The Governor
The Honourable LINDA DESSAU, AC

The Lieutenant-Governor
The Honourable KEN LAY, AO, APM

The ministry

Premier .................................................. The Hon. DM Andrews, MP
Deputy Premier, Minister for Education and Minister for Mental Health The Hon. JA Merlino, MP
Attorney-General and Minister for Emergency Services .................... The Hon. J Symes, MLC
Minister for Transport Infrastructure and Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop The Hon. JM Allan, MP
Minister for Training and Skills and Minister for Higher Education .... The Hon. GA Tierney, MLC
Treasurer, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Industrial Relations The Hon. TH Pallas, MP
Minister for Child Protection and Family Services and Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers The Hon. AR Carbines, MP
Minister for Public Transport and Minister for Roads and Road Safety The Hon. BA Carroll, MP
Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change and Minister for Solar Homes The Hon. L D’Ambrosio, MP
Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services and Minister for Equality The Hon. MP Foley, MP
Minister for Ports and Freight, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Gaming and Liquor Regulation and Minister for Fishing and Boating The Hon. MM Horne, MP
Minister for Crime Prevention, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice and Minister for Victim Support The Hon. NM Hutchins, MP
Minister for Local Government, Minister for Suburban Development and Minister for Veterans The Hon. SL Leane, MLC
Minister for Water and Police The Hon. LM Neville, MP
Minister for Industry Support and Recovery, Minister for Trade, Minister for Business Precincts, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events and Minister for Racing The Hon. MP Pakula, MP
Assistant Treasurer, Minister for Regulatory Reform, Minister for Government Services and Minister for Creative Industries The Hon. DJ Pearson, MP
Minister for Employment, Minister for Innovation, Medical Research and the Digital Economy, Minister for Small Business and Minister for Resources The Hon. JL Pulford, MLC
Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Community Sport and Minister for Youth The Hon. RL Spence, MP
Minister for Workplace Safety and Minister for Early Childhood The Hon. I Stitt, MLC
Minister for Agriculture and Minister for Regional Development The Hon. M Thomas, MP
Minister for Prevention of Family Violence, Minister for Women and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs The Hon. G Williams, MP
Minister for Planning and Minister for Housing The Hon. RW Wynne, MP
Cabinet Secretary Ms S Kilkenny, MP
Legislative Council committees

Economy and Infrastructure Standing Committee
Mr Barton, Mr Erdogan, Mr Finn, Mr Gepp, Mrs McArthur, Mr Quilty and Mr Tarlamis.
*Participating members:* Dr Bach, Ms Bath, Dr Cumming, Mr Davis, Mr Limbrick, Ms Lovell, Mr Meddick, Mr Ondarchie, Mr Rich-Phillips, Ms Shing, Ms Vaghela and Ms Watt.

Environment and Planning Standing Committee
Dr Bach, Ms Bath, Dr Cumming, Mr Grimley, Mr Hayes, Mr Meddick, Mr Melhem, Dr Ratnam, Ms Taylor and Ms Terpstra.
*Participating members:* Ms Burnett-Wake, Ms Crozier, Mr Davis, Dr Kieu, Mrs McArthur, Mr Quilty and Mr Rich-Phillips.

Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee
Ms Burnett-Wake, Ms Garrett, Dr Kieu, Ms Maxwell, Mr Ondarchie, Dr Patten, Dr Ratnam and Ms Vaghela.
*Participating members:* Dr Bach, Mr Barton, Ms Bath, Ms Crozier, Dr Cumming, Mr Erdogan, Mr Grimley, Mr Limbrick, Ms Lovell, Mr Quilty, Ms Shing, Mr Tarlamis and Ms Watt.

Privileges Committee
Mr Atkinson, Mr Bourman, Mr Davis, Mr Grimley, Mr Leane, Mr Rich-Phillips, Ms Shing, Ms Symes and Ms Tierney.

Procedure Committee
The President, the Deputy President, Ms Crozier, Mr Davis, Mr Grimley, Dr Kieu, Ms Patten, Ms Pulford and Ms Symes.

Joint committees

Dispute Resolution Committee
*Council:* Mr Bourman, Ms Crozier, Mr Davis, Ms Symes and Ms Tierney.
*Assembly:* Ms Allan, Ms Hennessy, Mr Merlino, Mr Pakula, Mr R Smith, Mr Walsh and Mr Wells.

Electoral Matters Committee
*Council:* Mr Erdogan, Mrs McArthur, Mr Meddick, Mr Melhem, Ms Lovell, Mr Quilty and Mr Tarlamis.
*Assembly:* Ms Hall, Dr Read and Mr Rowswell.

House Committee
*Council:* The President (*ex officio*), Mr Bourman, Mr Davis, Mr Leane, Ms Lovell and Ms Stitt.
*Assembly:* The Speaker (*ex officio*), Mr T Bull, Ms Crugnale, Ms Edwards, Mr Fregon, Ms Sandell and Ms Staley.

Integrity and Oversight Committee
*Council:* Mr Grimley and Ms Shing.
*Assembly:* Mr Halse, Mr Rowswell, Mr Taylor, Ms Ward and Mr Wells.

Pandemic Declaration Accountability and Oversight Committee
*Council:* Mr Bourman, Ms Crozier, Mr Erdogan and Ms Shing.
*Assembly:* Mr J Bull, Ms Kealy, Mr Sheed, Ms Ward and Mr Wells.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee
*Council:* Mr Limbrick, Mrs McArthur and Ms Taylor.
*Assembly:* Ms Blandthorn, Mr Hibbins, Mr Maas, Mr Newbury, Mr D O’Brien, Ms Richards and Mr Richardson.

Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee
*Council:* Ms Patten, Ms Terpstra and Ms Watt.
*Assembly:* Mr Burgess, Ms Connolly, Mr Morris and Ms Theophanous.

Heads of parliamentary departments

*Assembly:* Clerk of the Legislative Assembly: Ms B Noonan
*Council:* Clerk of the Parliaments and Clerk of the Legislative Council: Mr A Young
*Parliamentary Services:* Secretary: Mr P Lochert
MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT—FIRST SESSION

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The Hon. N ELASMAR (from 18 June 2020)
The Hon. SL LEANE (to 18 June 2020)

Deputy President
The Hon. WA LOVELL

Acting Presidents
Mr Bourman, Mr Gepp, Mr Melhem and Ms Patten

Leader of the Government
The Hon. J SYMES

Deputy Leader of the Government
The Hon. DM DAVIS

Leader of the Opposition
Ms CROZIER

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1 Appointed 5 March 2020
2 Appointed 2 December 2021
3 Resigned 17 June 2019
4 Resigned 26 September 2020
5 Resigned 1 December 2021
6 Appointed 28 February 2020
7 Resigned 15 August 2019
8 ALP until 15 June 2020
9 Resigned 23 March 2020
10 Appointed 23 April 2020
11 ALP until 7 March 2022
12 Appointed 13 October 2020

Party abbreviations
ALP—Labor Party; DHJP—Derryn Hinch’s Justice Party;
FPRP—Fiona Patten’s Reason Party; Greens—Australian Greens; Ind—Independent;
LDP—Liberal Democratic Party; LP—Liberal Party; Nats—The Nationals;
SAP—Sustainable Australia Party; SFFP—Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party; TMP—Transport Matters Party
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Wednesday, 6 October 2021

The PRESIDENT (Hon. N Elasmar) took the chair at 2.36 pm and read the prayer.

Announcements

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The PRESIDENT (14:37): On behalf of the Victorian state Parliament I acknowledge the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of this land which has served as a significant meeting place of the First People of Victoria. I acknowledge and pay respect to the elders of the Aboriginal nations in Victoria past, present and emerging and welcome any elders and members of the Aboriginal communities who may visit or participate in the events or proceedings of the Parliament.

Bills

FORESTS LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (COMPLIANCE AND ENFORCEMENT) BILL 2019

Council’s amendments

The PRESIDENT (14:38): I have a message from the Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly informs the Legislative Council that, in relation to ‘A Bill for an Act to amend the Forests Act 1958, the Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004 and the Conservation, Forests and Lands Act 1987 and for other purposes’ the amendments made by the Council have been agreed to.

Papers

PAPERS

Tabled by Clerk:

Planning and Environment Act 1987—Notice of Approval of an amendment to Melbourne Planning Scheme—Amendment C418.

Business of the house

NOTICES

Notices of motion given.

Notice of intention to make a statement given.

Members statements

INDEPENDENT BROAD-BASED ANTI-CORRUPTION COMMISSION

Mr DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan—Leader of the Opposition) (14:41): Today we have heard extraordinary revelations about the involvement of the Premier and potentially his office in decisions with regard to the United Firefighters Union (UFU). IBAC are clearly investigating, and clearly they have got to be allowed to do their investigation, but it is also clear that the Premier ought to be stepping aside to make sure that there is not the slightest doubt and that the process can operate free of him being in that executive position and can operate in such a way that the community can have full confidence.

I say there is a shocking stench about the deal that has been done between the UFU and the state government in Victoria, the Labor state government headed by Daniel Andrews. I say that the Premier, with this investigation, ought to step aside not just for the need for things to be clear and clean but for the perception that things need to be clear and clean. He cannot possibly remain in that position while he is under investigation by IBAC. He will not even answer the question as to whether he is under
investigation by IBAC. If he is under investigation by IBAC, he should be standing aside. I mean, this is a shocking stink. The whole community knows it is wrong, and everyone wishes IBAC full speed.

NATIONAL POLICE REMEMBRANCE DAY

Mr BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (14:43): 29 September was National Police Remembrance Day. It has a special meaning for me, and of late it has a special meaning for a lot of police officers. Back in 1998 I worked in Cheltenham, which covered Moorabbin East, so every time this time of year comes around it does get special. I have just got to say that people need to take a look at what is going on and what this day is about and separate the two, because this is a day that is about the people that gave their lives serving our society. I am really disappointed that some people are taking it out of context. Let us just get back to the program, which is just remembering those that gave their lives.

LAKE TYERS MEN’S SHED

Ms BATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:44): It was a privilege to visit the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust community last week, talk to some of the fantastic people that live and work there and tour the community shed. It is normally called the men’s shed, but in this case the whole of the community is so very excited about it. Lindsay Oates, from the Victorian Men’s Shed Association, invited me to come with him to look at the facility. There is a multitalented person down there by the name of Peter Byrne. He has lived in that region for over 20 years. He is part of Lake Tyers Health and Children’s Services, and he walked us through the shed. It is almost at completion, and they are looking to complete it roughly by Christmas time. It has a meeting room, a kitchen and a workshop, naturally, for the shedders to be creative and to do their artwork and their furniture. And the children and women are most keen to get involved in this.

I looked at some of the fabulous work that they do, and it is very culturally specific. There is some amazing artwork and useful furniture that they are creating, and they are looking to make this a sustainable and self-funding shed which can then promote other activities in that space. So I thank the multitalented Peter, I thank the other people who I saw, and I particularly give a shout-out to Jeanette who was down at the community centre there doing some fantastic work for her community. I also thank Lindsay Oates of the men’s shed.

COVID-19

Dr CUMMING (Western Metropolitan) (14:45): In April 2020 Jenny Mikakos, the then health minister, announced funding for 4000 ICU beds. On 20 September of this year, when the Premier was asked about it, he said:

Hang on a minute, that is not what she announced …

The notion that we’re going to have 4000 beds down at a warehouse somewhere, turn the Exhibition buildings into an ICU unit and then have a nurse at the foot of each of those beds practising hospital corners—no, that’s not how it works.

Well, thank goodness for all the video footage and his own media release and Facebook page to set the record straight. In that initial announcement, he said:

… I don’t rule out the Exhibition buildings, whatever it might be, a really big space …

And the funding was, according to the press release, to:

… secure the … equipment, staff and space …

And only a few days ago, in another press conference, the Premier said that if you have any symptoms, you probably have COVID. Really? The percentage of daily tests that returned positive results over the last months have varied between almost half a per cent and 2.84 per cent, so it is no wonder that people are losing confidence in the government. A principal agreement was actually to make sure all the hospital operators— (Time expired)
FOSTER CARERS

Mr GRIMLEY (Western Victoria) (14:47): There are often a number of statistics quoted in this place, but none more significant than those relating to children. The Crime Statistics Agency just released their 2021 crime data, and I was gobsmacked by not only the family violence increases but the increase in child sex offences of 44 per cent. Not only that, these statistics show that on 34 000 occasions children witnessed family violence. In my opinion this is one of the forgotten issues of the pandemic: vulnerable children left in the home under restrictions with dangerous parents.

One way to reduce this awful statistic is to give these children an alternative home, one where they will be loved and respected. On average Barwon agencies receive three referrals per day to place children and young people with a foster carer. Approximately half of these requests cannot be met due to insufficient carers in the Barwon region. More foster carers are desperately needed throughout Victoria to offer a safe, stable and caring home environment for children and young people who are unable to live with their parents or extended family.

Throughout this pandemic suitable families have been deterred from fostering because of the possible risk of infection and other COVID-related concerns, resulting in further foster carer shortages and an urgent need for carers in regional areas. I have stood here many times advocating the significance of foster care for vulnerable children by encouraging western Victorians in particular to open their hearts and homes to these defenceless children requiring a loving and nurturing place to heal and flourish. If anyone is interested in foster caring, I strongly encourage them to call Fostering Connections on 1800 013 088, because all children deserve a safe and loving home.

NELL PEDZIK

Mr MEDDICK (Western Victoria) (14:48): Two weeks ago, in the early hours of the morning, a house fire tore through the residence at Wild Paws Wildlife Shelter in Monbulk. In a matter of minutes the entire home was engulfed and the sanctuary’s founder and sole carer, Nell Pedzik, was taken to hospital by ambulance. She was lucky to survive. It is absolutely heartbreakingly that despite Nell’s best attempts, the fire claimed the lives of many rescued and companion animals.

The wildlife sector would be lost without people like Nell. The survival of Victoria’s wildlife is dependent on the countless volunteer hours put in by rescuers, carers and transporters. Nell’s contribution to this space is remarkable. Those who know her describe her as one of the most dedicated and passionate carers they know. I want to acknowledge and thank her here today. I have been so pleased to see the community come together to support Nell as she attempts to rebuild from this shattering loss. In just six days a public fundraiser set up to help Nell rebuild her life has smashed its target goal of $100 000. She has my support 100 per cent of the way.

COVID-19

Mr ATKINSON (Eastern Metropolitan) (14:50): I note the media reports of Yarra council imposing charges on businesses for using space to conduct their business in a COVID-safe way in accordance with what the state government has suggested that they do. Now, Yarra council is not the only council at fault here. I am aware of Knox council actually imposing conditions on businesses in Knox as well in the same way. I believe that the government needs to bring in urgent legislation to stop the councils from having charges on these businesses at this time whilst the COVID situation exists and under the government’s own recommendations as to how these businesses might trade in the interim period.
HEALTHCARE WORKERS

Mr MELHEM (Western Metropolitan)

Incorporated pursuant to order of Council of 7 September:

Caring, compassionate, courageous, selfless, determined, strong and appreciated—these are just a few words to describe the amazing workforce of nurses in the Victorian health system. Nurses are always there, caring for the Victorian community at the most vulnerable times in our lives. When our nurses treat a patient, they not only take on their health care but all the complexities of humanity. They share in the joys of our success and grieve with us at our losses. They don’t discriminate; they put aside personal views to treat and focus on the health and wellbeing of each and every person they look after. In every circumstance they give a little of themselves, leaving a lasting impression on those they care for. With COVID-19 patients they now also adopt the role of family, holding a patient’s hands and providing gentle comfort and compassion while loved ones watch on remotely.

The harrowing accounts at Sunday’s press conference from two nurse unit managers highlight the wonderful nature of people who are caring for our community. How fortunate Victorians are to have such amazing and remarkable people on the front line ensuring we all get the best of care. We could not have any better. Somehow saying thank you does not seem gratitude enough.

Nurses, we know you are weary and the mental stress is immense. Please know that for every shift you work you go forward with the whole state behind you with our deepest appreciation and 6.6 million individual daily cheers from each and every Victorian.

So, Victorians, do your part to support nurses: get vaccinated. It’s the greatest thankyou as a community we can show these amazing people.

Ms VAGHELA (Western Metropolitan)

Incorporated pursuant to order of Council of 7 September:

1. President, I take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank many frontline health workers, including our doctors and nurses, who each day work to fight this pandemic, often by putting their own lives at risk to save the lives of others.
2. Like the majority of Victorians, President, I have done my part.
3. I have received both doses of AstraZeneca vaccination. Getting vaccinated is the only way out of this pandemic.
4. The west has done a fantastic job in getting vaccinated at a fast pace. I strongly encourage all Victorians, including residents of Western Metropolitan Region, to get vaccinated at their earliest opportunity.
5. My husband and I have lost three family members to this pandemic and our heart is still grieving their losses.
6. We know that a great majority of hospitalised COVID cases in Victoria are unfortunately people who have not been vaccinated. We have heard firsthand from nurses in charge in ICUs, on the regret that many patients and families have for not getting vaccinated.
7. I thank each and every resident in Western Metropolitan Region who has done the right thing and received their vaccination before it is too late.
8. There are many vaccinations available now.
9. I wish to thank our community and faith group leaders for taking a leadership role in facilitating pop-up vaccination centres to assist with the delivery of the vaccines. There are too many of them in Western Metropolitan Region for me to name individually.
10. I also take this opportunity to thank all staff at Western Health and Werribee Mercy Hospital for working around the clock to support our community.
11. Thank you.
Bills

MENTAL HEALTH AMENDMENT (COUNSELLORS) BILL 2021

Statement of compatibility

Ms CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:51): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

Opening paragraphs
In accordance with section 28 of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (the Charter), I make this Statement of Compatibility with respect to the Public Health and Wellbeing Amendment (Greater Transparency and Accountability) Bill 2021 (Bill).

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

Overview
The Bill is a Bill for an Act to which is to amend the Mental Health Act 2014 to provide that counsellors are mental health practitioners for the purposes of the Act and for other purposes.

Proposed Amendments
The Bill proposes to amend to the Mental Health Act 2014 to provide that registered counsellors are defined ‘mental health practitioners’, whereby a registered counsellor means a person who is registered by the Australian Counselling Association or the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia.

Human Rights Issues
The amendments address issues that are critical to preserving the human rights of Victorians to access mental health support from appropriately registered and qualified mental health practitioners.

I am satisfied that the Bill is compatible with the Charter and the amendments impose no limitations on human rights.

Georgie Crozier MP
Member for Southern Metropolitan Region
Shadow Minister for Health

Second reading

Ms CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:51): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

The Liberal-Nationals opposition are committed to ensuring that all Victorians have access to vital and comprehensive mental health support when needed. This bill being introduced today seeks to better support Victorians and their mental health problems by boosting our mental health workforce.

As we all know, the COVID-19 pandemic has had, and continues to have, a detrimental impact on the health of many Victorians.

As Melbourne has now taken on the unenviable title of being the longest locked down city in the world, the extent of Victoria’s lockdowns is taking its toll.

It is not just the physical health of Victorians impacted by extended lockdowns but also Victorians’ mental health.

And it is Victorian children whose mental health has been and continues to be severely impacted. School closures denying the important element of face-to-face learning, an ability for children to develop social and communication skills have all been but lost over the past two years as kids and their families have struggled with home schooling. Decisions such as closing playgrounds and restricting access to grandparents, other family members and friends have also had a massive impact on many young Victorians’ wellbeing.
The devastating statistics of young people self-harming, being admitted to emergency departments in record numbers, and the horrific statistics of young Victorians taking their own life cannot be ignored. The mental health toll as a result of extended lockdowns, the social dislocation and having disjointed schooling will have a lasting effect for too many young Victorians—and extend for years to come.

A report from the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute released on 15 September 2021 found that the Premier’s actions of ‘continued lockdowns and school closures’ were the ‘main risks to children and adolescents’ health in this pandemic’.

We know more people are reaching out for help, with record numbers of people accessing the support of Beyond Blue, Kids Helpline, and Lifeline.

It is also becoming extremely difficult to access appointments for specialist management and care with psychologists and psychiatrists as more and more Victorians seek help for mental health issues.

The Mental Health Act 2014 defines a ‘mental health practitioner’ as being a registered psychologist, registered nurse, social worker or registered occupational therapist.

Currently counsellors are not currently recognised as a ‘mental health practitioner’: therefore they are not authorised to be able to provide mental health support in our public school system and through other agencies such as the TAC or WorkCover.

This bill will add registered counsellors to be included in the definition, whereby a registered counsellor must also be registered as a counsellor by the Australian Counselling Association or the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia.

The royal commission into mental health identified many problems within the system and the ability of access to support. It also identified that counsellors have an important role to play in our mental health system. Why are they then being excluded from providing that vital support at such a critical time?

This amendment will provide approximately an additional 2000 counsellors who will be able to deliver the vital and necessary mental health support to Victorian students. As required for anyone working within the school system, all counsellors will be required to have a current working with children check and relevant training appropriate for the delivery of support to school-aged children.

