and Estimates Committee** — (*Assembly*): Mr Dimopoulos, Mr Morris, Mr D. O’Brien, Mr Pearson, Mr T. Smith and Ms Ward. (*Council*): Dr Carling-Jenkins, Ms Pennicuik and Ms Shing.

**Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee** — (*Assembly*): Mr J. Bull, Ms Blandthorn, Mr Dimopoulos, Ms Kilkenny and Mr Pesutto. (*Council*): Ms Bath and Mr Dalla-Riva.



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## Tuesday, 8 March 2016

**The SPEAKER (Hon. Telmo Languiller) took the chair at 12.04 p.m. and read the prayer.**

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

**The SPEAKER** — We acknowledge the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future, and elders from other communities who may be here today.

### INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

**The SPEAKER** — Today International Women's Day is being celebrated around the world. Let us celebrate this day by honouring the women members of the Parliament, past and present, for all they have done to build a better society for all of us.

Today we applaud the many achievements of women across the world, including in our own diverse communities here in Victoria. Let us join together in pledging justice and equality for all women. At the same time, let us recognise and address the challenges that still confront many women in their day-to-day lives. For this year's International Women's Day the United Nations has chosen the theme, and I quote, 'Planet 50-50 by 2030 — Step It Up for Gender Equality'. The world will be a far better place when full equality becomes a reality.

### CONDOLENCES

#### George 'Ian' Davis

**The SPEAKER** — Order! I advise the house of the death of George 'Ian' Davis, the member of the Legislative Assembly for the electoral district of Essendon from 1992 to 1996.

I ask members to rise in their places as a mark of respect to the memory of the deceased.

#### Honourable members stood in their places.

**The SPEAKER** — Order! I shall convey a message of sympathy from the house to the relatives of the late Ian Davis.

### DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

**The SPEAKER** — Order! On behalf of the Premier, the Leader of the Opposition and all members of the Legislative Assembly I wish to welcome

Senator William H. Payne, Minority Whip of the New Mexico State Legislature.

Further, we wish to welcome retired Brigadier General Kenneth Bergquist from the United States Army. Welcome.

**Ms Green** — On a point of order, Speaker, I am very glad that the house is now doing a recognition to country at the beginning of each sitting week, but I respectfully ask you, as Speaker, to examine whether or not as a further mark of respect members of the house may be asked to remain standing for this acknowledgement after the Lord's Prayer. I think that would be an appropriate way to recognise the traditional owners of this place, and I ask you to examine that before the next sitting week.

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The Chair will examine the matter raised by the member for Yan Yean.

### ABSENCE OF MINISTER

**Mr ANDREWS (Premier)** — The Minister for Equality will be absent from question time today, and the Minister for Health, who is also the Minister for Ambulance Services, will answer any questions on his behalf in relation to all of his portfolio responsibilities.

### QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE and MINISTERS STATEMENTS

#### Water policy

**Mr WALSH (Murray Plains)** — My question is to the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water. If Melbourne's water storages are now at critically low levels, as claimed by the government, why has the minister previously not taken any action, such as imposing stage 1 or stage 2 water restrictions as set out in Melbourne Water's water security framework?

**Ms NEVILLE (Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water)** — I thank the Leader of The Nationals for his question. I must say that there have been a lot of people trying to provide me with advice on water policy over the last period of time. In fact we have the member for South Barwon apparently suggesting that I may have been deliberately reducing our water supplies in Geelong — apparently I have been drinking a lot of water and having a lot of showers. What I can say is that I may be powerful but I have not yet got the power to make it rain or not rain.

The last person I am taking advice from is the former Minister for Water, whose biggest claim to fame is

losing millions of dollars of taxpayers money through the Office of Living Victoria. If the former water minister would have a bit of a look at the December outlook reports that were put out by the water authorities, he would see that they said at the time that we needed to make sure that Melbourne water supplies did not go from the high zone to the medium zone. Unfortunately we are in the medium zone; we are hitting that zone. We are not talking about a water crisis in Melbourne; we are not. We are talking about taking sensible action, based on advice, to provide a buffer for Melbourne's water supply.

Last year we had the lowest — lower than the millennium drought — inflows into our storages. Lower than the millennium drought into our storages! The buffer that has been suggested provides a third of what went down in our storages. We hear a lot over on the other side. Last week we had targets — 115, no, 190, 130! We had targets from those opposite; those people who actually abolished those targets because they were political spin! This week we have heard from the Leader of the Opposition, 'Water restrictions! Water restrictions!'. We would need to be providing hundreds of thousands of buckets to people because we would need to have level 4 restrictions, and we still would not deliver 50 gigalitres!

This is sensible. It is the right, balanced approach to ensuring we are securing Melbourne's livability and securing jobs and our economy. We will make the right decisions based on the best possible advice, unlike the former water minister who has been driven completely by politics on this issue.

*Supplementary question*

**Mr WALSH** (Murray Plains) — With Melbourne's water storages almost double the level they were at the end of 2010 and with more than five years water supply on hand today, why is the government misleading Melburnians and deliberately trying to fabricate a water crisis in Melbourne?

**Ms NEVILLE** (Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water) — Once again can I say we have always said that this is an insurance policy. It is an insurance policy to protect the important part of our economy, and we know water security is absolutely critical to jobs, to the economy and to livability. We are not going to play the politics of those opposite. The one who did not follow advice is the person sitting over there; the former water minister did not follow advice. He went to every length he could to make sure this plant was never turned on.

**Mr Walsh** — On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, I ask you to bring the minister back to actually answering the question as to why she is trying to fabricate a water crisis to deceive Melburnians.

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The minister, to continue.

**Ms NEVILLE** — The only people talking 'crisis' are those across the table. We are talking about a sensible, balanced approach to provide a buffer in times when it is dry, it is hot and our inflow is at the lowest level, even lower than the millennium drought. This is a sensible approach based on advice, and we will not put at risk Victorians' water security.

**Ministers statements: International Women's Day**

**Ms RICHARDSON** (Minister for Women) — Today people around the world are being asked to make a pledge to actively improve the status of women as part of International Women's Day. Tragically at the current pace of reform the World Economic Forum estimates that it will take until 2133 before we see equality between men and women — that is, 117 years from now — and this is despite the overwhelming evidence that shows more women in leadership positions leads to greater productivity.

But gender equality is not just about improving productivity, important though that is, and gender equality is not just about fairness, important though that is. Gender equality is also about keeping women safe from harm. It is a simple equation: more equality, less violence. That is why the Andrews government is embarking on a Victorian first — a gender equality strategy, with submissions closing on 18 March.

But as today is the day to make a pledge for women, and given that my mum is in the public gallery today and that we are just three weeks away from receiving the most significant report into violence against women, today I make this pledge — a pledge for women and, importantly, also for their children. As we implement the recommendations of the royal commission and redesign our family violence system, we will put victims at the centre of our response, working in partnership with survivors and the sector, something that has never happened before. We will heed the words of Rosie Batty, who said:

People who make decisions about people like us cannot know what it's like ... but you can experience it deeply if you listen to our voices.

Making a pledge is about being accountable, and it is to the women and children, long silenced about the harshest of consequences of gender inequality, that we make this commitment.

### Water policy

**Mr WALSH** (Murray Plains) — I remind the minister that Melbourne water is actually in the secure zone, not the medium zone. Before determining that the way forward is to turn on the desalination plant, why has the minister not instigated one single water efficiency project — —

**The SPEAKER** — Order! I ask the Leader of The Nationals to start again and to refer the question to a particular minister.

**Mr WALSH** — Thank you very much, Speaker. My question is to the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water. Before determining that the only way forward is to turn on the desalination plant, why has the minister not instigated one single water efficiency project or water use initiative for Melbourne?

**Ms NEVILLE** (Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water) — I thank the Leader of The Nationals for his question. Well, how extraordinary a question that is. Let us go back to Target 155, which actually saved 60 billion litres of water.

**An honourable member** — Who abolished that?

**Ms NEVILLE** — Who abolished that? Those opposite abolished that. If I could just provide to the house a quote. In fact there are a number of quotes, but I will just provide a quote — —

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The Chair is unable to hear the minister. The minister is entitled to silence. The opposition asked a question of the minister. The opposition will cooperate and allow the minister to respond to that question.

**Ms NEVILLE** — In removing the Target 155 water conservation program, the then water minister, the Leader of The Nationals, said:

Target 155 ... was more about politics than genuine water conservation.

There was no actual punitive enforcement of it.

It was effectively an aspiration and just political spin ...

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**Ms NEVILLE** — The other thing that those opposite got rid of was in fact that our top 1500 biggest water users — businesses — were required to save water under legislation, and the then so-called environment minister got rid of it.

**Mr Walsh** — On a point of order, Speaker, on the issue of relevance, the question was about what this water minister has actually done for our water efficiency projects and water re-use, not a speech about previous actions by a previous government.

**The SPEAKER** — Order! I do ask the minister to come back to answer the question.

**Ms NEVILLE** — I would have thought that the former Minister for Water would understand the issue about reducing consumption and how we improve our storage levels. So let us take on one side reducing consumption issues, which is a — —

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**Ms NEVILLE** — So over the last 12 months I have spent many opportunities seeing a range of stormwater management and treatment projects, particularly in the new developments.

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER** — Order! I warn the member for Gembrook.

**Ms NEVILLE** — So it is being able to in our new developments look at opportunities to reduce consumption in order to enable us to conserve more water.

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**Ms NEVILLE** — Stormwater, recycled water, third pipes — we can list the whole number of projects that we have supported in the last 12 months. We are reducing consumption. We have got a long list of projects over the last 12 months which were about reducing consumption. This is a government — —

**An honourable member** interjected.

**The SPEAKER** — Order! I warned the member for Gembrook. I will not warn him again.

**Mr Walsh** — On a point of order, Speaker, on the issue of relevance again, this is not about what the minister has supported that the previous government did. It is a question about what the minister has actually done in her own right.

**Ms Allan** — On the point of order, Speaker, the question from the leader of the National Party was around water efficiency projects, and if I recall correctly, just before the minister was sat down and interrupted by the point of order, she was going through an entire list of projects over the past 12 months that she has been working on as minister. I would suggest the leader of the National Party might be a bit embarrassed at the poorness of his questions and should allow the minister to continue answering the question.

**Mr R. Smith** — On the point of order, Speaker, the question was about water initiatives that this minister has initiated, and that is not what the minister is answering. Can you please answer ask the minister to come back to answering the question as it was asked, not as she would like to answer it.

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The Chair is unable to direct the minister to respond in a particular way. The minister was relevant. The minister, to continue.

**Ms NEVILLE** — Let us make it really clear: Who has built the water grid in Victoria? It is the Labor Party that has built the water grid. Who have opposed every kilometre of that grid? It is those opposite? We understand the importance of —

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The Chair is unable to hear the minister. I hear reports around that the media is unable to hear the minister, and therefore the public. I ask members to cooperate and to allow the minister to continue in silence.

**Ms NEVILLE** — Our commitment is to continue to improve the water grid, to continue to ensure water security, and that is about investing in innovative ways to reduce consumption through stormwater, through recycling and through our redevelopments through *Plan Melbourne*. We have supported a number of those initiatives, but we need this buffer in our storages to ensure our water security.

**Mr R. Smith** — On a point of order, Speaker, with reference to your ruling that you are unable to determine how a minister answers, you can in fact subsequent to that determine under sessional order 11(2) whether or not the answer was responsive. The question was about —

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The member for Warrandyte, to be heard in silence.

**Mr R. Smith** — Did you get rolled between 8 o'clock and 10 o'clock last night?

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The member will resume his seat. I warn the member for Warrandyte. The Chair has asked the member to resume his seat. The member shall do so as requested.

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The Leader of The Nationals will resume his seat. The Chair has ruled on the subject matter. I stand by my ruling.

*Supplementary question*

**Mr WALSH** (Murray Plains) — Again I direct my question to the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water: is the minister's weekend announcement simply a manufactured water crisis for Melbourne, designed to justify the use of Labor's white elephant desalination plant?

**Ms NEVILLE** (Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water) — I thank the Leader of The Nationals for his question. Absolutely not. We have always said, one, this is an insurance policy to insure our water security and, two, that we would follow the best possible advice, unlike the former water minister, who absolutely played politics with this. It was only those opposite who were so ideologically opposed to this that they went to great lengths to make sure that not one drop of water was ever going to come from that.

That has put at risk some of the South Gippsland towns, and it has put at risk Geelong and Ballarat. This is a sensible decision based on advice. If anyone had a look at the advice that sits on the Melbourne Water website, if we were not to follow that advice, people would rightly be critical of our putting at risk Melbourne's water security. We will not do that.

### **Ministers statements: water policy**

**Mr ANDREWS** (Premier) — I am very pleased to provide further information to the house and to the Victorian community in relation to the efforts of this government to secure our water supplies and to make sure that we have the economic certainty and the certainty for families and communities that are so essential.

On Sunday the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water and I made it clear to all Victorians that the government would place an order after having

received independent expert advice. On matters of water those opposite are neither independent nor expert. They are experts at not ordering water when they are told to order water. They are experts at opposing every inch of pipeline laid in this state. They are experts in opposing the water grid, every element of it delivered by Labor for communities across our state.

We need a balanced approach, and that is what this government is delivering: the reintroduction of Target 155, which was shamefully abolished by those opposite; and the order, based on independent expert advice, of 50 billion litres of water to provide a 12 per cent top up to our storages, a buffer against continued strong population growth.

There is every expectation that our catchments will remain dry and inflows into our reservoirs will be low. We have seen significant declines in our storage levels. We have a changing climate and a growing Victoria, and it is only this government that is prepared to not only build the infrastructure we need but use it when it is the right thing to do. Every Victorian benefits from a government that is prepared to make the right decisions to invest and to secure our state's water resources now and for the future.

### Water policy

**Mr WALSH** (Murray Plains) — My question, again, is to the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water — —

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The member for Yan Yean will come to order. The Leader of The Nationals is entitled to silence. The Leader of The Nationals, to start again. The Chair must be able to hear the questions in order to adjudicate.

**Mr WALSH** — Thank you very much, Speaker. My question is again to the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water. I refer to the government's decision to attempt to justify its white elephant desalination plant by placing an order for 50 gegalitres of water and to the fact that it has appointed former Deputy Premier John Thwaites as chair of Melbourne Water on 1 October last year, and I ask: is the reason the minister appointed John Thwaites simply because she wanted him there to rubberstamp her use of the desalination plant?

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water is entitled to

silence. The minister, to respond to the substantive question put by the Leader of The Nationals.

**Ms NEVILLE** (Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water) — Thank you, Speaker, and I thank the Leader of The Nationals for his question. As far as I recall, John Thwaites was not the chair at the time that the former minister got his advice in March 2012, and that advice is very clear that 50 gegalitres should be ordered. I am pretty sure that the former water minister, if he had not played politics at the time, would have been aware of quite an extensive process that underpins the advice process. That advice process is based on a set of five principles that are weighed up by the water authorities, that access Bureau of Meteorology data and information, and that look at flow levels. So he can impugn John Thwaites — —

**Mr Walsh** — On a point of order, Speaker, on the issue of relevance, the question was about the appointment of John Thwaites as the chairman of Melbourne Water so that he could rubberstamp the desalination advice. It is not an issue about meteorology and other things. It is about the minister's appointment of John Thwaites — —

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The Leader of The Nationals, to continue in silence on a point of order. The Chair will begin to withdraw members from the house if interruptions occur while the Chair is on his feet.

**Mr Walsh** — On the issue of relevance, Speaker, I ask you to draw the minister back to answering the question about the appointment of John Thwaites as the chair of Melbourne Water and the fact that he was appointed so that he, as a supporter of the desalination plant, would actually sign off on the advice.

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The Chair does not uphold the point of order. The minister, to continue; the minister was being responsive.

**Ms NEVILLE** — The Leader of The Nationals may want to impugn John Thwaites. In fact I think the Leader of The Nationals may have actually utilised John Thwaites in some of the Office of Living Victoria stuff, so on one hand the member was happy to do that. I am not going to impugn our water authorities and our water boards. We went through a process of appointing the best people for challenging roles. We went through that process, and as part of International Women's Day we were able to achieve 50 per cent of people on our water boards being women. We have the best people with the right skills to take us into the future.

The water authorities of the time, including people like Alan Stockdale, who was chair of City West Water, were the ones who provided advice to the then minister in March 2012 to place an order. Our water authorities, the Bureau of Meteorology and the information and the data that we have absolutely suggest that we need to make this order, as they did back in 2012.

Let us look at the facts. In some parts of Victoria we have had the lowest inflows we have ever had. In Melbourne we have had lower than the average of the millennium drought inflows into our storages last year, and that builds on the year before, when we also had a decline. We have got the balance right. It is about adding to our storage levels while reducing consumption through Target 155, which will deliver 20 billion litres. To get anywhere near that through restrictions we would need to put in place level 4 restrictions, which would only deliver 40 gigalitres. The cost of that to our economy, to our community, to our sporting groups and to our health system is too great a price to pay. That is why we have an insurance policy, and that is why we have taken the advice of the experts and made the decision to provide this buffer for Melbourne, Geelong, Ballarat, Kyneton and Sunbury. This is an important decision that will assist Melburnians in the future.

*Supplementary question*

**Mr WALSH** (Murray Plains) — My supplementary question is to the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water. I refer the minister again to the appointment of John Thwaites as chair of Melbourne Water, an appointment made simply to rubberstamp the use of the desalination plant. I ask the minister: can she confirm that this is the reason she broke with longstanding tradition and spilt all water board positions — to put politics ahead of cost-of-living pressures?

**Ms NEVILLE** (Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water) — I am not sure what the former water minister was doing at the time he made his appointments, but I can tell you they were filled with mates. We went through a robust, independent process, including with the Victorian Farmers Federation, which was making recommendations on who should sit on our water boards — and we have got the best people. We have reached 50 per cent of membership by women, which calls for a great celebration — it is the first time ever. We have got strong boards providing strong advice to government about our water policy, tackling the big issues of population growth and climate change. The reality is it is not raining.

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**Ms NEVILLE** — It is not raining and it is having an effect on our communities. We are not the ones who are playing politics with water. Water sustains life. We should be above politics to ensure water security for as many Victorians as we can.

**Ministers statements: water policy**

**Mr PALLAS** (Treasurer) — I rise to update the house on a new project of the government to secure our water supply, protect business confidence and provide certainty. The desalination plant is Victoria's insurance policy against drought, and of course it is appropriate that as a government it makes economic sense for us to claim on that policy. We have made this order of 50 gigalitres in response to our rapidly diminishing reserves and to allow water-reliant businesses to plan for the future with confidence.

Mark Stone, the chief executive of the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, acknowledges that this water order will, and I quote:

... strengthen Victoria's water security and provide all Victorians with greater confidence in the supply of this valuable resource.

Victoria is dependent on secure, high-quality water supplies for a prosperous economy. The *Age* put it even more simply. It said:

The cost of running out of water would be cataclysmic.

Any dispassionate and rational assessment of the situation shows that this makes a great deal of economic sense. I will leave it to those opposite to tell us how an embittered, vindictive, pack of climate deniers see it. These actions are an investment made with an eye to the next 30 years not the next media cycle, because we are getting on with it, unaided by the priceless contributions of Mr Office of Living Better than Victorians over there.

Businesses deserve the certainty of a secure water supply, which the desalination plant provides. Businesses need confidence to rely on secure and affordable access to water.

**Water policy**

**Mr WALSH** (Murray Plains) — My question again is to the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water. Given Melbourne water customers paid \$750 million to build the north-south pipeline, who does the minister intend will pay the tens of millions of

dollars it will cost to reverse the pipeline — Melbourne water customers or northern Victorian irrigators?

**Ms NEVILLE** (Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water) — I thank the Leader of The Nationals for his question. I am sure the Leader of The Nationals is aware that we are seeking advice on this. I understand from today that the Leader of the Opposition does not believe I should ever accept advice and take advice, that I should just make up my own mind on all these issues. But I am seeking advice from experts about this. If anyone had listened to my comments over the last few days, clearly the issue here about the north is that we have significant issues in the north for our irrigators. We have some of the lowest inflows into the Murray River we have ever had as well. If you look at the Murray-Darling Basin Authority website, you will see it very clearly, very starkly.

Firstly, let us look at the north–south pipeline in terms of a piece of infrastructure, which I know that those opposite opposed every step of the way. Of course the price of water is a critical factor in determining whether that is viable or not, and that is what we are looking at. But in the meantime, because we have been able to access desalination water to provide a buffer for Melbourne, the water entitlement of Melbourne customers that is sitting in Lake Eildon at the moment has been made available for northern irrigators to help offset and keep downward pressure on prices in the north and provide access to a greater amount of productive water in the north. That is a sensible decision. Of course, in weighing up what we do in the future in relation to the grid, we have been looking at what the cost of the infrastructure is, what the cost of the water would be and whether it is viable or not — and we will take advice on that.

I just want to run through it. If we left water policy up to those opposite, we would not have the goldfields super-pipe and Ballarat and Bendigo would be out of water. Imagine where Wimmera and Mallee would be without the Wimmera–Mallee pipeline. Imagine where Geelong would be today without the fact that we can access —

**Mr Walsh** — On a point of order, Speaker, on the issue of relevance, I would ask you to bring the minister back to answering the question about who is going to pay the cost of reversing the north–south pipeline. It is not about other pipelines around Victoria. The question was very specifically about the cost of reversing the north–south pipeline.

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The minister was being responsive generally. The minister, to continue and to respond.

**Ms NEVILLE** — Again, I am talking about the water grid, which is a whole package of water infrastructure that is about providing water security across our state. We are looking at opportunities for how best to utilise that water grid and what else we might need to do. For example, with the Wedderburn community, how might we connect that into the Wimmera–Mallee; how might we connect the Wimmera–Mallee into the broader grid system; what best can we use the north–south pipeline for — should we be reversing it; does that make sense? That is the expert advice that we are receiving. And of course how do we connect South Gippsland in — where they have two outlets out of the desalination plant — to provide water security?

We are taking advice. We are working through the issues. We are working with local communities to ensure that we can deliver water security as best we can to be able to buffer our state against population growth and climate change. We will continue to work with Victorians to give them a greater sense of water security than they ever had under those opposite.

*Supplementary question*

**Mr WALSH** (Murray Plains) — My supplementary is to the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water. With the government turning on the desalination plant for political purposes and also planning to reverse the north–south pipeline at the cost of tens of millions of dollars, can the minister confirm that Labor’s latest water policy panic is the start of another massive increase in water bills under this Labor government, just like the doubling of bills under the previous Labor government?

**Ms NEVILLE** (Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water) — It astounds me how little those opposite know about water. I have been out in local communities, and I saw what the lack of water does to families, to communities and to our economy. It causes huge distress; lack of water causes huge distress. We do not work on the basis of, ‘If it rains in your area, good luck to you, and if it does not, you are on your own’. We are not letting local regional communities stand on their own. We will work with them to deliver better water security where we can. We are not abandoning them like those opposite do.

**Ministers statements: water policy**

**Mr MERLINO** (Minister for Education) — I rise to announce to the house changes the government is making to the Schools Water Efficiency Program by reintroducing the Target 155 campaign. Victoria's desalination plant was not a quick solution to the drought occurring at that time. It was a long-term investment so that in future times of drought Victoria would not be caught out. Victorian schools will not have to endure the effects of drought due to the action of the Andrews government in placing an order for water from the Victorian desalination plant and reactivating Target 155.

Melbourne's water storages have been declining steadily for the past two years and dropped by 152 gigalitres in the past year alone.

**Ms Kealy** interjected.

**The SPEAKER** — Order! I warn the member for Lowan.

**Mr MERLINO** — The time has come. The millennium drought had a severe impact on schools around the state. In a number of cases — —

**Ms Kealy** interjected.

**Questions and statements interrupted.**

**SUSPENSION OF MEMBER**

**Member for Lowan**

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The member for Lowan will withdraw from the house for 1 hour.

**Honourable member for Lowan withdrew from chamber.**

**QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE and  
MINISTERS STATEMENTS**

**Ministers statements: water policy**

**Questions and statements resumed.**

**Mr MERLINO** (Minister for Education) — Students lost their school ovals, dust bowls replaced play spaces and ovals became unsafe due to surface hardness. Principals had to undertake daily inspections to make sure that the ovals and the play spaces were safe. Schools like Melton Secondary College had to close both of its ovals in 2008 because of safety

concerns. I remember visiting Ballarat High School in 2008 to deliver funding — —

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The Chair will continue to have members withdraw from the house should they continue to be disruptive. The minister is entitled to silence. The minister, to continue in silence.

**Mr MERLINO** — We do not want our schools to have to go through hardship if we can prevent it. It is important that we use water wisely. That is why we have reactivated the Target 155 water conservation campaign which will bring the Schools Water Efficiency Program to the fore again. Rather than sticking its head in the sand, this government is taking action.

**Port of Melbourne lease**

**Mr GUY** (Leader of the Opposition) — My question is to the Treasurer. I refer to the Treasurer's unseemly rant during question time on the Thursday of the last sitting week, and I ask: when the Treasurer came to question time last sitting week, had anyone on his own side bothered to inform him that on that very morning his own government had actually agreed to endorse the coalition's proposed way forward on the port lease bill?

**Mr PALLAS** (Treasurer) — I am devastated by the question from the Leader of the Opposition! I am devastated that he thinks that my razor-sharp, precise analysis of the commentary and the expertise of the opposition would be called a rant. Those opposite are experts in rants, so they should never distort the use of the word.

Let us be very clear: for literally months now the people of Victoria have had the opportunity to look at the port of Melbourne lease bill, a vital piece of legislation. But the Leader of the Opposition would well know, because I have sat in a meeting with him, that all negotiations conducted on this side of house have been signed by our principal negotiator in the upper house and me. Let us be clear — —

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**Mr PALLAS** — We will not be distracted by the triviality and the irrelevance of opposition. We are in the business of getting on and delivering the vital infrastructure that we promised Victorians, removing 50 of our most dangerous and congested level crossings, while those opposite sit by and remain totally meaningless in this process. While we get on and

deliver the 10 000 jobs under Project 10 000 and what all Victorians had been sitting back urging previous government to do. We remember what those opposite were like in government: they acted decisively while glaciers whizzed past them. They were the sheer definition of sloth.

Those on this side have a very clear view. We are consistent, united and absolutely assured about what we will be doing. We are proceeding to lease the port of Melbourne. This is good for Victoria, it is good for jobs and it is good for an effective, functioning freight and logistics industry. We are united. We are convinced that this is in the state's best interests, and we are pleased, might I say, that the opposition has finally come to the same conclusion.

*Supplementary question*

**Mr GUY** (Leader of the Opposition) — The Treasurer made threats to bypass Parliament, which he never followed through on. He made the threat of an early election, which he quickly backtracked on. He has ranted, abused and stamped his feet throughout the whole process and even said, 'When I start rock hard, I stay rock hard'.

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The Leader of the Opposition, with a straight face, to continue.

**Mr GUY** — With the Treasurer's credibility in tatters and Gavin Jennings having to bail him out, is not the Treasurer's position now just completely untenable?

**The SPEAKER** — Order! Given the question, I think the Chair is entitled to make the point that the Treasurer requires some time to compose himself and respond. Question time has experienced all sorts of questions. The Leader of the Opposition asked a question and the Treasurer will respond to that question.

**Mr PALLAS** (Treasurer) — I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question. When I said 'rock hard' I meant granite — not the talcum powder puffs over there, whose position has gone from scathing opposition to promising the people of Victoria they were going to do the same thing to — —

**Mr Guy** — On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, it was a simple question to the Treasurer about whether his position is now untenable. He might be reminded that the bill is not through yet, and that granite might go flaccid.

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The Treasurer, to continue. I remind the Treasurer he has 36 seconds left. The Chair asks the Treasurer to come back to answering the question.

**Mr PALLAS** (Treasurer) — I do not know how you could take this question seriously, but I will try. What the Leader of the Opposition has done just then is demonstrate for any point in time, for any political opportunity, he will try to find a crack, a glimpse of light, to try and derail the development of good public policy. So is he for this bill or is he not? Because if he is not, he should just say it. He should tell the people of Victoria that he stands for nothing and believes in nothing.

**Ministers statements: water policy**

**Ms NEVILLE** (Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water) — I rise to inform the house of new information regarding Geelong's water storages. I have been advised that Barwon Water will be commencing a process to operate the Melbourne–Geelong connector pipeline at the start of April of this year in preparation for supply to customers by the end of April.

Barwon Water has written to Melbourne Water to inform it that it will require access to 13 megalitres per day, totalling 6 billion litres of water over 12 months from the Thomson Dam. As Geelong customers have already paid for this through the building of the pipe, there will be no additional cost. But of course this will also benefit the Colac residents, as we are connecting at the moment the pipe between Colac and Geelong. So this is another example of why it is absolutely vital that we took the advice of our Melbourne water authorities — advice about providing a critical buffer.

We are not taking advice from the failed water minister. We are not taking advice from the member for South Barwon, who clearly does not understand how rainfall works. We are not taking the advice of Simon Ramsay in the Legislative Council, who claims that Geelong residents are going to pay more when in fact the reality here is about water security for Geelong residents. It is about ensuring that they get the benefits of what they have already paid for through the Geelong pipeline.

The one person I may, however, take advice from is in fact the Prime Minister, who said:

As our weather becomes more unpredictable, we've got to have water options that are not climate dependent, so recycling is one and, of course, desalination is another.

That was our Prime Minister. So we may take water advice from the Prime Minister but certainly not from those opposite.

## RULINGS BY THE CHAIR

### Constituency questions

**The SPEAKER** — Order! On 25 February the member for Burwood took a point of order regarding the admissibility of constituency questions asked by the members for Broadmeadows and Frankston on that day. The point of order centred around whether the members sought information, which is admissible, or requested action, which is not. I have reviewed both questions and advise that the question from the member for Broadmeadows asked for information and therefore is in order. The member for Frankston's question asked the minister to undertake an action by providing an update, and I rule that out of order.

## CONSTITUENCY QUESTIONS

### Caulfield electorate

**Mr SOUTHWICK** (Caulfield) — (Question 6904) My constituency question is to the Minister for Energy and Resources. The Andrews Labor government has stated that a reason for building sky rail over the Grange Road level crossing is that a gas transmission main runs across the rail corridor next to Grange Road. Given that the proposed sky rail over Grange Road will be, at its highest point on the line, up to 12.5 metres long, and it is questionable as to how it will feed into Caulfield station and affect the local amenity, when is the gas main due for replacement around Grange Road, and has any other level crossing removal replaced a gas main in the process?

### Dandenong electorate

**Ms WILLIAMS** (Dandenong) — (Question 6905) My constituency question is for the Minister for Public Transport and Minister for Employment. How will the removal of the level crossing at Chandler Road impact on the business owners, visitors and residents accessing the Railway Parade shopping strip opposite the level crossing? Currently the residents around the Chandler Road level crossing in Noble Park are divided by the railway line that splits the suburb in two. Motorists are held up on their daily commute with the boom gates down up to 55.8 per cent of the time during peak hour. The divide is real, and it seriously affects the access and livability of the area. The impacts of the railway divide are felt alike by nearby residents and traders who use and run the businesses on Railway Parade. How will

the removal of the dangerous and congested level crossing impact on constituents in my electorate who frequent the Noble Park shopping strip?

### Ovens Valley electorate

**Mr McCURDY** (Ovens Valley) — (Question 6906) My constituency question is to the Attorney-General. The violent deaths of local residents 11-year-old Zoe Buttigieg and Whorouly mother of two Karen Chetcuti in separate incidents in the past six months have been devastating to our Ovens Valley community and have reverberated throughout the entire state of Victoria and Australia. On Sunday about 1000 people marched together along Wangaratta's main street to unite and share the message that enough is enough, to call for law reform and to address violence.

The march in Wangaratta highlighted the community's plea for changes to our criminal justice system. People want tougher sentencing laws and parole conditions for violent offenders. In calling for a stronger justice system, there is a focus on ensuring perpetrators are no longer a threat to society. Suggested reforms to the justice system include harsher jail sentences, parole reforms with mandatory supervision and a public sex offender register. The message from the community is clear: enough is enough. On today of all days, International Women's Day, I ask: will the Attorney-General commit to introducing tougher laws around parole and sentencing to ensure community values and expectations are reflected in the state of Victoria?

### Eltham electorate

**Ms WARD** (Eltham) — (Question 6907) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services and Minister for Consumer Affairs, Gaming and Liquor Regulation. I understand the negotiations with the United Firefighters Union regarding the Country Fire Authority's enterprise bargaining agreement have hit another roadblock. What are the ongoing issues, and what is standing in the way of signing a new agreement?

### Evelyn electorate

**Mrs FYFFE** (Evelyn) — (Question 6908) My question is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. A local constituent, who is also a local police officer and parent at St Mary's Catholic Primary School, has brought an issue to my attention relating to the movement of traffic in and out of the school and its effects on the safety of all users.

Clegg Road is becoming increasingly congested following a steady rise in the local school population of St Mary's Catholic Primary School and the numbers of parents driving children to school. Traffic banks up behind vehicles turning right from Clegg Road into the school grounds. The traffic along Clegg Road has also increased, and this and the narrowness of the single lanes and unsealed shoulders compound the problem. Could the minister request that VicRoads investigate the best means of improving local traffic flows along Clegg Road to ease the chronic congestion and improve safety?

### **Yuroke electorate**

**Ms SPENCE** (Yuroke) — (Question 6909) My constituency question is to the Minister for Public Transport. With significant growth in Melbourne's outer north, an increasing number of people using our train system and the recent release of the business case for the once-in-a-generation transformative public transport Melbourne Metro project, I ask: how will the Melbourne Metro project expand services for commuters on the Craigieburn line?

### **Shepparton electorate**

**Ms SHEED** (Shepparton) — (Question 6910) My constituency question is directed to the Minister for Public Transport. Bendigo, Ballarat, Geelong and Latrobe Valley commuters are serviced by up to 20 services daily, as are Seymour patrons. Shepparton has only four weekday trains to Melbourne and only three returning to Shepparton. The demand is much greater than this, and anecdotal evidence from my constituents indicates that many people drive from Shepparton and towns far beyond, such as Nathalia, Barmah, Numurkah, Strathmerton and Cobram, to Seymour to access a more regular train service to Melbourne. Shepparton is a major regional centre and deserves more, faster and better trains to Melbourne.