Young Victorians deserve to have a bright future, not a future plagued by mental health concerns, and it’s therefore important to ensure they are provided with the support they need. That is why it is critical to have the support in place to assist young Victorians.

Our public schools are ideally placed to help support better mental wellbeing of Victorian students struggling with the isolation of lockdown. We know that there are not enough workers. This bill will provide our schools with the additional staff to help ease the mental health burden on our state.

In many areas of Victoria, particularly regional areas, counsellors are the only mental health support available—but without these crucial reforms, schools can’t employ them as mental health practitioners. Again, this bill will help address the shortage of practitioners across our state.

It is why the opposition believes this bill should be passed. This bill will give greater immediate mental health support to all Victorians, especially our children.

With so many Victorians suffering from mental health problems, the time to act is now. We cannot afford to put this off any longer.

I commend the bill to the house.
Ms WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (14:56): I move, by leave:

That debate on this bill be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Ms WATT: Mental health reform and funding seem to be something I get up and speak about regularly here. Indeed I am proud to be a part of a Labor government that has invested more into mental health than any other in the history of our state.

It is very easy, and indeed we are seeing it today, to get up in this place and have a rant and rave about a topic and never actually do anything about it. Those opposite, we know, are very good at it. They are very good at being all talk and no action. By contrast, this Labor government is the one that cares about mental health, not as a talking point, not as a media conference, but it cares about reforming our mental health system and delivering vital changes that people in this state very much need. So while media advisers clearly work hard, I am not sure if those researching their policies do, because let us make something very clear at the beginning: this bill proposed by those opposite will not place one single counsellor in any school in any suburb anywhere in our state.

Simply, the Mental Health Act 2014 does not govern and never has governed who can and cannot provide mental health assistance in a school setting. The purpose of the existing Mental Health Act and the definitions within it pertaining to mental health practitioners is to govern and regulate the use of the compulsory mental health treatment orders in hospitals. It is literally a regulatory framework designed to protect vulnerable people experiencing acute mental illness and to provide guidance and instruction to qualified practitioners in the making of assessments and treatment orders.

There is no possible way for this amendment to deliver the purported counsellor influx the opposition has so cheaply suggested—unless, however, and I hope this is not the case, the Liberal Party is actually trying to achieve something far more sinister than we think and in fact it is wanting these counsellors to compulsorily treat schoolchildren in hospitals. That would be very grave indeed. But I will give them the benefit of the doubt on this occasion and assume that they have just simply not done their research on this matter.

But I do welcome the support from the Liberal Party on reforming mental health support in schools, and while I have sat in this place before and listened to those opposite argue against mental health funding, argue against the important recommendations from the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System, I am glad that the Liberals have finally supported measures that we have already undertaken to reform mental health support for students in this state. As a result of the magnificent investments from the Andrews Labor government in student mental health, every Victorian secondary and specialist school will have funding to employ a mental health practitioner by the end of this year. This rollout—

A member interjected.

Ms WATT: Absolutely. Actually, I am going to say it again because it is so significant. Every Victorian secondary and specialist school will have funding to employ a mental health practitioner by the end of this year.

Business interrupted pursuant to order of Council of 5 October.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

RENTAL SUPPORT

Dr RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (15:00): My question is for the minister representing the minister for consumer affairs. Minister, with the federal COVID-19 disaster payment set to wind up in the coming weeks, thousands of Victorians will once again be pushed further into poverty. The roll-back of the payments will affect thousands of low-income and casual workers who have already been
struggling with reduced or no income and who overwhelmingly rent their homes. Although this government has given financial support to other parts of the community who have been struggling, such as small businesses, renters have largely been forgotten in this lockdown. Minister, will your government provide urgent additional financial support to renters so nobody will lose their home in a pandemic?

Mr LEANE (Eastern Metropolitan—Minister for Local Government, Minister for Suburban Development, Minister for Veterans) (15:01): I thank Dr Ratnam for her question. I will ensure that question is passed on to the minister for consumer affairs. I note Dr Ratnam’s concern around the challenges for people who are renting, and I am sure the minister will take her question very seriously and give her a response in line with the standing orders.

Dr RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (15:01): Thank you very much, Minister, for following that up with the relevant minister. Furthermore, with the backlog of VCAT exploding in recent weeks, especially in the residential tenancies list, it is clear that many landlords are still attempting to evict tenants for non-payment of rent. The existing rental reforms are not sufficient to prevent unfair evictions in the pandemic. Further, the recently announced rental relief grant scheme is so restrictive many renters in need cannot access it and so stingy it barely covers one month’s rent, let alone ongoing rent payments. Minister, to ensure individuals and families who are struggling financially in the pandemic are not kicked out of their homes, will you bring back the eviction moratorium?

Mr LEANE (Eastern Metropolitan—Minister for Local Government, Minister for Suburban Development, Minister for Veterans) (15:02): Thanks to Dr Ratnam for her supplementary question, which is directed to the minister for consumer affairs. I will ensure she gets the supplementary question and the response is returned to this house and Dr Ratnam under the standing orders.

Mr DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan—Leader of the Opposition) (15:02): My question is to the Minister for Small Business. Minister, Tiny Good of Showtech, a rigging and lighting company that supports shows by international touring acts—ballet, opera, even musicals—employed 80 people but has now lost at least eight employees who have left the events sector. Mr Good has said the Victorian state government road map has made reopening for events before Christmas less likely. He has continued in his comments and said:

I’d love to know what event [the government] thinks is going to open under the guidelines this side of Christmas because you won’t have indoor concerts, exhibitions, or large-scale business meetings.

So if by events they mean sporting events, then they need to get their heads read.

So I ask you, Minister: on what date will events companies like Tiny Good’s company, Showtech, be able to return to the events sector they love?

The PRESIDENT: Minister, I will give you the call anyway, but I think it is for the sports minister, not small business.

Ms PULFORD (Western Victoria—Minister for Employment, Minister for Innovation, Medical Research and the Digital Economy, Minister for Small Business, Minister for Resources) (15:03): I thank Mr Davis for his question, and I will endeavour to answer this. But, yes, a business with 80 employees probably exceeds just about any definition you can think of for small business, and the events sector is predominantly the responsibility of the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events. Of course I am sure that Showtech involve themselves in smaller events as well, but in my capacity representing Minister Pakula I will endeavour to provide the best answer that I can.

There have been a whole lot of different sector-specific support programs in addition to the broader and more generally available programs for business support. Mr Davis’s question was very much about the road map and Victoria’s and the government’s and the public health team’s delivery of the national plan to reopen the economy. Mr Davis is asking for a precise date, and of course a precise
date depends on the vaccine rollout speed. I am sure, like many other people in the chamber and in the community, we are reasonably obsessively checking the vax rates on a daily basis—more than 90 000 people in Victoria, indeed an MCG’s worth of people on many days in recent times. The vax rollout now really has hit a great pace, which is a relief, and also it is exciting.

Moderna is in pharmacies now, which is terrific, and there are programs to particularly target communities that have been a little slower than others to jump into the opportunities that present in the rollout. Indeed Mr Gepp and I share a border which takes in the magnificent community of Buloke. I do not think they can lay claim to being top of the league table—I think that is our old mates in Queenscliffe—but the number of communities that have now hit 90 per cent single dose and are starting to hit 70 and greater numbers double dose gives us all great hope.

Everyone in the entire community is to be commended for the role that they are playing in getting the events industry reopened when we get to that 80 per cent double dose rate. The road map foreshadows this as being on or around 5 November. I like to optimistically think we might beat that by a few days. The fact that the advice for the spacing of Pfizer doses has now changed from six weeks to three gives me some hope that we might be able to do that sooner, and the road map provides for those— (Time expired)

Mr DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan—Leader of the Opposition) (15:06): I thank the minister for her answer. The events sector of course is replete with so many small businesses, some of them extremely small businesses, that have been hit very hard. The Save Victorian Events group—Simon Thewlis is the spokesperson—has said:

If the Victorian government doesn’t act very quickly there will be very few events happening in Victoria until well into 2022 …

I ask: given the large number of small businesses in the events sector, will the minister meet with Mr Thewlis this week to hear about his plan for an events-led recovery?

Ms PULFORD (Western Victoria—Minister for Employment, Minister for Innovation, Medical Research and the Digital Economy, Minister for Small Business, Minister for Resources) (15:07): As I was going to say before I was defeated by the clock, there will be numbers, depending on the settings, in the hundreds at that phase in the road map at 80 per cent or greater, and of course all peak bodies that the government deals with and works with closely are well aware of these things. So entertainment venues—outdoor seated entertainment—will be able to have the lesser of 25 per cent or 5000 people fully vaccinated. Hospitality venues, which obviously cater for many different types of smaller events, will be able to have—and I am looking at the road map here, which is public, so everybody should be well aware of these—150 outdoors and 150 indoors, subject to density quotients of four and two indoors and outdoors— (Time expired)

Mr Davis: Just on a point of order, President, the minister has not gone anywhere near answering the question of whether she will meet that group.

The PRESIDENT: The minister’s time has expired.

MINISTERS STATEMENTS: WOMEN IN APPRENTICESHIPS

Ms TIERNEY (Western Victoria—Minister for Training and Skills, Minister for Higher Education) (15:08): Every Victorian should have the chance to get a job that they want, no matter their background, identity or gender. That is why I was proud to launch the $5 million Women in Apprenticeships initiative last week. It will remove barriers for women who want a rewarding career in traditionally male-dominated trades like plumbing, electrical, aviation and IT. Among the first 10 programs in the initiative are 30 preapprenticeships for women in electrical, pathways for women to join the aviation industry and a program to help women facing financial difficulties in the rail industry. And that is not all. The programs also provide hands-on experience, wage support, peer support, mentorships, career pathways for school leavers and online sessions and workshops. Women
in Apprenticeships will support 615 women into preapprenticeships, traineeships and apprenticeships and create a strong, diverse pipeline of skilled workers for Victoria’s Big Build. The new initiative will be life changing for Victorian women of all backgrounds and at all stages of their career.

The response has already been resounding. Victorian women want a rewarding career in trades to help build their future. We have already seen a significant number of EOIs in the Big Build apprenticeships program that have been submitted by women, and the Women in Apprenticeships initiative will only boost that number. We are backing women who want jobs in trades, and I encourage anyone who is finishing school, looking for a job or wanting a career change to explore their future in trades at the Apprenticeships Victoria website.

COVID-19 VACCINATION

Mr LIMBRICK (South Eastern Metropolitan) (15:10): My question is for the Minister for Small Business. The Premier recently announced that all authorised workers will be required to be vaccinated, although as of this morning no mandatory vaccination directions were published on the Department of Health website. This announcement has sent many employers and workers into a panic. They are unsure what to do if staff either refuse to be vaccinated or refuse to hand over their medical details. Many of these workers are highly valued staff that the employer does not want to sack. What are you advising employers to do if staff refuse to either be vaccinated or hand over their private medical details?

Ms PULFORD (Western Victoria—Minister for Employment, Minister for Innovation, Medical Research and the Digital Economy, Minister for Small Business, Minister for Resources) (15:11): I thank Mr Limbrick for his question. I know that he has an audience and attracts an audience that is vehemently opposed to the scientific basis of the vaccination program, which is the thing between us and an open economy. I would encourage you to reflect on how people interpret your appearance at public events like the riots at the union office a couple of weeks ago.

Members interjecting.

Mr Davis: On a point of order, President, Minister Stitt accused Mr Limbrick of being a right-wing extremist. That is how I heard what she said. Now, I do not know whether he heard it, but that is what I heard, and I do not think it is right.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Mr Davis, I heard you clearly, but Mr Limbrick is in the chamber and I did not hear anything. I do not know if Mr Limbrick did. He did not raise a point of order. I do not know if he heard it or heard nothing.

Ms PULFORD: I know these are issues about which people in the community have strong feelings—the need for us to open up and the need for us to open up in a considered and thoughtful way that is cognisant of our obligations to ensure that people in the Victorian community who need help from our hospitals and our health services can access it while we open up. And I know that half the people in this room and half the people in the community reckon the road map is too slow and the other half reckon it is too fast, which maybe makes it about the right pace.

But in response to Mr Limbrick’s question about businesses that have staff members that do not want to be vaccinated, my answer is precisely the same answer I gave Mr Davis. I would encourage those businesses to talk to their staff about the importance of vaccination and its relationship to that business’s ability to trade and participate in a busier and more active economy. I would encourage those businesses to think about whether it is within their capacity to facilitate time off to go and be vaccinated, and I would encourage them to reach out to their peak organisations for support and advice about the way in which these things engage with industrial relations law.
As for organisations that have staff shortages and skills shortages because this tiny percentage of the community would rather ignore science and put themselves and their workmates at risk—that small percentage of our community—for employers that need to replace those people in their workplaces, I would encourage them to familiarise themselves with the supports that are available through the Jobs Victoria program that I administer in my employment portfolio, and we will do everything we can to assist them, also working with peaks, to find staff that are wanting to work.

Mr LIMBRICK (South Eastern Metropolitan) (15:14): If an employer decides that they must reluctantly sack a staff member due to a mandate, what protections are there for those employers in this situation against things such as unfair dismissal or other legal actions that may be taken against them?

Ms PULFORD (Western Victoria—Minister for Employment, Minister for Innovation, Medical Research and the Digital Economy, Minister for Small Business, Minister for Resources) (15:15): I would make the point that this is outside my area of training and portfolio responsibilities in a very direct sense, because you are asking about commonwealth industrial relations laws.

Ms Crozier interjected.

Ms PULFORD: No, he asked about unfair dismissal and commonwealth industrial relations laws. There are things I know about this, but I think—

Ms Crozier interjected.

Ms PULFORD: As we all do. I mean, you used to be in industrial relations too in your own way. But my answer to the question is that these are very, very particular instances and in a circumstance where an employer has to performance manage an employee they need to seek appropriate advice from someone more qualified and trained to provide this to them than I am. But, again, I think the best thing they can do is have that conversation about the benefits of vaccination.

CHURCHILL STREET, MONT ALBERT, AVENUE OF HONOUR

Dr BACH (Eastern Metropolitan) (15:16): My question is to the Minister for Veterans. Minister, in 1965 an avenue of honour with nine trees was planted by local residents of Mont Albert in Churchill Street. It was established in honour of the four Head brothers, William, Fawcett, Rowland and Gordon, and five of their mates—hence the nine trees—all of whom enlisted in the Great War from that community, with William tragically losing his life at the Gallipoli landings on 25 April 1915. Minister, what steps will you take to ensure that your colleague the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, Jacinta Allan, in the other place and her agency the Level Crossing Removal Project do not clear-fell these nine Anzac trees as part of their overzealous removal of trees associated with the Surrey Hills and Mont Albert level crossing removals?

Mr LEANE (Eastern Metropolitan—Minister for Local Government, Minister for Suburban Development, Minister for Veterans) (15:17): I thank Dr Bach for his question and his interest in this particular issue. It is my understanding that these particular trees are not necessarily acknowledged as an avenue of honour by the RSL or also the number of other authorities that do usually acknowledge this type of structure. But I do understand that there is a local interest and some locals that have some understanding of the history of these particular trees, and I am happy, Dr Bach, to get more information around these particular trees and maybe do some more research and get some more research done on the history. And I am happy to have conversations with any individuals or groups that want to have a conversation with me about these particular trees.

Dr BACH (Eastern Metropolitan) (15:18): I thank the minister for his response. Minister, the trees in this avenue of honour in Churchill Street currently have red and white tape wrapped around them, which has caused real concern that the decision may already have been made and that they will be removed, despite what I am informed by local residents is a lack of consultation. Now, I thank you for your response to me and your willingness to meet with my constituents. Given their concern, and if
indeed it is your determination, Minister, that this is a legitimate avenue of honour, can I ask: what actions will you take with your colleague in the other place in an effort to save these trees?

Mr LEANE (Eastern Metropolitan—Minister for Local Government, Minister for Suburban Development, Minister for Veterans) (15:18): I thank Dr Bach for his supplementary question. Dr Bach, I am committed to avail myself more of any information around these particular trees. I cannot make a commitment either way in terms of how this particular situation may go forward. Getting back to that, I do understand that the RSL and other groups that usually authorise that particular trees are of historical significance to the veterans community have not acknowledged that. I am still happy to put in consideration and have conversations with any of my colleagues, but in saying that, Dr Bach, I do not want to give any false idea that I will give the answer to your residents that they are particularly looking for.

MINISTERS STATEMENTS: KINDERGARTEN FUNDING

Ms STITT (Western Metropolitan—Minister for Workplace Safety, Minister for Early Childhood) (15:19): I rise to update the house on how the Andrews Labor government is helping our youngest learners get the best start in life by making local kindergartens inclusive for children of all abilities with facility upgrades, specialist equipment and state-of-the-art technology. Last month I announced more than $3 million in Building Blocks grants to help over 800 kindergartens improve learning outcomes for every young Victorian child. The investment includes $2.4 million in the latest round of Building Blocks inclusion grants, supporting 242 kindergartens to upgrade their facilities or purchase equipment to provide a safe and inclusive learning environment for children of all needs and abilities. Upgrades include infrastructure in playgrounds to make kinder activities more accessible, as well as movable inclusive education equipment like mobility stools and sensory equipment to support learning programs.

A further 569 kindergartens will also receive IT grants of up to $1500 from the latest round of Building Blocks improvement grants funding, sharing more than $796 000 in total for this support. These IT grants are so important to our early childhood centres and will help pay for new equipment such as computers, iPads and interactive TV aids that can be used for administration or to help deliver learning programs. Ensuring that all children can fully participate in their kinder is an absolute priority for our government. That is why it is so crucial that we upgrade facilities and equip them with the modern technology to create safe, inclusive and interactive learning environments, and that is exactly what this investment will do.

VICTIMS OF CRIME

Mr GRIMLEY (Western Victoria) (15:21): My question is for the Attorney-General. The Victims’ Charter Act 2006 seeks to improve the experience of victims of crime by providing statutory recognition for them while setting out the minimum standards for responses across criminal justice and government agencies. The original bill was passed more than 15 years ago with bipartisan support, but there is a lack of remedy for victims of crime in cases where agencies fail to meet the charter principles as noted in the second-reading speech. Despite recommendations by the Victorian Law Reform Commission in 2016 to institute such remedies, the charter remains a toothless tiger. In other words, there is no penalty or consequence for agencies which do not meet compliance with the charter. Ensuring compliance with the act is essential to minimising the risk that victims may be subject to, as secondary victims, within the justice system. Attorney, how can the Victims’ Charter Act be strengthened to ensure that it is not a toothless tiger?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (15:22): I thank Mr Grimley for his question. That is a big question. I was around in government 15 years ago when we introduced this, and it was a really good advancement in the recognition of victims in our criminal justice system and how we can do better to respond to and support them through the process, which often sidelines them, as we know, given that the consequences are for offenders and victims are not necessarily always given the attention that they
Mr GRIMLEY (Western Victoria) (15:23): Thanks, Attorney-General. That was very pleasing to hear. If we go specifically to section 21 of the Victims’ Charter Act, it requires you, Attorney, to cause the department of justice to include in its annual report information about the steps taken to promote the charter principles and also a report on the operation of this act. From our reading of recent annual reports, despite the word ‘victim’ popping up every now and then, there is no specific or significant coverage of the functionality or effectiveness of the Victims’ Charter Act in these annual reports. Again, in other words, it seems these reporting requirements are not being met. Derryn Hinch’s Justice Party would like to see the obligations under section 21 fulfilled explicitly in these reports. My supplementary question is: Attorney, can you explain how you and the department meet the reporting requirements of section 21 of the Victims’ Charter Act?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (15:24): I thank Mr Grimley for his question. I appreciate that he has made prior inquiries about this, which enabled me to have a look at it. Section 21 does require reporting on the operation of the promotion of the victims charter, and it is effectively achieved a number of ways. The Victims Support Agency within the department actively promotes the charter through its website and informs victims of their entitlement. The victims of crime commissioner obviously was brought in after the victims charter. She also plays a critical role in promoting the victims charter, ensuring justice agencies abide by its principles and treat victims with dignity, courtesy and respect.

In 2019 we further strengthened the commissioner’s powers to require agencies to report annually on their compliance with the charter to her. The commissioner then reports on this compliance in her annual report, which is tabled in Parliament. She also reports on the number, type and outcome of complaints that she has received in relation to the charter. This certainly gives Parliament and the community a clear line of sight on how agencies are performing on their obligations in relation to the charter.

Mr ONDARCHIE (Northern Metropolitan) (15:25): My question is to the Minister for Training and Skills. Demand for solar installation on buildings in Victoria continues to grow. This demand has driven a strict safety requirement need to ensure the highest rates of compliance for the solar industry, to keep households and workers safe and to crack down on dodgy solar installers. One option available is to ensure we upskill electricians to become licensed electrical inspectors, LEIs. To become an LEI, eligible candidates must successfully complete three separate assessments and apply for a licence through Energy Safe Victoria. The government outlined a plan for this on 31 March 2021. Minister, who has the government appointed as the training organisations to provide direct solar skill development and training for current LEI applicants during the LEI training phase?

Ms TIERNEY (Western Victoria—Minister for Training and Skills, Minister for Higher Education) (15:26): This is a matter that falls also within the remit of Minister D’Ambrosio, but can I say the following to you: that this, amongst a number of training issues to do with clean energy, is very much part of an important focus that this government has. We are about to announce the composition of the clean energy task force, and that will be announced very shortly. The chair of that will be the newly established CEO of the Victorian Skills Authority, Craig Robertson. They have already determined their meeting agenda. Coupled with that, the Victorian Skills Authority will be and is furnished with the task of providing me with a first-ever statewide training skills plan for the entire state.
Mr Ondarchie: On a point of order, President, which goes to relevance, this is a very narrow question—a very simple question that requires just a very simple answer. This minister comes in here and tells us she is the person who has turned the training system around. It is a very simple question: who has the government appointed as training organisations around LEIs? It is very simple.

The President: The minister has still got nearly 2 minutes.

Ms Tierney: This is a government that is making sure, in terms of where there are shortages, where there are needs, that the voices of industry are being heard. We are making sure that we have got the most aligned and listened to system that is agile and flexible. In terms of the particular question that Mr Ondarchie is requesting, this is a matter that is dealt with by the department of training as well as by Minister D’Ambrosio.

We have got a lot of work that has been done and a lot of work that will continue to be done, but I can assure Mr Ondarchie that it is this government and this government alone—not those across the road that would not have a clue of what is going on in industry and what the skill requirements are in this state, in particular in the clean energy economy. I look forward to your criticism of the composition of the task force.

Members interjecting.

Ms Tierney: Do not be so patronising, Mr Ondarchie. Your attitude towards women and other things is absolutely reprehensible.

Mr Ondarchie (Northern Metropolitan) (15:29): This from a minister who waxes lyrical in ministers statements that she is the saviour of training and cannot answer a simple question. My supplementary—

Ms Terpstra: On a point of order, President, I believe Ms Crozier made an unparliamentary remark directed at the minister and told her that she should get out of the kitchen and called her a precious petal. I ask that she withdraw that remark.

The President: There is no point of order. We will continue.

Mr Ondarchie: Thank you, President. Given the minister could not simply tell us who is doing the training, albeit she is the minister for training, since the government’s solar training announcement, how many new LEIs have passed the LEI solar skills test—in her capacity as Minister for Training and Skills?

Ms Tierney (Western Victoria—Minister for Training and Skills, Minister for Higher Education) (15:30): Yes, this is the specific question that Mr Ondarchie asks. This is a question that should be directed to the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change. In terms of providers in this state, there are hundreds of providers in this state across a whole range of areas. It is absolutely impossible for me to have that level of detail in front of me, and you know that, Mr Ondarchie. But in terms of the answer to this question, I am happy to take that on notice, Mr Ondarchie, and see whether Minister D’Ambrosio can provide some assistance in this area, Mr Ondarchie.

MINISTERS STATEMENTS: SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT

Mr Leane (Eastern Metropolitan—Minister for Local Government, Minister for Suburban Development, Minister for Veterans) (15:31): I would like to update the house on the suburban revitalisation program in the great suburb of Noble Park. The Victorian government will invest $1.1 million in the Ian and Frank streets projects. The Ian Street project will deliver new lighting, street furniture and landscaping as well as relocation of powerlines along the retail and dining strip. The Frank Street project will build a pocket park and create greener connections between Ross Reserve, Aubrey Moss Memorial Gardens and Copas Park. I want to thank the City of Greater Dandenong for their contribution as well.
Our government has invested over $25 million in the past 15 months for new revitalisation projects, partnering with local government and community organisations across 115 projects. That has delivered $73.8 million of co-investment across Melbourne’s suburbs. We are investing in community spaces in Noble Park to bring people together and make this, their much-loved area, a better place to live. I would like to thank the Noble Park Revitalisation Board and also the incredible, hardworking chair, Lee Tarlamis, MP, a fantastic MP, and also the other MP that is involved in the geographical area, the member for Mulgrave. He goes all right, the member for Mulgrave, doesn’t he? He goes all right.

Members interjecting.

Mr LEANE: It is like throwing raw meat into a cage, isn’t it? Exactly what I expected.

FOREIGN PURCHASER ADDITIONAL DUTY EXEMPTIONS

Mr HAYES (Southern Metropolitan) (15:33): My question is to the minister representing the Treasurer. On 7 September a report was tabled in this house. The report I refer to is the report 1 January 2021 to 30 June 2021 of foreign purchaser additional duty exemptions under section 3E of the Duties Act 2000. It indicated that 12 exemptions were granted, worth over $38 million. Can the Treasurer give details on who was granted the 12 exemptions and for what particular purchases the exemptions were granted?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (15:33): I thank Mr Hayes for his question to the Treasurer, a very specific question. I will seek advice from his office and respond accordingly.

Mr HAYES (Southern Metropolitan) (15:34): Thank you, Minister. My supplementary question is: can the Treasurer inform me why wouldn’t this $38 million of additional duty, which was exempted for these foreign purchases, be better spent on constructing much-needed social housing and providing funding for homeless services for needy and low-income Victorians?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (15:34): I will also pass on the supplementary question to the Treasurer in the other place, but I would point out this government’s record in social housing and public housing and the Big Build announcements that involve significant amounts of money. I think in this space you can always spend more, but I am very proud of this government’s investment to deal with homelessness and people at risk of homelessness.

FIRE SERVICES

Mr DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan—Leader of the Opposition) (15:34): My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister, last week the United Firefighters Union launched a disrespectful and dishonest advertising campaign designed to create fear and further destroy the reputation of CFA volunteers. Fire rescue commissioner, and mate of the UFU’s Peter Marshall, Ken Block has backed the campaign. I therefore ask, Minister: do you and government policy support this disrespectful and dishonest campaign?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (15:35): I am happy to respond to Mr Davis’s question in my capacity as Minister for Emergency Services. It is a fantastic honour to be appointed as the Minister for Emergency Services. Victoria has a world-class complementary fire service with fantastic people, and that is the reason that I am very happy to take on this role. I am certainly not in the business of dictating to others, whether it be unions or anyone else, about how they should communicate to the community. However, if I were the UFU, this is not the way I would choose to communicate, in the way that they have done, but it is fundamentally a matter for the UFU. I am extremely proud of the efforts of all of our firefighters, whether they be career or volunteer members. They are highly trained and provide a
world-class complementary service to our community, often at great risk to their own personal health and safety.

The substance of the UFU’s campaign directs communities to the Fire District Review Panel, which has commenced a legislative four-year review process that will be completed by June 2024. The Fire District Review Panel has been established in legislation to independently advise on whether any changes in fire risk require changes to the fire district boundaries, and I certainly welcome any community engagement in relation to this conversation. The review is ongoing. Many members of the community will have views in relation to this. There will be factors that the panel consider, including population growth, service demand and land use. I look forward to seeing this work progress and continuing to focus on ensuring that our fire services meet the demands of the community, regardless of where they live in Victoria, now and into the future.

Mr DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan—Leader of the Opposition) (15:37): Members of the chamber will be aware that volunteer firefighters in the CFA are the lifeblood of many local communities around Victoria. They are teachers, tradesmen, office workers, single parents and students, until they put their uniform on to serve their community. I note that you said it is ‘not the way I would choose to communicate’, and in that spirit I wonder whether you will commit to meet with volunteer representatives to hear how much this divisive campaign is tearing them apart?

Ms SYMES (Northern Victoria—Leader of the Government, Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (15:37): Are you kidding? I live in Broadford; where do you live? Right? I speak to volunteers in the supermarket quite regularly. My email is being filled by people who have views on this thing. I have spent the last six years as a member for Northern Victoria travelling around country areas, and there are not many areas where you do not meet a firefighter. I will continue to do so.

MINISTERS STATEMENTS: SOCIAL ENTERPRISE STRATEGY

Ms PULFORD (Western Victoria—Minister for Employment, Minister for Innovation, Medical Research and the Digital Economy, Minister for Small Business, Minister for Resources) (15:38): On Monday it was my enormous pleasure to launch the government’s new social enterprise strategy, developed in partnership with our wonderful social enterprise sector. It is the largest sector in Australia, with more than 3500 enterprises across the state. Social enterprises are embedded in our communities and in our lives—in sport and recreation, in retail, in food service and across our health and social services. We are committed to supporting this wonderful sector through the Victorian Social Enterprise Strategy 2021–2025. Key themes include building skills and capabilities, increasing access to appropriate financing, strengthening connections between social enterprises across Victoria and supporting social enterprises through government procurement.

I would like to thank our social enterprises for their engagement in this strategy. In particular I would like to thank Jane Garrett for her work in chairing the reference group and to extend a special thank you to all reference group members, including Cinnamon Evans, Jo Barraket, Wade Noonan, Matt Pfahler, Rebecca Scott, Kevin Robbie, Hanna Ebeling, Colin Stimpson, Rona Glynn-McDonald, Nick Verginis, Lisa Waldron and Mike McKinstry. In her role as parliamentary secretary, I know that Ms Garrett has very much enjoyed working with the sector. This strategy is theirs, and she and I share the sector’s excitement about the next steps as we now work to implement this and see our social enterprise strategy, which grows jobs and grows communities, flourish over coming years.

WRITTEN RESPONSES

The PRESIDENT (15:39): Regarding questions and answers today: Dr Ratnam to Mr Leane, question and supplementary, two days; Mr Davis to Minister Pulford, supplementary, one day; Mr Ondarchie to Minister Tierney, two days for the supplementary; and Mr Hayes, question and supplementary, two days, Minister Symes.
Mr Ondarchie: On a point of order, President, I put it to you that the question I asked to Ms Tierney, the substantive one, which simply asked for the name of the training organisation, was not responded to either, and I suggest she could respond to that.

Constituency questions

NORTHERN METROPOLITAN REGION

Mr ONDARCHIE (Northern Metropolitan) (15:41): (1405) My constituency is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. Preston residents are concerned about the traffic and congestion and the time it takes them to get to work in my region of Northern Metropolitan Region. The minister might be aware that last year I conducted a community survey into the Preston area and was inundated with responses. I later made it known to the house how the constituents felt about what was going on out there. I have again been contacted by those constituents, who are still frustrated with the traffic flow in Preston. My question for the minister is: will the government commit to investigating the sequencing of lights at the intersections of Bell Street and St Georges Road, Bell Street and Albert Street, and High Street and Murray Road so my residents can spend less time in traffic and more time with their families?

SOUTH EASTERN METROPOLITAN REGION

Mr LIMBRICK (South Eastern Metropolitan) (15:42): (1406) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. I was recently contacted by the secretary of the Friends of Karkarook Park group, who have big plans for the local park. The park is a beautifully vegetated area surrounding a large lake. The group has planted many trees and increased vegetation and are looking to establish an outdoor classroom and education hub to be used by local schools. I myself have been to this park many times and was fortunate enough to help stock rainbow trout in the lake—alongside the Victorian Fisheries Authority—which I am sure one of my staff has spent many hours trying to catch. However, one of the downfalls of this park is its location, situated on Dingley bypass. The bypass is a heavy traffic area and produces significant noise pollution, which echoes off the opposing sound walls to the park. The Friends of Karkarook Park have requested the installation of a sound barrier on the south side of the highway. My question to the minister is: will you or a representative of your office agree to meet with Friends of Karkarook Park and consider assisting in the establishment of the requested sound barriers?

NORTHERN VICTORIA REGION

Ms LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (15:43): (1407) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety and concerns the disgraceful condition of the C357, Murchison-Tatura Road, the main thoroughfare between the two townships. This afternoon my office spoke to Paul Shaddix, a Murchison resident, who detailed the deteriorated state of the road and the issue he faces driving on it each day. This morning Paul took two photographs of the road that he has posted on Facebook. These photos show sections of the road where the entire surface has disintegrated, leaving large potholes and loose bitumen, causing great hazards for road users. The worst stretch of the road is between River Road and Hammond Road, but Paul estimates there are between 50 and 60 similar patches throughout the entire 20-kilometre stretch of the road between Murchison and Tatura. Paul also confirmed that he had to replace two windscreen in the last four days due to the debris flying up from other vehicles. Will the minister order Regional Roads Victoria to undertake urgent and immediate repairs of Murchison-Tatura Road between Murchison and Tatura?

WESTERN METROPOLITAN REGION

Dr CUMMING (Western Metropolitan) (15:44): (1408) My question is to the Minister for Small Business from a resident in Point Cook. Can the minister give me a time line when we can expect an outcome for applications for hardship grants? My constituent is a bookkeeper and a BAS agent, and most of her clients are in the western suburbs. She has lodged nine applications for hardship grants for her clients between 13 and 23 August, and to date none of them have been assessed or approved. Her
clients are suffering significant hardship and have been unable to access any state government grants this year. These small businesses include electricians, landscapers, handymen and auto-electricians. Not knowing if they will receive the $20 000 is adding up to their stress. And this is from NCS Bookkeeping in Point Cook.

The PRESIDENT: Dr Cumming, while I have you, I really need to thank you first for yesterday providing me with a copy of your constituency question. I have looked at it again, as I had doubts, so I have ruled it out. So unfortunately your constituency question from yesterday was ruled out—not this one, yesterday’s one.

WESTERN METROPOLITAN REGION

Mr FINN (Western Metropolitan) (15:45): (1409) My constituency question is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. The sirens wailing through Bulla this morning told the story. A horse-carrying vehicle and a garbage truck had smashed head-on as they both attempted to cross the Bulla Bridge. This time we were fortunate that no-one was killed—this time—but deaths on this bridge are inevitable. As I have explained to the house before, this bridge was built when horses were not carried in trucks but indeed pulling carriages. It was built over 160 years ago and is totally inadequate for the traffic volume it is expected to carry every day. With the prospect of a further 800 to 900 trucks and many B-doubles a day, the bridge and Bulla Road up and down Bulla Hill will not be able to cope. Minister, we have been waiting for the building of the Bulla bypass for as long as I can remember. It has been needed for years. Minister, will you now build the Bulla bypass?

NORTHERN VICTORIA REGION

Ms MAXWELL (Northern Victoria) (15:46): (1410) My constituency question is to the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events, and it is regarding the City of Whittlesea’s call for a regional tourism board to be established for interface councils. The City of Whittlesea recorded almost 4000 job losses in the retail trade, accommodation and food services sectors in 2020 and estimates a further 7000 could be lost in 2021. These jobs support the city’s visitor economy and provide entry-level positions in the community, particularly for young people. Cancellation of major events included their country music festival, rodeo, the Whittlesea show and the Table of Plenty as well as smaller community events, festivals and cultural heritage programs. Since Destination Melbourne was discontinued in 2019 there has been nothing in place for interface councils to unlock their opportunities. The Visitor Economy Recovery and Reform Plan will reimagine regional tourism boards into visitor economy partnerships, and I hope this will include interface councils, but this is not clear. So I ask the minister: will there be a visitor economy partnership specific to interface councils?

WESTERN VICTORIA REGION

Mrs McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (15:47): (1411) My question is for the Minister for Education. The government’s road map for regional Victoria is preventing children in Warrnambool and across western Victoria between grade 3 and grade 10 from returning to school. The Warrnambool Standard recently reported that the Burnet Institute stated that the regional road map plan was developed independently from them. The minister was recently asked about this in a press conference and denied it, claiming that the Burnet modelling looks at the epidemiology of the situation across the whole of Victoria and that that is what the back-to-school is plan is based on. So I ask the minister: are you accusing Dr Nick Scott of the Burnet Institute of lying, and if not, what is the modelling and health advice that is preventing Warrnambool and western Victorian students from going to school?

WESTERN VICTORIA REGION

Mr MEDDICK (Western Victoria) (15:48): (1412) My constituency question is for the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change. Since February, 16 koalas have come into care from the corridor that runs from Brown Hill in Ballarat down to Enfield State Park. With extensive road injuries, only six have survived. There are no specialty koala facilities and limited carers in Ballarat. A local rescuer I met with last week stated, ‘We couldn’t take in another koala if it was injured today’.
Parts of Ballarat used to be a sanctuary for koalas. Now many have not seen them in years. Wildlife carers fear for the release date of the animals in their care, because their surrounding habitats are unsafe. Friends of Canadian Corridor have done incredible work over the past 10 years to campaign for our much-loved marsupials, but they desperately need support. Will the minister and her department help facilitate independent research to better understand Ballarat koala abundance and future prospects?

EASTERN VICTORIA REGION

Ms BATH (Eastern Victoria) (15:49): (1413) My constituency question is for the Minister for Education, and it relates to a constituent mother of mine with a child with special needs. This mother I think reflects a number of other parents who have children with special needs. With the schools being closed and no access to ongoing schooling face to face, her child has had separation anxiety and behaviours of regression, of violence and of supreme frustration. Indeed her frustration is that the minister’s road map does not include anything to do with children with special needs. They are just lumped in with all the other students. Now, they do have special needs. They should have special consideration. She is also concerned that a lot of the NDIS funding that they are allocated has been spent on trying to provide additional activities for their parents, and that is running out. Will the minister open up our special needs schools asap in my electorate, as in next week?

NORTHERN VICTORIA REGION

Mr QUILTY (Northern Victoria) (15:51): (1414) My constituency question is for the Minister for Higher Education and Minister for Training and Skills. I have recently met with representatives from universities and TAFEs in northern Victoria who raised this concern. University and TAFE students have adapted to many changes over the last 18 months, including the shift to online learning. However, students training for careers in allied health and medicine are required to undertake mandatory placement. Due to the pandemic, this has been disrupted. Neglecting to provide adequate safeguards and contingency measures to ensure students can continue to undertake placements only exacerbates rural health workforce shortages in northern Victoria. We cannot see the pipeline for the bottleneck which has been allowed to coalesce. We have massive shortfalls of graduates and a growing training backlog. University and TAFE students in northern Victoria who have had their placements interrupted or postponed due to the government’s pandemic response need assurances. Minister, how are you enabling current allied health students to complete mandatory placement requirements?

NORTHERN METROPOLITAN REGION

Dr RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan) (1415)

Incorporated pursuant to order of Council of 7 September:

My question is to the Minister for Housing.

My Melbourne Greens colleagues and I recently met with community leaders from public housing in our respective electorates. This included residents from many different cultural backgrounds who live in public housing across North Melbourne, Flemington, Carlton, Fitzroy and Richmond.

During the meeting, residents told us of the many challenges they face in communicating their concerns and needs to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

These leaders expressed, on behalf of their communities, the need for a multicultural liaison officer who they could speak with directly when they need to contact their local housing office about maintenance and tenancy issues, or in regard to housing applications.

Will the government commit funding to ensure that each office of housing has a dedicated multicultural liaison officer?
Incorporated pursuant to order of Council of 7 September:

1. My constituency question is directed to the Minister for Education, Minister for Mental Health and Deputy Premier, the Honourable James Merlino, MP. My question relates to the portfolio responsibilities of education.

2. New legislation was introduced in the Parliament to deliver two new avenues for students in their final years of school from 2023.

3. This reform will be providing outstanding education alongside workplace experiences to set students up for further education or employment.

4. The Victorian certificate of education vocational major is a new two-year vocational pathway program that will replace intermediate and senior VCAL and will be embedded in the VCE system.

5. Students enrolled in this major will have access to an enriched curriculum, which includes practical workplace experiences which are relevant to their career goals.

6. Further, the Victorian pathways certificate will replace foundation VCAL with the intention to support students to transition either to the VCE or to entry level VET or employment.

7. My question to the minister is: how will this important educational reform be shared with constituents and students in my electorate of the Western Metropolitan Region?

8. The Andrews Labor government is supporting every Victorian student to get the skills they need for the job they want, whether that’s going on to further education or straight into the workforce.

Debate resumed.

Ms WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (15:52): I am really glad to get up here and continue my contribution. As you know, mental health support is something that I am very proud of, which I will just repeat. Indeed I and the Andrews Labor government are not just passionate about speaking about mental health, we are actually implementing the change required to fix our mental health system. I do welcome absolutely the support from the Liberal Party on reforming mental health support in schools.

But I have sat in this place before and listened to those opposite argue against mental health funding and argue against the important recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System. I am glad that the Liberals are finally—finally—supporting measures that we are already undertaking to reform mental health support for schools in this state.

It bears repeating, the very significant announcement made this week by the Minister for Mental Health, James Merlino, that every Victorian government school—secondary and specialist—will have funding to employ a mental health practitioner by the end of this year. This rollout has been brought forward to the end of 2021, a year earlier indeed, to support our students through the coronavirus pandemic. Just this morning I was involved in some very good conversations and calls with local schools within my electorate about this funding. Every single school I have talked to is so excited about this announcement—truly excited—and I have heard loud and clear that this funding is needed and that it will make a real impact on the lives of students within my region and right across the state.