I believe that if efforts were made to record the number of people boarding the train at Seymour and their home addresses, it would confirm the significant distances that my constituents travel to access regular train services. Does Public Transport Victoria have the capacity to ascertain the home addresses of travellers boarding trains at Seymour railway station using data from their registered myki cards?

### **Pascoe Vale electorate**

**Ms BLANDTHORN** (Pascoe Vale) — (Question 6911) My constituency question is for the Acting Minister for Police. What state government

funding is available for graffiti prevention initiatives? Across my electorate at the current time train stations, local schools, public spaces and important pieces of public infrastructure are the target of graffiti vandals. In November last year the Andrews Labor government announced the graffiti prevention grants program. This program consists of grants which support a number of projects that can include graffiti removal activities such as trailers, public murals and graffiti prevention and education campaigns. This fund was first introduced by the Labor government in the 2005 budget. Across Moreland there are a number of innovative and artistic approaches to deterring unwanted graffiti in these locations, and I ask the minister what supports might be available to assist.

### **Rowville electorate**

**Mr WELLS** (Rowville) — (Question 6912) The constituency question I wish to raise is for the attention of the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water. Last year local residents raised with me the issue of out-of-control foxes killing or maiming domestic pet animals on residential properties and wildlife on adjacent public lands in Rowville. The foxes live on the Rowville public lands controlled by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), Melbourne Water and Knox City Council. Local residents and local media have already reported that foxes are again roaming the streets of Rowville on the prowl for prey. It is my understanding that Knox City Council has advised that there is no funding for any fox cull or ongoing fox mitigation programs.

I therefore ask the minister on behalf of the concerned residents of my Rowville electorate: why has a long-term coordinated eradication or mitigation solution to the local fox problem in Rowville not been developed between the agencies that manage the respective adjacent lands bordering the residential estates of Rowville, DELWP, Melbourne Water and Knox City Council?

### **St Albans electorate**

**Ms SULEYMAN** (St Albans) — (Question 6913) My constituency question is for the Minister for Education. Furlong Park School for Deaf Children is a school in the western suburbs which caters for children from the age of three years to the end of year 6. How can the Furlong Park School for Deaf Children in St Albans receive support from the Victorian government for an all-weather upgrade to its playing surfaces?

**Mr R. Smith** — On a point of order, Speaker, I wish to raise an issue of concern to me, and it is an issue of concern to a number of my colleagues, with whom I had rather heated discussions yesterday. It is that when many of us arrived at our parliamentary offices yesterday we found that a significant amount of material had been removed from windows and there had been a lot of movement of documents in our offices. In the 10 years I have been here I have been extremely happy, like most members, with the work that our parliamentary attendants do around the Parliament and in our offices, but never in that 10 years have items been removed, moved or otherwise interfered with in those parliamentary offices.

It is of concern to me that there seems to have been a directive to go in and remove material from windows. That certainly has not happened in the past 10 years that I have been here. Further to that, if you happen to take a walk down to the offices that sit at the front of the building under the stairs, you will find that every single member's office has the blinds drawn. That is quite simply because there is sensitive material in our offices. We do not want any member of the public or any other member going past to see what is being done in those offices or what material might be there.

As I arrived yesterday along with the member for Morwell I found that the blinds had been raised, exposing the office to anyone who walked past. I understand, and you may correct me, Speaker, that this was done in order to show people who came during the Open Day what the offices look like. Having said that, the fact that maybe hundreds of people have walked past my office and seen what is in it, including pictures of my children, whom I have never put in the public eye in the 10 years that I have been here, I find deeply disturbing.

I ask you, Speaker, whether it was a directive from the Presiding Officers or from the Secretary of the Department of Parliamentary Services, who seems intent on depoliticising politicians. I ask that if it was you, as Presiding Officer, who directed that, that we have a chat in your office. If it was indeed the secretary, I would expect him to come to me and talk to me about what has happened rather than remove material without any reference to the member at all. I reiterate that it is not just me but other members. I am now concerned about the privacy of my office, and I will certainly consider putting my own lock on the door as a consequence.

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The Chair takes the member for Warrandyte's point of order on notice and

will discuss the matter with the member and report to the house in due course.

**Mr Northe** — Just on the point of order, Speaker, I wholly endorse the comments made by the member. Might I add that I did experience all those things in my office, and while some might say it actually cleaned up my office, by the same token to arrive yesterday and find my office in a state where things had been relocated and moved around — I was somewhat shocked given there was no forewarning to either of us on that particular aspect. I wholly endorse the member for Warrandyte's comments on this, and I hope, as you have suggested, you will make a thorough investigation and report back to us on it.

**The SPEAKER** — Order! I thank the member for Morwell for the point of order. The Chair will come back to the house in due course.

## CONFISCATION AND OTHER MATTERS AMENDMENT BILL 2016

### *Introduction and first reading*

**Mr PAKULA** (Attorney-General) — I move:

That I have leave to bring in a bill for an act to amend the Confiscation Act 1997 to improve the operation of that act as it applies to serious and organised crime, to amend the Criminal Organisations Control Act 2012 to remove the distinction between different types of declarations made in respect of organisations, to make miscellaneous amendments to the Surveillance Devices Act 1999, the Open Courts Act 2013, the Criminal Procedure Act 2009, the Sentencing Act 1991 and the Family Violence Protection Amendment Act 2014 and for other purposes.

**Mr CLARK** (Box Hill) — I ask the Attorney-General to provide a brief explanation further to the long title.

**Mr PAKULA** (Attorney-General) — I can inform the member for Box Hill that the bill contains, as would be clear from the title, a number of amendments to various pieces of legislation. Many of those amendments are technical, but one that is referred to in the long title regards the distinction between different types of declarations — that is, the distinction between prohibitive and restrictive declarations as relate to organisations that may have declarations sought against them. At the moment there are different types of declarations that have different standards of proof. We are seeking to standardise that standard of proof in regard to declarations and in regard to the question of proceeds of crime. This bill will have the effect of closing a loophole which has emerged through appeals in regard to some commonwealth legislation regarding

the interplay between the purchase of property with borrowed money.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read first time.**

### HOUSE CONTRACTS GUARANTEE REPEAL BILL 2016

*Introduction and first reading*

**Mr SCOTT** (Minister for Finance) — I move:

That I have leave to bring in a bill for an act to repeal the House Contracts Guarantee Act 1987 and for other purposes.

**Mr CLARK** (Box Hill) — I ask the minister to provide a brief explanation of the reasons for the bill.

**Mr SCOTT** (Minister for Finance) — The bill repeals the House Contracts Guarantee Act 1987, which has become redundant following the closure of the Domestic Building (HIH) Indemnity Fund established under the act.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read first time.**

### TREASURY AND FINANCE LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2016

*Introduction and first reading*

**Mr SCOTT** (Minister for Finance) — I move:

That I have leave to bring in a bill for an act to amend the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013, the Accident Compensation Act 1985 and the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 to further improve the operation of those acts and for other purposes.

**Mr CLARK** (Box Hill) — I ask the minister for a brief explanation of the bill.

**Mr SCOTT** (Minister for Finance) — The bill amends the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 to increase the maximum penalty for a corporate body found guilty of the offence of reckless endangerment. The bill also makes a number of minor technical amendments to clarify aspects of the Occupational Health and Safety Act and the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013 and to ensure the legislation operates as intended.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read first time.**

## PETITIONS

**Following petitions presented to house:**

### Special religious instruction

To the Legislative Assembly of Victoria:

The petition of residents in the Gippsland East electorate draws to the attention of the house that the government has scrapped special religious instruction (SRI) in Victorian government schools during school hours.

Prior to the last election, Daniel Andrews and Labor said they would not scrap SRI during school hours in Victorian government schools. Daniel Andrews and James Merlino have announced that next year they will break their promise and will only allow SRI to occur outside of school hours or during lunch breaks.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Assembly of Victoria ensure that the Andrews government reverses its broken promise and allow students attending government schools to attend SRI during school hours.

**By Mr T. BULL (Gippsland East) (33 signatures).**

### Christmas carols in schools

To the Legislative Assembly of Victoria:

The petition of residents in the Mildura electorate draws to the attention of the house that the government has imposed the ban on singing traditional Christmas carols in Victorian government schools.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Assembly of Victoria ensure that the Andrews government reverses this decision and allow students attending government schools to sing traditional Christmas carols.

**By Mr CRISP (Mildura) (26 signatures).**

### Christmas carols in schools

To the Legislative Assembly of Victoria:

The petition of residents in the Morwell electorate draws to the attention of the house that the government has imposed the ban on singing traditional Christmas carols in Victorian government schools.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Assembly of Victoria ensure that the Andrews government reverses this decision and allow students attending government schools to sing traditional Christmas carols.

**By Mr NORTHE (Morwell) (2280 signatures).**

### Firefighter compensation

To the Legislative Assembly of Victoria:

The petition of certain citizens of the state of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Assembly that any legislation introduced for the presumptive rights (cancer) of firefighters must be equal to all firefighters.

Volunteers and career firefighters attend the same fires including vehicle fires, bushfires, Hazmat fires and spills and structure fires. It is therefore vital that any new legislation introduced does not discriminate against volunteers and their families rights.

**By Mr NORTHE (Morwell) (36 signatures).**

**Tabled.**

**Ordered that petitions presented by honourable member for Morwell be considered next day on motion of Mr NORTHE (Morwell).**

**Ordered that petition presented by honourable member for Mildura be considered next day of sitting on motion of Mr CRISP (Mildura).**

**SCRUTINY OF ACTS AND REGULATIONS COMMITTEE**

*Alert Digest No. 3*

**Ms BLANDTHORN (Pascoe Vale) presented *Alert Digest No. 3 of 2016* on:**

- Access to Medicinal Cannabis Bill 2015**
- Corrections Amendment (No body, no parole) Bill 2016**
- Fines Reform and Infringements Acts Amendment Bill 2016**
- Health Complaints Bill 2016**
- Parliamentary Budget Officer Bill 2016**
- Road Legislation Amendment Bill 2015**
- Sex Offenders Registration Amendment Bill 2016**
- Upholding Australian Values (Protecting Our Flags) Bill 2015**

**together with appendices.**

**Tabled.**

**Ordered to be published.**

**DOCUMENTS**

**Tabled by Clerk:**

*Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978* — Determination under s 17CA giving notice of intention to grant lease over Albert Park Reserve

Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme — Actuarial Investigation as at 30 June 2015

*Financial Management Act 1994* — Report from the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water that she had not received the Report 2014–15 of the Falls Creek Alpine Resort Management Board, together with an explanation for the delay

*Planning and Environment Act 1987* — Notices of approval of amendments to the following planning schemes:

- Ballarat — C186
- Banyule — C101
- Baw Baw — GC41
- Benalla — C31
- Brimbank — C166
- Buloke — C29
- Cardinia — C189, C207
- Casey — C215
- Darebin — C133 Part 2
- Frankston — C109, GC41
- Golden Plains — C70
- Greater Geelong — C333
- Greater Shepparton — C143, C162, C180, C181, C183
- Knox — C147
- Manningham — C110
- Melbourne — GC41
- Melton — C138
- Mitchell — C92
- Monash — C122 Part 2, GC41
- Moonee Valley — C149, C154
- Murrindindi — C46
- Nillumbik — C85
- Northern Grampians — C44
- Port Phillip — GC41
- Stonnington — GC41
- Strathbogie — C70
- Whitehorse — C183
- Wyndham — C183, C199

*Safe Drinking Water Act 2003* — Drinking Water Quality in Victoria Report 2014–15

Statutory Rules under the following acts:

- Children, Youth and Families Act 2016* — SR 7
- Fisheries Act 1995* — SR 8
- Subordinate Legislation Act 1994* — SR 6
- Water Industry Act 1994* — SR 5

*Working with Children Act 2005* — SR 9

*Subordinate Legislation Act 1994*:

Documents under s 15 in relation to Statutory Rules 6, 7, 8, 9

Documents under s 16B in relation to the — *Gambling Regulation Act 2003* — Notice under section 3.6.5A, fixing the value of the supervision charge.

The following proclamation fixing an operative date was tabled by the Clerk in accordance with an Order of the House dated 24 February 2015:

*Gambling Legislation Amendment Act 2015* — Part 4 — 2 March 2016 (*Gazette S34, 1 March 2016*).

## ROYAL ASSENT

**Message read advising royal assent on 1 March to:**

**Assisted Reproductive Treatment Amendment Bill 2015**  
**Kardinia Park Stadium Bill 2015.**

## APPROPRIATION MESSAGES

**Message read recommending appropriation for Parliamentary Budget Officer Bill 2016.**

## JOINT SITTING OF PARLIAMENT

**Senate vacancy**  
**Victorian Health Promotion Foundation**  
**Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation**

**The SPEAKER** — Order! I have received the following message from the Governor:

The Governor transmits to the Legislative Assembly a copy of a despatch which has been received from the Honourable the President of the Senate notifying that a vacancy has happened in the representation of the State of Victoria in the Senate of the Commonwealth of Australia.

**Ms ALLAN** (Minister for Public Transport) — By leave, I move:

That this house meets the Legislative Council for the purpose of sitting and voting together:

- (1) to choose a person to hold the place in the Senate rendered vacant by the resignation of Senator the Honourable Michael Ronaldson;
- (2) to elect three members of the Parliament to the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation; and
- (3) to elect three members of the Parliament to the board of the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation —

and proposes that the time and place of such meeting be the Legislative Assembly chamber on Wednesday, 9 March 2016, at 6.45 p.m.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Ordered that message be sent to Council informing them of resolution.**

## BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

### Standing orders

**Ms ALLAN** (Minister for Public Transport) — By leave, I move:

That so much of standing orders be suspended so as to allow the third reading of the Judicial Commission of Victoria Bill 2015 to be resubmitted immediately.

**Motion agreed to.**

## JUDICIAL COMMISSION OF VICTORIA BILL 2015

*Resubmission of question*

**The SPEAKER** — Order! The house has resolved to resubmit the third reading question of this bill. I advise the house that I am of the opinion that the third reading of this bill requires to be passed by an absolute majority and a special majority.

*Third reading*

**The SPEAKER** — Order! As there is no special majority of members of the house present, I ask the Clerk to ring the bells.

**Bells rung.**

**Members having assembled in chamber:**

**Resubmitted motion agreed to by an absolute majority and special majority.**

**Read third time.**

## BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

### Program

**Ms ALLAN** (Minister for Public Transport) — I move:

That, under standing order 94(2), the orders of the day, government business, relating to the following bills be considered and completed by 5.00 p.m. on Thursday, 10 March 2016:

National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015

Occupational Licensing National Law Repeal Bill 2015

Rooming House Operators Bill 2015

Victoria Police Amendment (Merit-based Transfer) Bill 2016.

Speaker, as you can see from the program that has just been proposed to the house, with the optimism that it will be supported by the house, it should be noted that provision is once again being made this week in the running of the legislative program in the Legislative Assembly for time to consider, should it come back to us in a timely way, the Delivering Victorian Infrastructure (Port of Melbourne Lease Transaction) Bill 2015.

It is with some great optimism and hope that we look forward to that bill being received by us in a timely way because, as has been flagged through the commentary on the debate on that bill in the Legislative Council, it is anticipated that there will be a number of amendments that will be required to be considered by our chamber and which will provoke some debate and discussion during the bill's passage. Pending the passage of this government business program and what might happen in the Legislative Council, we may be seeking the chamber's support to allow for that debate to happen sometime during the course of this week.

The only other matter I would like to note is, of course, that we have just passed a motion providing for a joint sitting to occur tomorrow. I am assuming that the Legislative Council will accept our invitation and that the joint sitting will occur tomorrow evening. The joint sitting has three important appointments to make: to the VicHealth board, to the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation and to the Senate — and I am sure those opposite would agree that that is an important responsibility that we will have tomorrow evening.

It is another good, strong program that we have put forward for the course of this week. There are a couple of other issues that we will need to consider in the running of the week. With those few comments, I commend the motion to the house.

**Mr CLARK (Box Hill)** — The legislative program for this week certainly cannot be said to be overloaded. The Leader of the House rightly says that time needs to be set aside for potentially dealing with the ports legislation. Certainly everyone is working to ensure that the amendments that come to the other place are ones that give effect to the understandings between the

parties involved, and we hope that that will be able to occur. However, even making allowance for that, it does not seem as though the house is going to be taxed with the program that the government has put before it. Indeed I think we may well be seeing a government that is having some challenges in determining bills to bring to the house. The government business program certainly cannot be described with the adjective attributed to it by the Leader of the House as being a 'strong' program.

As the Leader of the House says, provision is also being made for a joint sitting this week. That is certainly something that is welcomed by this side of the house, not only because it means that the state of Victoria will be acting promptly to fill the casual vacancy in our Senate representation but also because finally the government is moving to convene a joint sitting to fill the longstanding vacancies on the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation and the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation. As members on this side of the chamber and in the other place have pointed out on a number of occasions, these are vacancies that we have been anxious to fill for a long time, and both of those bodies have suffered considerably because of the lack of the parliamentary representatives, including for functions such as their audit committees. So the fact that a joint sitting is taking place is welcome.

However, I return to the point that I have made on numerous occasions previously. Yet again we have had no indication from the government of any intention to comply with its election commitment to making consideration in detail a standard feature for bills in the Assembly. In the past we have continued to hear spurious arguments from members such as the member for Broadmeadows that, 'You, the opposition, have not asked for them', but we have made the point on numerous occasions that we believe the logic of the government's policy position is that if it believes there is a case for a bill not to be considered in detail, that is something that it should be broaching with the opposition rather than the other way around.

In any event the opposition, during the course of consideration of the government business program, has repeatedly made clear and has highlighted those bills that it particularly thinks should be considered in detail. For example, the Rooming House Operators Bill 2015, which is part of the program this week, deals with a particularly important and sensitive area. It is vital that the detail of that legislation be right so that it operates as it is intended and does not have unintended consequences. In the absence of the government addressing this issue, the opposition opposes the government business program.

**Mr McGUIRE** (Broadmeadows) — Victoria has a big-picture government, and it is getting on with delivering on the issues that will define this state and the world's most livable city for generations. We have seen it in economic development, education, transport, water and the Fair Go rates system, and this government business program again provides the complementary legislation that underscores a number of these issues. This is the evolution of this agenda.

If we have a look at the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015, we see that it introduces in Victoria a new framework governing how small customers, including those with small, renewable-energy-generating facilities such as solar panels, can connect to the electricity grid. This is beneficial. This will help small customers to be part of this big picture. The Australian Energy Regulator will be responsible for monitoring and enforcing this, so there is a good compliance mechanism as well. I commend that bill.

The next one we look at on the government business program is the Victoria Police Amendment (Merit-based Transfer) Bill 2016, and again this is important because it enshrines in legislation merit and performance as the basis for the Chief Commissioner of Police to conduct transfers of police officers to country general duties positions and related appeals to the Police Registration and Services Board. Importantly, for fairness, there is scrutiny and accountability built into this process, so that is another piece of worthwhile legislation being brought by this government.

Then we will have a look at what the Treasurer is bringing to the house — the Occupational Licensing National Law Repeal Bill 2015. This comes off a Council of Australian Governments meeting and a decision to discontinue the national occupational licensing reform. The states and territories have agreed to investigate approaches to increase labour mobility, and it would deliver net benefits for businesses and governments. Again this is clearly in the public interest.

Then we have the Rooming House Operators Bill 2015. This provides a compliance regime to help vulnerable people. It will make sure that licensed rooming houses are under operation by fit and proper persons. That is an important definition, and this again, as I said, is a bill in the public interest.

These are important pieces of legislation. They go to the evolution of the government's agenda and narrative for the public.

The government is also hoping that we will see the Delivering Victorian Infrastructure (Port of Melbourne

Lease Transaction) Bill 2015 return to this house. This bill will unlock the port's value. It will put to work the value that has lain dormant there, and it will help increase jobs, growth and productivity. It will increase public safety, it will remove 50 of the most dangerous level crossings throughout the state and it will demonstrate to individuals, families and businesses how they will reap the rewards of this big-picture vision.

This is the agenda of the government. This is the government now prosecuting the case and delivering the projects. I just hope that we do get to see this legislation, the port of Melbourne lease transaction bill, come back into this house. There will be considerable debate and discussion on that, with amendments expected from the Legislative Council, and I think that that is in order.

I agree with the Leader of the House and the manager of opposition business that we need to have a joint sitting in order to appoint a senator to represent the state of Victoria, and there are two other positions that need appointments to be made by this Parliament.

You can argue whether a proposition is specious or not. In all of these debates opposition members have the opportunity in 10-minute slots to actually outline what their issues are. We will be looking at bringing the Delivering Victorian Infrastructure (Port of Melbourne Lease Transaction) Bill 2015 back into this house. That will be debated in full. This is the most critical piece of legislation to be driven by this government, and I look forward to that debate.

I commend the government's business program to the house, because the government is building the future for the world's most livable city and the great state of Victoria.

**Mr HIBBINS** (Pahran) — I rise to speak on the government business program, which the Greens will not be opposing in this instance. We have not proposed any amendments at this stage, and we have not sought to go into consideration in detail. I do not think it is a particularly onerous program on the cards this week.

I do note there are a number of significant bills still on the notice paper: the Integrity and Accountability Legislation Amendment (A Stronger System) Bill 2015, the Transparency in Government Bill 2015, the Parliamentary Budget Officer Bill 2016 and the Sex Offenders Registration Amendment Bill 2016. These are significant pieces of legislation, and I would certainly warn against cramming all of them into one

week, given that they will probably need significant amounts of consideration in a week.

I do not think this week is particularly onerous. We have four bills: the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015, which is about removing barriers to the distribution of energy and the uptake of renewable energy; the Rooming House Operators Bill 2015, which introduces a fit and proper person test for rooming house operators; the Victoria Police Amendment (Merit-based Transfer) Bill 2016, which provides for merit-based transfers to rural stations, where positions available have to be advertised and filled on merit; and the Occupational Licensing National Law Repeal Bill 2015.

With these bills, even though we have the government business program in place, if at one point we have no further speakers, if there is no desire to continue debate, rather than going to the adjournment, we could simply put the question to the house rather than waiting and putting it all off until 5 o'clock on Thursday. If we were to do that on those bills and other bills, we would find that the need for the government business program would actually be lessened and it would question whether it should be in place.

I welcome the joint sitting. Obviously we need to appoint a senator, but we also need to appoint members to the boards of the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation and the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation. This has been a long time coming. I think it has been over a year since these positions should have been filled. It is certainly about time that this Parliament fills those positions.

It has been foreshadowed that the Delivering Victorian Infrastructure (Port of Melbourne Lease Transaction) Bill 2015 will be debated in the upper house and will then come to this house. This has been a movable feast. We have woken up to daily news reports of how the negotiations are going or not going. I will believe it when I see it when it comes to the port bill. We have seen different approaches from the government — threats to bypass the Parliament altogether and threats to go to the Dispute Resolution Committee — so certainly I will believe it when I see it when it comes to the port bill, but we will not be opposing the government business program in this instance.

**Mr PEARSON** (Essendon) — I am delighted to make a contribution in relation to the government business program. As previous speakers have indicated, there are four bills before us this week. That is a modest workload. I think it is a reasonable workload for us to get through. It is important that there be that in-built

flexibility in relation to the government business program to allow members to make contributions in relation to the proposed lease arrangements for the Port of Melbourne Corporation and the vitally important piece of legislation that authorises and facilitates that transaction. Clearly if the Council does pass the bill this week, there will be a need for members to make a contribution in relation to that particular piece of legislation. It is very important that we have that flexibility for people to have their say.

I also recognise the great opportunity to have a joint sitting of both houses tomorrow night. It is important to have political representatives appointed to both the VicHealth and the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation boards. Both are very important instruments that were conceived in a spirit of bipartisanship. Members of those boards have worked assiduously over the life of the boards, and it is important that members from this place and the other place have the opportunity to serve on them and to make a contribution. I am particularly pleased that we will have the opportunity to meet in a joint sitting to deal with that.

I am also reminded though, when I turn my mind to the joint sitting tomorrow night, of the famous French polisher, Albert Patrick Field, who had an illustrious career —

**Mr Hibbins** — On a point of order, Deputy Speaker, on the relevance of the member for Essendon's contribution. This is a discussion of the government business program for the week in March 2016, not decades previously. I ask you to draw the member for Essendon back to debating the government business program and not referring to history.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER** — Order! There is no point of order.

**Mr PEARSON** — Thank you, Deputy Speaker. Maybe if the member for Prahran unblocked his ears and listened to the contribution, he would understand its importance and relevance.

**Mr Pakula** interjected.

**Mr PEARSON** — That is a very good question, Attorney: why is the member for Prahran seeking to defend Joh Bjelke-Petersen?

Albert Field was described by Gough Whitlam as an individual of the utmost obscurity, from which he rose and to which he sank with equal speed. Mr Field's illustrious contribution to the Senate lasted from 3 September 1975 to 11 November 1975, and played a

pivotal role in ensuring the dismissal occurred — which I would have thought might be of interest to the member for Prahran, because back then what happened was that rather than the political parties nominating a person to fill a casual Senate vacancy, in this case as a result of the death of Bert Milner, Mr Bjelke-Petersen took it upon himself to find his own person to nominate in that role.

I think we have come a long way as a Parliament when members of both houses can get together tomorrow night and respect the fact that the vacancy to be filled should be filled by a member of the Liberal Party because the people of Victoria originally voted in a Liberal Senator. It goes to show that we have matured as an institution when we can come together and recognise and acknowledge that this is a choice for the Liberal Party and fulfil and discharge that duty to respect the contribution made.

It is a very good government business program. It has inbuilt flexibility, and I hope that later this week we can debate the Delivering Victorian Infrastructure (Port of Melbourne Lease Transaction) Bill 2015. I think it is an important piece of legislation. Again, I look forward to participating in the joint sitting. It will be the first time I have sat in this place when it has been dealing with a casual Senate vacancy. I recall being here in 1997, I think, as a staffer when Karen Synon filled a casual vacancy, and I thought that was quite an interesting opportunity to see how this house operates. It is a great business program, and I commend it to the house.

**Mr R. SMITH** (Warrandyte) — I look forward to sharing in the member for Essendon's excitement as the casual vacancy is filled tomorrow. It should be a great old time.

I start with a quote from an ALP press release of 27 November 2014:

Scrutiny will be enhanced with consideration in detail made a standard feature for bills in the Assembly ...

In supporting the member for Box Hill in his opposition to the government business program, I draw the attention of the house to this commitment that was made by the Labor Party prior to the last election. I understand that there have been a number of commitments that have been dismissed as time has gone on: no compensation for the east–west link contract, building an elevated rail down the Pakenham–Cranbourne rail corridor, saying that the western distributor was shovel ready, the fact that there would be no more debt and the fact the budget would not go into deficit. All those things have been cast aside without so much as a backward glance, and on this

motion I want to draw members' attention to the fact that consideration in detail was said to be made a standard feature of the passage of bills through the Assembly.

As time has gone on, there have only been two occasions over the last 15 or so months when the standard practice of this government has actually been put in place. One was in February of last year when, I guess, it was at a time when keeping commitments was still a great idea, and the other was just a few months later, on 16 April last year, when we had a consideration-in-detail stage on the National Parks Amendment (Prohibiting Cattle Grazing) Bill 2015. Since then, we have not been able to get consideration in detail on any bill that has gone through this house. I refer in passing to comments made by the member for Broadmeadows during the last couple of sitting weeks. I listen intently every time the member for Broadmeadows speaks. It is always very enlightening, although I think the member for Essendon has become the more verbose on that side, so maybe the member for Broadmeadows will have to do a little bit more homework going forward.

The member for Broadmeadows, in the debate on the Building Legislation Amendment (Consumer Protection) Bill 2015, made some comments about the fact that we on this side of the house were complaining that there was no consideration-in-detail stage. He raised the point that perhaps, if we wanted to consider bills in detail, we should ask. I am sure on many occasions the very diligent manager of opposition business has asked the Leader of the House for opportunities to speak in consideration in detail on a bill. The fact that it has not happened is really an indictment of the government, and it shows that its commitments are worth very little.

The fact of the matter is that when the member for Broadmeadows said, and I paraphrase his comments, that if we want to go into a consideration-in-detail stage, if we want to argue in detail, we have got the chance during contributions in the course of debate. He said that we could go through the detail, go through the bill clause by clause and outline the issues that are there. The member has been around long enough to know that when issues are raised during the course of debate, there is very little opportunity to have answers come back to us, in much the same way, as I am sure you would agree, Deputy Speaker, as the opposition does not get any answers during question time, for instance. There seems to be a bit of a pattern: whether it be during the course of debate or through question time, it is fairly clear that the government is very reluctant to answer questions that are put forward.

The fact of the matter is that if the government said that consideration in detail during the course of debate on bills was a standard feature, you would think that that would mean it would be unusual if consideration in detail of a bill was not granted or was not required or if we said, ‘You know what, we don’t really need on this side of the house to go through this particular bill clause by clause, provision by provision, so there is really no need for us to do that’, then the government would say, ‘No worries. Off you go’. But as a standard feature as espoused by the press release of 27 November 2014, you would really think that that would just be a given — that we would come into this place with a government business program, whether it is brief, as this sitting week’s government business program is, or one that is a bit fuller — that we would be going into consideration in detail and that the Leader of the House would actually allow time for consideration in detail of each of these pieces of legislation. I think that to pretend that we have to go cap in hand every time we want to consider a bill in detail is an absolute nonsense. The government while in opposition made it very, very clear that consideration in detail of bills would be standard. It is another broken promise and I guess we are just adding it to the long, long list.

#### House divided on motion:

#### *Ayes, 47*

Allan, Ms	Knight, Ms
Andrews, Mr	Lim, Mr
Blandthorn, Ms	McGuire, Mr
Brooks, Mr	Merlino, Mr
Bull, Mr J.	Nardella, Mr
Carbines, Mr	Neville, Ms
Carroll, Mr	Pakula, Mr
Couzens, Ms	Pallas, Mr
D’Ambrosio, Ms	Pearson, Mr
Dimopoulos, Mr	Perera, Mr
Donnellan, Mr	Richardson, Mr
Edbrooke, Mr	Richardson, Ms
Edwards, Ms	Sandell, Ms
Eren, Mr	Scott, Mr
Garrett, Ms	Sheed, Ms
Graley, Ms	Spence, Ms
Green, Ms	Staikos, Mr
Halfpenny, Ms	Suleyman, Ms
Hennessy, Ms	Thomas, Ms
Hibbins, Mr	Thomson, Ms
Howard, Mr	Ward, Ms
Hutchins, Ms	Williams, Ms
Kairouz, Ms	Wynne, Mr
Kilkenny, Ms	

#### *Noes, 36*

Angus, Mr	Northe, Mr
Asher, Ms	O’Brien, Mr D.
Battin, Mr	O’Brien, Mr M.
Blackwood, Mr	Paynter, Mr
Britnell, Ms	Pesutto, Mr
Bull, Mr T.	Riordan, Mr

Burgess, Mr	Ryall, Ms
Clark, Mr	Ryan, Ms
Crisp, Mr	Smith, Mr R.
Fyffe, Mrs	Smith, Mr T.
Gidley, Mr	Southwick, Mr
Guy, Mr	Staley, Ms
Hodgett, Mr	Thompson, Mr
Katos, Mr	Tilley, Mr
Kealy, Ms	Wakeling, Mr
McCurdy, Mr	Walsh, Mr
McLeish, Ms	Watt, Mr
Morris, Mr	Wells, Mr

#### Motion agreed to.

## MEMBERS STATEMENTS

### Mornington Peninsula bus services

**Mr MORRIS** (Mornington) — In early February the Minister for Public Transport announced with great fanfare that the transport problems of Mornington Peninsula tertiary students were but a distant memory. She said a brand spanking new service, route 887, would commence on 22 February. According to the release, it would have six express round trips a day. But unfortunately it was not to Monash Clayton, like the service it replaced, but to Monash Frankston. But that is all right, said the minister, because the service is timed to coincide with the university shuttle to Clayton. According to her release, that is a view shared by the member for Frankston. The only problem with this cunning Labor plan is that students with 8.00 a.m. classes at Clayton cannot get there in time and those with 6.00 p.m. classes cannot get home if they attend them. Well done, minister!

The mayor of the Shire of Mornington Peninsula has recently written to me as follows:

Through discussions with Monash University and Ventura Bus Lines, the shire has identified the opportunity to transfer two ‘daytime’ timetabled services to an earlier morning and later afternoon journey. The timetabling changes will allow students to meet 8.00 a.m. start and 6.00 p.m. finish times at Monash University (Clayton campus). Monash University has committed to placing extra inter-campus shuttles to complete the journey to and from the Clayton campus at these times. During discussions, Ventura Bus Lines have indicated that they could deliver these services by allocating an additional resource.

The proposed change to the timetable would allow the minister to actually deliver on the claims she made in her 5 February release. I urge her to take the mayor’s advice and make the necessary changes and actually deliver a service that does solve the problems of Peninsula tertiary students.

### International Women's Day

**Ms RICHARDSON** (Minister for Women) — Considerable work has been undertaken since I was standing in this very spot last year on International Women's Day. Our government has now commenced Victoria's first gender equality strategy. We are increasing women's representation on our boards and in our courts, and we are ensuring that Victorian students understand the importance of healthy relationships. And yet, looking around this chamber, despite making progress in our pursuit for gender equality, we are still a long way off from where we need to be. There are 50 women out of 128 parliamentarians in the Victorian Parliament — that is only 39 per cent. Twenty-seven of these women are from the Labor Party. Today they will be filling the ranks with constituency questions, members statements and adjournment matters to celebrate International Women's Day.

But we know that we have much, much more that needs to be done. If we are going to be serious about addressing the barriers to women's equality throughout our communities, we must examine what is happening in our own backyards. The 2015 Global Gender Gap report ranked Australia at 36 out of 145 countries. In 2014 Australia ranked 24 out of 142. We need to do more to improve women's participation in parliaments right around Australia. To put it in lay terms, countries like Mozambique, Cuba and Rwanda all performed well above us. Our Kiwi neighbour joined this club as well.

It was an extremely proud moment when the Andrews Labor government was formed with nine female cabinet ministers. We will continue to do all that we can to increase the number of women not only in this place but in representation on boards around Victoria.

### Gippsland East electorate community events

**Mr T. BULL** (Gippsland East) — It was a huge weekend of events in my electorate of Gippsland East, and several are worthy of mention. It is great to see that, with the lack of investment we have got in our region, there is a number of community groups that are running events that are boosting our local economy.

Firstly, at Paynesville I had the pleasure of opening the classic boat rally, which was an outstanding success, with vessels coming from across the state and interstate. Full credit to Peter Medling and his team for pulling off such an amazing event, which I am sure will grow into a feature not only for my region but possibly the state.

The Orbest Poker Run on Saturday raised in the vicinity of \$50 000 for Ronald McDonald House in one day. Our local motorcycle enthusiasts ensure this day continues to grow, and it has now contributed over \$180 000 to Ronald McDonald House.

There were good rollouts at the Heyfield and Bairnsdale Relay for Life events where dedicated volunteers ensured the continued success of these events with a larger number of walkers taking part. It was the 10th birthday at Bairnsdale, and a huge number of teams turned out. I had the pleasure of presenting the Bairnsdale Cancer Council ladies with a special award for their ongoing hard work.

Last but not least was the (f)routeville festival at the Nicholson River Winery. Full credit to Andrea Lane and her organising group for making this one the best to date.

My congratulations to the premiership winners in our bowls grand finals on the weekend: Lakes Entrance in divisions 1 and 2, Bruthen in division 3 and Metung in division 4. All games were played in great spirit at the Bairnsdale Bowls Club.

### International Women's Day

**Ms WARD** (Eltham) — Dr Kylie Mason, a consultant haematologist at the Royal Melbourne Hospital in Parkville, spoke at my annual International Women's Day breakfast last Friday at the excellent Montmorency Secondary College. Dr Mason spoke about her experiences as a woman in science. We learnt of the exciting developments Kylie has worked on but also the challenges of being the only female in the high school physics class, the frustration of being asked 'What is the mother's club up to?' when women talk together in hospital corridors and the joy of realising that women do not have to do it all and it is okay to employ a cleaner.

I was also lucky enough to learn of the wonderful things young women in the electorate of Eltham are doing — young women who are working hard to strengthen reconciliation; young women who are writing plays about the challenges of being an asylum seeker, young women who are building relationships with senior citizens and who are bringing joy to the lives of others, young women who are showing leadership in the guiding movement, young women who are helping to restore native landscapes and young women who are supporting and looking out for each other.

At the breakfast I presented the 2016 Pauline Toner Prize to Zoe Rumble, a positive, energetic and determined young woman from St Helena Secondary College who has demonstrated her very strong commitment to equality, creating the St Helena Feminist Collective last year, and her strong advocacy for LGBTI students. Congratulations to Zoe and all the nominees: Grace, Indigo, Olivia, Sophia, Stephanie, Adele and Taleah, who are all amazing young women.

### **Maddy Fox**

**Ms WARD** — Recently I participated in the YMCA's Eltham Fun Run Swim Spin event at the Eltham Leisure Centre, held to support kids with a disability. I met an impressive young woman, Maddy Fox, who received an award for the most funds raised, impressively raising over \$2000 in the last two years, for which she received an award from the YMCA. Maddy is a tremendous swimmer, representing Victoria at the national championships. Congratulations to Maddy.

### **Diana Sharp**

**Mr SOUTHWICK** (Caulfield) — It is fitting that on International Women's Day I speak about a person in my electorate who passed away just on 12 months ago, Diana Sharp. Diana was honoured on Sunday by her husband, who decided to honour his late wife, whose birthday would have been on Monday, by walking 60 kilometres around Caulfield Park. I joined him along with many other constituents. The day was held also to raise \$60 000 to go towards HeartKids and the diabetes institute. I commend Ian Sharp on the great way he chose to remember his wife and also support these great charities.

### **Ripponlea Primary School**

**Mr SOUTHWICK** — At the Ripponlea Primary School badge presentation I got the opportunity to meet Mia and Tom, who are the two school captains. I have never seen this before: the two school captains are not only great because they were elected to the position but it turns out that they are twins. So they will be able to do a lot of their work together to ensure that they drive a very good agenda for Ripponlea Primary School. I commend Sue Newton on the great work that the school is doing and on the solar program that has been instituted at Ripponlea Primary School — again leading the way.

### **Clean Up Australia Day**

**Mr SOUTHWICK** — Congratulations also to those who participated in Clean Up Australia Day, including the Friends of Caulfield Park, who took part as well.

### **Trudi Hay**

**Ms SPENCE** (Yuroke) — On this International Women's Day I am very pleased to acknowledge the work of some outstanding local women from the Yuroke electorate. Trudi Hay of Greenvale hosts an annual high tea at her property raising money to help fund equipment for the Northern Hospital oncology unit. These funds have gone towards two portable chemotherapy units, a portable 3D ultrasound unit and a new treatment chair for the day unit. Trudi is an amazing woman whose fundraising activities are of immense benefit to those undergoing cancer treatments.

### **Jo Hardie**

**Ms SPENCE** — Jo Hardie was prompted last year to revive the Craigieburn Neighbourhood Watch program following several misleading Facebook posts regarding potential criminal activities. As a local mother, Jo has dedicated a significant amount of time and energy to this issue, and I commend her for the effort she is making to increase awareness and community involvement.

### **Rebecca Wright**

**Ms SPENCE** — Rebecca Wright of Greenvale last year founded the Greenvale Education Collective to advocate for secondary school education options for local families. Rebecca has organised meetings with me and residents and set up a Facebook page. She also provides reports to the Greenvale Residents Association. Rebecca is passionate about this issue and is working to ensure the views of Greenvale families are known.

### **Julie Dobbie**

**Ms SPENCE** — After losing her parents to cancer, Julie Dobbie of Craigieburn wanted to do more to fight for a cancer-free future. Julie has taken part in 16 events for the charity Can Too, including the gruelling 42-kilometre Melbourne Marathon in 2015. Julie has raised more than \$16 000 and covered hundreds of kilometres to help combat cancer.

There are of course many more terrific women doing great things in my electorate. I commend them all, and I wish them all a very happy International Women's Day.

### State Emergency Service Emerald unit

**Mr BATTIN** (Gembrook) — This weekend I had the pleasure of attending the Cockatoo plant market and the Cockatoo twilight market. It was the first time that community has held a twilight market, and it was absolutely fantastic to be up there with the community and to speak to the local community and see what is going on around the Cockatoo area and down at the Cockatoo plant market, which raised good funds for the local Country Fire Authority brigade.

Whilst I was there I realised that part of the reason we go to these events is to support our community, but we also get an opportunity to listen to our community, and there was one issue that was continually raised the entire time we were there. That was the Emerald State Emergency Service (SES) unit, which has for many years been asking for funding for an upgrade of its station. Only the coalition committed to that funding. The unit members have actually gone back to the government and asked, but government members will not even talk to them or come out and have a look at the facility. I note that the Minister for Education has been out there on occasion in the past, but nobody will discuss with them what is planned for the future.

The station has actually had a new vehicle delivered, which was funded through a volunteer emergency services equipment program grant from the former government. That truck has now arrived at the station. Surprisingly, the unit has been asking the minister to come out and hand over that vehicle, but out of fear the minister will not even come out and hand over that vehicle to the local SES volunteers. These are volunteers who turn out more than 1000 times every year. They turn out more than 1000 times through the Casey and Cardinia areas. They go out and make sure our community is safe up through the Dandenong Ranges during all flood and fire events. I call on the minister to go out there, present that vehicle and speak to the guys and girls out there about their facilities.

### International Women's Day

**Ms THOMAS** (Macedon) — On Thursday I attended Hepburn Shire Council's International Women's Day Heather Mutimer Women's Honour Roll celebration in Daylesford. The honour roll pays tribute to women in the shire whose contributions, courage and examples have led to significant social change for women. Now in its 12th year, the honour roll goes some way to correcting the historical record and ensures women's stories are told and highlighted for future generations. Congratulations to Heather Mutimer, who as a councillor had the foresight, love of

history and passion for women's equity to establish the roll in 2005. This year posthumous awards were made to Gale Orford for her services to golf and to Julie Ingleby, who, radicalised by the Vietnam war, went on to be a lifelong champion of workers' rights.

Our local history is too often neglectful of women's contributions. While men have been recognised with statues, parks and street names, women's contributions to civic life have for too long gone unnoticed. Today I call on councils across Victoria to follow in the footsteps of Hepburn, and indeed of the Victorian government, and consider the ways in which the contribution of women to the life of our communities can be better recognised.

What always makes the Hepburn event so special is hearing from the young women of Daylesford Secondary College, and this year was no exception. Congratulations to Ngahua Thompson, Annie Williams and Beth Olver for their presentation and to Bella Thomas for her speech. I would like to conclude by sharing some of Bella's speech entitled 'I'm not like other girls' — a reflection on internalised misogyny:

Girls can sail around the Southern Hemisphere by themselves ... Women can fight and win the right to vote. Women can write a book about an 11-year-old wizard and become a billionaire. Girls can sing like Ella Fitzgerald, help people like Fiona Wood ... paint like Frida Kahlo, dance like Beyonce ...

Girls are creative, powerful, beautiful, intelligent and complex.

### Gippsland rail services

**Mr NORTHE** (Morwell) — Whilst the Labor government tries to spin its way out of the ongoing V/Line debacle, the impact upon Gippsland commuters continues. My office has been contacted by a number of locals over the last week who conveyed their frustration at the ongoing disruption to Gippsland rail services. For example, a gentleman who commutes most days to Melbourne for work explained that he catches a bus in the morning and an evening train service and this is creating at least an extra 6 hours of travel per week for him. Of course this is not only a strong source of frustration but also means less time spent with his family. To rub salt into the wound given there are only very limited train services, it seems the evening train services that are operating are frequently running very late on a regular basis. I was also approached by a lady who told me that her long-awaited dental appointment had to be rescheduled as her dentist, who was due to travel from Melbourne to the Latrobe Valley, had had his bus service cancelled.

Genuine concerns have also been raised about how the government is going to deal with V/Line services when the AFL football season commences. Many Latrobe Valley residents frequent the football by way of train services and one fears this is going to be a major issue in the coming weeks. In Parliament we have a conga line of Labor ministers standing up and espousing the virtues of metropolitan rail projects, but when it comes to Gippsland V/Line service disruptions we hear nothing. This is simply not good enough when you consider that at the same time Gippsland commuters have endured enormous disruption and hardship over these past weeks.

### **Dandenong electorate sporting events**

**Ms WILLIAMS** (Dandenong) — I rise to speak about a truly stellar weekend of sport I enjoyed recently in Dandenong. On the Saturday I attended the first ever Dandenong Derby as our two soccer powerhouses, Dandenong City and Dandenong Thunder, fought it out for the inaugural Jim Memeti Cup, named after City of Greater Dandenong councillor Jim Memeti. As a supporter of both teams my loyalties were certainly split and I could not decide what colours to wear, so to the confusion of some I wore both — I wore a Thunder shirt and a City scarf. It was wonderful to see a packed stadium and people enjoying a very entertaining match. It is something truly special to have clubs like these that can balance such a strong connection to their traditional cultures — Albanian and Croatian in this case — with engaging with a diverse local community. With Thunder prevailing 4-0 in the end I am sure the team at City will be looking to make amends when they meet again later this year.

On the Sunday I went to Greaves Reserve to watch two wonderful cricket matches. It was the 7th annual police versus Aboriginal community cricket match on one oval, with teams contesting the Darren Knowles Memorial Trophy. The Aboriginal community was victorious in what was a resounding defeat of VicPol. Meanwhile on the oval opposite was the Victorian Asylum Seeker Cup cricket match between the Monash Health Seekers and the Sunshine Seekers. Monash Health, led by my good friend and local Monash Health volunteer Abdul, won on the day. Both matches were played with great community spirit. I look forward to the next edition of both of them. What a weekend!

### **St Mary's Primary School, St Kilda East**

**Mr HIBBINS** (Prahran) — Congratulations to the students, families, teachers and staff at St Mary's Primary School in St Kilda East for their successful Bicycle Network National Ride2School Day. It was

great to meet so many students and so many families who rode, walked, scootered, skated or caught public transport to school. St Mary's is going a step further and having a whole month dedicated to riding to school. It is collecting data on students' modes of transport for each class to report on at the end of the month. This is a fantastic initiative that will improve the health of students and reduce congestion on our local streets. As the local member I am committed to making sure our local streets are safe so parents have the confidence to leave the car at home and choose active travel instead. I look forward to seeing more St Mary's families riding and walking to school as I ride to Parliament.

### **Clean Up Australia Day**

**Mr HIBBINS** — On Clean Up Australia Day I spent my Sunday morning picking up cigarette butts from around Windsor Plaza and the Windsor railway station. I was joined by Jason Ball, Stonnington Greens and the community, who also cleaned up the Windsor siding and Gladstone Gardens, where bottles and cans made up a significant portion of the waste collected. It is clear from the amount of waste we picked up that Victoria needs a container deposit scheme as well as a ban on plastic bags and smoking in outdoor dining and drinking areas to keep our communities clean.

### **Victorian Honour Roll of Women**

**Ms COUZENS** (Geelong) — It was a great honour to attend Victorian Honour Roll of Women's induction event yesterday with the Minister for Women and other parliamentary colleagues. It is great to see so many Victorian women acknowledged for their contributions and also importantly recorded in our great state's history. I particularly want to mention Lisa Darmanin from the Australian Services Union; Patti Manolis from the Geelong Regional Library; and Sherryl Garbutt, a past Minister for Women's Affairs, who were inducted yesterday.

### **International Women's Day**

**Ms COUZENS** — Happy International Women's Day! There are a number of activities that celebrate International Women's Day in Geelong happening this week. I will be attending with my comrades at Geelong Trades Hall an International Women's Day breakfast on Friday morning.

### **G21 Region Opportunities for Work**

**Ms COUZENS** — On another matter, it was a pleasure to join the member for Lara, the federal

member for Corio and the Victorian Treasurer at the funding announcement for the GROW project. The Andrews government has committed \$1 million from the Regional Jobs Fund to the G21 Region Opportunities for Work, known as GROW. This is relevant today because one of the greatest issues faced by women is poverty, which this particular project tries to address.

I want to congratulate Elaine Carbines, the CEO of G21; Bill Mithen, the CEO of Give Where You Live; and Justin Giddings, the CEO of Avalon Airport and signatory to the GROW project, on their vision and commitment to this innovative approach to reducing poverty in the areas of Whittington, Corio, Norlane and Colac.

### Freedom of information

**Mr PESUTTO** (Hawthorn) — A secret state is what we have in this state these days. Despite the government going to the last election promising transparency and accountability, what we see is a secret state. At the moment the coalition has over 200 outstanding FOI requests, and those are just the opposition's. Forget the media, forget the stakeholders; there are over 200 outstanding FOI requests. It is a disgrace, and those opposite should hang their heads in shame.

We have said enough is enough; we are not going to put up with this. We want to expose to the Victorian people just what is going on inside ministerial offices and departments, so today's award, the inaugural FOI award, goes to Juliet Kim, the FOI officer in the Department of Education and Training. When we submitted an FOI request for details of ministerial expenditure we were told, 'We are going to refuse that because it would require a substantial diversion of resources'. When we wanted information about the top web domains visited by staff, we were told we could not obtain it because it required a division of resources. When we wanted briefs and reports on the western distributor project and how it would affect schools, kids, mums and dads, and families, we were told it would require an unreasonable diversion of resources. When we wanted the details of an election promise for a new primary school in South Melbourne we were refused that because it would require a substantial diversion of resources. I call on the government to invest in FOI, stop using such flimsy excuses and live up to its promise.

### Pascoe Vale North Primary School

**Ms BLANDTHORN** (Pascoe Vale) — I would like to acknowledge the work of principal Peter Adams and assistant principal Betty Stergiopoulos of Pascoe Vale North Primary School (PVNPS) on behalf of my constituent Terriann Seath and her son, Mitchell. Terriann is a fabulous local and does a lot of work for the Pascoe Vale women's football club and around breaking the puppy farm model but, most importantly, she does a lot of work for her own family.

Terriann wrote to me about the work of the school in looking after her son, Mitchell, who has very serious medical conditions. Mitchell has just finished grade 6. She wrote:

I am writing to you to tell you about the wonderful leadership team at Pascoe Vale North Primary School ...

Mitchell has many medical issues he has faced his whole life, anaphylaxis being a very serious major one.

When we enrolled Mitchell at PVNPS back in 2008 ... Betty Stergiopoulos quickly realised that the school would need to make changes to ensure Mitchell's safety. This was done immediately, without question, without fuss, and without the knowledge of funding to assist with the expense of this. Betty also implemented early learning classes on a Thursday afternoon ...

The first time Peter gave Mitchell the EpiPen he was in grade 1. I arrived at school just as Peter was about to administer the injection. I stood there and watched as the amazing man held my panicked, fighting son down, gave the injection, then pulled him into a tight, firm, reassuring hug whilst we awaited the ambulance arrival. Peter masterfully distracted Mich with a little key that helped slow his breathing down and relaxed him. Peter then put the key on some string and it went off to hospital ... Today, Mitchell still has that little key. It hangs on his bed in his room and still he grabs it to comfort him when he is unwell.

### International visitors

**Ms ASHER** (Brighton) — I wish to draw the house's attention to a media release dated 20 January 2016 issued by Melbourne Airport. It encapsulates the airport's 2015 passenger traffic results. We should be very pleased as an economy with the amount of tourists that are now coming into Victoria due to a lot of work done over many years, with international passenger growth reaching more than 8.7 million international passengers for the year, an increase of 9 per cent compared with 2014.

Indeed Melbourne Airport makes mention of the fact that in 2015 Scoot airlines, China Airlines and Indonesia Air Asia X all came to Melbourne. Indeed I recall very clearly holding a series of meetings and negotiating with those airlines, and I am delighted those

airlines have chosen to fly into Melbourne. A number of other airlines have also expanded services into Melbourne.

The most astounding growth of course has come out of North Asia. Over the 2015 calendar year international growth from China showed an increase of 26 per cent; Hong Kong, 12.9 per cent; South Korea, 9.1 per cent; and, in terms of South-East Asia, Vietnam nationals contributed a 16.5 per cent growth. French nationals contributed a 22.8 per cent growth, which is a very large amount of growth, and there was a 10 per cent growth in traveller numbers from Spain as well.

### International Women's Day

**Ms HUTCHINS** (Minister for Local Government) — This International Women's Day I am calling on all councils to support greater gender diversity in the forthcoming elections. The Andrews government is urging women from across Victoria to consider standing as candidates this October to ensure our councils reflect our local communities. Only 34.9 per cent of all Victorian councillors are women, and 60 per cent of all workers in local government are women, yet only 16 per cent are CEOs. At the bottom of the scale of councils we have seven councils across the state with only one female councillor compared to six males. At the other end of the scale we have Port Phillip and Melton city councils with five female councillors out of seven, representing over 70 per cent female councillors. I also note Moonee Valley City Council has a very good record on women's membership of its council as well.

I have written to all mayors to seek their councils' support in encouraging more women to stand as candidates in the October election. As leaders in the community we have a collective responsibility to do more to increase women's participation.

This morning I had the privilege to meet with women from LGPro, including vice-president Rebecca McKenzie, Celia Haddock, Liana Thompson, Robyn Mansfield, Pauline Bennett, Lynley Dumble and Sasha Lord. They presented me with a report called *Addressing Representation of Women at CEO Level in Local Government*. I look forward to working with these women to improve outcomes for women across the state.

### Clean Up Australia Day

**Mr ANGUS** (Forest Hill) — Last Sunday I was once again pleased to organise a local site for Clean Up Australia Day at the Lookout Trail in Vermont South.

As always it was a very successful time, resulting in lots of assorted rubbish being collected, including tyres, metal and various other items. The area was left in pristine condition, ready to be enjoyed by all comers. My sincere thanks go to all the volunteers who attended and helped out in this most worthwhile exercise.

### Water policy

**Mr ANGUS** — The decision by the government to place an order for water from the desalination plant represents an opportunity for Labor to justify its hypocritical decision from 2007. When the coalition first announced a policy to construct a modest-sized desalination plant leading into the 2006 state election, Labor decried this innovative policy initiative as a hoax. However, a short time later in 2007 it announced as a so-called great new initiative that it would build a desalination plant, and not just an ordinary one but one of the largest in the world.

The original cost of the desalination plant as announced by the Labor government in June 2007 was \$3.1 billion. In typical Labor style, within four years this cost had blown out to a massive \$19.3 billion, excluding water. As we all now know, the construction of this excessively large desalination plant will cost Victorians \$1.8 million every single day for 27 years, leaving our children's children with a financial burden for years to come. With water capacity levels currently sitting at 63.7 per cent of total capacity, being the third highest March level recorded over the last 10 years and with no additional water restrictions introduced by the current government, this decision is purely a political one. It is another decision that will negatively impact on the cost of living for most Victorians. With Labor's initial desalination decision causing Melbourne water bills to almost double, this recent ordering of water will further increase household costs and hurt Victorian family budgets to the extent of around \$117 million.

The politicisation of Victoria's water management can clearly be seen following the wholesale sacking of all Victorian water boards last year. The appointment of numerous Labor mates, staffers, candidates and former MPs, regardless of any skills they possess, shows just how far this government will go to politicise water. A classic example is the appointment last October of former Labor minister John Thwaites as the chairman of the Melbourne Water board. This government is a chaotic and dysfunctional government, increasing debt, spending, taxes —

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr Pearson)** — Order! The honourable member's time has expired.

### International Women's Day

**Ms GREEN** (Yan Yean) — Today as we celebrate International Women's Day, as other speakers have noted, gender parity is a long way off. I commend especially young women in education in my local schools and also Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala for their struggles to achieve this, and I hope to continue to work with them.

I am one of only 37 per cent of women in this Parliament of 128 members, but I am proud that 47 per cent of the Labor MPs in this chamber are women. We are getting closer. Yesterday I was delighted to join colleagues and friends to see the founder of the Victorian Honour Roll of Women, Sherryl Garbutt, inducted. Sherryl is a great friend and mentor, and among her many, many achievements began an International Women's Day event and award 24 years ago — a tradition that I am privileged to continue. This year's event last Saturday at The Windy Mile in Diamond Creek opened with 2015 awardee and Nillumbik deputy mayor Helen Coleman as MC.

Our guest speaker was Hurstbridge's own Miss Wattle, Sue Arnold, who channelled her alter egos, suffragist Muriel Matters and Lucille Ball. She entertained us with her humour, singing and ukulele playing, and inspired us with her personal honesty about living with depression. Wattle Glen resident Joanne Rockwell was named the 2016 Selina Sutherland International Women's Day awardee. Jo heads up a fabulous organisation called Boots For All, which has distributed more than 30 000 sports equipment items throughout its time. Congratulations, Jo.

### International Women's Day

**Ms STALEY** (Ripon) — Today is International Women's Day. It is a day I am particularly proud to be able to stand in this place as a Liberal MP. My party holds many significant achievements in getting women into Parliament, so many that my colleague in the other place Margaret Fitzherbert was able to fill an entire book, *So Many Firsts*. We have much further to travel on this journey, and I understand my role, as one who has at last got here, to help those coming behind and to never roll up the ladder behind me.

Every International Women's Day further names of outstanding Victorian women are added to the Victorian Honour Roll of Women, and this year is no exception. Twenty women join this illustrious roll. Today I will highlight two. Michelle Payne, of the great Miners Rest Payne family, is of course the jockey who rode the last Melbourne Cup winner. Her entry on the

roll not only celebrates her wonderful achievement of breaking that particular glass ceiling but is also timely as this week we hear Michelle appears in race books as 'Ms M. Payne' yet male jockeys are denied a similar honorific. Ms Payne was right when she said racing is 'such a chauvinistic sport' and equalising race books would be a lasting tribute to her win and her advocacy for change.

Simone Carson, as co-founder of SecondBite, is a person who has made a significant difference to the lives of thousands of Victorians and indeed Australians. SecondBite collects unwanted food from markets, and hungry people eat good food and waste is minimised through this charity. Earlier this year Simone and her husband were named the World Economic Forum's social entrepreneurs of the year. This latest accolade for Simone is well deserved and I applaud her.

### International Women's Day

**Ms HALFPENNY** (Thomastown) — On 3 March I had the great pleasure of opening the annual International Women's Day photographic exhibition at Magnet Galleries, an exhibition of women photographers held each year. The exhibition this year was titled 'No Lilies — Women and Work'. Many of the photographers contributing to the exhibition are well known and all of them exceptionally talented. The theme this year was inspired by the woman industrialist who owned and operated the Eliza Tinsley hardware and chain manufacturing business, an English business that expanded to Melbourne and operated from the building that is now the temporary home of the Magnet Galleries.

Eliza Tinsley took over the English hardware and chain manufacturing business in 1851, following the death of her husband. She did so as a single mother with five children aged under 11 years. Mrs Tinsley was wholly responsible for this business that employed up to 4000 workers, yet she had no right to vote. If Mrs Tinsley had remarried, all her property and the business would have transferred to the ownership of her husband — married women had no property rights. The women in Australia who worked for her had also no right to vote and would have received a fraction of the wage paid to men for doing the same work. While equal pay was legislated for in industrial awards in 1972 in Victoria, the issue of pay inequality between men and women continues to this day, and the gap is getting wider.

The exhibition showcases both the talent and skills of the photographers and makes such a strong statement about women, their strengths, creativity and

contribution to society. The photographs themselves capture many and varied aspects of women, their work and celebrate the contributions they make. Well done to the contributors.

## NATIONAL ELECTRICITY (VICTORIA) FURTHER AMENDMENT BILL 2015

*Second reading*

**Debate resumed from 9 December 2015; motion of Ms D'AMBROSIO (Minister for Energy and Resources).**

**Mr SOUTHWICK** (Caulfield) — I rise to speak on the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015. This bill amends the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 to apply a new framework governing the process for connecting retail customers, including small-scale renewable energy generation proponents, to the electricity grid. I say from the outset that the coalition will not be opposing this bill. On this side of the house we think there is a requirement for energy reform to ultimately ensure that energy affordability — the cost of energy — remains as affordable as possible and that we do whatever we can to drive down energy prices. Another element that is important when we are talking about connectivity in the bill is that we focus on transparency within the industry and that we deliver to the customer the most efficiency we can to ensure they are not given the runaround when it comes to connectivity.

It would be fair to say that this portfolio is quite a difficult one for many consumers to understand. In many instances when a consumer gets their power bill they find it difficult to understand the mechanics behind it — the costings, the wholesale price, the distributor price and the retail price. It is very confusing. I know that when the coalition was in government it did a lot of work in terms of transparency, including developing websites so people could compare and contrast, and in fairness the current government has expanded that work. It is very important that we have that transparency and that we give customers as much information as possible to make the best decisions they can about affordability and connectivity to ensure their cost of living is minimised when it comes to these sorts of important issues.

In this bill part of the framework looks at how Victoria operates in the national electricity market to ensure there is consistency within that framework, and it seeks to provide greater clarity regarding the information that must be exchanged between an electricity distributor and a customer to set up a connection. This is very

much about the customer wanting to connect, whether it be the customer connecting to the grid or, in the instance of renewables and small-scale renewables, ensuring there is an ability to connect those in the easiest possible manner without confusion.

I suppose one of the key things in the bill is that distributors will be required to respond to and process requests for connection in a more timely manner. Currently distributors need to respond within 20 days — that is, if somebody rings up for a connection, the distributor has 20 days to respond to that connection inquiry and ensure that a home or a business is connected to the grid. The bill reduces that from 20 days to 10 days, so it must be done in a more timely manner. There is a further requirement for more complex matters, which is 65 days. That was what it was under the previous set of regulations, prior to this bill, and that will remain as it is. I hope that we will look to create further efficiencies around that to get people connected as soon as possible. When I talk to businesses in particular around new connections, they tell me this is one of the key issues they face in terms of some of the complexity — who is responsible — involved in ensuring businesses are up and running as quickly as possible and connected so they are able to do business. This involves householders as well. It is really important that we get people connected in a timely manner.

Under new section 11A the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) will be able to use its compliance powers if there is a breach of the civil penalty provision which may lead to a civil penalty. If there is an issue in terms of compliance, there are penalties in place. For a natural person it is an amount not exceeding \$20 000 and an amount not exceeding \$2000 for every day during which the breach continues. For a body corporate it is an amount not exceeding \$100 000 and an amount not exceeding \$10 000 for every day during which the breach continues. That is the penalty for non-compliance.

The standard terms and conditions for a connection must be published by each electricity distributor. These terms and conditions must be approved by the Australian Energy Regulator. The AER will be responsible for monitoring and enforcing electrical compliance within the new framework.

Another element of the bill is that there is an obligation on electricity distributors to offer to underground, relocate, modify or remove distribution assets if requested to do so. The obligation to call for competitive tenders to perform construction works associated with new connections of the Victorian

framework not captured under the new framework, which is not included in the new framework but exists in the current Victorian framework, will remain and be enforced by the AER. This is important in terms of connections and the undergrounding of power, moving power and modifying distribution assets.

Again, there have been a number of circumstances in the case of industry moving to a larger premise requiring additional power. Quite often a business will be quoted a huge amount to get connected. What needs to be in place, and I hope with some of these changes this will occur, is more transparency. There is a tender process and there is an opportunity for businesses to look at contractors, providing they are registered, providing a competitive quote.

The member for Evelyn took me out to a business that was moving to larger premises. They were quoted \$150 000 to relocate and underground the power. This is a huge impost on businesses, and I hope there is more transparency and an ability to ensure more efficiency when it comes to such a situation. That is really the context for the bill. As I said, it is important that we provide the most transparent way possible to get people set up and run their homes and businesses connected to power.

One of the things we need to focus on at every possible post is what we can do to drive down energy prices. What is this government doing about driving down energy prices? It is one thing to get Victorians connected, but once they are connected we want to keep them connected. We want to ensure they are getting the lowest possible prices in terms of their power. We do not want situations where we see an increase in disconnections as a result of hardship on people faced with escalating energy prices. That is something I will talk to.

Another element this government has failed at is energy market reform. What we have seen to date are a whole lot of different reviews that the government has put in place. I note that in the minister's second-reading speech she spoke quite substantially about renewable energy and the important role it plays in supporting customers to take action on their energy bills. That is certainly an important component in terms of connecting renewable energy to the grid.

But in terms of saying one thing and doing another, in the time this government has been in power we have seen a 20 per cent cut in the credit that people receive by putting electricity into the grid through solar energy. It is one thing to say that by connecting people there is going to be a benefit, but we have seen a decrease

under this government. We have also now heard that the government is going to do a review in terms of solar and solar rebates. This is just one of many reviews this government is doing, but we are not seeing substance in terms of the sorts of things that are going to drive down energy prices.

In opposition the then shadow Minister for Energy and Resources, the member for Mill Park, stated:

Households are now further than they ought to be from getting the real cost-saving benefits that the advanced metering infrastructure is able to deliver.

She also said:

... the AMI program will enable small businesses and households to have greater control over their energy use and costs. It will also be an important tool in the management of peak demand.

What are we talking about there? We are talking about the smart meter program. The smart meter program was meant to be the absolute fix-it to ensure that Victorians could monitor their energy use, that they could plan their energy use, that they could see how they could respond in terms of what they were using in the peak period and what they were using in the off-peak period and that they could make clever decisions in terms of their energy use. Unfortunately we know that was not the case, and the Auditor-General found that Labor's smart meter program resulted in an estimated \$2.23 billion in higher power bills. It was originally costed at \$800 million, but it has had a blowout of some \$2 billion. This means the average Victorian household has paid roughly an extra \$760, some paying up to \$1000, on their power bill since 2009. At every possible turn we have seen a failure of the smart meter program.

Recently an opportunity was presented to the minister to look at some tariff reform promoted by the energy regulator to look at how we go about ensuring that people make informed decisions and that, again, people are able to utilise things like smart meters to get them to use power in the off-peak period to take the pressure off the peak period. Currently we have a whole lot of people using during peak periods, which is putting more pressure on the peak load. The smoothing out of energy use would make a huge difference to prices. It would make a huge difference to energy use. It would make a huge difference in terms of the environment and sustainability as well. It is a great opportunity that has been missed. The government has failed in this test of delivering market reform, and it has backed away from the changes in electricity pricing that experts say would help the poor, reduce cost subsidies and make power to the grid more efficient.

Here is Victoria, the most perfectly positioned jurisdiction in the country and the one that has rolled out smart meters across the board, albeit poorly. When we could be showing leadership and could go to the Council of Australian Governments in a month and say, 'This is what we're able to do. We're going to get on board with the feds. We're going to lead with the other states. We're going to drive energy reform, and we're going to make sure that there is flexible pricing. We're going to ensure that people get on board with flexible pricing'. But what has the minister done? The minister has said no, that it is too hard. She has said, 'We don't want to do that. We'll just back away from this, and we'll choose an opt-in method when it comes to people signing up with flexible pricing', with no other opportunity for reform and no other talk about what the government is going to do to take pressure off the peak and smooth out the load to ensure that we drive down energy prices. There is none of that whatsoever.

Do not take my word for it. According to the Grattan Institute energy program director, Tony Wood, the minister's decision will lead to a negligible take-up of flexible pricing, locking Victoria into the current flat tariff that will result in cross-subsidies in favour of those who use more power at the cost of those who are energy efficient. AGL estimated in a 2014 paper titled *On the inequity of flat-rate electricity tariffs* that the net aggregate benefits of flexible tariffs could result in as much as \$1.6 billion to eastern states households and that poorer households would likely be better off. Here is a great opportunity that has gone missing because of the government, as is shown by what AGL has said and what the Grattan Institute has said — that flexible pricing could really drive down prices.

In addition to the short-term benefit of flexible pricing, the Grattan Institute estimated in a 2014 report called *Fair pricing for power* that cost-reflective pricing could save network businesses nearly \$8 billion in pole and wire investments over five years, with benefits being passed on to consumers. Here is a case of, again, the distributors needing to build for the peak because we have more and more pressure on the peak period and need more poles and wires when we are talking about renewables, when we are talking about efficiencies and when we are talking about ways of being able to encourage better investment in this area. But we are doing nothing to alleviate pressure on the peak. This government is doing nothing to alleviate pricing, which is absolutely key to ensuring affordability. This minister is missing in action when it comes to affordability and pricing.