I have heard from plenty of parents as well. The last 18 months have been difficult for our schoolkids with the pandemic, and I have heard from those parents about the vital need for mental health services within their schools. This is not just some talking point. This is real and tangible implementation that we are talking about today.

Importantly, these practitioners must be registered with either the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency or the Australian Association of Social Workers. They have the highest possible
qualifications and registration requirements so that students with high needs are supported as best as possible. This is the norm for the industry and ensures high-quality practitioners that follow industry standards. This is a sharp contrast from what has been proposed by the opposition in this bill. ‘Counsellor’ as defined in this bill is not a protected term under the national health practitioner registration scheme. Any person can work as a counsellor, and they are not subject to regulation by AHPRA or any similar bodies. Counsellors certainly have a role to play supporting mental health in the community, but mental health practitioners as defined in the act perform a specialised role within the designated mental health service. These are not roles for providing counselling in schools. So I must say, while the opposition has little rigour and research on this bill indeed, we on this side are implementing programs and making sure that they are up to scratch.

Can I also note that while Ms Crozier says there are no counsellors that operate within schools, this is simply not true. They already operate within a number of programs. I will just go to that now and say that the state is already providing counsellors through the student support services. Any school is able to apply for this via their Department of Education and Training region. There is dedicated access for government secondary schools to Headspace counselling. Primary welfare officers operate in 800 primary schools out of 1200 government primary schools. The schoolwide positive behaviour model supporting student social and emotional wellbeing and positive behaviour operates in 420 schools across the state, and there is mental health training for school staff. But it is not the only thing that we are bringing into our schools.

The 2021–22 Victorian state budget included $200 million over four years for a new School Mental Health Fund. This fund responds to recommendation 17 from the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System. The menu will provide schools with opportunities to purchase support for initiatives that promote mental health and wellbeing and reduce stigma and also enable schools to intervene early to support students and provide targeted support for individual students. The first round of this will be available to schools in October 2021—this month. A fuller expression-of-interest process will run in 2022, with providers across the mental health and wellbeing sector invited to apply to be included on the 2023 menu. I encourage counsellors who are interested in providing school-based counselling to apply to be a provider as part of this program.

In addition, we are supporting the mental health in primary schools pilot in 100 schools. A partnership with the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, the pilot will enable schools to employ a mental health and wellbeing lead while also supporting staff to better understand and respond to mental health and wellbeing issues affecting their students. Evidence produced through this pilot is informing larger scale research and development of what works to support primary school students’ mental health and wellbeing.

Obviously this is all within the context of an unprecedented investment this government has made into the mental health system following the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System. This is absolutely an unprecedented investment. It is an important investment, and it will change lives. This is because our government has committed to implementing every single recommendation from the royal commission since we pledged to begin the royal commission back in 2018. Not everyone in this chamber is as committed to implementing all of those important recommendations. Not everyone—indeed some may wonder who. It seems that quite regularly we have these discussions in this place around mental health, and time and time again we see empty talking points, poorly researched statements and big words about the importance of mental health. But ultimately, when it comes down to it, only Labor governments deliver proper funding and investment into our mental health system.

Ms PATTEN (Northern Metropolitan) (15:58): I rise to speak to Ms Crozier’s bill, the Mental Health Amendment (Counsellors) Bill 2021. You know, I do not think there is a single person in this chamber who does not passionately believe that a child’s mental health is crucially important and mental health support in our schools is very important. I am also clearly of the view that we should have highly qualified mental health support available to Victorian students, but I have to say I am
perplexed by this bill, albeit we have only looked at it over the last few days. I have read the second-
reading speech and heard Ms Crozier provide it, but this bill goes to amending the Mental Health Act 2014. It does not relate to or touch on schools at all. It changes the definition of ‘mental health practitioner’ for the purposes of the Mental Health Act. The definition of ‘mental health practitioner’ in the Mental Health Act only relates to those who can make a mental health assessment order under that act. If you read that act, and I went through that act this morning, that is what the definition for mental health practitioner relates to. And under that means that this allows the people who are defined specifically and directly in that act to make assessment orders, which is the first step in initiating compulsory mental health treatment.

A mental health practitioner under the act may make an assessment order. An assessment order then enables an authorised psychiatrist to examine the person without the person’s consent to determine whether they have a mental illness and need compulsory mental health treatment. An assessment order enables a person subject to the order to be taken to and detained in a designated mental health service for assessment if necessary. It is a really narrow purpose in this act, and it does not in any way relate to counsellors in schools. So I do not understand why we would add counsellors to that definition in the act, because it will not actually help. It will not make the case for bringing more counsellors into schools, which I entirely support. In reading the second-reading speech, everything around the bill I support, but when we go to the bill, that is where it just does not make sense.

Ms Watt listed substantially where counsellors are in schools and in fact where student support services are available through regional Department of Education and Training offices. There is dedicated access for secondary students to counselling through Headspace. Primary welfare officers, who are often counsellors, operate in 800 or 1200 schools. There are counsellors there already. So I am still quite perplexed as to why we would want to define them under the Mental Health Act and for some reason come to the conclusion that that would increase the number of counsellors in schools. The second-reading speech says that by doing this it will provide approximately an additional 2000 counsellors. It will not. It will not make any difference.

We have just seen the announcement from the government of the mental health practitioners program—and I think Ms Watt also spoke to this—where every Victorian government secondary and specialist school will have funding to employ a mental health practitioner. That is a very broad range, everything from therapy dogs to psychiatrists. I wonder if that is where the confusion has come with this bill and whether it was because of the term ‘mental health practitioner’ in that announcement that it was thought that maybe it was only allowing those defined under the Mental Health Act as mental health practitioners to become part of that program.

But I do think there is an area I am passionate about, and that is actually ensuring that we have qualified, good mental health practitioners in our schools—that we have the right people to do the right job. We need to weed out those that are deficient. You know, some of that support there is completely unqualified, and I think it will come as no surprise to this house that I am speaking about the chaplaincy program. To become a chaplain in Victoria you have to be a Christian, one. You need a cert IV in youth work or pastoral care or even both. That is it; that is what qualifies you to become a chaplain to provide student welfare in the schools. Now, the department’s guidelines say that chaplains may be from any faith or no faith, and the chaplain’s job and work are not meant to be religious, but you cannot get a job as a chaplain unless you are religious—and not any religion; the chaplaincy program is limited by the providers of the program, and all bar one insist that they will only hire Christians, because they can. So this is incredible discrimination, apart from anything else.

I would just like to also mention there are chaplains out there who have got very high qualifications and are very good at their jobs, and I grant that, but when we are talking about wanting qualified people in our schools to provide mental health assistance to our students then maybe we should be looking at where we are not providing qualified people. Maybe we should be reconsidering that, because I think our children do deserve highly qualified mental health support now more than ever. But a 13-unit, one-
year course in youth work or pastoral care is not it. Those are not the professional qualifications I want for my children to help support their good mental health.

Now, yes, as we increase the volume of mental health support in our schools, we as a state should also increase the calibre of that support, and I would say that one way to do that is by cutting out the obvious deficiencies that place underqualified staff on the front line with our vulnerable kids—that is, getting rid of the chaplaincy program in this state. But again, I support counsellors in our schools, and I certainly think that given the announcements and given the rollout of all of these new mental health programs we are going to see more counsellors. I think that is a wonderful thing, and I will do whatever I can to assist the schools in my electorate to access those programs. But I still cannot understand, and maybe Ms Crozier will be able to sum up and explain, how amending the Mental Health Act to add ‘registered counsellors’ to the definition of a mental health practitioner puts more counsellors in schools. It just does not.

Dr BACH (Eastern Metropolitan) (16:07): It is good to rise to talk on a very important bill regarding such an important matter in Victoria at all times but in particular at this time. It is well recognised that right now Victorian children are facing a mental health crisis. I concur with some of the remarks of Ms Patten at the commencement of her contribution that surely all of us in this chamber, surely all Victorians, care deeply about the mental health and wellbeing of Victorian kids. We know that the last year and a half has been so difficult for them, severed from ties of school and community and of broader family networks and banned at times from sources of pleasure like going to play at the local playground. This has led to, we know, ballooning rates of serious mental illnesses like depression and anxiety, significantly increasing rates of self-harm, suicidal ideation and even suicide in certain categories, in particular including adolescent girls.

It has been said by our children’s commissioner, for example, but by so many other experts in our state that the government’s decision-making at this time has not placed an appropriate priority on the mental health of our children. Ad nauseam the government says that all it ever does is follow the health advice. Well, that is nonsense of course. If the government only ever followed the health advice, it would scrap the curfew today. It would have scrapped it months ago. The health advice on the impact of COVID on children and the impact of lockdown on children is really quite clear.

Last month I was interested by a report from the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, and Ms Crozier has already referred to it. What that report says—and I have a copy of it here—is that:

COVID-19 disease in children and adolescents is rarely severe …

This is from the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute. It also says that:

Children and adolescents who have COVID-19 will commonly have no … symptoms …

Sometimes they will have mild symptoms. These are similar to a cold. This is from the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, not known as a bunch of—what was it Ms Terpstra said during question time?—right-wing extremists, but rather the Murdoch Children’s Research—

A member interjected.

Dr BACH: It could not have been Tien. He was asleep.

Ms Tierney: On a point of order, Acting President Gepp, the member made a claim that a member made a statement during question time that was not the case.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Mr Gepp): I will ask the member to continue, but whatever statements were made during question time have been dealt with by the President. They have already been ruled on, and no member should make any further comment without reflecting on the Chair.
Dr BACH: After making these important findings the staff at the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute made a really important conclusion that we should bear in mind as we make policy for Victorian children as we move forward. I will read it into Hansard with the forbearance of the house:

The main risks to the health of children and adolescents in this pandemic continues to be from indirect effects on mental health, wellbeing and education, which are worsened by continued lockdowns and school closures.

As I said this morning when I joined the Leader of the Opposition and the Shadow Minister for Education to launch our education plan, it is really important that we continue to take commonsense steps to protect Victorian children from this virus, and those commonsense steps are built into our plan. It is also really important to note that the greatest threat facing our kids is the mental health shadow pandemic. That is why this legislation is so important to unlocking huge numbers of additional highly trained staff. I would rebut the comments of members opposite that seemed to denigrate the qualifications of counsellors; I would rebut those. As somebody who has worked in schools for many years and seen the great work that can be done by counsellors, I would say that counsellors are appropriate people to be allowed to engage in our schools to support children to a far greater extent than they are right now.

There is massive need. If the current government has some ideological objection to counsellors, where are these further workers going to come from? I was pleased—I do not mind telling the house—by the government’s announcement the other day that they have come on board with our position that we need far more mental health support in our schools. That is good; I welcome that. But as I dare say we all know, kids cannot get in right now to see mental health practitioners or to see mental health specialists. Psychiatrists and psychologists are backed up for months. We need to use every reasonable resource we have. I say, and on this side of the house we say, that counsellors are appropriate people to be enabled to engage with our students in a far more fulsome way than they are able to right now.

I do not think it is particularly edifying to see these ongoing attacks on the opposition from those opposite on the basis that everything that has gone wrong in the education system is somehow our fault. One member opposite—I will not mention her—referred to decades of neglect by the Victorian Liberals. I am not sure when these decades of neglect occurred. Presumably in the 1950s and 60s; that is the last time we were in power for decades. Nonetheless, that is the key problem, according to those opposite, in the Victorian education system. Well, I have a different view. I think the key problem in the Victorian education system right now, the key problem facing our children, is the need for much greater mental health support. There is a workforce there. There are Victorians there who would love to be able to do this work.

I received a piece of correspondence from an interested constituent on exactly this point just a couple of days ago. Again I would not mind, with your forbearance on this occasion, Acting President Gepp, reading it into Hansard. My constituent said to me:

Why would the Andrews Government at a critical time for children’s mental health oppose the policy of simply changing an outdated definition, to allow nearly 2,000 ... mental health professionals the ability to tackle the mental health crisis?

Furthermore:

Why does Minister Merlino’s office refuse to meet with the Australian Counselling Association to discuss … how this could be done—to come to some of the points Ms Patten raised—in an effort to seek to address the crippling shadow pandemic that our children are facing?

The Leader of the Opposition has recently said that the greatest threat facing our state is the shattered mental health of our kids. He is right. I do not think in this debate it serves to make petty points about who over the course of time has cared more about mental health. I am sure when Ms Watt reflects upon her contribution, which it did not appear she had written herself, she might come to think better of some of the things she said. As a former adviser to a former Liberal minister for mental health, I do not think we should cast aspersions in this house regarding whether individuals care deeply or not,
whether political parties care deeply or not, about the sorts of matters that we are discussing. I concede—I do not doubt—that every single member of the government cares deeply about the mental health of our children. We care just as much, and on this point we believe that this is a commonsense measure that could do great good to support our children, who are going through a mental health shadow pandemic. I commend the bill to the house.

Mr TARLAMIS (South Eastern Metropolitan) (16:16): I also rise to make a contribution on the Mental Health Amendment (Counsellors) Bill 2021 introduced by Ms Crozier. Can I just begin by saying how pleased and proud I am to be a member of the Andrews Labor government, which has invested more than any other government in mental health. Our commitment to improving mental health and reforming the system and rebuilding it from the ground up is unmatched and unparalleled by what anyone else has done. We continue to monitor the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the mental health of all Victorians. We know how tough the last 18 months have been for our community, and we recognise that mental health effects could long outlast this pandemic. That is why we are ensuring that Victorians get the care they need during and well beyond this pandemic.

I will go into more detail about the types of funding initiatives that we have actually done later in my contribution, but before I do that I just want to point out that you can always tell when it is Wednesday in this place because the opposition are back here with yet another politically motivated and ill-conceived piece of legislation—usually it is a motion, but this time it is a piece of legislation—that does not actually do what they purport it does, and that is the key point here. They stand up and say, ‘This is what it does’, but it is not what it does. Ms Patten and other speakers previously have basically added to this and pointed out some of the inconsistencies within this bill, but basically it is quite astounding that those opposite seem to think that if you get up and say something often enough, it just becomes fact. I am sorry, that is not how things work.

Dr Bach can seek to basically verbal what people have said in their contributions when he makes claims that we are denigrating counsellors. That is not what we are doing. We are simply pointing out the facts—that your bill does not do what you say that it does. And you talk about people’s contributions in this place and say they will regret saying what they said. Well, I think some on that side will regret what they have said during this debate and other debates in this place. I am always happy to stand by the things that I say in this chamber. I am always happy to stand by them. It is on the record forever. But some of those opposite basically should think more carefully about the things that they say and put on the record, because they will be judged by that.

And I am not talking about holding those opposite to account for what has happened in the past. We all have a collective responsibility with regard to the mental health system and how it has got to where it is. Basically those opposite continually talk about how important mental health is, but when the rubber hits the road and it comes down to it, what do they do? They certainly do not support the initiatives. They stand up in their press conferences and talk about hope and positivity. ‘Hope and positivity’ they say 16, 17, 18 times during their press conferences, and then they basically proceed to not actually present hope or positivity. Maybe you could stand up and talk about the initiatives and the important reforms that have helped in mental health and basically how there are services out there that can assist people that are in need and that are doing it difficult in the community, but instead you choose to stand up and say, ‘There’s no support for mental health. There’s nothing out there for you to do’.

Ms Crozier interjected.

Mr TARLAMIS: You should go back and listen to some of your press conferences, because that is exactly the fearmongering and misinformation that you put out there. You give people the impression that there is nowhere for them to go when they need some assistance. That is what you do.

Ms Crozier interjected.
Mr TARLAMIS: Sure, whatever you say. You just keep talking. We should not be surprised by any of this, because it is what those opposite do. They play politics with every little thing. They use any opportunity to basically play politics with issues that are far more important and should be above this.

Returning to the bill, despite what those opposite say, this bill does not do what they say that it does, and my colleague touched on this in her contribution. The Mental Health Act 2014 does not govern, and never has governed, who can and cannot provide mental health assistance to students in school settings. The purpose of the existing Mental Health Act and the definitions within it in relation to mental health practitioners is to govern and regulate the use of compulsory mental health treatment orders in hospital. It is literally the regulatory framework that is designed to protect vulnerable people experiencing acute mental illness and to provide guidance and instruction to qualified practitioners in making assessment and treatment orders. Again, despite what those opposite say or choose to believe, there is no possible way that this amendment will deliver the purported counsellor influx the opposition has so cheaply and dishonestly suggested. It is nothing more than make-believe, playing politics, but we have come to expect that, time and time again.

When the report of the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System was actually handed down at the special joint sitting that we had over at the Royal Exhibition Building, there was an opportunity for you to show bipartisan support and promote how important mental health reform is. But instead your then leader chose to politicise the occasion. Rather than join with the government in talking about the significance of this opportunity, he sought to politicise the issue and not take that bipartisan approach. He chose to not take that road. Those on the other side have yet to support each and every one of the important and transformative recommendations from that report, yet they come in here and lecture us about what we are supposedly not doing and say we are not doing enough. Well, how about you start with accepting the recommendations? How about you start there? But you cannot. That would be a bridge too far for those opposite. I will say to those opposite: actions speak louder than words, and you have been found lacking time and time again in this space. You have had plenty and ample opportunity to prove your commitment in this space, but you just do not do it—you just will not do it.

The functions of mental health practitioners can significantly impact on the rights of individuals, and for that reason mental health practitioners must work at a designated mental health service under the current Mental Health Act. Designated mental health services are our tertiary specialist mental health services—our hospitals, not our schools. Further, ‘counsellor’ is not a protected term under the national health practitioners registration scheme. Any person can work as a counsellor, and they are not subject to the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) and other similar bodies. No-one is saying that counsellors are not suitable and they do not have a role to play, but that is a fact.

Unlike those opposite, we have taken real action and important action in this area to reinforce our commitment to addressing mental health issues in schools as well as outside of schools and in the community more broadly through, amongst other measures—this was touched on by my colleagues—the mental health practitioners in schools program. Now, this is a program that basically is already supporting students with practitioners offering counselling and early intervention services, helping students with complex needs, connecting students to broader allied and community health services and delivering whole-school mental health promotion and preventative activities, including during periods of remote learning.

As a result of these significant investments from our government in student mental health, every Victorian government secondary school and specialist school will have funding to employ a mental health practitioner by the end of the year. This rollout has been brought forward to the end of 2021, a year earlier than was originally committed to, and it supports students through the coronavirus pandemic.
These practitioners must be registered with AHPRA or the Australian Association of Social Workers. They have the highest possible qualifications and registration requirements so that students with high needs are supported as best as possible. This is the norm for the industry and ensures high-quality practitioners that follow industry standards. The state already provides counselling through student support services and dedicated access for government secondary students to Headspace counselling. We also provide mental health and wellbeing support in a range of different forms to meet different student needs through programs like primary welfare officers, schoolwide positive behaviour and mental health training for school staff. On top of that, there are other educational investments in school-based mental health and supports that we have also invested in as a government.

On top of what I have already outlined, the 2021–22 Victorian state budget included $200 million over four years and $86.9 million ongoing for a new School Mental Health Fund. This fund responds to the royal commission’s recommendation 17 and will support Victorian government schools to select programs, staff and other support from an evidence-based menu that best meets their students’ mental health and wellbeing needs. The menu will provide schools with the opportunity to purchase support for initiatives that promote mental health and wellbeing and reduce the stigma, enable schools to intervene early to support students and provide targeted support for individual students. The first round of the menu will be released to schools this month, the full expression of interest process will run in 2022 and providers across the mental health and wellbeing sector will be invited to apply to be included in the menu for 2023 also.

In addition, we are expanding the mental health in primary schools pilot to 100 schools. A partnership with the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute and the pilot enable schools to employ a mental health and wellbeing lead while also supporting staff to better understand and respond to mental health and wellbeing issues affecting their students. The evidence produced through this pilot will inform large-scale research and development on what works to support primary school students’ mental health and wellbeing.

So there are a whole suite of initiatives there that will do far more than what your bill purports to do and which will not actually achieve anything. These are real measures, real programs and real initiatives that will assist students in schools and get them the support that they need, basically unlike your proposal, which will not do any of that or achieve anything anywhere near those initiatives that I have outlined just now.

Our mental health investment goes even further, in line with the investment in the royal commission’s recommendations and delivering on that—again, which those opposite have not committed to and I do not believe they have any intention of committing to. People should be consistently reminded about that because it is not very hard to basically—

Dr Bach interjected.

Mr TARLAMIS: Well, again, I think it is important that everybody understands what your position is, because when you come in here with a bill and talk about how ‘nobody cares about mental health like we do’, when you will not basically—

Members interjecting.

Mr TARLAMIS: So the issue is the record stands for itself. Show me where you have said that you will endorse and accept all the recommendations of the report. Show me that and I will sit down and be quiet, but you cannot. So again, I will say it 15, 20, 30, 50 times. I will say it as often as I want to say it, because it is true. Unlike those opposite—they say things about 50, 60, 70 times that are not true with the hope that they will become true—I am actually saying things that are actually true and are on the record for everybody to see. As I say, I stand by that record, because basically you cannot show me. That is the reality of it.
The 2021–22 Victorian state budget invested a record $3.8 billion to create a new mental health and wellbeing system based directly on the recommendations of the royal commission into the mental health system. This is the start of a 10-year reform agenda to build a new mental health and wellbeing system from the ground up so that it is fit for purpose and gets the access to people that need it where they need it and when they need it the most. Again, we are not going to apologise for that. We are going to talk about it at every opportunity we can. We are going to spruik the fact that we are doing that, because it is important. And that is why I cannot understand why those opposite cannot simply sign up to that.

If you want to talk about hope and positivity, show people hope and positivity. Take a bipartisan report, set aside your politicking for 5 minutes and basically agree with us and come on board to accept all the recommendations of the royal commission’s report and roll them out. And instead of disappearing down this mantra of ‘There’s nothing available for people’ and putting out there and suggesting to people that there is no support for them to further spread fear, talk to them about the initiatives that are available, talk to them about where they can go for support to ensure that they actually know that it is available. I do not understand why you cannot be positive, given that that is what you are saying your new mantra is, and talk positively about the important processes there are and important services that are currently available for people in need.

But no, you cannot do that, because you want to basically take a political opportunity to try and create some issue that is not there and basically talk about how you have got this bill and how if we do not support this bill we are apparently not committed to mental health, when basically it is clear for all to see that the only people not committed to mental health are those sitting opposite us and continuing to try and lecture us about how much they care more than we do, when it is not the fact. Your actions and the things that you say basically say that. So I am sorry, we are not going to apologise for the position that we have taken on mental health. Our record will stand for itself, unlike what you have done in this space, which will basically be there for all— (Time expired)

Ms MAXWELL (Northern Victoria) (16:31): I rise to speak on the Mental Health Amendment (Counsellors) Bill 2021, and just at the outset I would like to talk about counsellors, counsellors that I have actually worked alongside in schools, and I would like to give them a shout-out for the fantastic job that they do. I know from working in that field and having studied mental health myself that often children do not care about what qualifications you have got. They just need somebody who they can talk to and someone who has the expertise, the knowledge and the skills to be able to refer on when necessary. Trust in a counsellor, trust in anybody that you are talking with, particularly as a child, is so significant and so important.

Derryn Hinch’s Justice Party welcomes the government’s commitment to funding mental health practitioners in all government secondary schools and specialist schools. We desperately hope this expands to primary schools, understanding that providing the earliest support for intervention possible is critical to achieving better outcomes for children. The northern and western regions that Stuart Grimley—sorry, Mr Stuart; it is what the President called him today—and I represent face significant challenges in meeting the demand for mental health services in our communities. It is something we regularly speak about in this Parliament, and we hope that in implementing the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System the government will provide full support for regional areas so that our communities have the services they need.

Speaking of regional and rural areas, we know that there are excruciating lengthy waits. I often have emails from parents asking me—pleading with me—what can be done so that their child can see a professional, because in some instances it can be six to eight weeks. Children, particularly, with mental health problems often cannot wait that length of time. So I implore the government to continue on their road map in supporting the mental health needs of our children.

We also support the role that counsellors play in helping people address many of the struggles they face, and we support the role they already play in our schools, as young people navigate what can be
a very difficult transition to adulthood. This is done through programs such as student support services, primary welfare officers and others, as Ms Watts talked about in her contribution. We do note that schools have the opportunity to employ a range of mental health workers under different funding streams, and this we hope would continue.

The bill seeks to expand the definition of ‘mental health practitioner’ to include counsellors. On the surface this seems like a pathway to broaden the pool of people that can be appointed as mental health practitioners under the government’s mental health practitioners in schools program. The government tells us that this bill will not deliver a single additional counsellor for any Victorian school because the Mental Health Act 2014 simply does not cover it, and yet it is that exact definition that the Department of Education and Training uses for the program. I query that: if the definition is so insignificant for schools, then why does the department use it? At the end of the day schools should have the choice to decide the best fit for their students’ needs. In some cases this could be a social worker or a psychologist or even a psychiatrist, and in other cases it could be a counsellor. Our hope is that if the bill is changed, the department will adjust the requirements for the program accordingly, and they could require a base level of qualification to ensure counsellors have appropriate training for these roles. Now, I am certainly not saying that counsellors do not have appropriate training; what I am indicating is that if they were to come under the Mental Health Act, there may need to be a review of their current training schedules.

Of most concern to Mr Grimley and me is the fact that regional, rural and remote schools are the most at risk of missing out in this program if the department does not choose to allow counsellors to take part. The government have assured us that there is currently no shortage of mental health workers in schools. I would say in rural and regional schools that is definitely not the case, and we know that whether it be wellbeing workers, counsellors, student support services officers or social workers who are working in schools, they are and have been for a significant amount of time absolutely run off their feet. My concern now with COVID and with children resuming school is that we are actually going to see a significantly higher number of children who are needing support.

If the government expands this program to all primary schools in the future after their successful pilot, as our party hopes it certainly will, then it is likely that there could be shortages, especially, as I said, in regional areas. But the Australian Counselling Association tells us that around 30 per cent of the state’s counsellors live in regional areas, so it could be that this workforce is very important to helping to deliver help to young people in the thousands of schools across our electorates. We note the Premier did commit to assessing at the end of the year if the program needs to be expanded, and we will be consulting with our communities and keeping the government accountable to this commitment.

Counsellors should not be treated like outcasts in the mental health debate. Most complete three years of university and 750 contact hours. This is more work in mental health than that of some of those already defined under the act as a mental health practitioner, and I would ask the government to please recognise this.

Whilst we are aware that this bill will not deliver what the opposition are hoping for overnight, we hope the government will take this as notice that mental health in primary schools and all schools matters, and we need the workforce to support its expansion. Some children return to school this week, and many more will return in the weeks to come. As I said, many children will be feeling apprehensive and unsure of how they will interact with friends they might not have seen for months. Some may not even want to go back to school and may suffer separation anxiety, along with many other emotions. Some children will bounce back. Others will have ongoing struggles from the uncertainty that COVID has brought to their lives. Some will develop complex mental health needs. So now more than ever we need all hands on deck to build resilience. No matter their qualifications we need to ensure that there is a professional there for those children when they need that support. We need to strengthen the capacity of children and young people to cope with the uncertainty of the last 18 months, all that has come with it and what might be ahead. We have to ensure that we provide early intervention. We do
not want to be treating kids once they become acute with a mental illness. We think counsellors can play an important part in this process, and so we commend this bill to the house.

Ms BATH (Eastern Victoria) (16:40): I am delighted this afternoon to rise to speak on the private members bill that Ms Crozier has put forward on behalf of the Liberals and The Nationals. It is the Mental Health Amendment (Counsellors) Bill 2021. I would like from the outset to congratulate my colleague in the lower house Ms Emma Kealy, Shadow Minister for Mental Health, for bringing that bill into the lower house. It was rejected by the government, unfortunately. I would also like to thank the many, many people who have emailed me asking me to support Ms Kealy’s bill, as we are doing today. One of those people who wrote to me is actually a teacher in one of the schools in my electorate and is endorsing this position and pleading for this expansion of the mental health services to be agreed to. I want to say to those people who wrote to me, and I am sure to others, I endorse this bill and it should go ahead. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Australian Counselling Association for their work and their support of this bill.

COVID has been absolutely crippling for our young people and for all of our Victorians who have been in and out of rolling lockdowns and isolated from their families but specifically and terribly for children—for children who are coping with remote learning, for children who have been isolated from their friends, for children who are isolated from seeing grandparents or extended families and for children who are not coping in the home environment for a variety of reasons and also through boredom and loneliness. These children are really suffering.

Let me give you some sobering facts. These are facts from this year and last year. There are real people, real children, behind these statistics. The demand for counselling services and Kids Helpline services between the first part of last year and the first part of this year has seen a 30 per cent increase. The weekly demand for Kids Helpline services in Victoria this year, from May to July, has seen a 68 per cent increase. There is a great deal more that I could say on all of those, but I will go through some other statistics. The number of teenagers rushed to hospital after self-harming and suffering suicidal thoughts has spiked by 51 per cent from last year. This is from the Victorian Agency for Health Information report Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment Services in Victoria of June 2021. These are current statistics. The number of the most serious cases, where teenagers needed resuscitation and emergency care, between last year and this year spiked by 41.9 per cent. The report also speaks about a rise in the number of girls aged 12 and above with eating disorders.

Only today we saw in the Herald Sun a discussion around the rise in anorexia. This is what the Royal Children’s Hospital eating disorders service and the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute found. It is all of those complications and constraints and the tearing away of the fibre of young people’s mental health that have created this. Indeed Butterfly Foundation CEO Kevin Barrow made some comments about this. He said the findings were replicated more broadly, with demand up by 30 to 70 per cent at many services.

The foundation runs a national hotline, which has seen an increase of demand of 50 per cent, including repeat callers. A couple of years ago I had the pleasure of attending here in Parliament a joint-party discussion around this, and I am sure the Butterfly Foundation came and spoke to us. The importance of having an ongoing relationship with a valued healthcare professional could not be understated. Mr Barrow was reported in the paper today as having said that ‘many psychologists, specialists and counsellors were fully booked and had long waiting lists’. This bill helps to address some of those long waiting lists. There is another statistic, and then I will finish with that. The Victorian Agency for Health Information found that an average of 342 children aged up to 17 are presenting at emergency departments for mental health reasons each week.

Looking at the comments of Ms Maxwell, I endorse her comments in relation to children needing a trusted source. They need to have someone who is qualified, but often they need that ongoing support that somebody based in the school system can create. Indeed, this bill helps to make that happen.
Looking at the bill, the Mental Health Amendment (Counsellors) Bill 2021 is a simple bill with far-reaching benefits. The purpose of the bill is to amend the Mental Health Act 2014 to include registered counsellors in the definition of ‘mental health practitioner’ so that:

… registered counsellor means a person who is registered as a counsellor by the Australian Counselling Association or the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia …

Those counsellors would have to have had a certain level of qualification—diploma, bachelor, graduate and/or masters—and there can be a varied level of that support provided through that counselling service.

Endorsing this bill will remove a barrier and allow up to 2000 additional qualified counsellors into our system, and it is much, much needed. One of the key things that I have heard today and I have heard those from the government talk about is we are just talking and not acting. This is a direct action and a positive action that has been endorsed by many.

The Minister for Education this week put out a statement on Monday about the government’s plans for mental health practitioners, and I will quote it:

The mental health practitioners can include psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists and mental health nurses …

And they have allocated some money. What this government often fails to recognise though is that in our regional schools these sorts of counsellors can be like hen’s teeth. In our remote schools getting one of those levels, one of those qualifications, is absolutely like hen’s teeth, and therefore allowing others and indeed these counsellors to be accessed by schools would be a windfall and a much-needed benefit to our regional schools and our students in great need.

I also find it flabbergasting that Ms Patten always has a dig at our chaplains. I know from my constituents and my schools in my area how sought-after chaplains are and how sometimes they are vying for the one chaplain, and I have had direct experience where some of those young people were actually quite bereft at the fact that their chaplain had to end up going to a different school. So it is really important that this government recognises the deficiency, the lack of these general psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists and mental health nurses in our regions, and the fact that we need that added layer, those 2000 that could be relating and coming out to our schools.

I would like the house to note—and there has been some discussion on it in the course of this debate—that our social workers are classified as mental health practitioners in Victoria and, as the minister has said, they are sought after. But what has not been stated here is that the social workers are not regulated by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. These people are much needed, but the number of counsellors who are not AHPRA registered actually nullifies their argument.

We need these people. We need to be able to support our youth. There is huge need out there both in the city, where we have had the most exorbitant lockdown in the entire world, and where we have got regions that need services that they cannot get. We have children harming themselves in an alarming manner, and we need this bill to go through and to support those people, those children, those families in need. I fully support this bill.

Ms VAGHELA (Western Metropolitan) (16:50): I rise to speak on the Mental Health Amendment (Counsellors) Bill 2021 regarding including counsellors in the definition of ‘mental health practitioner’. I stand here today as a proud member of the Andrews Labor government. I thank our Minister for Mental Health for the great work he has done in supporting the mental health of Victorians through this difficult time. Our record in supporting mental health is unprecedented. We are delivering the biggest social reform in Victoria’s history. We are investing in the mental health system that Victoria deserves. We all know someone who has faced a struggle with their mental health. It is not as uncommon as some people think. We recognise that the coronavirus pandemic has inflated mental health concerns across the state and the country. Unfortunately still some people do not take mental
Health issues seriously. This is why we started to work on Victoria’s new mental health system. We are building this mental health system from the ground up. We committed to delivering on every single recommendation of the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System, and we are delivering on that commitment. We are investing billions of dollars in the system to give it the boost it needs. These reforms will deliver more community-based services. They will help those who need it the most.

Mental health is a very complex issue, and it has to be dealt with in a delicate manner. We have to ensure that every Victorian gets the care they need. I believe young Victorians have faced significant challenges during this pandemic. The years young Victorians would have spent making friends and learning about the world were put on pause. Hence our investment is also making sure that we support young Victorians.

It is important to support young Victorians in schools as well. The Honourable James Merlino announced the timelines for the 2021 rollout for Victorian government secondary schools across the state that will receive extra support under the mental health practitioners initiative. This initiative will make it easier for young people who are experiencing mental health challenges to get access to the support they need at their school. If students are supported properly, they can focus better on their studies and focus on forming friendships and building their critical thinking. Mental health practitioners offer counselling and early intervention services and coordinate support for students with complex needs, linking them with broader allied and community health services.

I am happy to see that the Liberals support what we are doing to reform mental health supports for students in schools across Victoria. However, I am a bit disappointed that they took so long to realise how important this support is. But nevertheless it is welcomed. I think we in the government will be beyond ecstatic if and when the opposition commits to implementing every single recommendation from the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System. In 2018 we pledged to implement every single recommendation, and we have been hard at work doing exactly that. We have invested a significant amount in student mental health. Every Victorian government secondary and specialist school will have funding to employ a mental health practitioner by the end of the year. All Victorian government school students have been able to access mental health and wellbeing support during the pandemic.

We are also making sure that the practitioners have the highest possible qualification and registration requirements so students can feel supported in the best way possible. These practitioners must be registered with either the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency—AHPRA—or the Australian Association of Social Workers. This is the norm for the industry and ensures high-quality practitioners that follow industry standards. The state already provides counselling through student support services and dedicated access for government secondary students to Headspace counselling.

This is the kind of commitment Victorians deserve, but this proposed change to the Mental Health Act 2014 by the opposition will not place one single counsellor in any Victorian school anywhere in the state. The Mental Health Act does not govern and never has governed who can or cannot provide mental health assistance to students in school settings. The purpose of the existing Mental Health Act and the definitions within it pertaining to mental health practitioners are to govern and regulate the use of compulsory mental health treatment orders in hospitals. It is literally a regulatory framework designed to protect vulnerable people experiencing acute mental illness and to provide guidance and instruction for qualified practitioners in the making of assessments and treatment orders.

The functions of mental health practitioners can significantly impact on the rights of individuals. That is the very reason why mental health practitioners must work at designated mental health services. Designated mental health services are our tertiary specialist mental health services—our hospitals—not our local schools. Australia has no law that requires a person who provides a counselling service to have either qualifications or experience. Any person with no training or skills can call themselves a counsellor. Any person can work as a counsellor, and they are not subject to regulation by the
Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency, AHPRA, or any similar body. Further, ‘counsellor’ is not a protected term under the national health practitioner registration scheme.

Unlike the opposition, we expect a little more rigour from people making decisions which impact on human rights. I understand that trained and qualified counsellors are objective professionals who offer talk-based therapy, and they have a very important role to play in supporting mental health at a community level. However, mental health practitioners as defined in the act perform a specialised role within a designated mental health service. These are not roles for providing counselling in schools. We have to make sure that students are supported with the highest quality of care. School is part of the formative years of a person; therefore we must put care into how we go about providing support.

On top of all this work I have spoken about, in the 2021–22 Victorian state budget we included $200 million over four years and $86.9 million ongoing for a new School Mental Health Fund. This fund responds to the royal commission’s recommendation 17. The 2021–22 state budget invests a record $3.8 billion to create a new mental health and wellbeing system based directly on the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System.

The government continues to closely monitor the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the mental health of Victorians. The last 18 months have been immensely tough on the community, and we are aware of that. Therefore, seeing there is a need for support, we are ensuring that Victorians get the care they need during and well beyond the pandemic. For this, more than $247 million in additional funding has been provided to support our mental health services through a list of programs. As outlined in my contribution, the Liberals do not understand the importance of the right care when it comes to mental health. I do not support this bill.

The PRESIDENT: Members, the next speaker will be participating remotely. I would like to thank the Clerk and the staff who were involved with this, and I would like to thank the member as well.

Ms TERPSTRA (Eastern Metropolitan) (16:58): I rise to make a contribution in regard to this bill, the Mental Health Amendment (Counsellors) Bill 2021, proposed by Ms Crozier. I have had the benefit of listening to the contributions to the debate in the chamber by all contributors today. I try and look for the positivity in this debate rather than focusing on the divisiveness that often has been evident in this debate, sadly. I think from a positive point of view what can be seen is that there is a lot of care and concern for the mental health and wellbeing of our students. I note that although the opposition is proposing this bill and they may see it has some merit, there have been a number of contributions this afternoon that have very aptly pointed out some of the deficiencies in it.

I also think it is sad that throughout the course of this pandemic mental health has been discussed but it has been weaponised. For some in the chamber to come and talk about their care and concern about mental health—where they are coming from really is a place of divisiveness and weaponising of those concerns rather than actually putting front and centre the concerns of students who have mental health concerns. Mr Tarlamis and Ms Vaghela very aptly spelt out the government’s awareness of our concerns around the mental health of our students and that we are aware of the issues that are facing our students.

The pandemic has been challenging for people in a range of ways, not only young people but everybody. This is something that none of us ever had to experience in our lifetime, and we have found ourselves being thrown into very uncertain circumstances. I think the government at one of the press conferences had the chief psychiatrist talk about some of the challenges but also the fact that most people will have the ability to work through this pandemic. Most people, through the care and support and love of their own family support networks, whilst it might be challenging, will be able to step their way through this and recover. But of course we know that there will be a proportion of people who will find recovery or readjustment after the pandemic to be more challenging than perhaps they might have experienced or might have apprehended.
Consequently the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System, which the government committed to and which was prior to the pandemic, is something that is really a watershed moment in Victoria’s history, particularly around the acknowledgement of the need for really strong reformation and support and an injection of funds into our mental health system to ensure that we have a fit-for-purpose mental health system.

But in terms of our students—and I know Ms Vaghela and Mr Tarlamis touched on the level of investment that the government has committed to to help students in our schools—likewise, as I said earlier, this is something that our students have never endured before. I note many of the concerns that students have raised have been around missing their friends, for example, and the social interaction that they have enjoyed when they have been at school. I never thought I would see the day when we would hear children say that they actually want to go back to school. My own children, and I know many of their friends, would always live for the days that they did not have to go to school, but you can see how the pandemic has literally turned some of these norms on their head, and it is quite interesting to see some of the challenges that have been thrown up and how things have been really turned upside down.

These initiatives, and I will touch on some of the points that were made earlier by Ms Vaghela, really are designed to ensure that the mental health practitioners that we have in our schools—the reforms that the opposition wants to introduce really provide a worrying interaction, perhaps, into the framework, where you might have people who call themselves counsellors or psychotherapists who may not have skills or qualification. What we need to absolutely ensure is that any mental health practitioners that are going to be working with students and developing a therapeutic relationship with students absolutely are regulated and have the appropriate and proper qualifications.

It takes a long time to be a psychologist. It takes a number of years—up to six years—and then there is also a registration process and a requirement that you be licensed to practise and also that you continue to update and educate yourself. These are all requirements of AHPRA, the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. So there is important rigour within the system to ensure that there are appropriately and suitably qualified people—people who are actually fit to practise with children. What we know is that the earlier you get mental health intervention for people, the better the outcomes. So leaving things until later, when you cannot get help or access, is something that may add a layer of complexity.

This is why we want to introduce this scheme with our own mental health reforms. Again, there is the investment that we are making through the Victorian government—for example, $200 million over four years, with $86.9 million ongoing for a new School Mental Health Fund. This fund responds to the royal commission’s recommendation 17 and will support the Victorian government schools to select programs, staff and other supports from an evidence-based menu that best suit the students’ mental health and wellbeing needs.

I note the concerns raised by the opposition that counsellors are being left out. That is not the case. Particularly, counsellors can apply to be part of this menu. But again, it is a process that requires rigour. Not everyone will be clearly accepted into that program, because there has got to be rigour around the sorts of people who will be ultimately accepted into schools to support students, their mental health and their wellbeing.