The other element is that it is important to ensure that there is transparency when it comes to this sort of thing

and that there is flexibility as well. What has happened? What we have seen is a minister who has completely backed down when it comes to an opportunity on flexible pricing and a Labor government that has again demonstrated its incompetency when it delivers any major infrastructure project. On smart meters — —

**Mr Richardson** interjected.

**Mr SOUTHWICK** — The member for Mordialloc knows all too well that the smart meter failure is just one of those legacies we can talk about. It is interesting, because I spoke to the New South Wales Minister for Industry, Resources and Energy only last week.

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**Mr SOUTHWICK** — The people in the back rows can squawk all they like, but I spoke to the New South Wales minister. He said, 'You know what? We're actually rolling out smart meters, but we're doing it properly', unlike what the Labor Party did when it made an absolute mess of its smart meter program. In fact the Labor Party is a laughing stock when it comes to these sorts of things around the other states, again demonstrating that it does everything poorly. Like we have heard only today with the desalination plant, that was an absolute joke. It was a white elephant. What does Labor do? It has to switch it on because it has to show some justification for that investment.

**Mr Northe** — More energy!

**Mr SOUTHWICK** — Exactly! As the member for Morwell quite rightly points out, all that does is jack up the energy prices. The Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water today said, 'That's okay. That's fine. We'll build a wind farm, and that wind farm is going to subsidise everything because that has been built to be able to take that power off the grid'. So we are able to use the power off the grid. Well, what we were doing with that wind farm that was built by AGL was putting power back into the grid, but now we are going to have to take power off the grid to subsidise the desalination plant, which will mean less renewable energy.

Government members absolutely squawk in terms of what they want to do by talking up their *Victoria's Renewable Energy Roadmap*. They talk up what they are going to do in terms of investment in renewables, but they have hijacked a whole lot of it to boost up the desalination plant. What an absolute joke! I would ask the minister to go and front many of those green groups out there and see what they have to say in terms of turning on the switch and using all of that power to get the desalination plant working.

But let us get back to higher prices, because I think that is really important, certainly for the members in many of the electorates on the government side, many of whom would be aware of the escalating prices. They probably have constituents knocking on their doors saying, 'What is your minister doing about reducing prices? What are you going to do to ensure that I do not get escalating power bills?'. Well, households in many electorates, including many on the government side, will be slugged with higher energy bills because the Andrews Labor government has sabotaged electricity pricing reforms.

Recently government members rejected flexible pricing, so the St Vincent De Paul Society did some research to have a look at a Victorian tariff-tracking project. This research tracked how we were going. Government members like to talk up the fact that they are doing really well in all of these wonderful areas. Well, how are they actually going when it comes to rising energy prices? What we saw is of course the impost of the smart meters doing nothing in terms of energy reform — 14 or 15 months of doing absolutely nothing other than reviews in this space. Government members have ignored a golden opportunity left by the previous government — the former minister, the member for Morwell, is sitting at the table — to implement a whole lot of reforms in this place in terms of being able to choose packages. There was a whole lot of reform in this space, and now we are doing nothing.

So what did the St Vincent de Paul tariff-tracking project actually tell us in terms of how energy has gone over the last 12 months? People in the inner city and in the northern and eastern suburbs, such as the Melbourne CBD, Brunswick, Carlton, Fitzroy, Northcote, Richmond — and I know the minister is in the chamber right now — and Collingwood will typically receive an increase in energy costs of \$110 this year. Members representing those electorates can go back to their constituents and say, 'Sorry about that; we will just add a \$100 increase to your power bill'.

**An honourable member** interjected.

**Mr SOUTHWICK** — And the water bill as well.

I turn to the electorates of Kew, Hawthorn, Camberwell, Balwyn and the inner southern and eastern suburbs of South Yarra and Prahran. The member for Prahran can go and tell his constituents that they will receive an increase in energy costs of \$100. So there will be extra costs of \$110 to the Melbourne CBD households and \$100 to the southern and eastern regions. Households in St Kilda, Port Melbourne and

Albert Park will typically receive an energy cost increase of \$125 compared to last year — up go their prices by \$125! In my electorate of Caulfield I have got to go and apologise on behalf of the current government for bills going up \$100 compared to last year. Here is another example of how the research by the St Vincent de Paul Society — the work of an independent body — shows that prices have increased thanks to Labor.

But let us go to the inner west and the northern suburbs. Acting Speaker Pearson will know about my favourites, Jemena, AusNet Services and AGL's north gas zone. Households in Footscray, Yarraville, Williamstown, Flemington, Moonee Ponds, Broadmeadows, Coolaroo, Braybrook and Sydenham will experience an increased energy cost of \$30 compared to last year. Government members can go and put out a press release to tell their constituents that that is what they will be receiving. Households in Heidelberg, Fairfield, Ivanhoe, Bundoora, Thomastown, Preston and Reservoir will experience an increased cost of \$45 compared to last year.

In the south-eastern suburbs we have United Energy, Multinet Gas and AGL's south zone. Households in the south-eastern suburbs, including Elwood, Elsternwick, Brighton, Sandringham, Beaumaris, Chelsea, Bentleigh, Moorabbin, Springvale, Noble Park and Keysborough will experience an increased energy cost of \$80 compared to last year.

In the United Energy and Origin south zone, households in Seaford, Frankston and Mornington Peninsula will experience an increased cost of \$50 compared to last year.

Lastly, in the United Energy, Multinet and Origin metro gas zone, households in Bulleen, Templestowe, Box Hill, Doncaster, Mitcham, Vermont, Glen Waverley and Chadstone will experience an increase in energy costs of \$55 compared to last year.

What does this say? Clearly it says that this government is asleep at the wheel. This government is not doing what it was elected to do — that is, to ensure that we are driving down energy prices, to ensure that customers get the best deal possible, to ensure the cost of living is kept as low as it possibly can be and to ensure that the government is actually governing for all Victorians.

It is important that we see that this government takes action. This is important in terms of getting connectivity, and this bill talks about connectivity. We need to get that right, but we also need to actually do something when it comes to some of this pricing. We

need to ensure that we do not get such headlines as ‘Get set for bill shock — inside the legal fiasco pushing up electricity prices’ or read an article in the *Australian* which states:

Hoped-for cuts to household power bills of up to \$339 a year are under a cloud after the electricity networks won a review of rulings imposed by the Australian Energy Regulator.

The networks are the ones providing the connections. In terms of the connections themselves — a significant part of the bill is to do with connections — I note that about 30 per cent of the cost of electricity bills is to do with connections. We need to ensure that those costs are kept as low as possible, we need to ensure that there is proper reform and we need to ensure that ultimately it is the customers who get the best deal. Government members need to do whatever they can and what Victorians would expect them to do to provide the best deal for consumers and for industry. Government members also talk about their jobs plan, but the best jobs plan possible is to ensure that we maintain an environment that is sustainable for investment and sustainable for jobs.

**Ms EDWARDS** (Bendigo West) — I am very pleased to rise to speak on the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015. Gosh, for a minute there — just for a little minute — I thought the member for Caulfield was actually like a leopard who had changed his spots and was getting on board and becoming a true believer in renewable energy, but no, he could not help himself. Once again he is back to the old climate change denial position. His comments, I have to say, on the bill situation for consumers at the moment are outrageous.

Let us just look at the history of the previous government and what its members did to consumers of electricity. Between 2012–13 and 2013–14 electricity disconnections rose by 36 per cent, gas disconnections rose by 42 per cent and wrongful disconnections doubled. If that is not a history of letting down energy consumers, I do not know what is.

But let us talk about what this government is doing. We are getting on with building our renewable energy credentials, we are building the jobs of the future and I have to say that this bill is indeed the sixth energy bill that this government has introduced since forming government. I think that is probably a record. That is of course after four years of the previous government, during which it passed eight pieces of legislation in four years. I think we have already passed five, and hopefully this one will be the sixth, because we want to kick-start the growth of sustainable jobs in this state — and that is exactly what we are doing.

There is absolutely no doubt that this bill will benefit consumers, and particularly small consumers who want to get connected to solar. One of the barriers at the moment to people who want to connect to solar, particularly small-scale renewable energy projects, is the cost — and also the complexity — of the current process to connect small-scale energy generation to the electricity grid.

As we know, the energy companies own the lines, the power and the wires that deliver power to homes and businesses across the state. The energy distributors are required to connect the customers, including those small-scale renewable energy generation proponents, to the electricity grid. But at the moment these arrangements and the governing arrangements around this are very complex, they lack transparency and they are not particularly customer friendly. So this bill will change all of that.

The bill will amend the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 to apply in Victoria. This will mean a new framework governing the process of connecting small customers, including small-scale renewable energy generation proponents, to the electricity grid. There is absolutely no doubt that this government has set the agenda for Victoria to become once again a leader in renewable energy. Let us be very clear that under the previous government for four years those opposite did nothing but restrict the growth of renewable energy. Onerous and restrictive wind energy laws were introduced, which absolutely created a hiatus when it came to wind energy investment in this state. I would like to quote, if I could, from Bernie Finn in the other house, who stated in 2011:

wind turbines and wind farms ... are ugly, noisy and unhealthy, are going to put a lot of people out for very little benefit.

Simon Ramsay, also in the other place, in October 2011 stated:

Embracing wind farms will decrease land values.

Clearly for four years we had a government that had no idea about the significant investment and the significant jobs that could come from wind energy expansion across our state.

Let us talk about solar. Let us talk about solar in the sense of how this government is actually getting on with helping not just small-scale solar farms but also whole communities that want to switch on and get off the grid.

In my community of Newstead, one of the leading communities when it comes to renewable energy,

Newstead 2021 and the renewable energy project will be a first for Victoria. This will be a whole town that will be off the grid. This is not just about creating a town that is entirely off the grid but it is a social solution to the great challenge of transitioning energy markets from centralised and extractive to local and renewable. This is a very important initiative, and what is even more important about this initiative is that it is driven by the community, it has got the backing of Powercor now with a memorandum of understanding signed just a couple of weeks ago, and it will set the benchmark for other towns across regional Victoria that might want to go down the path of becoming 100 per cent renewable.

This is a fantastic initiative, and I am really proud and pleased that Newstead in my electorate is the town that is leading the charge in this space. I am really, really pleased that the Minister for Energy and Resources has got behind this project right from the start. She saw right from the beginning the potential for this project and what enormous benefits it would bring not just to the people of Newstead but indeed across the whole of Victoria.

We have so many small communities across Victoria that could actually transition in the near future. The road map for this has been set. Renewable Newstead is documenting the process right along the way so that when other towns come to say, 'We might want to do that as well', the community will have documented exactly the steps that they will need to take to do this. They will also have documented any hurdles that they might have to overcome in order to transition to 100 per cent renewable.

I am very excited about this project, because when we were in opposition we knew that there was a significant hiatus when it came to renewable energy in this state. We knew that people were calling out for more investment in renewable energy. That is why Newstead became so important to us, because at the time the now Premier said that a Labor government would reverse the wind farm restrictions imposed by the coalition state government at the time and seek to unlock billions of dollars in stalled investment. That is exactly what we did. In the focus on Newstead, we allocated a \$200 000 grant to fund the local community group behind the project to draw up a master plan, and it is in the process of doing that right now.

I would like to, if I can, mention the memorandum of understanding that was signed not long ago because I think this is an important start for this project and indeed a momentous start for Newstead, because this

has never been done before. This is a first for Victoria, and if I can I would like to read from Citipower:

Powercor is pleased to announce the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Newstead 2021 Inc. to support the community's goal of transitioning to a 100 per cent renewable energy supply.

The project — Renewable Newstead — aims to implement a locally generated renewable energy model within a community scale electricity network and has received \$200 000 in funding from the Victorian government. The project is also expected to deliver outcomes that will be replicable —

that is important — replicable —

in other similar communities across Victoria.

'Renewable generation is now a reality of our energy generation mix, with solar, wind power and energy storage increasingly being integrated into electricity networks ...

This is important because this means that our energy companies are actually getting on board with our communities which want to transition to bring in renewable energy, but more importantly partnering with the Victorian government when it comes to renewable energy.

This bill is just another step along the way as this government makes sure that Victoria is a leader in renewable energy. Investment was at its peak in 2009 and we saw it plummet over the next four years. In fact annual investment in renewable energy fell from \$2 billion in 2013 under the previous government to just \$238 million in 2014. That is a significant drop for a state the size of Victoria.

I think the previous coalition government also committed to abolishing the energy efficiency target. I recall the member for Caulfield again talking about the bills and costs to customers. Well, the energy efficiency target was an energy-saving scheme that cut the energy bills of families and small businesses.

There was very rarely in the last four years under the legislative program of the previous government any significant legislation passed regarding renewable energy. But here in Victoria, under this government over the last 18 months, we have kickstarted the growth of sustainable jobs through our \$20 million New Energy Jobs Fund. We have announced the government's renewable energy purchasing initiative, which will buy 100 megawatts of clean energy and create 1000 jobs. We have launched our solar for lifesaving clubs program offering solar panels to every Victorian lifesaving club and we have given renters the power to access solar energy and have lower bills.

You cannot argue the case that this Andrews Labor government is not actually getting on with promoting renewable energy in this state and creating jobs that go along with renewable energy. There is no doubt that this government has the credentials.

**Mr NORTHE** (Morwell) — I am pleased to rise this afternoon to speak on the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015, following the member for Bendigo West and her rewrite of history. I will try to put some facts back on the table during my contribution — the real facts.

This bill does a number of things, and I suppose its most important parts relate to the establishment of a new framework to provide greater clarity regarding information that is exchanged between an electricity distributor and a customer in setting up a connection. The member for Caulfield talked about making sure that those connections are done in a timely manner, bringing the required number of days back from 20 to 10 in most cases. However, he noted the fact that complex cases remain at 65 days. The bill talks about any disputes that may arise, and the Australian Energy Regulator would be the dispute resolution provider in that case.

It is interesting to note that at the moment the national energy market is an interesting one — it is certainly one that has challenged all governments, and indeed all involved in the industry, over a long period of time. As members would know, my electorate of Morwell is a very important and critical part of not only Victoria's energy supply but also the national electricity market. Without being condescending, I would say that I am not really sure that a lot of members of Parliament or indeed the general public understand the reliance of other jurisdictions on the electricity supply that comes out of the Latrobe Valley.

From a local point of view there is no doubt there are significant challenges for the energy industry in Victoria. The shift has been substantial in recent years. Overall we have seen a reduction in demand, and that can be attributed to a number of factors. Part of the challenge, which I will take up with the member for Bendigo West, is the suggestion that for four years under the former government things went backwards from a renewable energy perspective. That is not the case at all. In fact, if you look at rooftop solar, you see it more than doubled in the four years we were in government, as one example. Indeed in the Victorian context the take-up of renewable energy actually increased substantially in our term in government.

Nonetheless, from a local point of view there are challenges in the industry. Statewide we have seen that some of the heavy users of electricity in Victoria have closed or had some challenges, and the take-up of renewable energy is the primary reason we have seen a reduction in demand. At the same time the generators in the Latrobe Valley have seen a very stable price, or even a reduction in the wholesale price, over a long period of time, which has put enormous financial pressures on those particular industries — the businesses and the workers. Still, today, in 2016, the Latrobe Valley is absolutely critical to the security of supply in Victoria, and might I say it is critical as an exporter to other jurisdictions, which I will talk about shortly.

I want to set the record straight on some points. When we were in government I think one of the key things we did was to issue an energy policy statement, and that talked about a number of things that we were able to do and some of the key initiatives that we were to take up. Price has been discussed by the members for Bendigo West and Caulfield, and that is absolutely a critical part of it. I remind all members of the house that one of the key initiatives the coalition put in place was to extend electricity concessions, making them available all year round. Those concessions are critical to some of the most vulnerable people within our community. It was actually the coalition government that implemented that policy — we did that — and until this day it has been an important concession for many of the most vulnerable in our community.

We have talked about the smart meter rollout — I will not go there — but from a consumer perspective there was the My Power Planner initiative, which the current government has rebadged and which has morphed into something else. It was going perfectly well.

**Ms D'Ambrosio** interjected.

**Mr NORTHE** — It was going perfectly well. The minister at the table is interjecting, but nonetheless I appreciate that the government has rebadged it. It is a good initiative that we introduced as a coalition, and it had a great take-up. I know many people, including me, actually use it on a frequent basis. It is a good initiative. It gives some power back to the consumers — pardon the pun! It is a good tool, and it is a good initiative that has been used. Again, I can stand here and say that I have used it myself.

There are a whole range of other initiatives that we put in place. Critically when we are talking about distribution companies, after the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission reported we implemented

the powerline bushfire safety program, which is a critically important part of making sure that we do protect our electricity assets whilst keeping the community safe at the same time.

I mentioned our energy policy statement, and one of the key aspects of that was competition for network connections. If I can read just part of that out, on page 41 we said:

Electricity distribution connections are currently provided to consumers by network businesses. There is little competition in delivery of this service and anecdotal evidence suggests that many consumers experience considerable delays in applying for and having the connections installed.

Successive Victorian governments have supported an approach that allows competitive markets to drive efficient service delivery and ongoing improvements in productivity. While it is not possible to introduce competition into all elements of the energy supply chain, network connection services could be provided by suitably qualified third party providers.

I have been approached as a local member of Parliament on a few occasions about the exorbitant costs that can exist for one to have electricity connected and the time frames for doing so. We put measures in place in September 2014 to drive that contestability but also to make sure that connections did occur in a timely manner, and that is very important. Here we are, probably 18 months later, and we are talking about these same things.

I also want to talk about these matters from a national electricity market point of view. I am not sure if some of the challenges that other states are having at the moment are widely known, and I will preface my comments by saying, of course, that I am very supportive of the notion that we do increase our renewable energy capacity in Victoria, but it has been interesting to read over the past few months about the challenges that some of the other states are encountering at the moment. Many members may not be aware, but we are a substantial electricity exporter to South Australia and New South Wales. South Australia had enormous challenges over the summer period. There has been media article after media article talking about the fact that the wind did not blow over the summer, and that state has had to endure substantial electricity prices and a threat to its security of supply. I will say it in context: good on South Australia, but at the same time we have to be very careful in making sure that we still do have a mix of energy supply sources and that we do have substantial baseload power to be able to continue to not only power homes but also businesses.

Members may have heard about the Basslink issue Tasmania is having at the moment, with the interconnector not working, having been offline for months. I have an article that says, 'Hydro's solution to Tasmanian electricity crisis to cost millions'. You have one of the largest paper machines in Tasmania effectively shutting down as a consequence of it not having power. Hydro Tasmania's facilities are not working effectively. Water storages are very low, and with the interconnector now broken, Tasmania is really struggling.

I will make that point again: the fact is that I well and truly and strongly support the notion of having a mix of renewable energy in Victoria, but at the same time Victoria has been playing a key role in making sure that South Australia has power during critical periods, and we also play an important role with respect to Tasmania. From my perspective these are sensible provisions, and I commend the bill to the house.

**Mr RICHARDSON (Mordialloc)** — It gives me great pleasure to rise to speak on the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015, which is part of another pillar in the government's approach to renewable energy more generally — getting people more connected to renewable energy sources and the mixture of energy sources across the network. Having listened to the member for Morwell, who touched a little bit on the balance of different sources of power, but then also having the opportunity to listen to the member for Caulfield, it was quite interesting how sensitive and how cautious the member for Caulfield was not to talk about the whole energy mix across the board and not to make any reference to any past procedures or practices of the previous government. He strayed very far away from the approach of the federal government and its attack on renewable energy. It was sort of a speech in a silo, really, and particularly his comments about the pressure on the peak and the claims about affordability struck me, because the opposition's actions while in government were to stifle renewable energy and they really were the prequel to the Tony Abbott attack on renewable energy in the sector over a number of years, putting that substantial industry at risk.

The member talked about being asleep at the wheel, but there was only one side that was asleep at the wheel over those four years, and that was the coalition. It had strange policies about wind energy and strange policies about 2-kilometre buffers that were not based on science. It really missed an opportunity, because there are two prongs to this: taking reliance off the base load but also the employment benefit and the employment opportunities that come from investment in renewable

energy. I have said previously in this house that in a sector where we have automotive component part manufacturers going to the wall and people in my community losing their jobs, we want to be first movers when it comes to renewable energy investments and uptake, particularly in the manufacturing sector. I acknowledge the presence of the Minister for Energy and Resources in the house, who is leading some of those investments, and I refer particularly to the \$200 million Future Industries Fund, a key component of which is renewable energy.

It is worth then thinking about where we are up to in an entire context, and about where our renewable energy is going longer term, because our small consumers, and then small businesses more generally, have a part to play. It is estimated that by 2020, the Australian renewable energy industry will be around \$14.7 billion in investment, and that is a significant opportunity for our state, and to take back our mark as first movers in renewable energy and really lead that charge is very important.

I take up the comments made by the member for Bendigo West about comments by members of the previous government, particularly by Bernie Finn, a member for Western Metropolitan Region in the other place, regarding wind farms and turbines, and by Simon Ramsay, a member for Western Victoria Region in the other place, who made suggestions about decreasing land values. But it is worth considering that investment in renewable energy plummeted in Victoria and that across Australia annual investment in renewable energy fell from \$2 billion in 2013 to \$238 million in 2014. That is an absolute travesty and a missed opportunity. All we are doing is seeing other economies around the world, but also our counterparts interstate, taking up those opportunities that Victoria should be leading, particularly when we think that as a convenience opposition members are trying to avoid some of those struggles in their party on ideological lines.

We see the current Prime Minister at the moment absolutely struggling to get across the need to invest in renewable energy, and we see the federal opposition putting forward an ambitious target for renewable energy by 2030. That is the policy space we should be in, and it is not a question anymore of science or the need to do it. The previous Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, and a former Premier, Ted Baillieu, turned their backs on renewable energy as if it were something in their antiscience playbook. It was climate change denial, and denial about the need for renewable energy, or saying that the aesthetics or look of a wind farm has something to do with its energy production is absolutely absurd. We would expect that from

grassroots Neanderthal councillors rather than from the leader of our state and our Prime Minister. To be putting that forward is absolutely absurd.

Thinking about how we go forward into the future and particularly about connecting more people to solar, about 250 000 units in Victoria are connected to solar, and that is really the result of reform over a number of years of transition to more renewable sources. But then we also see communities taking action locally. During my time as an adviser in the federal government to the former parliamentary secretary for climate change and energy efficiency, we came across the Hepburn Wind project. This is a wonderful purely community-led initiative where locally people are taking action to offset their energy needs. What we need to be doing is seeing how we can give more towns and more regions the ability to transition and take pressure off the grid, and for people to see those opportunities in their local communities. I think initiatives like that and the one the member for Bendigo West was talking about in Newstead are really important.

The question of how we drive that change and how we drive community and grassroots action to offset some of those challenges is a very important discussion to be had. I also think it is worthwhile noting some of the other initiatives that the government has put forward in renewable energy and job investment. I have mentioned some of the challenges in the automotive sector, but I am really keen to see, as a package of reforms, how some of that investment in the Futures Fund transitions into newer technologies.

It is in stark contrast to some of the changes, for example to CSIRO, that we have seen recently where we have seen some cuts to science, research and innovation. The technologies of tomorrow that could be setting up community-based initiatives like Hepburn Wind could potentially not see the light of day because of cuts to science investment. We need to be looking to invest in science and research to try to transition away from those heavy polluting industries that we know have such a huge impact on our climate.

It is good to see as well that at the grassroots level communities are taking action. There is one school in particular in my area, St Louis de Montfort's Primary School, that across the south-east has led a real sustainability charge. It is thinking about how it can be as sustainable as possible in energy efficiency, in water use and power generation across the board, and is trying to mentor and inspire other schools. It has been a recipient of ResourceSmart School awards for years running. It is those kinds of examples where across the

board we look to how we can invest in those technologies going forward.

The key element for us to focus on — and some of the other members have touched on this — is the stripping away of the complexity, in particular with distributors, and the cumbersome and lengthy time periods for small operators who are connecting to the grid either by solar panels at home or as small businesses trying to offset their power needs. It is making it easier to connect to the grid and offset some of those peaks. I think the point made by the member for Morwell about the balance in power supply is important. Nationally our renewable energy power output is about 14 per cent. It could be so much more, and I know the member for Caulfield mentioned the Council of Australian Governments as a way of putting that forward. There can be no greater leadership than from the federal government.

We need it to step up in that space, and we need other states and territories to follow that lead. It should be about how as a nation, across our states and territories, we really lock in that investment and create those jobs for tomorrow, rather than seeing a situation occur where for a whole term of government there was no real action or investment, where there was a decrease to the factor of 10 in investment in renewable energy.

When I first saw that number of \$2 billion decrease down to just over \$200 million, I thought there was some sort of typo or error. How could it be that an industry, with so much investment and so much potential, could see such a decline in such a short period of time? Going forward we need to look to the longer term and at how we are investing in these industries and making it easier to connect these innovative power sources into the grid. We need to look at how we offset our base load, because we all know the effects of climate change and its effects on our communities. It is time that all governments stood together and acted in the best interests of our states and territories. I commend the bill to the house.

**Ms SANDELL** (Melbourne) — The Greens will be supporting this bill which, as we understand it, makes it easier and quicker to connect distributed energy such as solar to the grid. The electricity network at the moment is set up to favour network and distribution businesses and retailers and to pretty much favour anyone except the consumer. This bill, as we understand it, makes that connection to the grid just a little bit more customer friendly. I think that is a really good thing.

There are a few features of the bill that stand out as real improvements for us. The first is that electricity

distributors must have basic standing offers for connections approved by the Australian Energy Regulator on the basis that they are fair and reasonable. Secondly, the bill increases transparency by requiring the publication of these standing offers. Thirdly, the bill requires that connections be processed within a set time frame. So they are three stand-outs in the bill for us. All of these particular elements will restrict the ability of power companies to penalise and bully solar customers, which has been happening.

The Greens do support the bill but also note that a few bills such as this one have come before the house over the last year that are really about tinkering at the edges of the energy system. They do not really go to the heart of some of the biggest problems facing our energy system at the moment. We have, for example, at the moment a gold-plated grid with consumers paying through the nose for a misguided spend by power companies, which are really being dragged kicking and screaming into the new energy future. While we can make some minor improvements to the system, actually what we really need to do — what this government really needs to do — is to get to the heart of what is plaguing our energy system and what is preventing us from moving into the new future.

The grid needs to evolve. It needs to be useful and efficient in a future where distributed energy is a much more significant part of our energy mix. The world is — and we should be doing this here in Victoria — leaving behind this age where power companies have had a stranglehold on our power supply. We see this all over the state and indeed all over the country. Consumers are taking the power back for themselves. They are sick of the gentailers deciding how their energy is going to be distributed, what they have to pay for it, the energy mix and the greenhouse gases associated with that.

Consumers are taking their power back, and they are doing it through the huge uptake of solar panels that we have seen over the last decade. It is just astronomical, more than anyone could ever have imagined. We are seeing it through the many community wind farms and solar farms that either already exist, such as the ones that have been mentioned in the chamber today, or the ones that are in the works and are about to get up and running if only some of the barriers could be removed. We are seeing it through other innovative models that communities come to me with very regularly — innovative models where communities are just trying to figure out how they change the energy mix, how they take the power back and how they reduce their greenhouse gas emissions at the same time.

Government policies should be rewarding these types of efforts from consumers. They should be rewarding renewable energy above everything else. We need a much more flexible approach to the planning and operating of the electricity system to take us into this new energy future. It is in nobody's interest, except perhaps the power companies, to preserve an outdated grid system which forces those who can afford batteries off the grid altogether and leaves those who cannot produce their own power, for whatever reason, trapped in an expensive and more inefficient system. I think that this is a real problem that is not being addressed. It is great that people go off the grid and take the power back, but we need to look at what the grid is actually going to look like when we move to 100 per cent renewable energy. We have to make sure that it does not degrade to a point where those who cannot afford to go off the grid are left bearing the cost of an inefficient and outdated grid, which is a very real possibility.

The Greens have been calling for a number of measures to improve our energy system. One of them is, of course, a fair go for solar and a fair feed-in tariff, something that many people across the state are talking to us about. They do not see that it is fair that for the energy they produce they get paid so much less. Their neighbour, for example, might buy energy from a coal power company and that coal power company is paid so much more per megawatt hour than people who produce their own energy. It just does not seem fair.

We need to improve the rules around distributed generation and community renewables. There are still a number of regulatory barriers in the way of people taking power into their own hands and creating the kind of community organisations needed for distributed energy. This bill goes a small way towards addressing that, but there are still many barriers that need to be fixed that people are coming to me talking about. I hope that we see many, many more bills like this come into this house that we can support, but we cannot just tinker around the edges. We really need to get to the heart of some of these issues that we have been raising over the last decade.

Victorians know that times are changing. Victorians know that our state really should be the one leading the way in renewable energy generation. It is clear from the widespread resistance to fossil fuels across Victoria, whether it be the people fighting against coal seam gas and onshore gas or people fighting against coal developments here and in other states or the people who are standing up and saying, 'We need to replace our dirtiest coal-fired power stations like Hazelwood with renewable energy if we are serious about acting on the greatest moral challenge of our generation'. I am

disappointed to see that we have seen no action from the Labor government on replacing coal in this state. We have not seen any commitment to stand up and say, 'Actually we need to move to 100 per cent renewable energy'. We need to move to 100 per cent renewable energy if we are serious about climate action, and we really needed to have done it yesterday, but tomorrow is the next best day.

Unless we see some real commitments from this government on phasing out coal, helping communities transition and helping workers transition and a vision for 100 per cent renewable energy, I struggle to take it seriously. Unless the government sets out a vision for 100 per cent renewable energy, all of these bills tinkering around the edges just seem like they do not add up to anything. So I am really looking forward to this government setting out a vision. I am not holding my breath, though.

Another issue around changing our energy system is energy efficiency. I hope to see a very strong energy efficiency program laid out by this government. Unfortunately we have not seen anything to date. It needs to be something at scale. It cannot just again be tinkering around the edges. It needs to be something like the One Million Homes Alliance has proposed. This is not just a group of greenies; this is an alliance of social groups, welfare groups, environmental groups and industry groups, who are out there saying, 'We could actually create significant value in our economy by investing in huge energy efficiency programs' — for example, in public housing and low-income housing. It would actually create jobs, and it would also create a huge benefit for our climate — probably the most cost-effective benefit of any program. So I hope that the government takes that up and brings that before this Parliament. If it does, we will be very happy to support it.

**Ms THOMAS** (Macedon) — It is absolutely my pleasure to rise today to speak on the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015. In doing so, I note that the Minister for Energy and Resources is in the house. I want to take the opportunity to commend her on the way she has approached her portfolio. She has set a very strong and very busy legislative program as she goes about doing the hard work of supporting renewable energy in this state. I would also like to take the opportunity to contrast what can be achieved when the government is of a party of the mainstream that seeks to govern for all Victorians, compared with a protest movement whose members can stand up in the Parliament and say whatever they like, knowing that they will never ever have to deliver a

single thing to the people of Victoria. On that, I note that the two Greens are walking out of the house.

I want to take members back to just a couple of weekends ago, to Saturday, 27 February, a beautiful sunny day in Woodend and the Macedon Ranges Sustainable Living Festival. What a delight it was to welcome the Minister for Energy and Resources to my electorate on that day. It is the third time she has been up to Macedon to visit with me. She was there to turn on the switch to power up the Woodend solar farm at the old timber mill. What was so fantastic about this was that it was only a year prior to that — it was at the festival the year before — that the minister announced the \$100 000 grant. So in the space of 12 short months the grant was made and the Macedon Ranges Sustainability Group did all the hard work, with the support of the minister, enabling it to get on with developing a fantastic solar farm at Woodend.

The exciting thing about this solar farm is that it is a 30-kilowatt solar photovoltaic system that now powers the mill. The old mill itself is a hub for local artisans — timber recyclers, woodworkers and furniture makers — and on the weekend of the sustainable living festival it also hosted an art exhibition of street artists, so it is a fantastic community space. What the minister was able to do by applying hard work was change the electricity retailing regulations to enable that community supplier to retail the electricity generated by the solar farm to those tenant groups. She was able to do that by making a provision that small community groups did not need a licence. That is a fantastic enabling decision made by this minister, and it demonstrates what you can do when you are in government and you have the will to do the hard work that is involved.

I point out that, as we know, the member for Caulfield likes to have his photo taken at wind farms. But this is much more than a photo opportunity; this is about serious hard work. It is much more than sloganeering, which is what we hear from the Greens. What we have with this Andrews Labor government is a commitment to doing the hard yards to make renewable energy a reality here in Victoria.

The Woodend project is just one small part of all of that. It was fantastic to hear the member for Bendigo West talk about the Newstead project, another terrific community project — powered along by a \$200 000 grant from the Andrews Labor government. I would like the member for Bendigo West to be aware that the minister threw down a challenge to us when she was in Woodend. It is this: which of these communities will be the first to be powered by renewable energy. I did make

the point to the minister that Woodend is about five times larger than Newstead.

What is also exciting in Woodend — and I am glad that the Minister for Planning has now walked into the house — is that what we are doing also in Woodend is amending the draconian regulation that was put in place by those on the other side to stop the development of a community wind farm. This was a proposal for a community wind farm that was based on the highly successful Hepburn model and was owned by the community of Woodend. They are passionate about delivering it. They had a mast up already, and they were measuring the wind. Anyone who has been to Woodend knows that it is a windy place. If you take yourself up to a hill there, you will know it is especially windy. They had the mast ready to go, and what did that mob on the other side do? Apparently the relative of a certain Premier had a personal objection to wind farms in the vicinity of my electorate, and so a ban was implemented.

I am really delighted that this government is determined to take the steps necessary to ensure that communities like Woodend, Newstead, Daylesford and others in my electorate can take the generation of renewable energy into their own hands. This bill of course is an important part of this, and I will get to what it seeks to do. I got carried away talking about my own electorate, which you would do if you were in my electorate.

This bill will make the connection of solar panels to our homes much easier than it currently is. The problem is that under the current framework, families can face lengthy delays when they request connection information from electricity distributors. Further, if there is a dispute between the consumer and the electricity distributor, the dispute resolution process is unclear.

Again, in contrast to the former government, the Andrews Labor government thinks that Victorians deserve a better, clearer and fairer connections framework. That is why we have initiated this bill. It provides that an electricity distributor must respond to a request for a basic connection offer within 10 business days, rather than 20 business days under the current regime. An electricity distributor must respond to preliminary inquiries about a connection within five business days; there is no equivalent obligation under the current framework. The Australian independent energy regulator, the Australian Energy Regulator, will be required to approve the electricity distributors' connection terms and policy. There will be a formal dispute resolution process for disputes arising between consumers and electricity distributors.

In essence, let us be clear on what this bill is about. It is about making it easier for Victorians to connect to renewable energy and specifically to solar energy. This is one of many initiatives that this government has introduced in support of renewable energy here in Victoria. I am very excited about this government's program for action in this area and particularly about the \$20 million New Energy Jobs Fund. The New Energy Jobs Fund is really going to have a significant impact in regional Victoria.

What we saw under the previous government was that the wind energy industry was killed off in this state. I have met with a wind energy company in my electorate, Westwind, and it expressed to me its real concern. In fact it was really on the brink as a result of the previous government's absolute disdain for wind energy. What a contrast it is to have the Andrews Labor government now in power and making a real commitment across all portfolio areas — energy, environment and planning. It is fantastic to see a cabinet whose members are committed to working together to deliver the renewable energy that the people of Victoria are telling us they want. They have voted with their feet. We have seen that the uptake of solar in Victoria is quite extraordinary. It will only continue to grow, and it is fantastic that the minister has brought this bill to the house, which will make it easier for those people who wish to purchase solar energy. I commend the bill to the house.

**Mr GIDLEY** (Mount Waverley) — I rise this afternoon to make a contribution on the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015. In doing so I will focus my energies on a couple of key areas which the bill deals with — that is, connections and disconnections. There has certainly been quite a wideranging commentary on the issue of disconnections and connections in the electricity industry in Victoria.

One of the things that it is abundantly clear has a significant impact on the level of connections and disconnections is the cost of electricity in Victoria. Not only does it have a significant impact on the level of connections and disconnections, but it has a significant impact on the household budget. It has an impact on the amount of money people can set aside after they have utilised their funds for the basic expenses of electricity. That might be on heating their house or running their lights. Whatever it is, we must always remember that electricity is an essential service. From my perspective and that of the residents of the Mount Waverley district I am certainly very focused on reducing disconnections but also from the point of view of fighting for residents

and protecting their household budget as much as possible from costs in the industry.

It is a very sad indictment that the costs of electricity in Victoria are higher than they ought to be as a result of a number of botched projects implemented by previous Labor governments, and of course there is not one that is any bigger than the smart meter program which was devised and implemented by the previous Labor government. When I turn my attention to the smart meter program I am informed by the Auditor-General's report that this program has resulted in Victorians paying an estimated \$2.23 billion in higher power bills. That of course was originally costed at \$800 million but has gone well over budget and resulted in higher power bills flowing through to the household budget. It has also meant that connections and disconnections in particular are higher than they otherwise should be. Households have paid roughly \$760 extra on their power bills since 2009 as a result of that botched smart meter program.

The alarm bells were ringing for that program in 2009. The 2009 Victorian Auditor-General's report into the rollout of the smart meter program was critical of the original business case for smart meters. You would have thought that a minister who was even half competent would have sensed alarm bells ringing and got on top of that, but that did not happen. Then we fast forward to the Auditor-General's report of 2011, which is an indictment of the program that flowed through to those household electricity bills. In particular I want to comment on the Auditor-General's comments in relation to that program, and I quote:

When the rollout was announced, the benefits were promoted widely. However, when the government reviewed the program in 2011 it was clear there would be no overall benefit to consumers, but instead a likely cost of \$319 million —

flowing directly through to household electricity bills and also the bills of small and medium size businesses and therefore a higher rate of disconnection.

I go back to that report and I quote again:

The reality of the smart meter rollout is that the state approved a program, many of the costs of which it could not directly control, nor drive many of the benefits ascribed to it.

That is the Auditor-General's indictment of the previous Labor government's smart meter program.

If it were just the one energy program that had gone completely off the rails, turned into a train wreck and had that impact of producing higher household bills and higher bills for small to medium size businesses,

resulting in the higher levels of disconnections which this bill touches on very clearly, you might say, 'Well, that was an unfortunate incident, but the rest of the track record is good'. Unfortunately the rest of the track record is anything but good.

I turn my attention to another energy program that was rolled out by the previous Labor government, the solar panels program, and in particular the cost benefits of that program. The solar panels program, which was put in place by the previous Labor government, has not been a benefit to consumers; in fact it has been a cost. I note that there have been a number of comments on this particular program, and in particular I want to look at the Grattan Institute's report and some of the feedback on that. It is clear from the report that the cost of installing and maintaining solar-powered systems for more than 1 million households has outweighed the benefit by more than \$9 billion — \$9 billion was the cost compared to the benefit of that program. Of course money does not grow on trees, so that cost has come directly out of a number of areas, including the household electricity bill.

I note that by the time the generous federal and state government subsidies run out, households without solar panels will have subsidised those that have made the switch to solar to the tune of \$14 billion — that is, those who do not have the financial capacity or for whatever reason chose not to install solar panels have been part of that \$14 billion cross-subsidy program. From an economic as well as a social welfare point of view that is anywhere but where the country and the state should be. Of course it is important to look at these things because they do have an impact on the price of electricity and the household budget. They do have a negative impact on the cost of running a small to medium size business, and in the end they reduce employment opportunities, employment security and employment certainty.

Of course it is important to recognise that that is the second of three programs with that particular track record — that is, energy programs that have resulted in higher rates of disconnection because of higher electricity prices — that have been put on the agenda. The third one I will comment on is the premium feed-in tariff, which was set at 60 kilowatts but blew out very early in that scheme. It was clear again that that program was another ill-thought-out program. It was not going to meet the objectives that it was supposed to meet, and again, from an economic point of view and a cross-subsidy point of view, it was not going to stack up economically. From an equity point of view it was highly unfair to have those who did not have solar panels and could not access the premium feed-in access

tariff paying for and cross-subsidising those who could. The previous coalition government put in place, after the publication of a Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission report, a sustainable feed-in tariff system and scheme which ensured the industry had some certainty.

Those are three very clear programs which have resulted in higher energy prices and higher rates of disconnection, which this bill deals with, as well as lower employment opportunities and lower employment security as a result of those higher costs — the smart meter program, the solar panel program with its massive cost benefit that does not stack up and the premium feed-in tariff scheme, which was well and truly out of control and unsustainable. These three areas have had a negative impact on electricity prices in the household budget. That is why on this side of the house we are very focused on ensuring that when government is involved in the energy market and it implements a program, its involvement does not put pressure on prices, because the consequence of that upward pressure on prices for families and for households will be energy and electricity bills that are higher than they otherwise should be.

From an employment perspective it means less job opportunities for future generations, as well as current generations, because energy is such an important part of our economy. Indeed from an economic freedom aspect, in terms of looking after our citizens and ensuring that they have the capacity to pay for essential services like electricity and other energy, as I said, we are very conscious of not increasing and putting upward pressure on electricity prices through botched programs or ill-thought-out schemes, whether it be smart meters, premium feed-in tariffs or solar panel schemes, which households pay for regardless of their financial position. It is not only economic vandalism but also socially unfair to those households.

**Mr PEARSON** (Essendon) — I am delighted to make a contribution in relation to the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015. What an extraordinary contribution from the member for Mount Waverley, a member of the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), who seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time in his contribution talking about the evils of private companies making profits — these terrible companies in the private sector making a profit! What a travesty! What an absolute outrage that you would have companies increasing their fees on an annual basis — which I suspect would be in part reflecting the fact that the cost base has increased — to make a profit! Profit, according to the member for Mount Waverley, is inherently evil. Honestly, this

bloke is a member of the IPA. I have heard more sense coming from the rabble from the Socialist Alliance than the member for Mount Waverley, and he is a member of the IPA and a member of the Liberal Party. It is just extraordinary.

This bill is important because it is about making it easier for customers to connect to solar power, and it will enable electricity distributors to respond quickly to those interests. It is important because the reality is that what we are seeing in the energy market in Victoria is an extraordinary level of volatility and contestability. Victoria has, I think, last time I checked, probably the most contestable energy market in the world. There is a plethora of companies out there offering a variety of products in order to meet the needs of consumers.

If you look at the way in which solar has been rolled out in this state, you would see an almost perfect confluence of events. You would see technological change happening radically to reduce the unit cost price of solar panels. You would see the rise of China and the ability to produce these products with a very cheap labour supply, and you would be able to get those products to market relatively quickly. Whereas solar panels historically were seen to be the province of the wealthy and the eccentric, solar panels became all of a sudden very marketable and very available, and there was that rapid uptake of those products.

I am reminded of a book I read recently by Larry Downes and Paul Nunes entitled *Big Bang Disruption — Business Survival in the Age of Constant Innovation*. Their thesis essentially is that the bell curve of a normal distribution is effectively broken — that what you see now is sudden change happening quite rapidly, and you see these massive spikes of change. I think that when we look at the uptake of solar panels, we are seeing a huge change — an enormous change — and a huge impact in terms of the grid.

I remember growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, and I think many of us remember those times. How often would you have a brownout? How often would you be sitting there on Sunday night at 8.30 p.m., waiting for the movie of the week on Channel 9, and the power would go out? It was a brownout. I remember as a kid being frightened and thinking, 'Has someone cut the power? Are we in mortal danger?'. But the reality is that that does not happen anymore. I cannot remember the last time I experienced a brownout. I cannot remember the last time the power went out and the lights went out.

Why is that important? The last time we commissioned a base load coal-fired power station was in 1993 when

Loy Yang B was commissioned. At that time the population of Victoria was 4.464 million people; in 2014 the population in Victoria was 5.866 million. We have had an increase in those 21 years of 1.4 million people, yet we have not had to commission extra base load capacity. Now, yes, I accept that we have over the course of that time seen the introduction of peaker units — gas-fired power stations that can be switched on relatively easily and can pump megawatts into the grid. We have seen the development of the interconnector with Tasmania, which failed in December last year, and the interconnector with South Australia and along the eastern seaboard. The national energy market is now in place.

But we have also seen the fact that people are increasingly going off the grid. A bit like the way in which solar panels have become quite popular, we will see the rise of battery storage units. Once battery storage units start to become affordable — and the last time I heard their cost was about \$20 000 or \$30 000, so it is a reasonable amount of money — once that unit cost price comes down, we will have battery storage units attached to people's homes and will have solar power that will enable people to either be off the grid or be able to pump renewable energy back into the grid. That is a great thing.

For policymakers though it will present some challenges, because for the poles and wire network, for the distributors who have been used to getting a fixed rate of return, when we see that number of people exit the grid, that will undermine their business model, so we are going to have to turn our minds to how we respond to that. We have always got to be mindful and aware of moral hazard. We do not want a situation where organisations basically run down their assets and say, 'Well, now we can't make a profit out of this. We'll throw the keys back to the state and the state can run it'. But we do have to recognise the fact that that is a trend that will increasingly occur.

It will be a great day when we see more people getting off the grid and we have cleaner power. But we must be mindful of the fact that with that will come some challenges about making sure that the profitability of the distributors can be in some way maintained or recognised, that they do not run down that asset and that we do not have problems with security of supply and get back to where we were in the 1970s and 1980s with brownouts.

The reality is energy policy is not easy. It is a complicated policy area. It is very, very much a niche and specialised area. You often find people go into the energy industry and spend their whole lives there,

particularly the people who work in regulatory affairs or in that policy space. They are very focused on a very niche area. But there is that need to make sure too that people can understand the way in which these tariffs are set and the way in which these products are created and made available to people, so there is that level of knowledge. It is also about making sure that individual consumers have their rights protected and that we try to make sure that people understand their bills and that there are appropriate hardship mechanisms in place.

Again, the member for Mount Waverley — you know, the people's great friend, the great sort of socialist hero of the Soviet workers party — was talking about the shame and the horror of disconnections. Well, between 2012–13 and 2013–14 electricity disconnections rose by 36 per cent and gas disconnections rose by 42 per cent.

**Mr Dimopoulos** — How much?

**Mr PEARSON** — Thirty-six per cent. I repeat for the member for Oakleigh that the electricity disconnections rose by 36 per cent. Gas disconnections rose by 42 per cent. Wrongful disconnections doubled.

I was not a member of this place at that time, but I know the member for Mount Waverley was. He was a member of the government, and it is not clear to me whether the member for Mount Waverley commented at all about this or made representations on behalf of his constituents in relation to this.

Again, the member for Caulfield in his contribution earlier today talked about the increases in charges to consumers from the distribution companies. I think he quoted my area and indicated the shame and his horror at the fact that consumers in my electorate will have to pay an extra \$30 a year, and he said that I will have to try to defend that position or justify that position. Of course you need to be mindful of cost-of-living issues and acknowledge them. Equally, though, you have to make sure that businesses can earn a profit. You must make sure that businesses can invest in their businesses. The reality is that we have what is called the consumer price index, and we have wage increases that are often pegged to the CPI that reflect these changes.

If you listened to the member for Caulfield, you would think that any sort of increase is to be opposed and denied. Yet the reality is that all state taxes and charges increase every year to take account of that. You want that; you want that smooth pathway, because if you do not and you keep prices pegged, then you have price shocks, and price shocks lead to disconnections. You have to question the economic credibility of people like

the members for Caulfield and Mount Waverley when they come in here and show a lack of understanding of basic economics. You want that smooth increase to deal with that fact. That is the best way to guard against price rises.

**Ms BRITNELL** (South-West Coast) — It pleases me to rise to speak on the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015. The purpose of the bill is to facilitate certain customer connection arrangements and to ensure speedy connections and transparency in improving access to the grid, particularly for renewable energy customers of solar. Currently the process is onerous, with levels of paperwork that prevent customers from wanting to embark on connecting. I wish to place on record that I do not oppose the bill but I do not feel that the changes go far enough.

The power challenge we are facing as a state needs further action. In fact, I think it needs a review: a review of the short, medium and long-term implications of exactly what the future looks like with more people hooking up to renewables and fewer being left on the grid, the implication being that consumption will go down but the cost will be greater because the sharing of the infrastructure of the power — the poles and wires — will be left with just a few to maintain it.

Obviously I agree with renewable energy, and it is being embraced by our community. It is what we will be moving towards in the future. However, at this time we have to understand that renewables are not reliable every single day. As a dairy farmer I need power every day, twice a day, and I cannot have it being unreliable.

In Western Victoria we have a big dairying area. One particular company, Murray Goulburn, the largest Australian-owned food and beverage company, has sites at Leongatha, Koroit and Cobram. They are all at capacity from a power perspective, and for companies like Murray Goulburn, Saputo and Fonterra the cost to increase the power supply into their factories is absolutely prohibitive. We need to come up with a solution, because although manufacturing is a success story in our regions, employing thousands of people, it is obviously under enormous pressure. At this point in time we have not got the answer. Renewables are on the way to becoming part of the solution, but we are certainly not in a situation where we can rely on renewable energy every single day.

The Murray Goulburn company, for example, has revenue of \$2.9 billion and exports to 49 countries around the world. We all know there is increasing demand for protein, and it is an opportunity for

Victoria, but we need to find a way to make sure we can facilitate that so we can grow the manufacturing opportunity that the dairy industry, for example, provides for our region. It is not only manufacturers like dairy companies, it is also farmers. In south-western Victoria we have 1500 dairy farms, and they produce as much milk as they were producing several years ago with twice as many farmers. So it is not a diminishing industry; it is a growing industry. What is holding it back is infrastructure, and power is one part of that, particularly in my electorate of South-West Coast.

We have dairy farmers wanting to expand. One particular fellow, Bruce Knowles, has a campaign up at the moment. He has no access to power in the Heywood area and has had to purchase very old-fashioned technology such as generators. I have to say that the member for Essendon, who says we had brownouts back in the 1970s, should come out and visit my region. Brownouts are normal. Brownouts happen a lot. We have real problems with being able to access power. Three-phase power is not something everyone can access. SWER lines are causing all sorts of problems. When the Murray Goulburn factory has a brownout someone has to physically get into the silos to shovel out the product that has been downgraded as a result of the brownout — power not being able to get to the factory because there is too much load. It is costing us a lot of money, and we need to find ways to facilitate a future where we can optimise the growth by a review, as I said, to find better ways to provide the essential service that electricity is.

Whilst we have not got the answer that renewables will maybe provide for us into the future, in reality it is probably a balance, and we are a long way off achieving that balance at this point. On the farm there is no economic return for me if I invest in solar; it just will not pay over a 10 to 15-year period, so it is not able to be invested in. I do not have the luxury of doing something because it feels good. In business you are not in a position where you can do things that do not return on an investment within a reasonable period of time. There are just not the margins.

I think this bill is one of the six I heard referred to earlier that have been put through by the government, but I think it falls a long way short of attending to the needs of rural communities that need to be considered to be just as important as other communities, particularly going into the future. We have finished a mining boom, and we are about to embark on a dining boom — and if we do not find ways of embracing that opportunity, it is going to be very, very hard for farmers who have always wanted to optimise the environment.

They are not the enemy of the environment. They understand it, and have understood it for generations. That is why they hand farms from father to son to grandson.

**Mr Nardella** — And granddaughter.

**Ms BRITNELL** — I am a dairy farmer, and I am a daughter, but I am not the daughter of a farmer. I made myself a farmer. I use the words ‘grandson’ and ‘granddaughter’ with respect. I understand that it is International Women’s Day. I respect the fact that women and men have equal rights — and I have milked the cows just as many times as my husband, let me assure you.

But getting back to the bill, I think it is great that we are facilitating a better way for customers to feel it is less onerous getting onto renewable energy, if that is what they want. However, I think we must remember the importance of power, particularly out in the regions. I mention Alcoa, another manufacturer that is providing many jobs and sustaining the very important regional town of Portland. It is a beautiful town, and I urge all members to go to visit it. It is one beautiful place to visit in Victoria. I think it is sometimes misunderstood for how much it has to offer. Alcoa is very important. There is an opportunity right now for government to deliver on the promise that was made prior to the election to ensure that every job is worth fighting for. On that note I wish the bill a speedy passage through the Parliament.

**Mr HOWARD** (Buninyong) — I am pleased to speak on the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015. In listening to members on the other side in their contributions on this bill it perhaps does not surprise me, but it again disappoints me, that at no stage do they use the term ‘climate change’, because climate change is a central feature of the bill. It is about supporting renewable energy. It is about supporting clean energy and providing greater opportunities for us to lower our carbon emissions and address the very, very significant issue of climate change — the issue that requires good sound government leadership to address climate change to lead to a better future for future generations in our country.

I am so pleased that Labor governments have shown that they understand what the scientists are saying across this country and across the whole world. They understand that we need to address this issue. We need to show leadership in supporting renewable energy in a range of forms.

As well as looking at supporting renewable energy, this bill helps to support families. It helps to support those families who say, 'Yes, we want to do something. We think it would be great to put solar panels on the roof of our house or even establish a small wind generation plant, but when we go to the energy distributors, whom we are reliant upon to help connect us into the grid, they muck us around. We get false information'. As a state MP, a number of people are contacting my office because they have been very frustrated. They have put solar panels on their roofs, and the information that they got from the distributor when they initiated their connection has not come to fruition. The connection process has been dragged out. They have then found that the amount they are going to be paid when they put energy back into the grid is not what they expected and that they have been misled at several stages along the way.

The central aim of this particular bill is to ensure through legislation that distributors will provide clear information to those people — families, smaller industries and so on — who want to connect solar panels or other renewable energy systems into the grid, that those people will get timely information that will come to them within 10 days, not 20 days as has been previously the case, and that that information will be accurate and correct. That is a very important issue.

As I noted before, this government has shown leadership already under the Minister for Energy and Resources, as did the Bracks and Brumby governments, in saying, 'We want to move along this way. There are great benefits not just in addressing climate change but in building a renewable energy industry across our state; there is great economic opportunity in this state to do so'.

I have a farm in the Waubra area, where I live much of my time — as much as I can. Of course I was interested many years ago when there was talk of a wind farm being established in Waubra. I saw over the years to come that, first of all, when information was provided to the community of Waubra about wind farms, suddenly we had an influx of people who were not from Waubra saying what an awful thing it was. However, the majority of people in Waubra were open to it. They saw that there was economic opportunity for them when you get a rental of \$7000 to \$8000 a year on each turbine you have on your property. Suddenly farmers who have up to 10 turbines on their place have gained additional income that has been able to support them and their families on their properties, giving them greater certainty. We saw as the Waubra wind farm was built lots of jobs provided to regional contractors, whether that be the people providing the concrete or

whether that be the people building the roads to the wind turbines. We saw Keppel Prince Engineering in the Portland area gaining so much because it was building the wind tower structures and providing those to the wind power operators.

We know what happened when the Liberals and The Nationals came to power in 2010. Suddenly they said, 'Some of our people don't like the look of these wind turbines. We don't believe in climate change. We're not going to support the wind industry, so if anybody wants to object and a proposed turbine is 2 kilometres from their house, that will stop the entire project'. How many new permits did we see under the Liberal Party and the National Party in government? We saw none. We saw Keppel Prince Engineering closing its operations in Portland and, clearly, jobs lost in Portland and across regional Victoria from the effective shutdown of the wind energy industry in terms of new wind farms. This was a great disappointment.

Former Prime Minister Abbott said that he thought the wind turbines were ugly and that we should not support them. 'Dreadful things! I would much rather support the coal industry, of course', Tony Abbott said. We know that investment was significantly held up over the mandatory renewable energy target scheme, which of course was the flow-on from the scheme brought in by the Bracks and Brumby governments, the Victorian renewable energy target scheme. We introduced the renewable energy target scheme, and then under former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd it was extended across all of Australia. It did put money into renewable energy; it provided a great investment stream into the renewable energy industry, which was so important for this state and this country.

We were leaders in renewable energy through the period up until 2010 but not so after that. We saw wind energy, as I said, slow down. We saw the feed-in tariff price drop, so there was less stimulus to support people or to ensure that families and businesses saw the opportunity of wind panels. But we are about setting that right again. We are about supporting those who want to establish renewable energy in a range of ways. This bill is clearly going to assist with that.

As we look at the two sides of politics and as we look at the Labor Party, we know that the Labor Party is ongoing in its support for renewable energy to address climate change and to ensure that we do move to the future in a way that will provide future generations with opportunities and certainty of a better environmental future. But we keep hearing those troglodytes on the other side of the house from the conservative parties who keep saying, 'No, no, this climate change isn't

real. We don't need to do anything — or if we did, it might cost us something in the short term!'. Sometimes it might cost us something in the short term, but we know that the costs of not acting now are certainly going to be much greater for future generations. It is so vitally important that we do act now and not say no and find reasons to not act.

Of course under our government and the former Labor government we have heard from other people talking about the community wind farm concept. I was pleased to visit the Hepburn community wind farm with Gavin Jennings when he was the Minister for Environment and Climate Change. It was the former Labor government which supported the Hepburn community wind farm, which was the first community wind farm to be established in this state. It is a great model and other communities were hoping to be able to follow suit, but they were cut dead as soon as the Baillieu government was elected.

Clearly we need to see more legislation, and more support for renewable energy projects, and that is what we will see under this government. This bill leads us down the path to ensuring that those smaller operators who want to put solar panels on their roofs will be able to establish other renewable energy projects and get the information they need from energy distributors. Better support should lead to better opportunities for smaller operators to connect and know what they are in for when they do so.

I am very pleased to support this bill, and I am also pleased to support the stand on this side of the house. This government is acting as a sound Labor government to address climate change and provide the economic opportunities that can come with alternative energy to support families connecting to alternative energy projects and reducing their energy costs as a result.

**Mr McCURDY** (Ovens Valley) — I rise to make a contribution on what is a very light business program this week, this bill being the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015. I listened closely as the member for Buninyong talked about climate change, but I did not hear him talking too much about utility costs, a subject which is at the very heart of what we are talking about. Whether they be electricity or water costs, we are certainly seeing a farce, particularly in what is going on with the desalination plant. Utility costs is an issue that is very close to my heart, and many of my constituents in the Ovens Valley continue to talk about the increase in those costs. If you live in Melbourne, you will know that utility costs are just skyrocketing — there is no doubt about that.

This bill amends the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 to provide a new framework to govern the process for connecting retail customers, including small-scale renewable energy generators, to the electricity grid. By way of background on the bill, the new framework is set out in the national electricity rules and is a framework which already applies in other states and territories which participate in the national electricity market. Distributors will be required to respond to and process requests for connection in a more timely manner — 10 days as opposed to 20 days. I think that is more of a pipedream than anything, because certainly our experience to date has been that it has taken far longer than 20 days. I will wait with interest to see whether that time frame can be reeled in to 10 days, which certainly would be important to most customers.

The new framework will provide greater clarity regarding information that needs to be exchanged between the electricity distributor and the customer to set up those connections. Of course the standard terms and conditions for connection must be published, and that goes hand in hand with the Australian Energy Regulator. In the event of a dispute, parties wishing to connect to the electricity grid and an electricity distributor can have access to a formal dispute resolution process. To me, that seems like a fair and equitable proposition.

The Australian Energy Regulator will be responsible for monitoring and enforcing electricity compliance within the new framework. Under that section, the Australian Energy Regulator will be able to use its compliance powers if there is a breach, which certainly could lead to civil penalties — an amount up to \$20 000, or an amount not exceeding \$2000 for every day on which the breach continues. In the case of a body corporate, that amount is up to \$100 000, or \$10 000 for every day that the breach continues. The obligation on electricity distributors to offer to underground, relocate, modify or remove distribution assets if requested to do so, and the obligation to call for competitive tenders to perform construction works associated with new connections of the Victorian framework not captured by the new framework, which is not included in the new framework but exists in the current Victorian framework, will remain and be enforced by the Australian Energy Regulator.

It is also important to mention some of the failings of the Labor government when it comes to energy market reform.

**Mr Nardella** interjected.

**Mr Walsh** — That would be a long list.

**Mr McCURDY** — That is quite a long list, and it certainly got a squawk from that side of the house. We have to admit that there are failings in this situation, and I am sure no doubt the majority of the members on the other side will understand that there are failings — some successes but also failings — and we have to recognise those.

In opposition the Minister for Energy and Resources, then the shadow minister, stated that households were further than they ought to be from getting the real cost-saving benefits that the advanced metering infrastructure is able to deliver. She also said that the advanced metering infrastructure program would enable small businesses and households to have greater control over their energy use and costs, and that it would also be an important tool of peak demand. Now, after over a year as minister, we can see that she has failed her first big test on delivering energy market reform for Victoria and that this government has backed away from the changes to electricity pricing that experts said would help the poor, reduce cost subsidies and make the power grid far more efficient. Certainly constituents in the Ovens Valley continue to make contact with me, particularly around timeliness and cost, and in particular about the failings of the rollout of the services.

The Grattan Institute's energy director, Tony Wood, said that the minister's decision would lead to a negligible take-up of flexible pricing, locking in Victoria to the current flat tariffs that result in cross-subsidies in favour of those who use more power at the cost of those who are energy efficient. In fact AGL estimated in a 2014 paper entitled *On the inequity of flat-rate electricity tariffs*, that the net aggregate benefits of flexible tariffs could be as much as \$1.6 billion for eastern states households — \$1.6 billion! — and poorer households would likely be better off. It is important that we update the rules and the regulations so we connect households and businesses to the grid in a transparent and timely manner, but the issue continues to be rising energy prices and the pressure on cost of living. Under this government we are seeing the cost of living going up all the time.

I will touch on how important energy is to our communities. We found out about that just on Sunday at the Wangaratta Cup, with the power going out, which caused a huge stir in terms of the ability to run a horserace event. Admittedly Paul Hoysted, to his credit, managed to keep the functions running, and a great Wangaratta Cup it was, but we only got to race 4 as the power went out. Certainly the extreme heat has put pressure on all communities, as we found out firsthand

just at the weekend. But in fairness, the Minister for Racing has backed us and supported us for another cup day, which will now be on Easter Sunday. That little glitch in our system has been resolved thanks to the minister in that respect.

Again on smart meters just before I finish, the Auditor-General found that Labor's smart meter program resulted in Victorians paying around about \$2.2 billion in higher power bills, when it was originally costed at \$800 million. This means that the average Victorian household has paid around about \$760 extra on its power bills since 2009, which really is disgraceful. Furthermore, flexible tariffs are needed to maximise the benefits of smart meters to help manage reliance on the power grid as they reward energy efficiency and smooth peak demand.

It is interesting that the Minister for Energy and Resources keeps talking about the rising number of disconnections, offering no policy and just pointing the finger at the opposition. It is fair to say that Victorians can see right through her performance. As I said, utility bills are a major concern to all households. Whether you are in the Ovens Valley, in the Murray Plains electorate, in any other country electorate or in metropolitan Melbourne, you will know utility bills are on the rise, and we need to do something about it.

However, clearly this government does not appear to be tackling those issues. I will give the example of the desalination plant again. I suppose that is just another cruel hoax on people who think they are going to get support in regional Victoria where there is a genuine water shortage in terms of drought conditions. The desalination plant is just a smokescreen, firstly, to get the desalination plant up and running and, secondly, so that government members can try to make out to metropolitan Melbourne that they are actually trying to support regional Victoria. At the end of the day government members are trying to create a crisis in the morning and solve that crisis by the evening. Clearly they are not going to solve that crisis. If you can create a crisis and then try to be the knight in shining armour that comes along and resolves it, you might look good on a short-term basis, but the people of Victoria are starting to see through this government and certainly will not stand for this as we go forward. We will find out as time goes on. As you are aware, Acting Speaker, the opposition will not be opposing this bill, and I wish it a speedy passage through the house.

**Ms SPENCE** (Yuroke) — I am very pleased to speak in support of the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015. As we have already heard, the bill amends the National Electricity

(Victoria) Act 2005 to implement the national electricity connections framework, which already applies across other states and territories, and this better serves households and small-scale energy generators. The framework governs the process that must be followed by electricity distributors when a small customer wishes to connect to the grid. The current regulations are unfriendly to consumers, overly complicated, lack clarity and create barriers to connecting households who generate renewable energy to the wider electricity grid.

Through this bill, as we have already heard, an electricity distributor must respond to a request for a basic connection offer within 10 business days rather than the 20 business days that are currently provided. An electricity distributor must respond to a preliminary inquiry about a connection within five business days. There is no equivalent obligation under the current framework. Australia's independent energy regulator will be required to approve an electricity distributor's connection terms and policy, and there will be a formal dispute resolution process for disputes arising between consumers and electricity distributors.

So the lengthy wait that families and households can face in seeking to connect to the grid will be addressed with the requirement for a timely response to processing requests for connection. Importantly, the contracts will be more transparent, with a requirement that standard terms and conditions are published by each electricity distributor and approved by the Australian Energy Regulator. This is particularly important, because it is often a matter of great confusion for customers as to what these terms mean. There are a lot of very confusing terms. Having them standardised will not remove the fact that a lot of them are confusing, but at least they will be interchangeable between the various companies and there will be an agreed interpretation of what those terms mean, so that will be very beneficial.

The changes outlined in the bill are, importantly, supported across a range of stakeholders, including consumer groups, industry and environmental groups, and I am very pleased to hear that the opposition is not opposing this bill and nor is the Greens political party.

This bill is important. It is important because renewable energy is important, and reducing barriers to the development of local renewable energy generation is also important. There are plenty of reports and statistics available that confirm this importance. Over 245 000 solar panel systems are installed in households across Victoria, with a capacity of over 700 megawatts.

In 2014, 1 in 5, or 19 per cent, of households across Australia and more than 1 in 10, or 11 per cent, of households in Victoria had rooftop solar panels or solar-powered hot water systems. This is up from 1 in 20, or 5 per cent, of households across Australia in 2011. In 2014 alone, 36 000 rooftop solar systems are estimated to have been installed in Victoria, and industry experts estimated in January 2015 that every second detached home in Victoria could have solar panels by 2030. I did a quick drive around my street on the weekend to do a check of how many houses had solar panels currently installed, and I would have to say that it will be a lot sooner than 2030 that that street has every second home with solar panels.

Household solar, like with broader renewable energy industry, was neglected by the previous coalition government, including changes to solar feed-in tariff laws resulting in the current low feed-in tariff rates. In Victoria and across Australia annual investment in renewable energy fell from \$2 billion in 2013 to \$238 million in 2014, and we have already heard what a shocking decrease this is. It is almost unbelievable that it could be reduced so significantly.

The bill will also support the clean energy industry by making it easier for consumers to install sustainable energy in their homes. This bill will be welcomed by the residents of Yuroke, who I know welcome renewable energy initiatives, and we can have a look at some reports and statistics about that as well.

The *Herald Sun* reported in August 2015 that 'droves' of homeowners and businesses in Craigieburn, Cranbourne, Tarneit and Melton were installing solar panels due to the benefits of selling electricity back into the grid. In 2014 Craigieburn was ranked the fifth highest suburb in Victoria for solar installations. If I have a look at the number of residential solar installations in the suburbs within Yuroke, as at September 2015 there were 366 installations in Attwood and Westmeadows, 719 installations in Greenvale, and in the 3064 post code, which includes Craigieburn, Kalkallo, Mickleham and Roxburgh Park, there were 3187 installations.

So we know that the bill provides practical changes to help Victorians connect to the grid. It also supports the clean energy industry by reducing the barriers consumers face to install sustainable energy in their homes. Overall this initiative forms part of the Andrews Labor government's commitment to grow renewable energy in Victoria. We know that residents in Yuroke welcome renewable energy initiatives, and this bill will make it even easier for more of them to do so. I commend the bill to the house.

**Ms STALEY (Ripon)** — I rise to speak on the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015. As previous speakers on the coalition side have said, we will not be opposing this bill, and there are certainly aspects of this bill that deserve support. I particularly want to talk about the standardisation of contracts, the change in the time lines for contracts and the complaints mechanism.

It would be fair to say that the installation of solar across Ripon is an area that drives a lot of foot traffic into my electorate office. A lot of people seem to have great difficulty in getting their solar hooked up after they have signed the contract and then also in having solar included in their bill by their power company. I get a lot of complaints from people in my electorate that the take-up of solar and the way in which it is installed is not working. I welcome the parts of the bill that address those issues.