In addition to this, we are expanding the mental health in primary schools pilot to 100 schools. Now, this is important because what we have heard and some of the things we are seeing are that earlier and more complex presentations are being noticed in primary schools. This is a partnership with the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, where the pilot enables schools to employ a mental health and wellbeing lead. That will also help provide support staff to better understand and respond to mental health and wellbeing issues affecting their students—so again, asking teachers to notice that but then giving them a place to go to, so through the mental health leads being able to discuss any concerns or observations they are making in behaviour about their students and then for that mental health lead to
play a pivotal role in being able to get the right support for those students or to provide those supports. The evidence that is produced through this pilot will then inform larger scale research and development of what works to support primary school students and their mental health and wellbeing.

So there is lots of work that is being done on many levels. This really is a watershed announcement and development. But again, the responsible thing to do for those opposite would be to provide bipartisan support rather than again weaponising or providing a wedge to say that we are leaving people out, we do not care about the mental health of students. I think all of those sorts of comments and the incendiary comments on social media and weaponising things, the gaslighting about how the government is not doing this or that really does nothing other than to cause fear and division within our community. It is really just a fake presumption or a fake scenario for those opposite to say that they care. They do not care, because if they did care, they would provide bipartisan support for our reforms to the mental health system, particularly bipartisan support for the reforms from the royal commission and its recommendations. This bill does not do that.

I note the earlier comments. I know I have received and I am sure many of us in the chamber have received campaign-type emails from counsellors purporting to say that they have concerns around this. But again, bombarding MPs with computer-generated emails does really nothing to advance this cause—and that is to ensure that we work together to make sure that students can actually have the support that they need.

In our most recent budget, for example, we have provided $842 million to rebuild the mental health and wellbeing supports for children and young people under our royal commission final report. The announcements are many and they are very well funded: $136 million to reform our 13 infant, child and family area mental health services across the state; $173 million to provide increased hours of care through our youth area mental health services; $141 million to build five new youth prevention and recovery care units and upgrade three existing units; $41 million to establish three brand new infant, child and family wellbeing hubs; $16 million to establish four new hospital outreach post-suicidal engagement sites specifically designed to deliver for children and young people who have self-harmed or who are at risk of suicide; $163 million to expand our existing mobile targeted assertive outreach teams, which provide specialist outreach support to young people with multiple and complex needs; and $6.4 million to Switchboard’s Rainbow Door, increasing support for LGBTQ+ Victorians, as well as a satellite house to support our young carers.

So we have a comprehensive plan and a comprehensive approach, as you can see, that came out of the royal commission. Those recommendations were recognised and adopted by government. We recognise that, as I said, the earlier the intervention for young people, the better the outcomes. Sometimes children will go on to develop complex needs, complex mental health concerns, regardless of the intervention that is provided. Not everything is going to be generated from the pandemic. Some children will have a propensity to develop mental health concerns or problems regardless of the pandemic. Some children have reported that they actually feel that not having to go out has eased their anxiety. So we cannot just say that this pandemic has been bad for everyone, because it has not been. It has been bad for a lot of people, there is no doubt about that, but there are swings and roundabouts to this, and we cannot simply put everyone in the one basket. What we have got to do is respond to the concerns that are put forward by these children and work in the school setting, because kids spend a lot of time at school, obviously.

There are some workforce challenges, no doubt, but those things will be worked on in the system—TAFE, for example. Some of the free TAFE initiatives are also talking about some of the options for people to work in mental health settings, in mental health first aid and the like. So there will be a range of options for people to participate in the mental health space, but particularly in regard to schools we know that we need suitably qualified and appropriately qualified practitioners. We need to ensure that those practitioners who are working with our young people in schools are the best and most suitably qualified mental health practitioners—ones that are regulated by an appropriate body—and that they are designed to get the best support necessary for those young people.
I might leave my contribution there. I know there may be some others who wish to contribute to this debate, but I must say we oppose the bill proposed by Ms Crozier, the Mental Health Amendment (Counsellors) Bill 2021. I would encourage everyone in the chamber to also vote against it.

The PRESIDENT: Thank you, Ms Terpstra. We heard you clearly, by the way. It was very good. That was the first experience in the chamber, and I really appreciate that.

Ms TERPSTRA: Thank you, President. I will conclude my contribution, but I just want to also thank very much the clerks and everyone who has worked behind the scenes to enable the hybrid sitting. It was very easy. I am glad that everyone can hear me in the chamber, and perhaps this is a new approach for us in the Legislative Council. I just want to thank everyone for working on this and making it possible.

Dr RATNAM (Northern Metropolitan)

Incorporated pursuant to order of Council of 7 September:

The Victorian community has gone through a lot since the beginning of last year. The impacts of the COVID pandemic have left no part of our community untouched.

We know that while the last 18 months have been challenging for all of us, children and young people have done it especially tough.

They’ve had their education disrupted for the better part of two school years. They’ve been in and out of lockdown and online learning and learned how to do physical education from the local park or home economics in their kitchens.

For many, they have also been increasingly isolated, cut off from their friends and school communities. Rates of anxiety and mental distress have risen.

As we begin to come back together in person in the new year, in classrooms and workplaces, there will be a lot of healing to do. And having the right supports in place will be crucial to help children and young people adjust to life back in the physical classroom.

Especially as prepandemic our mental health system was already failing our young people.

The Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System found that there were not enough services for children and young people and that less than 10 per cent of the estimated hours of services needed were being delivered.

We agree we need to do better by our young people. And that means making it easier to access mental health care, including by placing more mental health workers and counsellors in schools.

However, the problem is not that the definition of ‘mental health practitioner’ in the Mental Health Act is too restrictive.

The problem is that there isn’t enough funding for our schools to hire and retain qualified mental health staff.

That is why the Greens find it difficult to support this bill today—not because we don’t think there should be more mental health support available to our young people in schools, but because we don’t think this bill offers the solution that is needed. The real solution is more funding to expand the existing network of mental health practitioners in our schools.

Furthermore, as the government has explained, the bill would also cause problems within the existing Mental Health Act and the provision of important and appropriate mental health services throughout the community.

We share concerns about the differences in training and qualification between those who currently fall under the definition of ‘mental health practitioner’, like nurses, psychologists and social workers, and counsellors, and the implications for the functions of mental health practitioners under the act.

The opposition’s approach misses the key issue here, which is that there just isn’t enough funding for public schools in Victoria.

Our public education system is underfunded to the tune of around $1 billion a year—$1 billion that could be used to pay teachers more, to abolish school fees to reduce costs for struggling parents and to employ more teachers, more specialist teachers and more support staff, like mental health practitioners.

Our public education system is a precious public service, like public health, or public housing. And it should be getting the funding priority this government affords its big transport projects.
It’s time for our state and federal governments to revisit their school funding deal. A bad deal that left public schools billions of dollars short, private schools over-funded and Victorian schools some of the lowest funded in the country.

And so returning to face-to-face learning is the right opportunity to rethink how we’re funding and delivering education in our state. We can prioritise creating a world-class public education system in Victoria and tackle the funding gaps that entrench disadvantage for too many students and leave students without proper support services.

Our mental health system as a whole is also underfunded. I hear too often of people waiting months for an appointment with a mental health practitioner. Or those who are unable to access services due to the high cost and are left to struggle in silence.

While we’re absolutely committed to improving our mental health system and making it easier for everyone in Victoria to access mental health services, we do not support the approach taken by the opposition in the chamber.

Because the reforms in the bill, while designed to improve mental health care in schools, have broader implications for how mental health services are delivered in our state.

And while we urgently need a big investment in our mental health system, including in creating more qualified mental health practitioners and improving mental health support for young people, this bill does not achieve any of those outcomes.

The Greens support the recommendations of the royal commission in full, including a major investment in our mental health system and more services for young people.

And federally, we’re pushing to make mental health care freely available for everyone who needs it as part of Medicare.

It is this type of vision of care for all that should be being embraced across the country.

Ms CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (17:12): I will be very brief in my closing remarks, because I have listened to the debate and I want to just make the point that one of the core principles and objectives of the Mental Health Act 2014 is that priority is given to holistic care and support options that are responsive to individuals’ needs. Now, government members said that the opposition does not care about mental health and we have not done anything. Well, in fact it was the former minister, Minister Wooldridge, in 2014 who did massive reform in this place, and it was the Mental Health Act 2014 that I have just referred to. So I think there has been some quite misleading information in relation to what has been done in this important area, and I think everybody in this house is actually committed to providing support to those in need, especially when—as we are talking largely around in this debate—it is around children.

Now, there have been comments from those opposite in the government to say that this was a cheap and dishonest move by the opposition. It is very unfortunate that those comments were made, because there are thousands of counsellors out there, many of whom, 75 per cent, have tertiary degrees and are very well qualified. I want to put on record the contribution made by Ms Maxwell—a very significant, meaningful contribution—that talked to the heart of this issue about what counsellors do and how important they are for children and how they can be utilised to support children.

We know that there is and has been throughout the past 18 months significant trauma through the COVID pandemic—children who are self-harming presenting at emergency departments in record numbers and, as we have seen today, reports of record numbers of eating disorders. These mental health issues are having a massive impact on our children, and they will last for years to come. The government has put forward mental health practitioners to be in secondary schools by the end of this year. That is in a few weeks time. Where are they going to find these people? Nobody is denying that it is an appropriate initiative by the government to undertake, but what we are saying is that we need counsellors and practitioners in our schools now. What this bill does is it removes that barrier—that definition that is a barrier—and that is why it is important that members of this house support this bill so that we can unlock those thousands of counsellors that are in Victoria that can provide the support in schools, in other agencies and in other areas where there is a desperate need.
Just as the Minister for Health said with the 4000 intensive care unit beds, they need staff. That is exactly right. They need staff, not just one person but three people a day, to look after those 4000 intensive care beds. And he quite correctly said, ‘Staff don’t grow on trees’, and I could not agree with him more. That was my problem about announcing such a big announcement, just like this. You have got to have these practitioners in the system. So where are they? They just cannot come out of thin air, and that is the problem with what the government has announced—a very big announcement, but will it be delivered? However, this bill will provide the necessary resources immediately, and that is why I urge all members to support this bill.

**House divided on motion:**

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**Motion negatived.**

**Production of documents**

**COVID-19 VACCINATION**

Mr LIMBRICK (South Eastern Metropolitan) (17:22): I move:

That this house, in accordance with standing order 11.01, requires the Leader of the Government to table in the Council, within 14 calendar days of the house agreeing to this resolution, all documents relating to the COVID-19 Mandatory Vaccination Directions (No 1), (No 2), (No 3), (No 4) and (No 5), including but not limited to:

1. human rights charter assessments;
2. health advice; and
3. any other data or correspondence that the public health team considered in drafting these directions.

Today, just like every other day, the Liberal Democrats are proud to fight for the rights of Victorians. We believe coercion by governments, or anyone else for that matter, is wrong. We believe the liberty of individuals is sacrosanct. It must be fought for, protected and, at the very least, respected. Some will refer to this motion calling for the government to release human rights assessments, health advice and other correspondence used in drafting vaccine mandates as a documents motion. But what this motion is really about is respect and common decency. Hundreds of thousands of Victorians are now in distress. They are being forced to choose between getting a vaccination or getting the sack even though they never agreed to this as part of their terms of employment. Let us not forget that many people who might lose their jobs also have families, and these family units are also under severe strain. The very least the government can do—the bare bones of common decency—is to reveal how they came to the decision to mandate vaccines in the first place.

Some of the more cynical people I speak to say the government will allow this motion to go through and then refuse to comply by claiming executive privilege. I hope this is not the case, because this would be an act of arrogance. The cynics say that the government will do this in the full knowledge
that the mainstream media will pay no notice. I prefer to give people the benefit of the doubt, and I prefer to think the government might not see this as a threat but as an opportunity. I like to believe that the government will start to bring Victorians together by treating them like adults. I like to think that the good journalists believe Victorians have a right to know and will report on the government response without fear or favour. Or at least I like to think that, because the government has claimed executive privilege in the past. They have claimed it is not in the public interest to let the public know why they are being locked up. I can tell you from thousands of emails and phone calls to my office that the public really are more than interested.

These people come from all walks of life. Some are teachers, some are nurses, some are construction workers and some work in a supermarket. Many are depressed, and many are alarmed and wondering if their family has a future in this state. My staff describe the phone calls we receive as reflecting a level of severe and unprecedented emotional distress. These people feel like they are being treated like second-class citizens, and they feel that way because they are. They are being threatened with the sack, not because of their ability but because they have been deemed to be the wrong type of person. To top it all off, they get called right-wing extremists by their own representatives.

If someone was being treated like this because of their religion, there would be outrage. Why should it be any different for their medical status? Let me remind you that this is not a fringe group. This is around 10 per cent of Victorians. This may be our new underclass. They deserve an explanation. They never signed up for these medical treatments when they started their jobs. They deserve respect for their personal choices. They deserve to have their private medical information kept private if they choose to do so—we all do. If the government continues down this path, many of them—nurses and teachers included—will pack up and leave. Tens of thousands of Victorians already have over the last year.

The government can continue to keep their decision-making secret or they can treat this as an opportunity for healing, treating Victorians like adults. Today I encourage the government to end the divisiveness, end the name-calling and bring people together. Nobody doubts that decisions made during the pandemic are difficult, but while the workings remain secret the vacuum will be filled. The government cannot complain about conspiracy theories if they refuse to tell the public what is really going on. Specifically, the government need to answer questions about how vaccine mandates are justified. They need to show how this does not contravene section 10 of the Victorian human rights charter, which requires that any medical treatment must be made with full, free and informed consent. They need to show us how it does not contravene advice from the federal Department of Health’s immunisation handbook that vaccines must be given voluntarily and with the absence of undue pressure, coercion or manipulation.

Whatever anybody may think about the appropriateness of health orders, there should be no argument that the government has a moral duty to explain its actions to those Victorians who are now in distress. Victorians have been on a long, hard road and I urge the government to show them respect by releasing these documents. I commend this motion to the house.

Ms SHING (Eastern Victoria) (17:28): Listening to Mr Limbrick’s motion just now it strikes me that in fact it may have been better drafted as something other than a documents motion, because as we well know in this chamber, not just from this Parliament but from previous parliaments, the well-established principles that guide documents motions relate—as Mr Davis well knows in his esteemed role as Leader of the Opposition—to very narrowcast motions seeking the provision of documents which relate to a specific subject matter.

Now, the motion itself is drafted in a very narrow way and does in fact seek the production of documents which are relevant to the subject matter that Mr Limbrick has referred to—namely, the application of the human rights charter, health advice and data and correspondence the public health team considered in drafting public health directions. What Mr Limbrick, however, has done in getting to his feet today to make the case for production of these documents is to recharacterise the nature of
this motion. I am making a technical point but I think it is a really relevant one because it goes directly to the way in which this house and this chamber makes decisions and the way in which government assesses requests for the provision of documents.

I can paraphrase Mr Limbrick as having said that we may well look at this motion and see that it is in fact seeking charter assessments and other documents but, to paraphrase Mr Limbrick, it is actually about respect and common decency. I do not disagree with the rationale that has prompted Mr Limbrick to draft this motion. It is in fact really important that people have, through parliamentary processes and through the operation of parliamentary democracy in Victoria, an opportunity to seek information and to understand better the rationale for public and government decision-making, particularly where it impacts upon everyday life and particularly in circumstances such as those that we have faced over the last 20-odd months. However, what Mr Limbrick’s motion does in the way in which he has spoken to it goes far beyond the nature of a production of documents motion and indeed seeks to mount a case around the merit or otherwise of public health decisions as they have been taken in the context of the pandemic and in the context of the agile, dexterous, nimble and quick decision-making that has been required as we face—as every other country around the world has faced—a challenge of public health order, of rights and of freedoms the likes of which we have never seen before.

What we have at this stage of the pandemic is well over 55 million infections around the world and well over 4.2 million deaths as a result of COVID. What we have also had has been, around the world and around Australia and in Victoria, a response which has enabled for governments—through declarations of emergency, through acts, through regulations and through public health orders—fetters on personal freedoms, limitations on movement and changes to the way in which people live, work, connect, socialise and access programs and services. Nobody is disagreeing with that. I think, however, that in the midst of making his argument around the delivery of documents in the form sought by this motion Mr Limbrick also needs to have regard for the principles which sit underneath provision of documents and production of documents motions.

We know the challenges that have been outlined extensively in public discourse, including media conferences, parliamentary inquiries, release of peer-reviewed papers, data and genomic sequencing and modelling and extensive materials provided by experts—from the chief psychiatrist, Dr Coventry, through to the chief health officer, Professor Sutton, through to the chief commander, Jeroen Weimar, through to the health minister, Martin Foley, through to the Premier, Daniel Andrews, through to premiers of other states around Australia and of course the chief ministers of the Northern Territory and the ACT, which have also not remained unscathed, as well as the Prime Minister. And what we do know is that throughout this process there has been a cabinet-led approach to the way in which decisions have been taken, which has been informed very clearly and unambiguously by the public health advice. Everyone in this chamber and indeed the Parliament knows the way in which the process has unfurled in the course of developing and releasing public health advice and directions.

The chief health officer retains authority which has been checked and has been balanced against scrutiny, accountability and transparency, including in monthly reports to Parliament; including in briefings that have been made available to members of the Parliament; including through attendance of the deputy chief health officer, Allen Cheng, at Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearings, at which I note not one member of the opposition asked a single question of Professor Cheng; and indeed including in regular information updates, including release of the Burnet Institute modelling and genomic sequencing information.

Information is also provided on a daily basis by the health minister, including as it relates to vaccinations, to case numbers, to primary close contacts, to secondary contacts, to exposure sites and to other information about the way in which we are managing the delta outbreak in Victoria and the way in which we are working through that to bring case numbers down and in fact to enable us to open the entire state in a steady, considered and disciplined way so that again we are not putting undue pressure on our health and hospital system.
We have seen as real-life examples healthcare workers, frontline workers, appear in front of cameras and talk to the daily experiences that they face—pressure sores, exhaustion, abuse and challenges in not having access to the sort of backup and support that they deserve, that every worker in Victoria deserves. We have seen the need to temper violent, riotous acts which have sought to disrupt our response to the pandemic and which ought to be and have indeed been appropriately condemned. We need to continue to work on transparency, and that is why also documents motions such as these are carefully considered and the subject matter of those documents is reviewed so that to the best extent possible information can be provided. Yes, there are exceptions to this. There are always exceptions to the way in which documents can be provided in accordance with documents motions. Mr Davis is no stranger to that, having seen himself processes whereby documents were denied and health performance data was held back for 18 months in fact under the last coalition government when he was health minister.

What we do see however is that we are in fact working really, really hard. The Department of Health is working extraordinarily hard, in addition to the pandemic response and recovery effort, to assess and to work on orders that have been made, including as they relate to the chief health officer and to motions that have been passed seeking public health advice received by him. Requests that are currently the subject of assessment are being reviewed, and they are being processed by way of the usual channels. The department will be considering and continues to consider the nature of those documents and the way in which they can be facilitated, rather than the shield by which they are able to be withheld, in the same way as all other motions of this type have been. There is nothing by way of contradistinction that exists here because of the subject matter of what Mr Limbrick has sought. This application and this motion will be responded to and acquitted in exactly the same way as other documents motions, and that will in fact far exceed the nature of transparency and accountability which, for example, was delivered under the last coalition government.

One of these requests in fact that has been received and follows a motion from this place includes over 7000 pages of documents. Now, that is one example of the volume of material that it is necessary to assess in order to make determinations about how and what material can be released and how government can make sure that this is done in accordance with the requirements that exist around cabinet in confidence and around other considerations. The responses to requests will be finalised as soon as they possibly can. Mr Limbrick may well not get everything that he seeks, but I suspect that in this place and indeed for purposes which may in fact suit Mr Limbrick he will not in fact get what he wants through the course of the government’s response to this pandemic. In any event, the government will not be opposing this motion in the terms sought.

Mr DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan—Leader of the Opposition) (17:38): I am pleased to rise and support this motion 628 brought by Mr Limbrick:

That this house, in accordance with standing order 11.01, requires the Leader of the Government to table in the Council, within 14 days of the house agreeing to this resolution, all documents relating to the COVID-19 Mandatory Vaccination Directions (No 1), (No 2), (No 3), (No 4) and (No 5), including but not limited to:

1. human rights charter assessments;
2. health advice; and
3. any other data or correspondence that the public health team considered in drafting these directions.

Well, the first request for documents on health advice I made to then Minister Mikakos in March 2020. Three lots of orders have been made by this chamber, including on the curfew and retrospective documents from about September last year and then prospective documents beyond that, and none of them have ever been provided—not one. Not one document that is not already public has been provided to the chamber.