I would like to talk about part 2, clause 5A.E.3 of the bill, which is about connection charge guidelines. The clause states that the Australian Energy Regulator:

... must develop and *publish* guidelines (**connection charge guidelines**) for the development of *connection policies* by *Distribution Network Service Providers*.

Clause 5A.E.3(b) states that:

The purpose of the guidelines is to ensure that *connection charges*:

- (1) are reasonable, taking into account the efficient costs of providing the *connection services* arising from the *new connection* or *connection alteration* ...
- ...
- (3) limit cross-subsidisation of *connection costs* between different classes (or subclasses) of *retail customer* ...

That brings me to the second part of my remarks today, which is in relation to the failure of this bill to really grasp the problem we are seeing when we move to a distributed system, which is what we see with solar. Previously you would have your power created in one place, and you would have large transmission lines that distributed the power out. Now of course with solar we have a much more distributed system, and that brings benefits, but one of the things it brings is additional costs. I would refer the house to a report by the Grattan Institute called *Sundown, sunrise — How Australia can finally get solar power right* by Tony Wood and David Blowers. That extensive report states that:

... the structure of electricity network tariffs means that the cost of solar PV take-up has outweighed the benefits by almost \$10 billion.

The particular matter I want to talk about is not the feed-in tariffs, which is a large part of that, but in fact the network costs — how solar increases the network costs and how we need to ensure that when we create policy we are cost neutral and make sure that those who do install solar are not in fact being subsidised by those who are not.

The report goes into quite a lot of detail. The thing that I found really interesting is that what happens is that the people who build the poles and the networks get regulated because they are a natural monopoly, but they expect and demand a return on their capital. That is to be expected. However, the return on their capital, which they put to the regulator, is based on a certain demand profile going forward. What we have seen over the past 20 years, largely as a result of the uptake in solar, is a reduction in the general demand for electricity but no reduction in peak demand.

What that means is that the actual amount of electricity going over the poles and running through wires is less than what has been expected and less than has been built into the distributors' rates of return. Because of solar they do that, but then the peak power is still the same. The reason for that, if we take Victoria as an example, is that peak electricity usage on a day like today is at around 7 o'clock — we get home and it is 35 degrees, so we put on the air conditioning. Yet our solar energy systems have stopped producing power generally by 6.30 p.m. So the peak is not being helped by all of this solar installation, and yet the cost of the distribution includes the additional cost of having a distributed network.

That would not matter so much if solar was distributed in some sort of equal way, because it would mean that those who were being subsidised were an equivalent group, but they are not. The group that cannot afford to put in solar is in fact made up of low-income earners. So the lowest take-up of solar is by some of the poorest and most disadvantaged people in Victoria. The government, in its current solar policies and the way in which it has structured this bill, has failed to grasp this fundamental change in how power is distributed. The poorest and most disadvantaged people in Victoria will continue to pay for the additional poles and wires required for a distributed network, even though they are not able to access it.

It is a great disappointment to me that the government has failed to use this opportunity to address this. In opposition the then shadow minister, now Minister for

Energy and Resources, actually put forward some statements that suggested she understood that infrastructure costs are part of these costs and that they need to be addressed. In particular she talked about how you use control over peak demand to smooth out how you do all of this, and yet in this bill she has failed this test; she has failed it entirely. She has made no attempt at all to make changes to electricity pricing. The experts — whether it is the Grattan Institute, and there are others — make it clear that we could help the poor by reducing cross-subsidies and making the grid more efficient.

That is the great failing of this bill. It is just a missed opportunity. We are not opposing it. There is nothing inherently wrong with anything. I could not find a clause in this bill that I would say is doing the wrong thing. It is more a failure of omission. It is a failure to recognise that the structure of electricity in many countries, including in Victoria, is changing profoundly.

In my final remarks I will move to the whole issue of how and whether we should be promoting solar power. Solar power costs more per kilowatt hour than wind, it costs more than hydroelectricity and, particularly, it costs more than coal or gas. Those dollars matter to people — the whole cost of energy matters. It is shared by all of us. It is embedded in everything we buy and every piece of transport we get on — all of those things include the embedded cost of electricity. By putting up electricity prices, whether that be through promoting and cross-subsidising more expensive types of energy at the cost of cheaper ones or by creating network structures that cost more, we all pay those costs, and they are a brake on the Victorian government's economy.

Governments — successive governments, I should say — need to think very carefully when they go down the route of more expensive power, which is often done for non-economic reasons. It is done in the name of the environment. We need to think about what this costs in terms of people's jobs and in terms of people's power bills. People's power bills matter. The cost of living matters to people. It may not matter to those opposite, and it may not matter to the absent Greens members, but paying a power bill matters. If we are creating policies that put those costs up, I think we need to have a really good hard look at that. Unfortunately this bill does nothing to reduce power costs, and yet it really could have made some clear strides in using the regulatory framework to drive us towards that.

**Ms WARD (Eltham)** — I rise very happily to speak on the National Electricity (Victoria) Further

Amendment Bill 2015. Let us talk about costs. Let us talk about what it costs people and what it costs small businesses not to have a good regulatory framework. Let us talk about what happens when we have distributors which are a law unto themselves and which decide how they will in fact go about distributing their power or, in this instance, not distributing their power. Let us talk about the costs to small business. What this bill will do is put in a new framework which will govern how customers with renewable energy generation facilities will connect to the electricity grid. It will create a better framework. It will improve the existing framework. In general why do we need to improve the existing framework? Because at the moment it is just not good enough, and I have some very good examples in my electorate of why regulation is not good enough.

Let us talk about AusNet and let us talk about AusNet's lack of customer service in my electorate. Let us talk about the fact that there are not currently enough regulations around to prevent AusNet from behaving in an appalling manner. We know that our distributors want to have flexibility. Why can the distributors not respond to a request for a basic connection within 10 business days, rather than the current 20 business days?

**Mr Nardella** — Why can't they?

**Ms WARD** — Why can't they indeed! Why can they not respond to preliminary inquiries about a connection within five business days?

**Mr Nardella** — Five?

**Ms WARD** — Five business days, that is all that we ask, and do you know why we ask that?

**Mr Nardella** — Why do we ask that?

**Ms WARD** — We ask that because AusNet seems to think that businesses only need four days notice before it shuts off their power because of maintenance works — four days notice — and it is just incredible that it thinks a business can run that way.

I want to talk about the Heidelberg Golf Club and I want to talk about the Heidelberg Golf Club only getting four business days notice that it was going to have no power today. What did that affect? That affected Banyule council's International Women's Day breakfast, it affected a funeral and it affected another gathering. The Heidelberg Golf Club had to hire a generator. Banyule council had to step in and help the golf club hire a \$4500 generator. And what happened last night? Last night the club got a phone call from the

generator hire company saying, 'Are you guys still going ahead with your power outage tomorrow?'. The golf course had no idea but it thought so. It got onto the internet and did not find out anything. It got on the phone and was told, 'No, it has been cancelled, you will have power today, you will have power on one of the hottest days in March, isn't that great?'. But no, it is not great for the Heidelberg Golf Club, it is not great for the \$4500 my community and small businesses are out of pocket. It is not great, it is appalling. It is absolutely appalling, and this is why we need improved regulation and why we need to tighten up how regulators and how businesses are responded to by these distributors.

Let us talk about another small business in my electorate that deals with hospitality. It had to spend \$6500 on a generator that it has not used today, plus it had to devote a day and a half to having an electrician come in to hook up the generator. This is another business that has been affected by the appalling customer service of AusNet and its inability to effectively communicate and manage its services to small businesses in my community. But it gets better.

**Mr Nardella** — There's more?

**Ms WARD** — There is more. There are shops in Were Street that have had their outage cancelled twice. Nearly a month ago AusNet was going to come along and it was going to cut their power for a whole day, but it was happy to negotiate and go down to finishing at 1 o'clock. This time it was not happy to go with half the day, it insisted on a full day, and one of my small businesses only found out about the power outage because of Facebook. Facebook! This is how these distributors deal with their customers. They alert them to the cancellation of a power outage via Facebook. How do they expect these small businesses to cope and to manage on such short notice when they are not prepared to reciprocate? I do not understand why those on the other side think the sky is going to fall in because of this. We do need to have proper regulation and we do need to have people being accountable for how they are going to manage their service to businesses, their distribution of energy.

Energy is absolutely vital to my small businesses. They need to have certainty over how it is going to be delivered. They need to have certainty of the quality with which it is going to be delivered, and they need to have a relationship of trust with their distributor to know that their power is going to be there. If it is not going to be there, they need to know the reasons why; they need to have enough time to prepare for it and they need to have enough time to do something about it. Or if an outage is going to be cancelled, they need not to be

so substantially out of pocket because of the bad practices of AusNet, which frankly should do a hell of a lot better. It is just appalling how it has treated small businesses in my community. But wait, there is even more.

**Mr Nardella** — More?

**Ms WARD** — There is even more. Prior to Christmas Eve AusNet alerted families in my electorate that they would have no power from 8.00 a.m. until 5.00 p.m. on Christmas Eve. Could it understand why people were up in arms? Could it understand why people would not be happy with this? It took a lot of hard work by my electorate office to get AusNet to listen, and I thank my staff for working so hard to get AusNet to listen and to put the power back on at 1.00 p.m. on Christmas Eve.

I accept that work has to be done. I accept that important maintenance work has to be done, but there has to be a better way to communicate with households and small businesses about how it is going to be done. There has to be a more efficient way and a better way, and it is through improving regulation that we will force these distributors, who obviously do not really care about how this is managed, to care. We have to force them to care. They need to be regulated so that we can impose on them parameters to make sure they do not hurt my small businesses, my family members, my communities, my sporting clubs, the whole of my electorate, and in fact I am sure that this is happening in other places around the state. Distributors need to be regulated and they need to be controlled because this is just not good enough. It is not good enough at all and people are going to be out of pocket for this, plus the business and the goodwill that they have lost through telling customers, 'We are open'; telling customers, 'We are closed'; or 'Oh, look, we are open again, but I am now paying for a generator'. How do they manage this?

AusNet owes my community an apology and it should come up and do it, and it should talk to my small businesses that it has affected and work out a better way of managing this. I applaud the minister for showing absolute foresight in creating a better way to regulate this industry because it has obviously been a long time coming, and it is something that we know the other side has not spent much time on at all. We know that this is not something that members opposite have been interested in, and in fact that has been obvious in the speeches they have given today. Instead we have heard lots from Chicken Little talking about the fact that there is no such thing as climate change, that wind farms are a waste of time and investing in solar energy is as well.

I hate to tell opposition members but investing in solar energy is not a waste of time. Where do they think the jobs of the future are going to come from? The jobs of the future are going to come from things like investing in solar energy, in refining technology and in improving technology. It is because of the intellectual capital that the smart people of this state give to things like solar energy that we can actually create the jobs that we want to and that we can create ongoing and sustainable jobs, because that is what we are about on this side of the house. We are about creating jobs; we are about creating a future for people.

We are not about putting on our tin hats and pretending that the future is not happening, because the future is happening, and on this side of the house we are embracing the future. The future is here. We can see it on the horizon, and we want to be there. We certainly do not want to be on that side of the house, in the past, where nothing happens. We do not want to be on that side of the house, and that is why we are investing in alternative energies. It is why we are investing in this state's future and why we are putting money and investment into things like solar energy, because that is exactly where we need to take this state.

It is just insanity that those on the other side cannot see the potential. They cannot see the growth that this state can build. They were happy to see the manufacturing industry die, they were happy to see the automotive industry die and they are happy to see the solar energy industry die, because they do not care about jobs, they do not care about investment, they do not care about infrastructure and they do not care about the Victorian people.

**Mr CRISP (Mildura)** — Well, well, well! Perhaps before I start talking about the bill, I might remind the member for Eltham that the previous government joined with the federal government in a split to establish large-scale solar energy within the Mildura electorate. It was a commitment for \$50 million towards a project. The feds put \$50 million in. Before I talk about the bill, I will talk about how the solar industry is divided into three areas. You have household solar, where people have been putting solar panels on their roofs for some time with various schemes. There is the commercial area, and increasingly we are seeing solar panels on top of commercial buildings. In fact the last government supported Leda Ag, a major agricultural machinery firm in Mildura, with its workshop. The entire roof of that very large workshop is covered with solar panels. Then there is the large-scale area, which I talked about, where we have a number of very large-scale solar projects in the Mildura region.

But perhaps back to the bill, Acting Speaker. The bill seeks to amend the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 to apply in Victoria a new framework governing the process for connecting retail customers, including small-scale renewable generator proponents, to the electricity grid. The bill sets out to deliver the framework that is set out in chapter 5A of the national electricity rules, which already applies. It amends that area and enables everybody to work with the national electricity market. The new framework seeks to provide greater clarity regarding information that must be exchanged between the electricity distributor and the customer to set up a connection. Distributors are required to respond to and process requests for connection in a timely manner — 10 days as opposed to 20 days in most cases; however, for complex connections it is 65 days.

Standard terms and conditions for connections must be publicised by each electricity distributor, and the terms and conditions must be approved by the Australian Energy Regulator (AER). If a dispute arises between a person wishing to connect to the electricity grid and the electricity distributor, that person will be able to access a formal dispute resolution process with the AER, which may be referred to a jurisdictional ombudsman. The AER will be responsible for monitoring and enforcing electricity compliance within the new framework. There is an obligation for electricity distributors to offer to place underground, relocate, modify or remove assets if requested to do so, and there is an obligation to call for competitive tenders for the performance of construction works associated with new connections of the Victorian framework not captured by the framework, which is not included in the new framework but exists in the current Victorian framework, which will remain and be enforced by the Australian Energy Regulator.

It is probably fair to say at this point that the Australian Energy Regulator coming up with a framework that is universal across Australia is a good move in the same way that we have a national energy market as well. Energy does flow around; however, energy does not flow easily. I think this is one of the misconceptions many people have. There are losses in moving energy around, and that is why there are higher costs in certain parts of the network because of what we call line losses. That does add a case for dispersed generation. Mildura is almost as far away from the Latrobe Valley as you can get and is in fact at the junction of three grids, those of New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria. Similarly the generation in the Hunter Valley is a very long way from Mildura. So there are losses involved. Being able to disperse new generation does assist with managing some of those losses. In fact investing in

Mildura in solar energy for some of our larger companies meant that the benefit to Victoria was even greater than the power they were producing because of the savings in the long line losses.

With that background, during our time in government we did support one very large-scale operation and a number of smaller scale operations. It has been interesting to watch how this has emerged, because certainly rooftop solar went first, and there was a large take-up of rooftop solar. Then we have jumped straight to the large-scale areas, and now the interest is very much back with businesses and commercial operations putting panels on their roofs to offset their power bills. This is really a simple bill about adding a little more rigour to how the energy companies need to interrelate with their particular customers and how to get on with connections. It is a long time ago now, but my office did have quite a number of frustrated early takers-up of household solar who had issues with their energy companies in getting connected. I am pleased to say that these complaints have dropped off, but I think the rush into household rooftop solar, particularly in my electorate, has slowed considerably. Also larger commercial users sometimes have different arrangements.

We are large energy users in the Mildura region. Pumping water for irrigation is not a low-cost exercise, so there is a huge demand for electricity, and it is one that needs to be reliably supplied. Of course we do know there are costs in supplying that, but we do want to have a competitive energy sector.

Energy is one of the things that does bring people to my office over cost of living issues, so I think a focus of any government is to manage those issues and to manage those energy bills in the best way it can. To do that requires very skilful knowledge of what is required in energy policy. To rush in a squeamish or fashionable way into any one particular sector does have its danger. We need to have a balanced supply of energy, and it needs to come from a balanced number of sources in order to give reliability to people. But we also need to be very, very clear on setting up a system that does contain the costs as best we can.

One of the big costs is the distribution network. Poles and wires are expensive and they need considerable maintenance. I know there is a considerable difference between the wholesale price of energy going into the system and what people pay. As I say, the further away you get from the power station, the more you pay — and that brings some of the higher costs in some of the larger scale operations more into the competitive market.

There are other ways too of having energy security. We have a very large almond industry. One of our large almond producers is in the process of putting in its own steam plant. It will burn the almond shells to create the energy it needs to run its factory and to assist with its irrigation pumps. Again, that is diversifying. It is a form of green power, because the power station sits in the middle of a very large almond plantation. The almonds are burnt, the trees suck up the CO<sub>2</sub>, they produce some almonds, you take the kernel out and you burn the shell. So it is a very sustainable thing. Again, it is different from wind, hydro or solar, but nonetheless it is a very useful way of producing that diversified energy mix.

This bill is about regulation and about putting considerable pressure on our electrical retailers and others in the market to respond to consumer needs quickly. This is very important. I think one issue we all have faced is the plight of people who have got into difficulty with their energy companies over various matters, so a bill with a structure that brings connections into a far closer time frame will give people some comfort. It is for that reason that The Nationals in coalition are not opposing this bill. We look forward though to those in government delivering reliable energy from diversified sources at a cost that does not impinge on the cost-of-living expenses for our families, particularly those in country areas who pay more for their energy because of their distance from the source of generation.

**Mr CARBINES** (Ivanhoe) — Can I just start by quoting the Premier when he said ‘there’s nothing ugly about a clean environment and there’s nothing ugly about hundreds of new Victorian jobs’. He said that when I was with him up in Ararat — time flies — on 15 July last year and he was inspecting a \$450 million expansion in Ararat of wind farms out there. Renewable Energy Systems, GE, Downer, Partners Group and OPTrust announced they would build some 75 turbines at a wind farm, making it the third largest of its type in the country.

A lot of this work came about through the work of the member for Richmond, who is the Minister for Planning, in winding back some archaic laws that just persecuted renewable energy development here in Victoria, renewable energy investment and development that has been lost in this state under the previous Liberal coalition government. A lot of that investment went interstate to South Australia, when research and development by companies wanting to invest in the long term were essentially driven out of Victoria by the flat earth, climate change-denying, renewable energy-hating policies of the previous government. They drove investment and jobs out of

Victoria, and those jobs and that investment went to South Australia, where people were welcomed with open arms.

There has been significant change over the past 18 months, not just through the government here in Victoria but through the leadership of the Premier and the Minister for Planning in winding back those archaic laws that persecuted renewable energy providers, the renewable energy industry here in Victoria. We are bringing back and encouraging investment in renewable energy here in Victoria by providing the right planning framework and the right legislative environment to make sure that it is very clear to those that want to invest in clean energy, those that want to invest in renewable energy here in Victoria, that they have a future here and that those long-term investments will be supported by the Labor government.

It was no small thing that was announced on 15 July last year in Ararat, that \$450 million expansion. That goes a long way to demonstrating how a forward-thinking government embraces not only climate change and the desire for renewable energy to grow and for companies to be able to invest in Victoria but sets the right planning framework and the right legislative framework.

That brings us to the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015. This bill provides a new framework governing how small customers, including those with small renewable energy generation facilities such as solar panels, connect to the electricity grid. The framework is more transparent, timely and customer friendly than the existing framework. What is interesting is that this framework already applies in other jurisdictions participating in the national electricity market and is set out in chapter 5A of the national electricity rules. What that means is that again Victoria has been lagging behind. It has taken the Andrews Labor government to bring us back from the Dark Ages when under the previous government renewable energy investment and renewable energy companies were driven out and 21st century jobs in our 21st century economy were driven away. Those opposite put the economy here in Victoria to sleep and did not grasp those great opportunities that Victoria is known for, to pursue clean energy jobs and investment in innovation and renewable energy schemes.

There has been consultation with stakeholders, including the electricity distributors and representatives of the Clean Energy Council and the Alternative Technology Association. There were some particular comments from the Clean Energy Council in support of the bill, which I would like to quote. It said:

Grid connection of embedded generation is a challenging part of any generation developer's business. In the Victorian case the lack of a clear framework and undefined information requirements for the connection process leads to a confusing and challenging process and high risk for these developers. Implementing chapter 5A will be low risk and make a significant improvement for the grid connection of embedded generation rated below 5 megawatts.

These improvements would ultimately lead to lower cost installation of embedded generation in Victoria. This is likely to lead to more efficient renewable energy businesses and increase opportunity for the uptake of renewables, especially commercial-scale solar PV.

Let us just go back to that quote again:

In the Victorian case the lack of a clear framework and undefined information requirements for the connection process leads to a confusing and challenging process and high risk for these developers.

That is what the situation or circumstance was under the previous government, one the previous government wallowed in, enjoyed, basked in and thought was a good outcome for Victoria. What we learnt over the four years of the previous government was that investment, innovation and jobs were driven out of Victoria because of its climate change-denying policies, its attack on wind farms and its attack on planning laws and development. Those have driven investment away from Victoria, and it is a Labor government that has been setting the policy framework and the planning laws to welcome back that investment and innovation that is all about 21st century jobs for a long-term sustainable future with renewable energy here in Victoria.

As Minister D'Ambrosio said in her second-reading speech:

Electricity distributors are required to connect customers, including small-scale renewable energy generation proponents, to the electricity grid.

The minister noted:

However, the existing arrangements governing the process for connection are overly complex, lack transparency and are not customer friendly.

Clearly the previous government quite enjoyed the fact and deliberately had a hand in making sure Victoria retained existing arrangements governing the process for connection that were overly complex, lacked transparency and were not customer friendly. We understand why the previous government was of that view — and where has that left it? It has left it in opposition. Progressive Victorians who understand 21st century jobs for the future want to encourage 21st century companies both overseas and within Australia to invest in renewable energies, but they also

want to make sure those companies have a business model that allows them to connect to the grid. People who want to use renewable energy need to know that they are not going to be jumping hurdles or coping with different arrangements that make things too difficult and too hard.

These are the arrangements that this government, the Andrews government, has had to wind back to provide greater opportunities for investment in Victoria. That is what was put at risk under the previous government. That is what we are turning around in Victoria by providing a long-term framework for people and companies to make long-term investment decisions about renewable energy here in Victoria.

The changes we are proposing in this bill will provide greater clarity in the information that needs to be exchanged between the electricity distributor and customers to enable connection to occur. As the minister pointed out:

Electricity distributors will be required to respond to, and process, requests for connection in a more timely manner. Standard terms and conditions for connection must be published by each electricity distributor and these terms and conditions must be approved by the national energy sector regulator, the Australian Energy Regulator ...

...

Existing aspects of the Victorian framework that are not captured by the national electricity connections framework but are important to retain through measures are also contained in the bill.

I point out that there are several other initiatives that Minister D'Ambrosio has been working on. Can I say as the Parliamentary Secretary for the Environment that there has been a very close relationship between the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water and the Minister for Energy and Resources, particularly in respect of a review of the Climate Change Act 2010. There has been a range of work around renewable energy. They have been working closely together because a lot of people in the community, particularly in our community I think it is fair to say, associate renewable energy initiatives and policy with their thinking about the environment. They think about it in terms of jobs and investment opportunities and innovation for Victorians. They see renewable energies as not only an opportunity to save on their energy bills but as a way to contribute to a better environment. The Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water is subject to great accountability. Even though a lot of the regulatory framework lies with the Minister for Energy and Resources, it is about working in partnership, as we are doing, to make sure we are getting an effective outcome from energy regulators.

The driver for a lot of people in the Victorian community is that they want to see a cleaner environment and they want to make a contribution themselves to the way in which they get access to renewable energy. They want to support a government that supports renewable energy and that has wound back the ridiculous and prosecutorial laws that the previous government introduced to support its flat-earth attitude and climate-denying science when you could not even mention the words 'climate change'. We have wound that back, and that has driven investment in Victoria. It has driven jobs in Victoria, 21st century jobs, and an economy and an environment that will stand the test of time. I commend the bill to the house and the work of the Minister for Energy and Resources.

*Honourable members interjecting.*

**Ms KEALY (Lowan)** — It is fantastic to have so much support in this chamber; it really is. Every time I get on my feet there is some commentary, which is great. I rise today to speak on the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015, and from the outset I want to make it clear that The Nationals, as part of the coalition, will not be opposing this bill. I have some commentary around the impacts of the bill, particularly around the impact on the cost of living of people who live in the Lowan electorate.

The main purpose of this bill is to seek to amend the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005 to apply in Victoria a new framework governing the process for connecting retail customers, including small-scale renewable energy generation proponents, to the electricity grid. It has been interesting to hear some of the remarks in the chamber today. I have heard perhaps a rewriting of history in a number of cases, particularly regarding the four years of the coalition government, and I think this is just another example of the words of this Labor government not matching reality. We have to go and fact check all the time, and I would just like to set the record straight.

I heard some rhetoric today basically calling people who were against anything that happens in terms of renewable energy Neanderthals. I think that is completely unparliamentary language and not something that should be said in this chamber. We heard the member for Ivanhoe calling those on this side of the chamber climate change deniers. There is no evidence behind that. If you look at the policy we had through our four years of government, you can see that we actually increased the uptake of renewable energy. In fact there was such rapid uptake of the rooftop solar initiative that there were over 200 000 photovoltaic units installed, which is twice as many as there were

when we came to government. We managed to grow the rooftop solar capacity by doubling what Labor had in place, so we have clear history here when we look at the facts.

We had a very strong position of supporting diversification in our energy sector. We spent \$42 million on sustainable energy initiatives, and that resulted in an increase of renewable energy across the state to 12 per cent of our total energy production, an increase of 5 per cent over what Labor delivered. We were taking very good steps on that, so for rhetoric to be going around that we were not doing anything is simply untrue.

I also heard the member for Ivanhoe talking about how fantastic the South Australian system is because it is so heavily reliant on the renewable energy sector. Unfortunately South Australians may not perhaps be so supportive of their program over there. We have seen some media coverage recently indicating that electricity bills in South Australia have increased by over 90 per cent this year, which is an enormous amount. The reason is that it simply does not produce the base load that is required during its peak periods. In fact it imports a lot of electricity from Victoria. We are doing a fantastic job in our energy production. That should be celebrated, and we certainly should not be admonished just for some simple political pointscoring.

There are some other elements of the bill I want to go through just to highlight some details in the bill. Distributors will be required to respond to and process requests for a connection in a more timely manner — 10 days as opposed to 20 days in most cases. However, complex requests that require negotiations will remain at 65 days. For me, this is good news. In country Victoria we often find it very difficult to get people to come out and service customers in our regions simply because there is a monopoly service provider or a lack of people based in our country communities qualified to do that kind of work. I hope that the changes to this legislation will mean that in country Victoria we will get better service delivery so that people who are connecting their homes and businesses to the grid can do so within a faster time frame. That is yet to be seen. It is all very well and good to have these requirements set out in legislation, but if there is not some penalty imposed, often we see them ignored and go by the wayside.

I do note that as part of this bill the standard terms and conditions for connection must be published by each electricity distributor and that these terms and conditions must be approved by the Australian Energy Regulator. The Australian Energy Regulator will also

be responsible for dispute resolution, and this is what I am concerned about. It is all very well and good to say that if you do not get your house connected within 10 days, then you can go through a dispute resolution process, but that could just take additional time. There does not appear to be an incentive or a penalty for energy providers if they fall outside of this 10-day requirement, so I am not sure if this is an empty technicality within the bill or whether it will result in real changes for our local people.

There is also a responsibility by the Australian Energy Regulator to monitor and force electricity compliance within the new framework. The obligation on electricity distributors to offer to underground, relocate, modify or remove distribution assets, if requested to do so, and the obligation to call for competitive tenders to perform construction works associated with new connections of the Victorian framework not captured by the framework, which is not included in the new framework, will remain and be enforced by the Australian Energy Regulator.

There are good changes in this bill, but we have to wait until the bill is rolled out to ascertain whether it will make a real difference to energy supply in particularly our rural and regional areas. I do refer to the member for Bendigo West's contribution, when she was gloating that this was actually the sixth piece of legislation related to energy that this government had brought to the Parliament. It is all very well and good to have a number of pieces of legislation coming through, but if doing that is not making a difference to the cost of energy and is not adding transparency to the industry or providing a simpler system, then it is simply failing.

You can make a technical change to a bill which actually makes no real difference in terms of the outcome for consumers. There is evidence of this. Since this government has been in place we have seen gas prices increase enormously across the Wimmera region. In 2015 gas prices went up by almost 19 per cent — 18.9 per cent in fact — and this year again gas prices increased by about 20 per cent. If this legislation was making a real difference, then we would surely see at least the gas prices increasing in line with the CPI rate or at least in line with price increases across the rest of the state, including metropolitan Melbourne, but unfortunately it looks like country Victoria is again just being left to pay increased and inflated prices.

Unfortunately this issue has been raised with the Minister for Energy and Resources and she has not taken any action. It has been on her desk for over a year. In fact I had a constituent who wrote to the minister, and the department responded. One of the

comments in the letter he received, which I am happy to make available, is that ‘the Victorian government will monitor the development of competition in the Wimmera area to ensure that the interests of consumers are protected’. This legislation is failing our local people. We are not seeing energy prices flatten; we are seeing them increase under this government. The cost of living is an enormous issue for people in my region, particularly in the Wimmera, where for the last 24 months we have been suffering because of the lowest rainfall on record.

The drought has had an enormous impact on our region because of obviously lower production through the agricultural sector which passes on to other small businesses in the community. To see gas prices and the cost of living continuing to increase is a real concern for our people. The fact that the minister has not intervened to ensure that there are other providers available to supply gas through the pipeline — currently we have one supplier who has got a monopoly and there has not been any work done to bring in another provider — is a real concern to me, and I really would like the minister to take action in that area.

In this letter there is also reference to the government progressing ‘policies that help households and businesses improve their energy efficiency, to reduce pressures on household bills and business costs’. One of those programs is the LED lighting scheme. Recently I have raised this issue in Parliament and also through the local media because there was simply no electrician available locally who would deliver this LED program. Any government-subsidised program should be available across the whole state, not just to people who live in Melbourne. I am very, very pleased that a former local electrician from Mildura, Clenton Crozier of Crozier Electrical, has come forward and put his hand up. So now he will be able to get involved in that LED program, but if it had not been for me and for the local people who said, ‘Hey, come on, this has to be fair. You have to roll out these energy efficiency programs across country Victoria as well as in the city’, and if we had not had support in the media, it just would not be a reality.

We have also got great developments coming online in our region that will help to diversify the income streams for our food producers. The Murra Warra wind farm is going ahead, which will be about \$650 million, and the Kiata wind farm, which will be about \$12 million over the \$5 million life span. We are taking great steps to support renewable energy in our sector. It helps to diversify our reliance on energy, which we need to do, and I think that country people are really supportive of going down this path. They are not climate change

deniers. They understand the climate better than most people, particularly people from Melbourne, because they work with it. I commend the bill to the house.

**Mr NARDELLA** (Melton) — I rise to speak on and support the National Electricity (Victoria) Further Amendment Bill 2015. I want to pick up on a number of matters that honourable members from the other side have touched on. It is really interesting when you listen to their contributions, because we all know that these people are the followers of the Lord Moncktons of the world and believe whatever Lord Monckton believes in, because they are climate deniers. We just heard the honourable member for Lowan say, ‘We’re not climate deniers’. Obviously she does not talk to her leader, she does not have any communication with the leader, because if you actually talk to the leader, if you actually understand what the National Party is about, you understand that these people are climate change deniers. There is no such thing as human-induced climate change! It does not exist for the National Party nor for the Liberal Party.

If you have a look at the actions of the previous government — the lost four years of the Geoff Shaw government — that was led at one stage by Premier Ted Baillieu, you see that he introduced in August 2011 — I think it was 11 August 2011 in the *Age*, if you want to have a look at it — a 2-mile exclusion zone. Unless you could get every household within 2 miles to agree to a wind farm, you could not build it. Unless you had the written agreement, what the Honourable Ted Baillieu and the government at that time said was, ‘We don’t believe in renewable energy’.

The member for Mildura said, ‘Oh, you know, we got one together. We got this really big one together in Mildura’. Thank you, the Labor government! Thank you to the Labor governments, both federal and state, at the time; not thank you to him, not thank you to his government, which did nothing.

The honourable member for South-West Coast got up and talked about farming, farmers, dairy farms, brownouts and those types of things — very, very important, extremely important for her residents and constituents — but she did not talk about Keppel Prince. She did not talk about all the jobs that she and her kind, including the previous Premier, the previous member for South-West Coast, made sure were gotten rid of. They made sure that they lost their jobs and made sure that Keppel Prince was providing work not for Victoria, not for Victorians, but for South Australia, which powered ahead — that is a bit of a pun, isn’t it? — providing wind farms and wind energy not only to its community but to the rest of Australia through the

national grid. No; not once did she talk about Keppel Prince and the effect on her communities, the effect on those workers in her electorate, because she does not care about workers. She does not care about businesses.

The member for Caulfield, the shadow minister — he is a winner; I will get to him now — talked about a number of things. One of the things that he talked about was jobs, continuing on from the member for South-West Coast. He talked about how you have to provide jobs and that it is really important. But one of the really interesting things is that the previous government destroyed jobs and then actually made things worse for small businesses, for farms and for large businesses because in 2013 and 2014 there were massive price rises in both electricity and gas. There was a massive price rise in electricity of \$370 because these people do not care.

**Mr J. Bull** — How much?

**Mr NARDELLA** — It was \$370. It is all care, no responsibility. He actually went as far as tweeting. Sometimes as a shadow minister what one should do is put one's brain into gear before one puts one's mouth — or in this case one's tweeting fingers or tweeting thumbs — into gear. So this is what he did on 9 February 2016. He said:

Vic power bills are soaring, @LilyDAmbrosioMP is leaving households out in the cold by doing nothing ...

Speaker, remember what I said? You have got to put your brain into gear before you put your tweeting thumbs into gear. Those stats were from 2013–14 when he was in government, when he was on this side of the house, and he is blaming us for his government's price rises! You really have to wonder how these people opposite get to do anything when they use their own statistics, their own abysmal record, to attack us. Then you have the situation back at that time where 58 000 households were disconnected. They are proud of these figures; he was so proud of tweeting it out at the time. The wrongful disconnections doubled. So we are fixing up the mess. This is the legislation to fix up their mess.

Those opposite talked about smart meters. All they did whilst we put in place smart meters was oppose the rollout. They opposed it then; they oppose it now. They wear the tinfoil on their head. You should have heard some of the things that they were saying at the time, Speaker: 'These things are going to cause cancer'; 'These smart meters are the worst things in the world'. We heard here today that it 'cost \$2 billion'. They just pull figures out of the hat — out of the tinfoil hat. They

just have no responsibility as an opposition, and that is why they are going to be there for a long time.

Those opposite talked about the network costs. The cost-reflective network pricing was discussed by the honourable member for Caulfield. Well, we have not blocked it. He said that we have not blocked it. What we are providing is choice. Those opposite talked about the gold plating of the network system. Well, in fact, if you read their contributions, they are all over the place on this — the Libs, the Nats and the Greens political party. They want it; they do not want it. Gold plating; not gold plating.

The thing is that you need to know what you are talking about. It is regulated by the national regulator. It is about making sure it is reliable and safe as a network, but they do not understand that. It is about the in-built redundancy. They do not understand any of that, right? I have just said it. They will not even be able to go to their dictionary and work that out because they are not that smart. But the in-built redundancy is important within the network.

I just want to finish now by talking about the Greens political party members and their woeful contribution — —

**An honourable member** — Where are they?

**Mr NARDELLA** — They are never here. They are not here at the moment. These are the people who voted down the energy technology innovation strategy twice. These are the same people who destroyed the carbon tax. These are the same people who are now going to be supporting the Liberal Party and The Nationals through preference deals to make sure that renewable energy in Victoria will go back to the dark ages like it did under former Premier Baillieu and that side of the house. These are the same people who do not believe in the environment, because when you scratch the surface, when you talk to them and listen to what they are saying, you realise that these people hate the environment because they hate doing the right thing by the environment. I support the bill before the house.

**Debate adjourned on motion of Ms GARRETT (Minister for Emergency Services).**

**Debate adjourned until later this day.**

## JOINT SITTING OF PARLIAMENT

**Senate vacancy  
Victorian Health Promotion Foundation  
Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation**

**Message received from Council informing Assembly that they have agreed to joint sitting to choose a person to hold a place in the Senate rendered vacant by the resignation of Senator the Honourable Michael Ronaldson and to elect members to the boards of the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation and the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation.**

**VICTORIA POLICE AMENDMENT  
(MERIT-BASED TRANSFER) BILL 2016**

*Second reading*

**Debate resumed from 10 February; motion of Mr SCOTT (Acting Minister for Police).**

**Mr CLARK** (Box Hill) — This is a bill which at its heart makes a straightforward amendment to the Victoria Police Act 2013 to give effect to the provisions of a police enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) that was entered into late last year. However, the bill needs to be assessed in the context of the enterprise bargaining agreement generally and in the context of the operational issues currently being faced by Victoria Police.

As the minister indicated in his second-reading speech, as part of the police EBA last year the chief commissioner and the Police Association Victoria agreed that general duties constable and senior constable positions at country locations should be filled by a merit-based selection process. This reform needs to be supported by legislative amendment, which is what this bill does. The heart of the bill is in clause 4, which scales back the operation of the current provisions of the Victoria Police Act 2013 that deal with transfer on application or request, and it scales those back to apply simply to metropolitan positions so that country positions can be filled on a merit-based basis in accordance with the EBA. The remaining provisions of the bill are definitional or consequential around that change.

So the essence of the bill is very straightforward. But the broad question that needs to be asked is: what is the rationale and the logic for the change that the house is being asked to agree to? At its heart it is about extending the merit-based filling of positions to these country places to which the bill applies. Almost by

definition one would expect to be supportive of merit-based appointments so that the most suitable person can be deployed to fill a relevant position. This has been a provision agreed to between the Chief Commissioner of Police and the police association. I understand it is one the police association is pleased with, as is Victoria Police, and insofar as it goes it seems a reasonable provision.

The question that needs to be asked, and as yet I do not think a satisfactory answer has been given, is: what is the logic for applying this to non-metropolitan positions but not to metropolitan positions? As far as I am aware the only answer that has been given to the opposition in this regard is that it is because that is what was agreed to in the EBA. I am sure there are lots of reasons that can be given — and no doubt the parliamentary secretary, who seems to be gearing up to speak, will provide them to the house — about the benefits that will flow to positions in country Victoria from having merit-based appointments there. That is certainly not something I would question. But I hope he will then go on to address the logic of not having similar provisions apply to metropolitan provisions, and that is what I will be particularly interested to hear his remarks in relation to.

As I said at the outset, this is a provision that needs to be assessed in the broader context of the police EBA and the constraints under which Victoria Police are currently operating. In relation to the EBA, it is difficult to get a full account of what the EBA outcomes were and what their import is and the implications are for Victoria Police and for the government sector and government finances more generally. As far as I am aware the government did not put out a media release summarising the provisions that were agreed to in the EBA; however, there are two fairly extensive media reports that run through some aspects of those provisions.

One of those reports, published in the *Age* of 10 December last year, states:

... in-principle deal will deliver:

2.5 per cent annual pay rise over four years.

An additional 0.5 per cent annual increase linked to productivity.

Higher penalty rates for those [who] work between midnight Friday and midnight Sunday and on public holidays.

It refers to the Minister for Police, the member for Williamstown and states:

He said it was difficult to quantify how much an average officer would earn because of the introduction of penalty rates, because rosters varied significantly between individuals.

There is a further report in the *Herald Sun* of 10 December 2015, which goes into a bit more detail. Under the heading 'Victoria Police set to get more pay in new EBA deal', the version currently available online states:

Police who work weekend shifts will be paid thousands of dollars a year more under a generous pay deal ticked off by the Andrews government.

Under the in-principle deal, officers who work fortnightly weekend shifts would get an immediate annual pay boost of at least 6 per cent, because of new penalty rates that have been introduced.

There would be a 39 per cent loading for daytime weekend shifts, 45 per cent extra for twilight weekend shifts, and 58 per cent extra for the graveyard weekend shift.

An experienced senior constable would get between \$103 and \$141 more for a weekend shift, and a sergeant with four years' experience would get between \$129 and \$177 extra.

The new weekend rates are on top of a 3 per cent-a-year base pay increase, effective from December 1 this year.

The deal will also include family violence leave, IVF leave, lactation breaks and a \$6000 annual bonus for inspectors on-call.

This article proceeds to quote some remarks from the minister, saying:

Police minister Wade Noonan said hardworking officers deserved the increased pay, and claimed the base increase of 10 per cent over four years, together with an extra 2 per cent linked to 'service delivery improvements', was within government wages policy.

But at a press conference Mr Noonan refused to admit what the weekend penalty rates could be, saying 'it will vary based on the hours people work'.

'I can't give you an exact figure. The exact percentages are still to be resolved', he said.

All public sector workers are entitled to fair and reasonable wages and conditions, having regard to the work that they do, and certainly no-one begrudges a fair and reasonable pay rise to Victoria Police officers. I think every member of this house acknowledges the incredibly valuable and demanding work that they do on behalf of the community. The point I make in this debate is that this house and indeed the community more generally do not have a full explanation available to them of the actual quantification of the outcomes of the EBA that is being entered into. There are of course the particular heads of outcome that have been reported on and that I have quoted, but as far as I am aware the minister has not, and nor has anyone else in the

government, actually quantified the all-up cost to the police force or to the government of the EBA.

Some honourable members will be aware the standard practice in government financing — it was certainly the practice under the previous government, and I believe it remains the practice under the current government — is that departments and agencies, such as Victoria Police, are funded to negotiate wage increases with their workforces equal to the amount provided for in the government of the day's wages policy as the standard increase. My understanding is that under the current government departments and agencies are funded on the basis of an all-up annual cost to them of the EBAs that they negotiate of 2.5 per cent. The consequence of that is that if an agency or department agrees to a wage increase in excess of 2.5 per cent, then either that department or agency needs to fund the increase from savings of one form or another or that department or agency needs to have its budget supplemented by Treasury to make up the cost.

The previous government's policy was that increases above the 2.5 per cent guideline had to be funded by genuine productivity savings; in other words, that they would be cost neutral to the department or agency concerned. My understanding is that the current government has a somewhat different approach to that and is prepared to agree to a 0.5 per cent increase on top of the 2.5 per cent without a specific requirement of productivity savings to meet that cost; it is just a more general requirement of some productivity or other benefit. However, the bottom-line position remains that if a department or agency has negotiated an EBA that has a wages cost all up of greater than 2.5 per cent per annum, then either that agency has got to fund that excess through either the savings negotiated under the EBA or through making other savings or else be supplemented by Treasury.

There has been nothing provided to this house or in the public arena, as far as I am aware, as to what the all-up cost implications for Victoria Police are of the EBA that has been negotiated. The importance of this of course is that if the all-up cost to the Victoria Police budget of this EBA is in excess of 2.5 per cent and there have not been productivity savings found to fund the excess, then that will put a squeeze on the Victoria Police budget. In other words, Victoria Police will need to cut back on the services that it provides to the community — cut back on the level of support, protection and coverage and so forth that it provides to the community — in order to fund the excess. This house and the community are entitled to expect an account of whether or not that is going to be the case, what the all-up cost has been and how that cost is going

to be funded and to seek some reassurance that in fact the EBA outcome will not have an adverse effect on the ability of Victoria Police to perform the good work it does in protecting the community.

The other aspect of the context of this bill that needs to be considered in the outcome of the EBA is the pressure that officers within Victoria Police are currently under as a result of operational developments and government policy. In short, there has been a squeeze on police numbers since the current government came to office, and that squeeze has occurred at the same time as there has been a series of increased operational demands on Victoria Police. These two factors together are putting huge pressure on the ability of Victoria Police to protect the community, placing big demands on individual officers and resulting in closures of or reduced hours at a number of police stations.

The exact number of Victoria Police officers under the current government has fluctuated from time to time, as one would expect with varying patterns of officers departing and new recruits taking their place, but the bottom line is that the number of police per capita here in this state has been steadily falling since the current government took office. That means that the number of sworn police is not keeping pace with the population growth in this state, and at the same time operational factors, such as the two-up requirement for police highway patrols, are dramatically affecting the capacity of Victoria Police to deploy sufficient police numbers in many important areas. That means the community is suffering, because in short the government is not providing the community with adequate police to do the job that needs to be done to protect the community at a time when crime is continuing to rise, as the latest statistics have shown.

The fall in the number of police officers per capita, particularly in the context of these increased operational demands, is diminishing the potential of police to do what was happening under the increase in police that took place during the term of the previous government — in other words, having more police available to go out and catch more crooks and bring them to justice. That is one of the reasons there has been a significant increase in the number of drug offences being detected and charges being laid, because more police had become available under the previous government to be more proactive in tracking down, arresting and charging the drug pushers who are causing so much harm in our community. If police numbers per capita are now falling, the capacity of Victoria Police to do that is being diminished.

As I said, this is also having flow-through effects on the capacity of Victoria Police to keep police stations open right across our state. This is in stark contrast to the commitment that was made by the police minister in the statement he issued on 15 April last year, when he said:

As Minister for Police, I made a commitment in Parliament in February that this would keep all existing police stations open.

This government does not support the forcible closure of police stations against the wishes of local communities. There are 329 police stations across the state and they all play a significant role in the work done by police.

Yet we are now seeing example after example where citizens who visit a local police station are finding signs placed up on that police station door about the station being closed or hours reduced. Ashburton police station has a sign up saying:

As from Monday 8/2/2016 the Ashburton Police station opening hours will be:

Mondays 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m.

Thursdays 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m.

If you require urgent police attendance contact 000.

Then there is a list of nearest other police stations, so they have been cut back to two days a week as a result of lack of police numbers. Nunawading police station is currently closed and has a sign saying so on its window.

At Burwood police station a sign states:

If Burwood police are not in attendance police assistance can be obtained at the following locations ...

There is also a very prominent sign saying:

Victoria Police closed. Emergencies call 000. Non-emergencies call Box Hill.

And on it goes across the state, with police stations being either closed entirely or having dramatically reduced hours, including at stations that were promised to be 24-hour stations but where that is not the case. Members of the community were assured by the Minister for Police back in April last year that he had made a commitment in Parliament that would keep all existing police stations open and did not support the forcible closure of police stations against the wishes of the local communities, but right across the state that promise is being broken.

That sits alongside the justifiable community concern that it is not only police officers but also protective services officers (PSOs) who are not being deployed as they should be. All railway stations across the state

should now have been fully staffed with PSOs, and that is certainly not the case. There are many railway stations that have not been staffed with PSOs, and there has been absolutely no adequate explanation for why that has occurred, apart from the suggestion that the deployment of PSOs to police stations has been deliberately held back by the current government because otherwise it could not have organised the PSO numbers that were required for its weekend night train service. Whatever the explanation might be, the bottom line is the same — that is, the community is suffering because PSOs are not deployed at the stations that they should have been deployed at, and commuters are still not being given the assurance of universal coverage so that whatever station they might travel to, they can travel in the comfort and confidence that there will be PSOs manning those stations when they arrive in order to keep them safe.

To conclude, while this bill is a simple and straightforward one, and it is a bill that the coalition parties do not oppose, there are many unanswered questions about the context in which the bill comes to the house and about the enterprise bargaining agreement provisions out of which it arises, questions that the community is entitled to have answered and which have not been answered to date, and questions that I certainly hope the Parliamentary Secretary for Justice will be able to provide some answers to when he speaks. There are also very grave concerns about the broader handling of the police portfolio under the current government, the steady reduction in the numbers of police per capita and the very significant adverse effects that is having on the community both through the closures of police stations and the general lack of police numbers to provide the community with the protection that members of the community are entitled to expect.

**Mr CARROLL** (Niddrie) — It is my pleasure to rise and speak on the Victoria Police Amendment (Merit-based Transfer) Bill 2016, a bill which will give effect to the enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) struck between Victoria Police and the government. I will begin by taking up a couple of the issues outlined by the member for Box Hill. I welcome the government's support of this bill — it is important legislation — because we have in the state of Victoria an outstanding police force led by Graham Ashton, a fantastic appointment.

But let me begin by correcting some of the errors made by the member for Box Hill. We have made a record investment in Victoria Police: \$2.5 billion in the Andrews government's first budget. This did not happen under a Liberal government; it happened under

a Labor government — \$2.5 billion in the first budget. Incredibly we have also funded \$150 million for our police custody officers. For my first event of 2016 I had the honour of attending the academy at Mount Waverley to see the rollout of our very first police custody officers. People do not have to take my word for it; they can take the Police Association Victoria's word. The association's press release of 5 May 2015 states:

Sen-Sgt Iddles says the police association is pleased that the government has seen fit to fix a number of problem areas which the association had previously identified.

'We congratulate Police Minister Noonan for his leadership in listening to our concerns and acting on them at the earliest possible opportunity — the government's first budget.

'For decades, we've been saying that police officers should be freed from 'babysitting' prisoners in police cells in order to do the police work their communities expect of them, like providing proactive street patrols. We're delighted that this 'chestnut' issue will soon be fixed.

They are not my words; they are the words of the police association.

The member for Box Hill also highlighted — and I agree with him — some of the increased demands on police. This merit-based transfer legislation will assist the leadership command of Victoria Police in ensuring that across the state, particularly in our regional areas, we have the best police force servicing our country needs. I am lucky to have a recent edition of *Police Life* magazine. In his introductory remarks the Chief Commissioner of Police highlighted — and the member for Box Hill touched on this — some of the growing demands and the stresses on our frontline police. He said:

I'm pleased to have appointed a deputy commissioner overseeing a focus on capability, to ensure all staff are equipped to manage the challenges of modern policing. We have started constructing a capability plan, which will provide a road map towards a better-equipped, more diverse, well-trained, and healthier workforce.

In this magazine we also hear firsthand from some of the police about what they are doing now on a day-to-day basis, whether it be family violence, whether it be the drug ice, or whether it be working under our ice action task force and the work that the government's doing to combat this deadly drug. This issue giving legislative effect to the EBA that was struck is very important. It will ensure that our police have the best support needed. We have had on various occasions from the opposition unanimous support for some of the reforms that we have implemented to ensure our police force is at its strongest.

Victoria Police is very strong in being incredibly proactive. We have got the police custody officers, the rollout of our family violence package and Marcia Neave overseeing her work at the royal commission, which will soon be released. We have had outstanding work done on International Women's Day. The Minister for Police and the Premier are at the forefront of ensuring our police are tackling family violence. One of the articles that grabbed me in this police magazine — 'Survivor' was the title of it — was the story of a young girl, Courtney Wirth, who endured more than 3 hours locked in a car with her former partner as he beat her. She was lucky to survive, but what she outlines in this article was the role of the Victoria Police in assisting her and giving her confidence to make her former partner accountable for his actions and ensuring that when she went through the court process Victoria Police officers were there every step of the way. They are to be commended for their work on a daily basis.

In relation to the enterprise bargaining agreement, the member for Box Hill raised a couple of issues with that. I was pleased — and the shadow Minister for Police was also there last year — to see the annual general meeting of the Police Association Victoria coming up later this week. It is good to see this issue raised in the association's forum, and that there is bipartisan support in terms of working with the association. I am sure some of the member for Box Hill's questions could be answered this week directly by the police association.

Essentially the legislation that we are debating today, supported by the opposition, gives effect to the EBA to ensure that our police force, particularly in country areas, is adequately resourced and has merit-based transfers. It is ensuring that Victoria Police officers from constable level up are the best equipped and the best trained, and that they are there to do the job in protecting and working for the community.

This bill continues the rollout of reforms for our police and protective services officers. I am very pleased to say that this Friday I will be at my second police custody officer graduation meeting the newest recruits, helping them get out there to not babysit but to make sure that we have got more police out on the beat doing the work that is needed. You only had to look at the *Age* newspaper recently to see that Police Minister Noonan said what the role of police custody officers will be. He said:

Custody officers will play a critical role in community safety by allowing more police to do what they do best — fight and prevent crime.

This has been a welcome policy by the Andrews Labor government. Almost \$150 million is being invested to do this. We are seeing more police back on the beat. We are seeing a whole new wave of recruits helping to free police from a lot of the custodial duties that they do to ensure that they are well and truly out on the beat protecting the community.

The legislation before us will ensure that we are supporting Victoria Police, often the first responders in protecting the community, keeping the community safe, investigating and upholding the law. As part of the 2015 police enterprise bargaining agreement the chief commissioner and the police association agreed that general duties constable and senior constable positions at country locations should be filled via a merit-based selection process. This reform embedded within the EBA essentially required us to put this sort of technical legislation into the Victoria Police Act 2013. This important service delivery reform will reward performance and, with other agreed reforms, will help facilitate a better spread of police expertise across the state.

It is great to have the Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence in the chamber for this debate. We saw a lot of work being done by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission. It delivered a groundbreaking report, and I was very fortunate with the police minister to get a briefing on the report about some of the culture and some of the issues that are confronting Victoria Police at all different levels. It was great to see Kate Jenkins — a fabulous person — at the minister's event yesterday for the Victorian Honour Roll of Women. I got to personally congratulate her on her recent appointment as Australia's new Sex Discrimination Commissioner, where she is going to do an outstanding job.

I think it is very important to highlight what the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission did find in its report. It found that some of the predatory behaviour, often found in a rural police station, has contributed to a poor workplace culture. The police association, working with police command and the chief commissioner's office, is really about addressing that. Chief Commissioner Ashton has been outstanding in his response to that report. With the changes we are making now to the legislation, let us hope we can ensure we attract the most outstanding police officers to work outside the metropolitan area in regional areas, keeping us safe and doing the very best job.

I commend this bill. It is an important piece of legislation, which is very much technical legislation

following the police EBA. I want to congratulate the minister on the EBA too.

**Mr R. SMITH** (Warrandyte) — I rise to speak on the Victoria Police Amendment (Merit-based Transfer) Bill 2016, and in doing so I acknowledge that it is largely a bill that enshrines into legislation parts of the recent enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) negotiations. However, it is another example of the Labor government filling the business program of the house with administrative bills, which is certainly a function of this Parliament, but in the context of other possible policing legislation or policies around police, it does show that there is not a lot going on in this particular portfolio. This bill is an example of that. Really, it seems that the only people who are benefiting from these bills more broadly — not this one in particular, but more broadly — are those in the Victorian Public Service who are employed to draft legislation: there are some examples of putting commas in and putting certain words in italics. It is not an exaggeration to say that I could actually use my allotted time to read this whole bill into *Hansard* and still have time to talk about how it is not contributing to people who are calling on police to assist them at times when they do need officers in their communities.

Of course the coalition is not opposing this bill, because frankly there is not a lot to oppose about it, but there are certain issues that are worth mentioning as a result of the debate going around this bill. The first I would talk about, if we are talking about transferring police into areas where they are needed, is that there has certainly been a longstanding request from my community that more police are put into the area, the electorate of Warrandyte, and more broadly into the eastern region, division 1, the Manningham area, where police numbers have dropped by over 14 per cent in the last few months. It is a real indictment of this government that we are seeing a fall in police numbers in my community, particularly when a petition was recently tabled in this Parliament of over 1100 signatures from people from the Warrandyte community who desire to see more police in that area.

I am hearing anecdotally that there is a significant amount of antisocial behaviour going on in the Warrandyte community — frankly, more than I have seen in the 10 years I have represented the area. There have been break-ins at the local service station and the local IGA down there on a couple of occasions. If we look at Victoria Police's crime statistics, we can see that just in the last year in my area crime in Doncaster East has gone up by 22.3 per cent. In Warrandyte itself on a weekly basis members of the community are witnessing and certainly reporting back to us an

increasing incidence of crime, and that is the basis for their request for more police in the area; in Warrandyte and Warrandyte North we are seeing crime statistics up by 16.3 per cent. Up in Wonga Park, a place where, for those who know it, you would not expect too much crime, those who would act outside the law are certainly aware that the lack of police is giving them opportunities they previously have not had. Over the last year we have seen crime rise by 31.6 per cent in that area. That is a huge rise, and it is certainly something that the local community has great concerns about. As I said, it adds to the community's view that more police in the area would certainly be beneficial.

While this legislation helps with the transfer of police — and that is useful; it is supported by all police and, as I said, it is not opposed by us — there are concerns about who actually allocates police to particular areas. As I have said in this house before, I have raised the matter of the allocation of police with the Minister for Police, who responded by saying that it was up to the Chief Commissioner of Police. Following that I wrote to the chief commissioner, who said that if I wanted to talk about the allocation of police, I should talk to the minister. When I sent copies of those bits of correspondence to my broader community, they were certainly appalled that while the chief commissioner and the Minister for Police were arguing about responsibility, they were left exposed to crime rises and left with the ongoing fact that they did not have the sort of police numbers that they thought they were entitled to.

It has been a longstanding practice that the chief commissioner allocates police to areas of need, and I would point to these crime statistics as a way of saying that the Warrandyte community is an area of need. However, in the term of this government we have seen that politicians, namely the Premier and the member for Bellarine, have allocated police themselves over and above the police hierarchy. I can cite examples outlined in media in relation to the Geelong area, where local police have said that there is no need for more police, whereas the member for Bellarine and the Premier have said, 'Well, we said we would deliver more police, and we will do so, no matter what the police say'. So there is certainly a clear political agenda when it comes to allocating police.

I feel that when we look at that semimarginal seat down in the Geelong area, there seems to be more of an inclination to ensure that police are put down there, but when we look at what the government may term a safe opposition seat, the government seems to have completely deaf ears. In fact, more than that, there is an abrogation of responsibility by both the minister and the

chief commissioner. As I said, we have the correspondence, and my community has seen the correspondence, that actually makes that very clear. It is certainly not something I am making up. It is in black and white, signed off by the chief commissioner's offside.

It is a great disappointment to my community that this government has not got any room in its budget for more police. The member for Niddrie talked about the extra funding going to police. Frankly, in the last term of government the coalition added almost 1900 extra officers, on top of police we already had. Under this government there has been no allocation of sworn officers. May I point out to the house that when the issue of sworn officers was raised, the minister at the time took great pains to talk about police, but he never addressed the issue of sworn officers. The fact of the matter is that there is no opportunity for the recruitment of additional police over and above the current number, and the figures I read out earlier certainly sustain that point in relation to the eastern region division.

In short, this piece of legislation is widely supported. It is a result of significant EBA negotiations. However, it does not deal with the ongoing matter that we are seeing rising crime in areas in which you would not previously have seen it. In my electorate, people have not expressed any concerns about community safety for the 10 years I have been the representative there and have done so only in the last year. Victoria Police's own crime statistics have shown that they have every reason to be concerned, because those statistics continue to rise, and that is of great concern.

While we certainly do not oppose the passage of this bill through this house, the government has been put on notice by the 1174 people of the Warrandyte community who have signed a petition asking for more police in the area to deal with rising crime, and the government should listen to that; it should not play games.

The issues of the allocation of police and community safety should not be used as political footballs. It does seem that that is the case with this government. The to-ing and fro-ing between the chief commissioner and the Minister for Police with regard to who has responsibility really needs to stop. I have called on the chief commissioner to organise some sort of public meeting at which he or his officers could explain to the Warrandyte community why it is that in the midst of rising crime they have been deemed not worthy of an increase in police numbers. To say that the chief commissioner's reply did not even address that particular portion of my letter just shows the contempt

it seems the government holds for my community. And, may I say, that while I have respect for police command, the fact that this particular issue that I raised on behalf of my community was ignored does give my community some cause to pause and think about how important it is to Victoria Police command.

I hope that I have misunderstood the situation. I will give the chief commissioner the benefit of the doubt, but, as I said, if he is unwilling to allocate police to the Warrandyte area in response to a petition with a large number of signatures, then he should at least explain why the public safety of my community seems to have come second to the electorate of Bellarine. It would seem that the member for Bellarine and the Premier have done a sweetheart deal with the commissioner in order to get the police that were committed there. I think my community, the Warrandyte community, deserves better than that from this government. It deserves some explanation, and over and above that, it certainly deserves to have the pleasure of some additional police in order to combat and deal with the rise in crime. Warrandyte is a great place to live, and we want it to continue to be a great place to live. Some extra police to deal with rising crime would certainly be in order, and I hope that the government addresses that.

**Mr McGuire** (Broadmeadows) — The Victoria Police Amendment (Merit-based Transfer) Bill 2016 is important because it enshrines in the legislation merit and performance as the basis for the Chief Commissioner of Police to conduct transfers of police officers to general duties country positions and related appeals to the Police Registration and Service Board. Victoria Police and the Police Association Victoria agreed to this reform as part of the 2015 police enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) negotiations.

I would just like to make a point that has not really been raised — that this agreement represents for the first time in 20 years that Victoria Police were not forced to take any industrial action. Unlike those opposite, the Andrews government listened to the police force, did not meddle in its affairs and did not cut its budget. There have been some claims about budget and financing and, let us be clear on this, the Andrews government's first budget for 2015–16 delivered a record \$2.5 billion to Victoria Police to continue its important work in keeping our community safe. The Andrews government will continue to work with police and treat them with respect. This is demonstrated by the agreement between the government and Victoria Police over this enterprise bargaining relationship.

By contrast, the former coalition government made budget cuts of more than \$113 million from the

Victoria Police budget between 2010–11 and 2014–15. Victoria Police advises that there was also a target to reduce 350 police support staff, the unsworn members. Already the Andrews government has committed to an increase of almost 700 police personnel to keep our community safe. As far as the community officers are concerned, there has been an investment of almost \$150 million to deploy police to the front line.

Police custody officers (PCOs) have been stationed at Heidelberg, Dandenong, Ballarat, Bendigo, Sunshine and Geelong. I am delighted to say they are coming to Broadmeadows, Bairnsdale, Frankston, Horsham, Heidelberg, Mildura, Mill Park, Moorabbin, Morwell, Ringwood, Shepparton, Swan Hill, Wangaratta, Warrnambool, Wodonga, Sale and city west. That will be an important development, and as I said, it has been applauded by serving members and their union, the Police Association Victoria. The 200 PCOs will be deployed by the end of June with the remaining 200 to be deployed by 30 June 2018. That gives a much greater view of what is happening with police officers and should address some of the claims that are being made by the opposition about how much funding is being provided, where the police officers are stationed and what tasks they are actually completing.

As far as this bill is concerned, it will allow Victoria Police to axe current merit-based transfer provisions, including appeal rights — importantly — to apply to transfers to general duties country positions. These provisions are currently used to transfer and promote police officers to sergeant, senior sergeant and inspector positions. Consistent with their current provisions, the bill will have the effect that transfers to country positions will proceed as follows. First of all the Chief Commissioner of Police has regard to the relative merit of each candidate. The next point is where a merit-based process determines that candidates are of equal merit, the chief commissioner must have regard to seniority. Then there is a provision for unsuccessful candidates to appeal to the Police Registration and Services Board. The appeal proceeds as a rehearing of the relative merits of the candidates. The Police Registration and Services Board's decision is binding on the chief commissioner and subject to judicial review by the Supreme Court. This is a considered and nuanced system to actually allow Victoria Police to be judged for these transfers on merit, and as a general principle we want to be promoting people on merit and performance. I think that is of importance in the way this has been resolved.

What it means in allowing further shifts in the duties of police officers is really important from the perspective of the Victorian government's overall strategy of

having an EBA that was negotiated without industrial action, which is of significance as well, and it also plays into the broader perspective that the Andrews government is bringing to law and order issues. As we see now, we are coming to the point where the Royal Commission into Family Violence is soon to give its report. One would be able to anticipate that this will also have significant ramifications for policing and for resources, as we also try to address these issues from the criminal aspect to the community aspect and to the change of attitudes that will be required.

I commend this bill to the house for what it does for achieving the EBA outcome and better policing, and for putting police officers in place to do the duties that I am sure they signed up for and that will be of the most value to the Victorian community.

**Mr D. O'BRIEN** (Gippsland South) — I am pleased to rise to speak on the Victoria Police Amendment (Merit-based Transfer) Bill 2016. As other speakers have pointed out, this legislation implements the details of the new enterprise bargaining agreement, as agreed by Victoria Police and Police Association Victoria and, as I understand it, it obviously has support from both. It is also something that the police were quite comfortable with, and as the member for Box Hill and the member for Warrandyte have pointed out, the coalition is not opposing this legislation.

The bill gives legislative effect to the EBA with respect to transfers, in particular for country areas, from metropolitan to non-metropolitan areas, for general duties police — that is, constables or senior constables. Rather than simply being on a list and that list rotating as vacancies become available, with those on the list having to get to the top of the list before being transferred to a new location, general duties police will in fact be able to apply on merit. And that in theory should be a good thing for our country police stations, meaning that those who are best qualified — best trained, most experienced et cetera — for a particular position will get that position rather than it simply being the next cab off the rank.

As a country member of Parliament, I know that our country police do a fantastic job. They do it hard, but they do it well. It certainly can be tough in country towns, particularly in some small country towns where everyone knows everyone else and when you are the local police officer, whether you are one, two or three of a group, there can be a lot of pressure on you. But equally we have all come across in our time what might be termed 'the sensible country cop'; the cop who knows the law but also has the common sense to not necessarily apply it to the letter of the law on every

occasion. In many cases they do a better job for that, because they apply common sense, make sure that order is kept in our communities and also that there is no unnecessary officiousness. I pay tribute briefly to one of those country cops, Senior Sergeant Rose Uwins, who has recently retired from the Yarram police station. Rose had been at Yarram for a couple of years. This is exactly the sort of community I guess I am talking about, where the community is not large, and neither was Rose's team, but those police do a great job. I wish Rose all the best in her retirement.

Clearly police in the country are heavily involved in their communities, as are most state government officers. They are not just there to uphold the law but are involved in a lot of our community groups as well, including footy clubs, school councils, in fundraising and in various other community groups. It is actually an important part of the policing that they do, because it means that they have a better understanding of the community, they get closer links with the community, they know the people and they do a good job. So as I said, this bill will hopefully deliver better trained and more qualified officers to country areas, including those who hail from country areas.

I know we have seen in the medical profession over the last 15 or 20 years, where we have had significant shortages of GPs through country areas, that one of the successful approaches to remedying that has been to encourage country kids to enrol in medicine. Likewise, there is a benefit for police when a trainee goes through the academy and comes from Sale, Wangaratta or Mildura — wherever it may be. The ability for them to go back to their own community and serve is certainly a good thing. I encourage them to get experience elsewhere, but having experienced police come back to their own local community does help, because as locals themselves they can build trust and break down barriers between the community and police.

I know this from my own family's experience. My sister is married to a policeman who has risen up the ranks and, from memory, his career has gone from Melbourne to Morwell, Horsham, Sale, Swan Hill, Hamilton, Warrnambool, Geelong and just about everywhere in between. It can be a tough life for the family of those police, but they do provide great support. I know there are plenty of officers like that who travel right around the state chasing promotion and chasing opportunities. This bill, again, will assist those at the earlier stages of their career, in the constable and senior constable ranks, to take those opportunities.

I will talk a little about police numbers. We heard the member for Warrandyte highlight the facts of the

situation of the previous government. I am not really sure what the member for Broadmeadows was talking about when he talked about cuts in police numbers, because the facts are there; they are undeniable. There were nearly 1900 additional police officers — additional numbers over and above those that we had when the coalition came into government in 2010 — over that four-year period, in addition to 940 protective services officers (PSO). They are positions that those opposite said could not be delivered and would not be delivered, but indeed they were delivered over and above our police commitment from the 2010 election. On top of that there were the 940 PSOs. Labor, on the other hand, will be arguing about the numbers, but in both real terms and certainly in per capita terms the numbers of police have already fallen, and that is something that the government does need to address, because in a number of areas it is already an issue. I will come to one of those in a moment.

The government's response of course is that custody officers — the 400-odd custody officers that are being employed — are indeed lightening that load. Well, I can say from my own electorate's perspective that it has had absolutely no effect, because we do not have any custody officers. As the member for Broadmeadows pointed out in his list, Sale is scheduled to get custody officers, but we have not seen them yet — we do not know when they are coming — but for others throughout my electorate it will make no difference whatsoever.

I highlight these comments now because at the moment in my electorate of Gippsland South we have actually seen that in the Shire of Wellington police service area the figures have dropped. In November 2014 the shire had a full-time equivalent number of 66.47 police officers. As at December 2015 that had dropped to 60.21. That is an almost 10 per cent fall in the number of officers in our region. These figures can be lumpy. Officers can move around with illness, leave and various other changes, but a 10 per cent drop in just over a year is certainly cause for concern.