So let us clear up all the nonsense about, ‘Oh, we’re going to look at this’. We know that the motion will be carried and no serious documents will be provided. The letter will come back in about two weeks saying, ‘We’re looking at it’, and after that another letter will come back and say, ‘You can
have a copy of the documents that are already on the website. Thank you very much’. But the human rights charter assessments will not be provided, although they should be. They are actually policy documents, not legal advice in the traditional form of legal advice, and the truth of the matter is that all of the public health orders that are made under the Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 have a briefing behind them. The chief health officer or their designated delegate needs that to back up the legal position, the weightings and the decision-making behind the objectives and the aims of the Public Health and Wellbeing Act. There is proportionality and there are requirements for transparency and accountability and basic scientific principles. So all those need to be weighed and measured in a briefing, which is handed to the chief health officer or their delegate. We know the way this works. I was a health minister; I know exactly how this is done. And I also understand from the Ombudsman’s report, which lays out what happened with the then deputy chief health officer with respect to the briefings that were provided to her—weighing and laying out the decisions and the matters in the case of the tower closures in North Melbourne—that in that process she was handed those documents 15 minutes beforehand, disgracefully and without, in my view, proper weight in that decision-making process. You could not conclude otherwise.

In the case of the curfew documents, which are in some ways the ones we know the most about, I can report to the chamber that even this afternoon I have written further about the legal proceedings and our attempts to get some of the documents around the curfew. It is clear that the government has had more than a year. I will just relate to the chamber for its benefit that on the very anniversary of the application for the curfew documents Mr Batskos of FOI Solutions wrote to us saying the government needed more time on the curfew documents—after a year, on the exact anniversary. And then subsequent to that—and this is as a result also of engagement with the government, where there has been a negotiated outcome—they have come back in the last week and said they need another two weeks. This goes on interminably as they seek to kick the can down the road and to avoid the release of documents that people are very much entitled to.

I say just very simply: if you are going to lock down 6.7 million people, or 5.5 million people in Melbourne, and you are going to make all of these orders, people are entitled to see the reasons in full. And what on earth is the alternate argument—that they are too stupid or too incompetent or there is something too secretive about the process that you have undertaken? What a load of nonsense. These are medical and health decisions that are made on the basis of information that is available at the time. I can accept that on occasions chief health officers have to make on-balance decisions. I understand that. But we are entitled to know that. We are entitled to know exactly what is there and what is behind them. We know the curfew was not such a case. We know there was not good evidence behind the curfew, and we know that there is a lot of public health evidence against the curfew.

On the matter of mandatory vaccination directions, they are controversial. I support people being vaccinated—I strongly support people being vaccinated—but that does not mean that the basis of the directions should not be public. I cannot see why the government cannot release these directions. You only have to think about the shocking decision-making process that we are seeing under this government and think about what happened with the construction industry and the switch that occurred late one Friday night as they clamped the whole sector down. With that switch that was made, a different set of orders was in place, and then, bang, late in the evening as the night grew long the chief health officer and his minions slammed the place shut under directions from Daniel Andrews and Tim Pallas. I do not believe that some of these decisions were properly made, and I do not think the bases for some of these decisions will stand up when they are finally scrutinised.

I am all in favour of taking the health advice, but I do say: let us see the health advice. The truth, as I have said in this chamber before, is that not once, never, under any circumstances anywhere, has the government under the COVID-19 approach released the formal written briefings that are provided to the chief health officer or their delegate—never once. I understand that there have to be intrusions on liberty with public health steps and decisions—I understand that—but that does not mean that there cannot be transparency, accountability and a demonstrated proportionality through the release of these
documents. That is in effect what Mr Limbrick is seeking here. He is seeking the actual balancing decisions that are being made by the chief health officer or their delegate, and it is not in my view satisfactory for the government to continue to deny these documents. It is outrageous. It is just such a travesty, and I say it is time they brought these documents forward. We will continue to fight for them through this chamber, in public and in the world of VCAT through the FOI process.

Dr CUMMING (Western Metropolitan) (17:46): My community wants to see the health advice as to why unvaccinated people can no longer have a job—why they can no longer work. It is pretty clear that to have a job is one way of actually looking after your health. When you have a job, you are able to provide for your family and buy food, and food is something that keeps you healthy. When you have a job, you are able to provide shelter, and obviously it is good for your health to provide shelter for yourself and your family. These are fundamental things that people need for their health, and a job is one of the things that provides those fundamental things for their health.

So how does this government believe it is right to say to Victorians, ‘No jab, no job. No jab, no pay’? The Premier has said if you do not get the jab, you cannot work. A government that in the same breath will say that they are all about job creation are just as happy to have people sacked if they do not get vaccinated. Now, why is this government refusing to treat Victorians like adults? They can make up their own minds on what they wish to put into their own bodies. What will the government actually do when 10 per cent of the workforce walk away from their job? Ten per cent of Victorians will be unemployed—police, nurses, teachers walking away. Ten per cent of that workforce will walk away. How will the government actually fill the gap of that unemployment crisis that they are creating?

If you are vaccinated, why do you have to share that information? Why should you? It is your private medical choice. It is your private medical information. It is your private medical status. The reason why it is private is that many, many people get discriminated against for actually expressing their medical conditions at work—many times over. That is why you do not have to disclose your medical information to your employer but just provide a simple medical certificate that says, ‘This person has a medical condition’. It does not go into any more detail, because everybody understands that people discriminate against others due to medical conditions.

For me, I looked at our Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008—the exact act that the chief health officer is using for their orders. The purpose of the Public Health and Wellbeing Act is to promote and protect the public health and wellbeing of Victorians. You will hear this stated by the government many times, but one of the objectives, the principles, of this act, as it actually says, is that:

public health interventions are one of the ways in which the public health and wellbeing can be improved and inequalities reduced …

This is one of the objectives: making sure that inequalities are reduced. It also talks about reducing inequalities in the state of public health and wellbeing. Now, subsection (3) of the objectives actually states that:

It is the intention of Parliament that in the administration of this Act and in seeking to achieve the objective of this Act, regard should be given to the guiding principles set out in sections 5 to 11A.

I am going to read these sections to you:

5 Principle of evidence based decision-making

Decisions as to—

(a) the most effective use of resources to promote and protect public health and wellbeing; and

(b) the most effective and efficient public health and wellbeing interventions—

should be based on evidence available in the circumstances that is relevant and reliable.

6 Precautionary principle

If a public health risk poses a serious threat, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent or control the public health risk.
7 Principle of primacy of prevention
   (1) The prevention of disease, illness, injury, disability or premature death is preferable to remedial measures.
   (2) For that purpose, capacity building and other health-promotion activities are central to reducing differences in health status and promoting the health and wellbeing of the people of Victoria.

So it is the differences in health status. Section 8, ‘Principle of accountability’, is where it all lies:

7 Principle of primacy of prevention
   (1) Persons who are engaged in the administration of this Act should as far as is practicable ensure that decisions are transparent, systematic and appropriate.
   (2) Members of the public should therefore be given—
      (a) access to reliable information in appropriate forms to facilitate a good understanding of public health issues; and
      (b) opportunities to participate in policy and program development.

Where has the government actually given the community opportunities to participate in policy and program development? It continues:

9 Principle of proportionality
   Decisions made and actions taken in the administration of this Act—
      (a) should be proportionate to the public health risk sought to be prevented, minimised or controlled; and
      (b) should not be made or taken in an arbitrary manner.

10 Principle of collaboration
   Public health and wellbeing, in Victoria and at a national and international level, can be enhanced through collaboration between all levels of Government and industry, business, communities and individuals.

Where has this government collaborated with any of the individuals, communities, businesses or industries? I will not go into 11. But these are our objectives here, the objectives that need to be sought.

I have only got 2 minutes to go. I could speak to this for days, I am guessing. But I wish to just read out an email from a registered midwife and mother of three children here in Victoria, who is now facing the loss of her beloved career and who has worked so hard over the last 14 years. Her partner is an electrician of 17 years and is in the same boat due to Daniel Andrews’s recent decision to make vaccinations mandatory for all essential workers. They say that they are not worried that they are being forced into a medical procedure, but they just do not feel comfortable about getting it at this moment in time and they feel that they are being coerced into this and threatened with the loss of their jobs, their livelihoods. They say that they are stressed out and constantly worried about their family’s future if they do not have jobs. She said:

   As a nurse, we were always taught about the importance of informed consent and if I refer to the Australian Immunisation Handbook, it clearly states that “For consent to be legally valid, the following elements must be … given voluntarily in the absence of undue pressure, coercion or manipulation”. For both of us to now be facing the loss of our jobs after so many years of being law-abiding citizens feels alot like coercion to us not to mention undue pressure and of course manipulation at its best.

She goes on to talk about how she has obviously been in her job:

   As with all medical procedures, medications and vaccinations where there is risk there should always be choice.

And she has serious concerns about the mandates— *(Time expired)*

**Sitting suspended 5.56 pm until 6.34 pm.*
Ms TAYLOR (Southern Metropolitan) (18:34): I do rise to speak on this, essentially a documents motion, and I will seek to acquit some of the core elements that relate to the debate we are having today. I have heard a lot of discussion so far about issues of transparency, and I think it is really important that we be very clear and put it on the table—although to be honest this has happened a number of times that we have had to put it on the table—because in spite of the best efforts of so many involved, not least our government, it appears that no number of documents ever seems to satisfy a number of people around this chamber.

Having said that, let us go to that. Let us look at exactly what the government has been providing, shall we? I will just go to some of the processes as well, because there is very much a formal process in place to make sure that there is integrity and transparency in this process. Advice on restrictions is signed off by our chief health officer and endorsed by cabinet, so first protocol there. Our senior public health team, I should add—because there seems to be an inference, or there is a questioning about the qualifications, the credibility of our public health team, so let us just be clear what the make-up of our public health team is—is made up of expert medical professionals and some of the leading public health physicians and infectious disease experts in the country, including Professor Brett Sutton and Professor Ben Cowie. Okay. So that is what we mean by ‘expert advice’. We are not just winging it here; we are getting the most eminent professionals who have the expertise and the public health experience to seek the correct advice.

Now, there are further elements to this, just to add, because I am not sure—the signal that is often sent by those opposite is somehow that they know better than public health experts, which I find odd. However, it is the world, the unusual place we are in, that medical professionals seem to have gone down a rung in the sense there seem to be certain persons in the community who no longer value the expertise of medical health professionals. But to add to all the influences, if you like, all the expertise that contributes to the outcome in terms of the public health advice, there are numerous ways in which the expertise of the broader medical community is fed into the department, including through the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee—I do not know if those opposite value that; maybe they do, maybe they do not—and the Communicable Diseases Network Australia, through other forums that include identified public health and clinical leads and experts in Victoria’s hospital system, through clinicians in the state’s network of public health units and through regular contact with major medical and allied organisations.

Now, I would like to also put to bed some of the conspiracy theories that are fed by those opposite who are trying to undermine the hardworking professional experts who have seen us through this pandemic—the Hippocratic oath to preserve life.

A member interjected.

Ms TAYLOR: That is right, because I think what gets lost in all the smear and all the undermining and the devaluation, if you like, of medical expertise is that there is actually a very sound principle underpinning the advice that is sought and the decisions that are made, and that is to keep Victorians alive and safe. Heaven forbid we should care about fellow Victorians.

The directions that are signed off by the chief health officer—get this—are publicly available on the department’s website. I checked them the other day. I went there, and do you know what? It only takes you about 2 minutes. You can get on there and you can see all those directions that are publicly available. So can I put to bed this constant smear, this constant undermining of our public health professionals, and note you can get it on Google. You can google it and you can get the public health advice, the public health directions. In addition, a monthly report is provided—

Mr Davis interjected.

Ms TAYLOR: Oh, yes, because Mr Davis is a public health expert. I am sorry, he has got more expertise than all these public health professionals, Professor Allen Cheng and the like—
Mr Davis: On a point of order, Acting President, the member has asserted that you can get the advice online. That is not true. You can get, as she said, the orders, but the orders are distinct from the advice.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Mr Bourman): Mr Davis, that is not a point of order, and you know it. Ms Taylor, if you would like to continue.

Ms TAYLOR: I will. Just because the information is unpalatable to the opposition, that does not mean it is not correct. In addition, a monthly report—

Members interjecting.

Ms TAYLOR: No, we are going to get to this. Let us get down to the weeds of this. A monthly report is provided to the Parliament. The chief health officer formally briefs members of Parliament each month, including those opposite, as part of the state-of-emergency legislation extension—who knew!—and last year appeared before numerous COVID parliamentary inquiries for hours on end. This is in addition to hours of media interviews conducted each and every day by our public health profession.

Mr Davis: On a further point of order, Acting President, the member is reading slavishly from a piece of paper, a document, and I hope that she will be prepared to provide that to the house.

Ms TAYLOR: We will be watching every one of your members. If you are going to call me out on that, I will call out every one of your members on that from now on.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Mr Bourman): Order! Ms Taylor! There is no point of order on that.

Ms TAYLOR: I am personally offended by that. I am personally offended. I am allowed to refer to data and notes. Unlike those there who pluck it out of the universe, I am going to refer to data, so take it or leave it. If you do not like correct information and data and you find that unpalatable, then that shows who you are, because you pluck it out of the air. I see presentation after presentation from those opposite who just wing it the whole way through and do not refer to any specific data or documents, and I am personally offended.

Mr Davis interjected.

Ms TAYLOR: I beg your pardon. Enough!

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Mr Bourman): Order! If we could just get back to the issue at hand, that would be a lot better.

Ms TAYLOR: I am trying to acquit the issues raised by those opposite. I get that they are trying to deflect and distract me from the issue at hand because it is unpalatable to them, but I like to refer to information rather than winging it like those opposite.

Now, you were talking about the curfew. It was decided on the basis of proportionate, timely, expert, evidence-based public health advice, with the intent to reduce the serious risk to public health caused by COVID-19 driving the exercise of power. Now, I want to get down further to the matters concerning the information that those opposite do not believe they have access to, because I am going to put on record what they have. And, yes, I am going to refer to facts. And I am sorry that you find that unpalatable. The public health advice provided by the minister and by the chief health officer and publicly available sets out in detail, and note that I am referring to facts, the current situation of the pandemic, the current statistics and outbreak numbers, the relevant legislation that informs the advice, the approach that the chief health officer takes to the advice, the rationale for the advice and, last but certainly not least, the actual advice located on—are you listening, do you want the data, do you want the information or do you want me to wing it? Listening now—page 149 and signed by the chief health officer. Note that I referred to a fact—and no apologies for that. The report also outlines the
Mr **FINN** (Western Metropolitan) (18:44): I thank Ms Taylor for her contribution, and a very spirited contribution it was, it has to be said. I rise to support the motion put forward by Mr Limbrick and support it indeed very, very strongly. Ms Taylor made mention of us finding information unpalatable. Well, it is very hard to be finding anything unpalatable when you do not get any information to start with. That is actually what this is all about. That is what we want—we want information.

One of the issues surrounding the government’s refusal to hand over advice from the chief health officer is: why all the secrecy? I mean, if we were at war and you did not want the enemy to find out, yes, you would have secrecy. That is fine. You could cope with that. And we have heard in previous months that the virus is quick, it is clever. It can even climb through windows. Apparently it can now read as well. Why otherwise would you not want us, the people of Victoria, to know why the decisions have been made? This is why people have just given up on this government, have walked away, have said, ‘We’re not going to take this anymore’, and are just doing their own thing—because the government will not take people with them. That is the problem. We have a Premier who gets up there every day bullying and abusing people and blaming and castigating and chastising them for anything and everything. All he has to do is get up, explain what he is doing and explain why he is doing it and I think he would get a far better reaction from the people of Victoria than he is getting now. I am absolutely convinced of that.

It is a bit like the vaccinations. I mean, we have heard a number of people in a number of areas express deep concerns about the vaccinations. Now, I have to say to this house, as I have before, that I am not an anti-vaxxer—I have my full vaccination quota for this year in fact—but there are a lot of people out there that are deeply concerned about the vaccination. Now, all the Premier needs to do is to explain to people that this thing is safe, that this thing will not hurt them. Instead he gets up there and he is belligerent and he is obnoxious, everything that we have come to expect of Daniel Andrews, and he refuses to explain to people what their concerns are. He will not address their concerns. There is all this secrecy. That is one thing about this government, apart from the stuff-ups and the lies—there is secrecy about everything.

What this motion is seeking to do today is to break down a bit of that secrecy, and for that Mr Limbrick has my support and indeed my admiration. I think this is a particularly good motion because it does refer to the COVID-19 Mandatory Vaccination Directions (No 1), and (No 2), (No 3), (No 4) and (No 5) as well—almost as many directions as indeed there have been lockdowns—and it refers to the human rights charter assessments, health advice and other data or correspondence that the public health team considered in drafting these directions. Now, I think when you lock up nearly 7 million people you had better come up with a pretty good reason for doing it, not just ‘Because I say so’. That is what the Premier says—‘Because I say so. Because you must follow my orders’. That is what he says. That is not the way to bring people with you. You need to explain what you are doing. This motion is actually attempting to help the Premier. It is actually attempting to get the message across to people, to find out exactly why these things are happening.

As I say, I do not understand all the secrecy. I do not understand why the Premier is so reluctant to explain to the people of Victoria exactly why he is doing what he is doing. Now, for example, with the curfew we know there was no reason, we know there is no reason. The curfew is a nonsense. There is no medical reason for the curfew. There is no law and order reason for the curfew, although I understand crime is down as a result of it. I suppose, if you do not have people outside their homes, they probably cannot burgle somebody else’s. It is extraordinary that we have this curfew. We did not even have a curfew during World War II, but here we have a curfew imposed by a Premier for no reason at all, or for only one reason: because he can. That is why he is doing it: because he can.
This Premier, more than anything else, is a bully. He wants people to do what he wants them to do irrespective of the reason. I would welcome any information at all coming from the Premier on this, particularly with regard to the vaccination mandate because it is causing a great deal of grief to a lot of people right around the state. I can understand why those employed in aged care and perhaps the health professions have to be vaccinated, but I do not understand why gravediggers or bus drivers or whoever have to be vaccinated. It makes no sense at all. I think we need to find out why. That is what this motion is about. It is about finding out what the medical advice is so that people know exactly what is going on.

Before I conclude my remarks I just want to make mention of a term that I find particularly repugnant, and that term is ‘authorised workers’. If that is not straight out of Stalinist Russia, I do not know what is. ‘Authorised workers’—why do we need to be authorised to work? Everybody has the right to work. For God’s sake, there are not enough people working who should be. Why do we have this? Mr Tarlamis is over there saying, ‘There’s nothing wrong with that’. Well, from the Socialist Left perspective I can understand authorised workers would be fine—that would not be a problem at all. But I find that attitude that we have to be authorised by the government in order to earn a living—to look after our families, to pay our bills—appalling. I find that despicable. Here we have a government that is just using that to crush people, to destroy people, and it has been doing it now for 20 months, and they will not tell us why. ‘Purely’, says the Premier, ‘because I told you so, because you are doing the wrong thing’. ‘You must have a civic responsibility’, he says. He says all these things every day, but he will not tell us why, and I want to know why he will not tell us why. There has got to be a reason. Mr Tarlamis might know; I do not know. Somewhere somebody has got to know. The Premier has an opportunity from this point on to back himself in, to actually explain to people why he is doing what he is doing and to take people with him.

Already we have seen riots in the streets, scenes that I never thought in a million years I would see in Melbourne, Australia. We have seen international condemnation of what is happening here in Victoria. We have had press conferences in Poland, we have had protests in the United States, we have had protests in the United Kingdom—not against China or North Korea, but against Victoria, against Daniel Andrews. And the reason that people are protesting, the reason that people are getting so annoyed with the Premier, is that he is so arrogant, he is so belligerent, he will not take people with him, he will not explain his actions. He just refuses, and he does not see why he should have to explain to the people of Victoria why he is doing what he is doing. Why the secrecy? That is what I want to know: why the secrecy? I am hoping that this motion will go some way towards removing that secrecy.

I commend Mr Limbrick again on moving this motion, and I sincerely hope that this house will support it in the hope that we can go on in this period in our history with a view to sharing information that should be shared among the people of Victoria.

Mr QUILTY (Northern Victoria) (18:55): I will be brief. This motion is about honest government. This government abuses secrecy powers to hide information from the public. This secrecy is an intentional attempt to manipulate voters. Over the last two years the Andrews government has used emergency powers to lock Victorians in their homes, force mask use, close businesses, implement a curfew, deploy armoured police, fire pepper spray at 11-year-olds, have police officers shove old ladies to the ground, arrest pregnant women in their homes for making Facebook posts—and now force vaccinations.

The act that enables these actions is the Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008. As a safeguard against human rights abuse, this act requires the government to conduct a human rights assessment every time it uses these powers. We have requested these assessments as well as the evidence being used to justify the infringements on human rights, and this government has consistently used confidentiality powers to keep these assessments secret.

So let’s get this straight. This government believes that the information about how its abuse of powers affects your rights is information you are not allowed to know. They say that it is not in the public
interest for the public to know how the government are behaving. They say that it is not in the public interest to inform the public of the justification for the actions of this government. They say that ignorance is strength—the less you know, the stronger they are.