I referred earlier to other policies. The impact of the two-up policy in country areas — whilst I am not for a minute criticising police command for being cautious with our police officers' security and safety — has had potential effects in our area. A number of one-man stations in my electorate, including Toora, Meeniyana and Loch, are effectively closed because of the two-up policy. Because they effectively have to work most of the time with someone else, they are relying on officers from Korumburra, Foster, Yarram or Leongatha, and therefore those stations are rarely open and rarely manned on their own. So it is a concern. I think it is one

that is a slow burn, and we have seen that the government is not willing to show its support for police in terms of numbers and making sure that they keep pace with population growth. The decline in numbers of police in the Wellington shire is a particular local concern for me.

Nonetheless, this bill, as I said, hopefully will improve the ability of police officers to transfer to country locations. I do strongly support our police, and I hope this bill and the agreement that underpins it will help them perform their duties better in country areas in years to come.

**Ms WILLIAMS** (Dandenong) — It is my pleasure to rise in support of this bill. As we have heard, the bill facilitates the merit-based transfer of police officers to country general duties positions. It also ensures that important reforms agreed to between Victoria Police and the Police Association Victoria as a part of the enterprise agreement will commence.

When we say ‘general duties’, we are essentially talking about our frontline police officers. They can be seen in divisional police vans or at police stations across Victoria, day and night. Many of us will have come across them in our roles as local members. They respond to queries from the public. They are our first responders. They protect our community and keep us safe, and they uphold the law. They are very important parts of our community and our social fabric.

As it stands, all general duties positions are filled via an expression of interest process. This means that in reality the police officer at the top of the list gets the job. As part of the 2015 enterprise bargaining agreement, as we have heard, the chief commissioner and the police association agreed that general duties constable and senior constable positions at country locations should be filled by a merits-based selection process. To achieve this a legislative amendment is required, and that amendment is delivered through this bill.

This bill will essentially facilitate a better spread of police expertise across the state. As we have heard from previous speakers, this is good for rural and regional police stations and ensures we have the right expertise where we need it. It also essentially means that we can now select the best person for the job, and I think in all areas of working life that is the best possible outcome.

This bill complements work being done to respond to cases involving sexually predatory behaviour and discrimination in Victoria Police. We know these are issues that have been raised in recent times through the IBAC and Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human

Rights Commission reports. It is fitting that these issues should come up through this bill on International Women’s Day. The reports that I have just referred to have shone a light on a deep-set culture in Victoria Police of hostility towards women. It is a very unfortunate culture and one that we know has eroded the lives and careers of many sworn officers and public servants.

These reports have identified several factors that enable predatory behaviour by rural police officers and contribute to a poor workplace and workplace culture, including an inability to attract and retain staff from outside the immediate area, an inability to periodically refresh supervisors and managers, and a low proportion of female supervisors and managers in rural areas.

I was very pleased to have learnt recently that while in my area we are seeing a great inspector in Bruce Kitchen leave the Dandenong area we will be seeing a new one start soon — she may have already started — and it will be a woman. I think that is a great addition to the Dandenong police station and to operations in that region more generally.

We know that the sorts of issues addressed in recent reports reveal patterns of behaviours by many men that are founded upon basically an intrinsic lack of respect for women. Particularly given recent discussions and some of the speeches that were made in the last sitting week on our take-note motion on the Rosie Batty address, a really important point for us to reflect on is the significance and outcome of gender inequality in our society — that is, gender inequality leading to violence against women and all the other social evils that come with that, as well as the destruction that this violence causes to lives in our community.

We know that cultural reform within VicPol must address some of the attitudinal barriers to professional development and promotion to ensure that talent is fostered, irrespective of gender. We should all be very proud in this place of Victoria Police for itself recognising that sexual discrimination was contaminating the organisation and for commissioning the independent Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission to investigate it. The government has every confidence that under the leadership of Graham Ashton and Assistant Commissioner Luke Cornelius Victoria Police will do what is absolutely necessary to change that culture of disrespect.

In particular I have had dealings with Luke Cornelius in his previous role in the southern metro region, and I have an enormous amount of respect for him, having

seen his advocacy work around issues related to family violence. I have had the pleasure of being at a number of events with him when he has spoken so passionately and intelligently on this issue. He has been a great role model for police in my region, and I think he is probably a great role model for police across Victoria. I am thrilled to see his leadership on this issue and in this area.

I also want to talk about the police more generally in my area of Dandenong. I recently had the opportunity to visit my local police station with the Parliamentary Secretary for Justice, who made a great speech on this bill earlier this afternoon. We were actually there to meet new custody officers that were provided by the Andrews Labor government. I remain impressed by the level of professionalism in the face of a very heavy workload demonstrated by all police and custody officers at the Dandenong police station. I also got a real insight into the challenging nature of the environment in which they work. It was wonderful to get around the station, see the holding cells there and speak to the police about the challenges that they confront day to day, but it was even better to hear how positive their response was to the Andrews Labor government's commitment to custody officers and how well that program was working there. They were really keen to see further officers rolled out over time.

We know that the Andrews Labor government's first budget last year delivered a record \$2.5 billion to Victoria Police to continue its important work in keeping our community safe. We will work with the police and treat them with respect. This is demonstrated by the agreement between this government and Victoria Police over its enterprise agreement. As the member for Broadmeadows highlighted, this agreement represents that for the first time in 20 years the police were not forced to take any industrial action. Like the member for Broadmeadows, I think this is a point worth reflecting on and emphasising.

Despite opposition members constantly and over their entire existence creating perpetual frenzy and alarm over law and order issues, the reality is that the former coalition government made budget cuts of over \$113 million from the Victoria Police budget between 2010 and 2014. Victoria Police also advise that there was a target to reduce 350 police support staff. I would also like to pick up the previous speaker's claims about the former coalition government delivering some 1900 additional police. Quite frankly, that is deceitful. Why? It is deceitful because those police were committed to and funded under the Brumby government, and they were funded in the 2010 budget. To stand up and quite frankly lie to the Victorian people

on that matter is incredibly disappointing and quite frankly discredits all those on the other side.

In contrast to the exceptionally poor record of the previous coalition government, we have already seen an increase of almost 700 police personnel to keep our community safe. We have seen, as I mentioned earlier, the introduction of police custody officers. That is an investment of \$148.6 million to redeploy police to the front line. As I said, I have been fortunate enough in Dandenong to be the recipient of those custody officers and to have seen just how well they work in practice, how welcomed they are into those stations and how relieved the police in those stations are to be freed up to do the jobs that they believe they are actually there to do, and that is frontline police work. We also know that 200 police custody officers will be deployed by the end of June, with the remaining 200 to be deployed by 30 June 2018. As I said previously, the police at Dandenong station were quite excited about getting more custody officers in there and seeing that program rolled out in full.

We also know that we have invested \$49.4 million over four years to fund an additional 88 new police personnel in counterterrorism. This is incredibly important in modern-day Australia and really in the world that we are in at the moment.

While this might be a largely technical bill, I would argue that it is no less important for being so and that it actually ties into a series of really important issues relating to culture within Victoria Police and the treatment of women. I take great pride in being able to talk to those issues today on International Women's Day. It is my pleasure to commend this bill to the house.

**Mr McCURDY** (Ovens Valley) — I am delighted to hear that the member for Dandenong has finally finished her contribution because there was not a lot of truth in all of that when it comes down to it. I cannot understand why members of the government spend most of their time trying to bag the daylights out of the previous government when it made significant contributions to the state of Victoria. Then they try to rely on spin to get themselves out of a spot. It is quite appalling. There were 940 extra police put on and now they are trying to tell me that that was during the term of the Brumby government. It is absolutely appalling.

**Mr Nardella** interjected.

**Mr McCURDY** — Now they are changing to hospital beds. That just shows that there is no truth in what the member for Dandenong said and it is just

appalling. They cannot talk about positive aspects of their community. They decide they will get better value out of belting the other side, which is just appalling. Anyway, they will use their time as they see fit.

I certainly believe that this bill, the Victoria Police Amendment (Merit-based Transfer) Bill 2015 is a step forward. As we know, it significantly improves opportunities in regional Victoria by allowing merit-based transfers as opposed to the existing expression of interest transfers for country officers and general duties police officers — that is, constables and senior constables. In a nutshell, this bill facilitates the new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) agreed to by Victoria Police and the Police Association Victoria that introduces a performance or merit-based selection process for country-based general duties police.

It is important to realise that currently general duties police officers — those below the rank of sergeant — who wish to work in country Victoria put up their names in an expression of interest in working at a particular location and when a position becomes available the next highest police officer's name on the expression of interest list is offered the position. The new process, as I said, was formally instigated by the police association as part of the EBA because it provides greater transparency to appointments and allows police officers a right of appeal to the Police Registration and Services Board that does not exist under the expression of interest process we currently have.

The merit-based transfer system will assist Victoria Police to improve the spread of skills across Victoria. It will change workplace cultures by reducing existing identified problems in country police stations, and as a country-based member of Parliament I certainly understand the challenges of attracting well-trained people to our communities. This is not just about the police force, it is about the doctors, surgeons, principals and other professionals we need to attract to regional and country Victoria to make sure we are also well serviced.

Country Victoria is under pressure from methamphetamines and ice, as we know. I was a member of the former parliamentary Law Reform, Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee that spent time on the ice inquiry and we certainly realised that ice and methamphetamines are having a major impact in regional Victoria. I will not say the word 'epidemic' but they are having a major impact in regional Victoria and more so than in the metropolitan area according to some of the evidence that is coming out.

Just recently we saw the horrendous murder of Karen Chetcuti in Whorouly, a small community between Wangaratta and Myrtleford. That was a heinous crime that really devastated our community. Karen Chetcuti was well loved and well respected in our community and had two young children. Not for a moment am I blaming the police force and the work it does, but our community rallied together on Sunday and over 1000 people gathered for an Enough is Enough march along the main street of Wangaratta. Our communities really are fed up with these heinous crimes, and again I say that I am not for a moment blaming the work that Victorian police do because they do a wonderful job in our regions. They suffer from the tyranny of distance when it comes to response times, just like we all do when we are travelling around our electorates in regional Victoria.

Superintendent Paul O'Halloran and Inspector Dave Ryan, based out of the Wangaratta police station, are fine examples of law and order combined with community involvement. When members of the police force are immersed, for want of a better word, in our communities in both their work and recreation it really is a win-win situation and we get the best of both worlds.

I will touch on single-officer police stations. Again, the tyranny of distance creates many challenges in country Victoria including for local MPs and school buses. Of course policing is another example, with one-man police stations in places like Whitfield, Moyhu, Katamatite and Tungamah being perfect examples of where we need to be able to still service our communities but where this cannot necessarily be done from the major towns, whether that be Wangaratta or Cobram or Yarrawonga,

In terms of this bill, merit-based transfers will assist towns like Bright and Myrtleford to service that alpine region because it will mean we can attract better officers or officers who want to go to those tourist-based towns. Even the Mount Hotham police station will benefit. The Yarrawonga and Cobram police stations are perfect examples of stations that will be beneficiaries of this bill. They are two exceptional examples of tourist towns based on the banks of the mighty Murray River where tourist numbers swell from December through to April. We want the flexibility to attract the right service officers, the right members of Victoria Police, to assist us as the towns grow with the tourist influx to those great country towns. By enabling them to attract more suitable officers this bill will be of benefit to those country towns.

As I was saying earlier in my contribution, we added 1900 police in the last term of government. That commitment was delivered. I certainly hope that the current government does not wait until the crime rates get completely out of hand before it reacts to what is happening in our communities.

It is important that police custody officers (PCOs) can play a part. I believe that Wangaratta is in line for about eight PCOs, and they will play a part, but you can never swap a PCO for a fully sworn member, because at the end of the day, while all numbers are handy, we cannot afford to stop recruiting good fully sworn police officers. Certainly the Victoria Police's two-up policy is a sound decision based on evidence, and I am not challenging the way in which VicPol or police command has made this decision, but again country Victoria and regional Victoria have further challenges. In many cases you will find the local police officer being out and about in the community, not in a hostile environment but more often attending the football and local community events. On their own they certainly can give that feeling of safety to members of the community without necessarily adhering to that two-up policy. However, I understand why that policy is in place. Again this bill will assist the police to attract better members to our community.

As I said, at the end of the day PCOs will be of assistance, but let us never remove ourselves from having fully sworn members as a preference whether it is in regional Victoria or metropolitan Melbourne. With that, Acting Speaker, as you have heard from the members for Gippsland South, Warrandyte and Box Hill, we will not be opposing this bill, and I wish it a speedy passage.

**Mr LIM (Clarinda)** — I am very pleased today to be joining this debate on the Victoria Police Amendment (Merit-based Transfer) Bill 2016. Indeed this bill is about human resources development in our police force, and it would be remiss of me not to observe that as a community we claim to be the most multicultural in the world. Something like 10 per cent of our population is of Asian origin, but that is not reflected in the composition of our police force, and I think it is a real challenge for the state and for us as community leaders to really think about the fact that maybe we have to make an effort in that respect.

At every opportunity I get to discuss this with the police commissioner or any of the deputy police commissioners they all agree that, yes, there is much to be done in this field. I actually hope that one day our police force will really reflect the composition of our population so that we can claim with pride that our

police force is truly multicultural and reflects the composition of our population.

Let me return to the bill. The bill establishes the legislative basis for the merit-based transfer of police officers to country general duties positions to bring into effect the important reforms agreed between Victoria Police and the police association as part of the enterprise agreement. The bill will also remove any barrier to unsuccessful applicants appealing the decision to the Police Registration and Services Board (PRSB). The appeal will proceed as a rehearing of the relative merits of the candidates. The PRSB's decision is binding on the Chief Commissioner of Police and subject to judicial review by the Supreme Court.

In the 2015 Victoria Police enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) the chief commissioner and the Police Association Victoria agreed that general duties constable and senior constable positions at country locations should be filled via a merit-based selection process. General duties police officers are the foundation of Victoria Police and are essential to ensure that the Victorian community functions safely. They are always the first on the scene at any reported incident. They are rostered around the clock statewide so that there are always police officers available to respond to the needs of the Victorian community. Currently these positions are filled via an expression of interest process. Moving from this lengthy process to a merit-based process for transfers to general duties country positions represents a major service improvement and ensures Victoria Police can select the best officer for the job.

The merit-based transfer provisions are currently used to transfer and promote police officers to sergeant, senior sergeant and inspector positions. The bill will enable the chief commissioner to have regard to the relative merit of each candidate for the general duties police officer positions. This greater focus on merit is important. The recent Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) report and IBAC report identified several factors that enable predatory behaviour by rural officers and contribute to poor workplace culture. The reports also indicated that cultural reform within Victoria Police must address attitudinal barriers to professional development and promotional opportunities to ensure that, regardless of gender, merit is rewarded and talent is developed. These reports provide a road map for reform. It is a chance to reset the organisation.

Victoria Police has committed to implementing all the recommendations made by VEOHRC in its report, either through the enterprise agreement or through policy changes. The Andrew's Labor government

congratulates Victoria Police for recognising that sexual discrimination was contaminating the organisation. This bill complements the work in response to the recent VEOHRC and IBAC reports. We have full confidence that under the leadership of the Chief Commissioner of Police, Graham Ashton, and Assistant Commissioner Luke Cornelius, police will do what is necessary to change the culture of disrespect. Police have already started down this road by establishing Taskforce Salus to re-examine historical cases and take action to right wrongs.

The government will carefully consider the findings and recommendations made in the report to support police as they continue their transformation. This includes helping police as they implement a redress scheme. The Andrews Labor government will work with police and treat them with respect. The enterprise agreement between government and Victoria Police represents the first time in 20 years that police have not been forced to take any industrial action, unlike when our friends opposite, who do not care about Victoria Police, were in government.

The Victorian public remembers the savage cutting of over \$113 million from the Victoria Police budget between 2010–11 and 2014–15. Already we have committed to an increase of almost 700 police personnel. Our first budget, for 2015–16, delivered a record \$2.5 billion to Victoria Police to continue its important work in keeping our community safe. I commend the bill to the house.

**Mr WAKELING** (Ferntree Gully) — It gives me great pleasure to rise to contribute to the debate on the Victoria Police Amendment (Merit-based Transfer) Bill 2016. This is a bill that will be addressing issues that were identified in the recently negotiated enterprise bargaining agreement, and it will be dealing with the issue of merit-based appointments for people who wish to work at police stations in country locations around our state.

Can I firstly place on record my thanks to the hardworking members of the Victorian police force. They do a fantastic job, and I personally know many of them who represent my community. I say on behalf of the Victorian Parliament: thank you for the work that is done by sworn officers, and thank you for the work that is done by members of our protective services. I would like to thank them collectively for the work that they do.

The issue of police is significant in the community of Knox. I go back to 2009, when I surveyed my community on the issues of law and order, issues

around police numbers and issues around sentencing, which were significant when we looked at what in fact people in the community were looking for. They were looking for more police on the beat, they were concerned about community safety and they were concerned about the sentences that were being meted out in our court system. It was a very good survey — an excellent survey — and I was proud to be part of a government that identified that those key issues were something that the government needed to address. I was very proud to be part of a government that employed 1700 new police, and in fact it was more than 1700.

Nearly 1000 protective services officers were employed. The feedback I received from my community about the protective services officers who were deployed at the Ferntree Gully railway station was nothing short of amazing. People were telling me that for the first time they would actually travel on a train at night. People were telling me that for the first time they actually wanted to drive their car to the local railway station, catch a train to the city, catch a train home at night, get off the train and know that they had the support and the assistance of our protective services officers and were able to get home. In the past those people drove to the city and paid for car parking in the city, so that demonstrates the benefit of the protective services officers that were working in our community.

I commend the work of those that are based at the Knox police station, the Boronia police station and the Rowville police station. They do a fantastic job. When we were in government we actually deployed more people to work in those communities. However, with the population of the state growing by in excess of 100 000 people a year, you cannot stand still. You cannot just rest on your laurels. You actually need to be recruiting for the future, and that is why it is disappointing that this government has seen fit not to employ any additional members to be deployed to the east of Melbourne. In fact in last year's budget the only capital allocation for additional police was going to geographically locate them on the Bellarine Peninsula, and that clearly is not a sustainable position.

I surveyed my community last year on this issue, and they were gravely concerned about the fact that this government is not seeking to recruit additional police for communities across the state or to specifically provide assistance for the members in Knox. We know that they are dealing with a range of issues. We know of the problems with family violence. We know of the problems of people affected by drugs and alcohol. We know of the problems facing police in my community and many communities with a range of drug-related crimes, particularly those relating to ice and other

issues. The government needs to get on with the job and identify a workable solution to deploy more police.

I note that this bill before the house talks about people being employed on a merit basis in country communities, but it does not deal with — —

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER** — Order! The time has come for me to interrupt the proceedings of the house. The honourable member will have the call when this matter is next before the Parliament.

**Business interrupted under sessional orders.**

## ADJOURNMENT

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER** — Order! The question is:

That the house do now adjourn.

### Warrandyte Bridge

**Mr R. SMITH** (Warrandyte) — My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety and relates to the recent announcement about the widening of the Warrandyte Bridge. My request is that the minister organise a public meeting to explain to residents how this final decision on the traffic treatment was made.

If I can just give a bit of background, in 2014 the emergency management commissioner, Craig Lapsley, came to Warrandyte. He identified the Yarra River crossing as one of concern, as if there were a fire incident, then we would have a lot of difficulty getting residents out of the area. He further identified that it was not just an issue during a bushfire event but also a day-to-day congestion issue and needed to be dealt with.

The former government allocated \$140 000 to VicRoads to look at the options that were possible to free up the traffic. On the Labor Party coming to office that funding was retracted. After some significant time and the raising of the issue with the CEO of VicRoads, the emergency management commissioner and the minister, the funding was restored. Around November of last year VicRoads and the emergency management commissioner held a public meeting in Warrandyte, detailed four options, put them on the table and said very specifically — the slides from the presentation from VicRoads show this — that from November to February there would be an opportunity for the community to have input on the options they had put forward in very limited detail.

My subsequent action was to ask the CEO of VicRoads and the minister how the community might have some input into those options. Those approaches fell on deaf ears. I did not get any response, but thankfully we have recently had an announcement to the community that there will be work done, which is fantastic news for the community, although there are some concerns.

It is unfortunate that members of the community did not get the opportunity to have their input. They are now saying they should have been afforded that opportunity, because they were promised that opportunity at the November meeting. It is of some concern to them that the consultation opportunity did not happen. I am not even saying that the minister was under any obligation to do so, but given his agency, VicRoads, had told the community that was the case it is somewhat surprising that it did not actually happen. There is certainly support for the changes; however, as I said, there is always a need to bring the community with you when you are making significant changes, particularly to an area like Warrandyte that prides itself on the village feel it has.

I think it would be belated, but I certainly think that holding a meeting with VicRoads and perhaps also with the emergency management commissioner would go a long way to helping people understand the details, how decisions were made and how this would benefit them in a fire situation as well as with the day-to-day congestion they face, and I ask the minister to arrange that public meeting.

### California Gully Primary School

**Ms EDWARDS** (Bendigo West) — My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Education, and the action I seek is for the minister to provide funding to California Gully Primary School in my electorate for the upgrading of its outdoor area and the development of a vegetable garden. The school has developed a master plan of the grounds and plans for staged upgrading. The works include strategic terracing, drainage and grass planting. The project also aims to include a shaded outdoor learning area. The school has been approaching various agencies for support and funding, with minimal success. The school is prepared to contribute between \$5000 and \$8000 to complete the first stage. There is also a small vegetable garden run by the students. Through community requests and support, the school is planning to extend the garden into a larger community vegetable garden, worked by the students during the day and by the wider community after hours.

### **SuniTAFE nursing course**

**Mr WALSH** (Murray Plains) — The matter I raise is for the Minister for Training and Skills in the other place. It concerns SuniTAFE in Swan Hill and particularly the diploma of nursing course, which is supposedly being delivered at the Swan Hill campus. The minister will be attending the SuniTAFE Swan Hill campus on 16 March to officially open its new facilities, which are partly being used to deliver the nursing course. The action I seek from the minister is that he gets assurances from SuniTAFE before he does the official opening that the diploma of nursing course will be delivered properly in the future because it has not been in the past. If he does not get those assurances, I would like him to consider not doing the official opening.

It has been raised with me by a number of my constituents that throughout 2015 and the start of this year students in the diploma of nursing course have raised concerns about the teaching staff and the sustainability of the course with senior management and have not received answers. The issues they have raised, and which they have raised with me, are that there are inadequate staff numbers to actually deliver the course, the absence of workbooks for subjects being taught in a classroom environment, the failure to plan placement times and future dates for students, inadequate heating and cooling in the classroom and the fact that the projectors and computers are not working all the time.

The students have been raising complaints through the official complaint process with SuniTAFE without any response, which is something they are very concerned about. Subjects have been marked as competent when students have not had any teaching contact learning. Students are required to complete work that they consider is completely outside their scope, and students are very unsure as to whether the course will be finished or whether they will have to be compensated for their time and their costs. Some of those students have borrowed money to do the course, so they are quite stressed about these particular situations. One of the students in particular has become so frustrated with the lack of answers from SuniTAFE that they have taken this to the Ombudsman to ask the Ombudsman to investigate these particular situations.

As I said, the action I seek is for the Minister for Skills and Training in the other place, who will be in our lovely city of Swan Hill on 16 March to do that official opening, to sit down with the management of SuniTAFE and get assurances that the failings of that course are corrected so that students — particularly

those who work at jobs to pay for the course and have to plan their work time around their course time and those who have borrowed money — have an assurance that they can graduate and get suitable employment in the future.

### **Dandenong West Community Festival**

**Ms WILLIAMS** (Dandenong) — My adjournment matter is for the attention of the Minister for Education. The action I seek from the minister is that he joins me in attending the Dandenong West Community Festival on Friday, 18 March, to celebrate Dandenong West Primary School's success and its diverse and vibrant school community. Dandenong West Primary School is a shining light in the Dandenong electorate. It is always a pleasure to visit the school and meet with principal Beverley Hansen and her team, and to hear about the wonderful projects and ideas they are working on. One of the strong features of the school is its community hub. The hub is used as a meeting place and connection point for the students and broader Dandenong West community. Dandenong is the most culturally diverse area in Victoria and our local schools are often the first connection point that newly arrived families have with their community. It can also be the best place to meet other families, access services and develop the support networks that build a strong and cohesive community.

School events are so important to ensuring that community life is vibrant and healthy, and to this end, one of the projects of the Dandenong West community hub is to arrange and coordinate the school's annual community festival. The festival coincides with and celebrates both Cultural Diversity Week and Harmony Day, and will include cultural performances from local students as well as professional performers. It can be enjoyed by the whole family and includes many free and affordable activities. The festival is of particular significance for the school as it is largely student run. The students are engaged and committed to making the day the best it can be, and I know they would be very thrilled to have the Minister for Education attend their school for the biggest celebration of their school year. On that note I call on the minister to join me at the festival and experience firsthand this great occasion at Dandenong West Primary School.

### **West Gippsland Hospital**

**Mr BLACKWOOD** (Narracan) — I wish to raise a matter for the Minister for Health, and the action I seek is that she release the details of the health services plan that has been developed for the West Gippsland Hospital. The hospital has a reputation in my electorate and more broadly of providing high-quality health care.

Currently it is really struggling to cope with the enormous increase in demand for its services. This demand is being fuelled not just by population growth but is a direct result of the professionalism of the staff and the excellent outcomes that are achieved because of their dedication and commitment.

The population of the Baw Baw Shire is around 45 000 and it is predicted to double by 2050. Currently the West Gippsland Hospital is located on a site that is 27 acres in size and fully occupied. It is also on the side of a hill and access from the car park to the hospital and consulting suites is difficult especially for elderly patients. The hospital's board of management purchased 60 acres of land using the proceeds of a significant bequest back in 2006. This land is perfectly located between Warragul and Drouin, with good access to the Princes Freeway and to both Warragul and Drouin. The combined population of these two major towns is currently almost 30 000 and it is predicted to hit 40 000 by 2025 or earlier. The number of babies being born each year at the hospital has been steadily increasing way beyond predictions and this year will hit 1300.

It is a no-brainer that planning must begin to relocate the hospital from the current site of 27 acres to a greenfield site of 60 acres, given the current demand and predicted population growth of the area. The Andrews government's response to this prior to the 2014 election was a promise to undertake a health services review of the West Gippsland Hospital in the context of the needs of the Casey and Latrobe hospitals. If I was a cynical man — I am trying not to be — I could take this to mean, 'Let's look at the option of closing West Gippsland Hospital and placing all of our resources into Latrobe and Casey'. Effectively this would force West Gippsland patients to drive at least an hour to get medical treatment. That would be totally unacceptable. I call on the minister to release the findings of the West Gippsland Hospital health services plan in full so that the future of health service provision in West Gippsland can be based on achieving the best possible outcome for the people of Narracan.

### **Diamond Valley College**

**Ms GREEN** (Yan Yean) — I wish to raise a matter for the attention of the Minister for Education. The action I seek is that he support Diamond Valley College and empower it to redevelop its building infrastructure to deliver learning for the 21st century, including the investment required for planning and then building these new facilities.

Diamond Valley College has served students and families in Diamond Creek, Wattle Glen, Yarrambat, Hurstbridge and surrounding areas as far away as Kinglake for nearly 20 years. The college has a current enrolment of over 800 students and is recognised as a leader in vocational education. Its academic outcomes at Victorian certificate of education level are now some of the best in the district. Diamond Valley College is a great school. It has an awesome, caring, supportive and worldly student culture fostered and developed by a dedicated and hardworking staff and by newly appointed principal Allison Bennett, who has worked at the college since its establishment. I pay tribute to the retiring principal, Greg Williams, who retired in December prior to the appointment of Principal Bennett, for his great work. He is much loved and missed by the school community.

I have been fortunate to work alongside this college since I entered the Parliament, and I also was proud to be a parent at this school when my son Carlo attended there. I worked alongside other parents in the canteen, doing my bit in the tuckshop. I have worked with staff, parents and the local community over many years, and I have seen how much the school has improved its outcomes. It now needs improved infrastructure and facilities that match the quality of the education and learning that is carried out there. It needs to position itself for the future — for the jobs that have not yet been invented.

It has great support in the local community. The student leaders are very motivated in wanting to have better buildings, and I know that they will be working hard alongside me with this call. They did great work with the RSL sub-branch in pulling together all the other schools in the district — the primary schools and the Catholic school — for a very moving centenary of Anzac just under 12 months ago, where the Deputy Premier, the Minister for Education, was just blown away by the great culture at the school and amongst the school community.

Staff, students and parents in our local community strongly support investment in this school. Therefore I request that the minister act quickly and support the staff, students and parents in the Diamond Valley and provide them with funding so that this great school can go from strength to strength.

### **UnitingCare East Burwood Centre**

**Mr ANGUS** (Forest Hill) — I raise a matter of importance for the attention of the Minister for Mental Health. The action I seek is for the Minister to visit the UnitingCare East Burwood Centre with me to meet

with the manager and to discuss the facilities needs of this organisation and how they can be addressed.

The UnitingCare East Burwood Centre is a longstanding local community support services agency based in my electorate of Forest Hill, having commenced operations in 1973. It assists vulnerable members of the local community, whether that be through counselling services, family services, no-interest loans, support groups, information referral, emergency relief or the provision of annual Christmas hampers. It is an invaluable resource for residents in and around the Forest Hill community, with the staff and volunteers doing a great job under challenging circumstances.

The demand for support services, including counselling, which is often linked to mental health issues, is growing, and the current premises has significant limitations in terms of space. This consequently has an impact on the number of people that can be reached in the community. The centre needs to expand its premises to accommodate the growing demand, especially for counselling services. I look forward to hearing from the Minister for Mental Health and welcoming him to my electorate, for him to see for himself the needs of the UnitingCare East Burwood Centre.

### **Coburg North former TAFE site**

**Ms BLANDTHORN** (Pascoe Vale) — My adjournment matter is for the attention of the Minister for Training and Skills. The action I seek is that this minister address maintenance and security issues at the old Kangan TAFE site in Dawson Street, Coburg North. Kangan Batman TAFE is no longer operational. It was located in Coburg North in a rapidly changing area. The site backs onto the Lincoln Mills Homemaker Centre in the industrial section and is located among many automotive repair and service businesses. The site would benefit greatly from maintenance works being undertaken, and it is important that the site's security be enhanced in order to deter would-be vandals.

As I know the minister understands, the area is changing rapidly from being a largely industrial area to a residential and commercial hub. In recent years Coburg North and Pascoe Vale have experienced significant population growth. Furthermore, this growth is forecast to extend well into the future. In order to meet the additional demand for goods and services that has subsequently arisen, a considerable amount of redevelopment has occurred in this area, particularly along the Gaffney Street precinct and with the

extension of the Coburg North village. New small businesses are also popping up in the area — the Generator Urban Eatery is fast becoming a local institution and the Australian Seafood Group, which has been voted as having the best fish and chips in Melbourne, is also opening up an extended restaurant on Gaffney Street to complement its Hossack Avenue operation.

I know that the minister understands this area. I know that he has visited the area, and I know that he has these issues in hand. I ask that he address this situation sooner rather than later.

### **Dunolly supported playgroup**

**Ms STALEY** (Ripon) — My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Families and Children in the other place. The action I seek is that she direct her department to implement the proposed trial of an integrated supported playgroup for all children in Dunolly. Over the past few months there have been a number of conversations between members of her department, the Central Goldfields shire and the Dunolly reference group for the playgroup as to how they can structure a different model than the government has introduced for supported playgroups. The new model requires that supported playgroups are only available to healthcare card holders. In Dunolly there is only one playgroup, and if that model were introduced in Dunolly, that would mean that there would be no playgroup because there are insufficient healthcare card holders to have a supported playgroup. It also means that the other parents would also miss out.

The council and the department had come to agreement on an idea that Dunolly could have a trial of a new model that would allow healthcare card holders to gain places first and if there were any places left in the playgroup after all healthcare card holders had received a place, then non-healthcare card holders could also receive a place. Dunolly is a rural community in severe drought, but because of the structure of many people's farms they are not available to get a healthcare card even though they have an exceptionally low income due to the drought. As a result it is many of these parents who face the challenge of not being able to create a community-run playgroup but want to seek to continue to access a supported playgroup, which is what they have at the moment.

The minister turned up in Dunolly unannounced the Friday before last. The playgroup thought that she was there to announce the final fix in this trial, but instead she reiterated some fairly tired rhetoric that suggested to them that in fact she had not heard anything about

this proposed trial. The purpose of her visit was and remains a complete mystery to them. These parents have worked very hard to communicate through to government and to their council what they need and how they can make this work, and I would really call on the minister to get herself across this and save this playgroup. Time is running out. They have only got, they believe, until the beginning of April for it all to be settled for next year, so it is time she got on with it.

### **Lancefield skate park**

**Ms THOMAS** (Macedon) — The matter I wish to raise is for the attention of the Minister for Sport. The action I seek is that the minister join me in supporting the excellent application by the community of Lancefield for a skate park facility at Lancefield Park.

At a recent Saturday morning listening post in Lancefield, I was delighted to be lobbied by many young skaters and their parents, who are keen to see the skate park go ahead after more than 20 years of organising, planning and campaigning. I am told that Andrea Crossman, who as a young woman fundraised for the skate park by washing cars, is now the mother of teenagers. Andrea was there at the beginning, as was Leonie Farrugia, whose kids are now grown and have left town. Currently the skate park committee comprises Amy Bell, Vivien Philpotts, Nikki Reeves, Damien Choate and Bill West.

We all know the minister is passionate about all sports, and, as he knows, team sports are not for everybody. I want to advocate tonight for skating, a sport requiring great agility and skill, a sport enjoyed by girls and boys and, importantly, a sport that young people can engage in on their own and at a time that suits them. Facilities that support and encourage activity are so important for our young people, especially in small communities like Lancefield, where things for young people to do can sometimes be a challenge.

I look forward to the minister advising me as soon as he can about Lancefield's skate park application. Again I urge him to support this fantastic project.

### **Responses**

**Ms NEVILLE** (Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water) — A number of members have raised a range of issues with different ministers. I will pass those issues on to those ministers.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER** — Order! The house is now adjourned.

**House adjourned 7.21 p.m.**