Liberal Democrats take a different view. We believe in honest government, that the government represents the people, and that means that information known to the government is information that ought to be available to the public. The release of information about why your rights are being restricted is in the public interest. The release of health advice, correspondence and evidence related to the greatest infringement of civil liberties in decades is in the public interest. Liberal Democrats believe in honest government and an informed citizenry.

We have heard government speakers trotting out the tired old line that the government has made the information available, presumably on the theory that if you repeat a lie enough someone will believe it. One day someone will be pulled up for misleading the house. Where is the public health advice for using rubber bullets on ordinary Victorians? Looking at all the human rights abuses that the government has enacted under these powers, I do not think any reasonable person would be under any illusions about why the government wants to hide these assessments. We know that they will show that the government has acted illegally over and over again for the entire length of this state of emergency. But the government only compounds the offence by continuing to conceal these documents. Open and transparent government requires the government to act on this motion and release the assessments. Show us your working.

Mr Erdogan: I rise to speak on the matter before the house, which is a documents motion which is not dissimilar to a number of other documents motions moved by the state opposition in this chamber over the last 18 months. I note the motion reflects on and is seeking information in relation to the COVID-19 outbreak and pandemic, which not only has absorbed Victoria or Australia but has globally affected everybody. This morning when I looked at the news the death toll was reaching the millions, and obviously daily thousands of people are dying. It is also an important point to make that today we know there were 11 people in Victoria who passed away from the COVID-19 pandemic, and my thoughts are with them and their families. It is very difficult to lose even one person, but with knowing today that we lost 11 it is a difficult time for all Victorians.

I think this motion is a reflection on a number of measures taken and a number of decisions along the way. Ms Shing earlier tried to reflect on the cabinet decision-making process during this pandemic, and I thought she gave a pretty good explanation of how decisions have been made through the cabinet-in-confidence process, the privilege process. I know Mr Quilty does not seem impressed by those, but nonetheless they are processes that are in place for good reason. Under our system of government and the separation between the legislature—all of us here—and the executive, the executive and the cabinet in particular should be allowed to have free and fair debate. That is why it is important that those debates, although they sometimes can only be preliminary discussions, are kept in confidence, because sometimes differences of opinions within that room can be portrayed differently. Whereas I think that difference of opinion is a healthy sign of democracy, sometimes it can be publicised differently, and that is why the cabinet-in-confidence processes in the Westminster system are so valued. So with some of the documents that have not been released in the past, I understand that was the basis on which they were not released.

But there are a number of other measures—and people talk about accountability and transparency—and I think it is all important, because we all want to see open and transparent government. And that is what I am impressed with—

Mr Finn: No, you don’t.

Mr Erdogan: I have been impressed with all the speakers today, except for Mr Davis’s interjections, because I think everyone talked about the need for open, transparent, accountable government, and that is what I support. That is why I think the health measures till now that have been
in place and the vaccination program are needed, because we want to open up safely, because we do not want what happened in other cities around the world to happen here in Melbourne.

Obviously it has been difficult, and people are fatigued no doubt. And for me, we have talked about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and we have talked about the impact on businesses, on communities, but I think it is more than just businesses, because as far as I am concerned the most important thing is not money but it is people. And I want to see communities together. I want to see grandparents and grandchildren. I want to see siblings reunite. I want that too, but I want it to be done as safely as possible.

All along—and I am someone who likes to take a positive light on life, and I like to see the good in people—I feel governments of all persuasions, state and federal, went in with the best intention, with the best plans for combating this once-in-a-century pandemic. Nonetheless even the best plans may not eventuate, like our vaccine rollout. The goal originally was that the vaccine rollout would have been completed by now, but obviously there were delays—there might have been planning issues. I do not make any negative inferences; that can occur. It is a once-in-a-century pandemic. I like to see the light in people, and so I feel all governments have tried to keep people safe. Along the way decisions are made. They need to be made promptly. So people are talking about a broad consultation like this is a planning process for a residential building. This is not the case. The pandemic is changing, there are variants and the information where possible has been provided, I have felt, in a quite timely manner.

In our democratic system there are processes, checks and balances, and the well-known ones are those such as question time and request of documents. There is the parliamentary committee process, and I have been impressed I must admit by the candid responses we have had from Dr Sutton and the health team at a number of committee inquiries. I sat on the Legal and Social Issues Committee when the people from the Department of Health and Human Services made a couple of appearances. More recently on my own Economy and Infrastructure Committee, Mr Tarlamis will recall, we did an inquiry into the effects of the global pandemic on the tourism and events sector. Again, the people from the Department of Health came and explained their reasoning for some of the necessary health restrictions. I think it is a broad process, and our system of government does have, I feel, quite robust checks and balances.

A number of speakers—Dr Cumming and Mr Finn—reflected on the employment impacts on people from the mandatory vaccination requirement. I think that is an important point to raise, because obviously the right to work—being a member of the Labor government—and jobs is one of the main reasons why I got involved in politics, to make a difference for working people. But I think it should be also stated that it is unremarkable to have some level of health checks in place for certain conditions of employment. It is quite common in certain industries. For example, my brother-in-law is a pilot. Pilots have to have regular health checks and need to provide health records at times and any medications they have been prescribed. It is a condition of employment. So I want to make that clear.

Of course a number of speakers spoke about the proportionality of any orders, and I concur totally. I think right now what we are going through is an outbreak with a variant which is causing multiple deaths every day. So are the orders proportionate to the circumstances we are in? I believe they are. Obviously it is difficult, and those orders and any orders made should be always assessed at the time. What was appropriate today, proportionate today, might not be that tomorrow or in six months or a year or two years, so I think general review and updating of policies and procedures and the legal system is important. That is a point that I think we could all agree upon, yes, the proportionality.

In terms of the information, I think they have been availing themselves. Ms Taylor reflected on her time on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee and the fact that, again, the health department was quite transparent in being available. The deputy chief health officer attended and was willing to answer any questions as required.
I think safety issues in the workplace have captured the interest of people—rightly so—and I think employers and employees all have duties. An employer has the duty to minimise risk of injury or illness. At this time, when this virus is spreading quite fast, they have an obligation to minimise risk of injury or illness in this scenario, and obviously some employers have already moved ahead with mandates. I personally, like I said, want to state as well that I do not want to use this platform to ridicule anybody due to their choices. I do not think that helps the public debate on this issue. I respect everyone’s opinions, but at the same time, like I said, steps to minimise risk of illness are proportionate at this time. I think that is important to delineate from other discussions. I think there is a lot of misinformation out there—that is concerning—and others will have genuine health concerns, so we need to be understanding. I think as public officials we should not be playing politics with the pandemic, and we should try to provide as much information as we can so that people get the information from the right sources.

When I say people play politics, I will just give one example that sticks out, because I know people talk about playing politics and trying to use the pandemic to their advantage. We have had members of the state opposition during this pandemic effectively inciting violence towards government members of Parliament. I am referring to, for example, the ‘capture or kill’ cards reminiscent of the Gulf War. One member of the state opposition was publishing on their social media platform last year capture or kill cards with graphics of the faces of elected members of Parliament. That is the kind of politics we are talking about, and that is just not on. I know there are some responsible members on all sides of politics, and I hope that they can see the reason and see the light too. But we have got to stop playing politics. Let us focus on the way out.

I am really impressed by and I want to give a shout-out to the people of Bayside, with an over 90 per cent vaccination rate as of today. That is fantastic work from the people of Bayside. But I also want to make special mention of those people who have had it tougher, the people of Hume. Only a few weeks ago they were on 50 per cent, and now they are over 80 per cent. It is obviously through the work of community leaders, our public health experts and the doctors and GPs in their roles in those multicultural communities—what an amazing achievement. I think we need to give credit where credit is due, but the key is not to play politics with this issue. I think the information is out there. Let us not put fear into people. Let us give people hope. We are on the way out. I look forward to seeing my siblings and also the rest of my family this summer. Everybody, stay safe.

Ms CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (19:08): I am very pleased to be able to rise and speak to Mr Limbrick’s motion, because it does go to the heart of what we have been arguing for and I think what many Victorians have been wanting, and that is greater transparency around the decisions made by this government under the circumstances that Mr Erdogan has just spoken about in terms of COVID-19 and how it has been a very serious issue. Now, no-one is denying that. We are all very aware of the situation.

I am very pleased that around the world there are countries that appear to be getting on top of their COVID-19 situation and getting back to life in a far more normal way. Of course in the northern hemisphere they are coming into their winter, and we will have to see what happens, but it is very encouraging to see so much activity and so many things happening in countries around the world. But that is in direct contrast to what is happening here in Victoria, Melbourne being the longest locked down city in the world. What a shocking title. It is not a title to be proud of. It is not an indication of success. It is an indication of government policy failure, because the Andrews government has locked Victorians down time and time again. Last year they could not control the virus with the debacle in contact tracing, which was absolutely catastrophic. This year they have been too slow in putting in place what they needed to do, and of course we are in lockdown because our health system is under enormous pressure. They have not done the work that they promised they would do 18 months ago. And whilst we are living like this the restrictions that are in place and the decisions that have been imposed upon every single Victorian have taken away so many rights and freedoms that we enjoyed just over 18 months ago. We cannot take those for granted.
It is incredibly important that when we are having these policy decisions thrust upon us we understand why. This is why Mr Limbrick’s motion is important, because I think every Victorian has a right to understand why the government is mandating vaccination. It is a very rushed, panicked policy when you think it is 6 October and on 1 October the government made this decision. There has been no time for consideration for the Victorian community to really understand what such a decision will mean for how people operate.

There are legitimate questions around how business needs to manage this. How do they police it? What about people who have got genuine concerns about vaccination? I say again the government has not done the work on this, because there has been no education about the benefits of vaccination. The Premier up until a couple of weeks ago just spoke about his state hubs. He never spoke about the work the GPs had been doing. They have been vaccinating since early March. They were the first to do it. The federal government provided so much assistance. They said, ‘We’ll help you with the booking system in March’. ‘No, we’re not doing that. We’ll do our own’. Look at that. That was an absolute debacle. We did not get that up.

Mr Finn interjected.

Ms CROZIER: Yes, it was, actually, Mr Finn—a total cock-up. It was bungled in June; it delayed that. And Mr Erdogan has been talking about playing politics. I have to tell you, the way the Premier has behaved through this whole vaccination rollout has been a disgrace, because he had every opportunity to run campaigns into the areas in the north and west, where the virus was. It did not happen. We got an email last week from leaders—Mr Ondarchie is very well aware of this—to run into the communities. That is too late. That is just too late. This should have been done months ago. The preparation has been appalling, and now you have got a panicked government making panicked decisions. They make decisions like this, very significant decisions, that say, ‘You Victorians will have a vaccine; otherwise you’ll lose your job and get fired’, or as you said, Mr Erdogan, ‘Employers have a duty to minimise risk’. The burden is all on the employers, and the government is walking away and washing its hands. ‘We have every right’ is what you said, Mr Erdogan. And most employers do. They have done the right thing. They are encouraging their staff to get vaccinated. They are doing the right thing.

Everybody wants to get out of these lockdowns. Remember, we are the longest locked down city in the world. Nobody wants to be here. You do not want to be here. Your constituents are my constituents. They are ringing my office the whole time telling me how dreadful your government is. They want out. They want to get vaccinated and get out. They want a pathway. They want that hope that you spoke of, but they do not see it under your government. They just do not trust or respect the Premier anymore, because he has changed the goalposts so many times, and that is the problem.

This is why we need to see what the decisions are that the public health team have made to mandate vaccinations. I am very supportive of health workers being vaccinated to protect the vulnerable—people working with vulnerable Victorians. Absolutely I am; do not get me wrong. But this is about transparency, this is about proportionality and this is about trust and respect for the Victorian community—not for your government or your leader, because that is gone. It is about respecting the Victorian community, and that is why Mr Limbrick’s motion is actually very important. Transparency and trust: that is what we need in this state. We have not got that. We have not got it with any of your leadership. I think it is shameful where the leadership of this state has led our state, and I think it is going to take a very, very long time to recover. So I would urge every single member in this house to support Mr Limbrick’s motion, because it goes to the heart of what we need: trust and transparency.

Dr KIEU (South Eastern Metropolitan) (19:15): I rise to speak to the documents motion, and I cannot support this motion because this motion is not just factually wrong, is not just a baseless accusation, it smears and undermines the effort and the work that has been done by the government, by the experts and by the majority of Victorian citizens. It is in itself is propagating conspiracy theories and misinformation in a sense by presenting this motion as if the government and as if the experts are
hiding behind some uncalled-for secrecy. In fact I have been listening to the debate in the house, and at times the language which has been used is quite stirring. It verges on incitement of the people because of the implications and the unfactual things that have been said. For example, it is as if the human rights of the people of Victoria have been taken away. Yes, the Victorian government and in fact the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission have considered very carefully limiting their rights because of the emergency. No right is more important than the right to life, and with the virus rampaging around a lot of people have been losing their lives. Look at the USA—700,000 lives lost there.

Members interjecting.

Dr KIEU: Okay, you talk about the longest lockdown. Look at Argentina. Over 100,000 people lost their lives. There is no pleasure in imposing very strict restrictions, but it is necessary to preserve the life of the people, to shore up public health and to maintain the health system and the hospitals, because we have to deal at the same time with not only COVID but also non-COVID patients. The restrictions are reasonable and very limited, and they have been done for a very good reason and with very good and thorough consideration. And they will be lifted when it is no longer necessary to impose such restrictions in order to preserve life, health, public health and the health system.

People talk about vaccination. The Premier for hundreds of days last year and this year has been standing up and answering all the questions. I do not know whether the opposition have listened to that, or worse still they might have listened to that but twisted the argument and the appeals from the Premier and the ministers. The Premier in particular has encouraged and even implored the people of Victoria to take up vaccinations, and do you know what? I do not need to remind the house why we are in this situation of lagging behind Sydney in vaccination. It is because our Prime Minister has botched up the vaccine acquisition badly, and when these things happened the vaccine was not available to us until very late, after many false promises. I do not need to also remind the house that last year with the first strain of the virus we successfully suppressed it. We had months of freedom. Why are we now in this very difficult situation? Isn’t it because Sydney closed down too little, too late, plus the fact that delta is a very virulent virus?

But now we are near the end of the tunnel. The light is in sight, and we are going to have the vaccinations to reach the milestones that have been agreed to at national cabinet. Once the 70 per cent mark and 80 per cent mark have been reached, we are looking forward to coming back to COVID-safe activities and back to the vaccinated economy. Those are the facts, and they have been twisted. They have been used in a way as if there is no transparency. Not just the members of this Parliament but also the people of Victoria have access to the advice of the experts on how vaccination can help. Let me remind people that of the hundreds of people now in hospital, only 5 per cent of those who have been hospitalised are actually fully vaxxed, and most of those 5 per cent have had underlying conditions. So 95 per cent are either unvaccinated or have had only one dose and are yet to have their second dose.

The members of this Parliament and this house particularly have had access to many reports from the chief health officer and from health experts and have had the opportunity to question and to raise any concerns, to dig deep into the reasons why and to understand how the orders are being imposed through the briefings that have been provided by the department and the chief health officer himself or his delegates.

Talking about vaccinations, of the state clinics, we have fixed clinics, we have mobile clinics and we also have pop-ups across the community. So far we have been able to provide from the government facility 3.7 million vaccines and from GPs and pharmacists another 7.5 million. Two-thirds of the vaccines supplied by the federal government have gone to private GPs and also to pharmacists. The state government itself has also provided grants to various local government areas as a focal point to help the GPs and the pharmacists open longer and to have more staff on so that the vaccinations can be taken up more quickly. In fact 355 providers—namely the GPs and the pharmacists—have applied
for the grants, and all of them have been provided with funding to boost the vaccination rates, particularly in the LGAs where they are needed most.

This motion is calling for information that has been provided where it should be provided. It is misleading, at least in my mind, to stir up and propagate misinformation implicitly. Even the language being used in this house just now during the debate verged on inciting the sentiments of people and also on trying to mislead people. As I and my colleagues have been stating during the debate, we cannot support this motion.

Mrs McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (19:25): In rising to speak on Mr Limbrick’s motion today I must admit a certain difficulty, because we just should not even be here debating this motion. It should be unnecessary. Mr Limbrick’s straightforward request, which in any properly functioning democracy would be wholly unnecessary, is just the latest of so many pleas to a government which constantly refuses to listen and stubbornly refuses to learn.

On the first part, it is clear that in a properly functioning system the information requested by Mr Limbrick would be released. It is not just about archaic procedure. It goes to the heart of our historical belief in democratic scrutiny and our philosophical desire for open government. Nor do arguments about unprecedented emergencies wash. Even if they were actually true, which on balance I find hard to accept, they cannot override the fundamental principles of our finely calibrated system of government. Certain procedures may need to be varied in the interests of speed, but the essential democratic duty of government cannot be. Any degradation of safeguards must be limited, proportionate, frequently reviewed and actively mitigated. Information is vital in any democracy. Without knowledge of why things are done it is hard to challenge them. It is no accident that the complete absence of public knowledge of government deliberation and decision-making is the hallmark of repressive and despotic regimes worldwide.

In Victoria it seems our only remaining guarantee is the judicial system. Looking at court judgements and VCAT proceedings I note that information such as that which we seek today does sometimes eventually emerge. Why though must it be dragged out in lengthy and expensive legal action? It is not just disrespectful to Parliament; it is an insult to taxpayers. This is information sought by publicly funded officials, departments and ministers from publicly funded health advisers, and yet it takes more publicly funded court sessions fighting publicly funded government lawyers to prise it out. It is beyond disgraceful.

Still, I am under no illusion that this government will listen to my arguments or even Mr Limbrick’s in defence of Victoria’s hard-pressed taxpayers any more than they will act on my plea and that of this side of the house that diluting parliamentary scrutiny is ultimately disrespectful to the Victorians we all represent. But perhaps they may be swayed by the practicalities, for it is increasingly clear that the Premier’s high-handed, contemptuous, bunker mentality is in fact becoming counterproductive. I will conclude my comments there so Mr Limbrick can sum up his very important motion.

Mr LIMBRICK (South Eastern Metropolitan) (19:28): I would like to thank everyone for their contributions on the debate on this today. They got a lot more heated than I expected for a simple documents motion. I would just like to address a couple of things. There was talk about the chief health officer briefings. There actually have been no CHO briefings for August or September, or if they happened, they did not happen with me invited.

I would like to point out something else—that even libertarians accept that under certain circumstances rights can be limited, in exceptional circumstances, and we did not oppose the emergency powers when they first came out. The reason that we ended up opposing them was that the workings of why the rights of Victorians were being limited were not being shown to us. We still have not seen, and we have not seen in the whole time of this pandemic, the human rights charter assessments, the assessments that must be made when the public health directions are made to show why it is justified, proportionate and necessary that these rights are limited.
If you look on the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission’s website, they talk about the rights that may be engaged by vaccine mandates, including:

- the right to life
- the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief
- the right not to be subjected to medical or scientific treatment without full, free and informed consent
- the right not to have privacy unlawfully or arbitrarily interfered with
- the right to equality and to be protected from discrimination.

Now, these rights presumably must all be engaged in the vaccine mandate directions. However, no-one has seen any of these, and when the government talk about the vaccine mandates, the only thing that they talk about is the right to life. They do not talk about what the balancing is that they have done on these other things, and that is exactly what we are trying to seek here.

Also there was talk about Australian Health Protection Principal Committee guidelines. The AHPPC did talk about vaccine mandates, but they talked about it for aged care and other specific settings. They did not talk about widespread mandates like what has been happening with the government.

The other problem that we have seen that I would like to get to the bottom of is that these mandates have come out—there have been announcements—and there is very little information for people like employers or indeed workers who may choose not to have a vaccine. There is very little information for them out there on how to manage this. As I mentioned earlier today, many employers simply do not know what to do in this situation. They are concerned about what might happen if they lose good staff. They are concerned they might be subject to legal consequences if they sack staff. They may not want to sack staff. Similarly, for workers, they do not know whether they are going to be sacked or whether they are going to be redeployed or what is going to happen to them. So there is a lot of uncertainty out there, and I really think the government need to improve their communications on this.

Again, all of these rights must have been considered as part of the health direction. I know that the documents motion requests other things, such as underlying medical advice, but to me the human rights charter assessments are the primary thing that I want to see come back so that the Victorian public can look at them.

Motion agreed to.

Business of the house

ORDERS OF THE DAY

Mr LIMBRICK (South Eastern Metropolitan) (19:32): I move:

That the consideration of order of the day, general business, 2, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Motions

COVID-19

Mr ONDARCHIE (Northern Metropolitan) (19:32): I rise to move motion 627 standing in Mr Davis’s name. Tonight Mr Davis has asked me to take the lead on this, and I shall. I move:

That this house:

(1) notes that:

(a) on 4 October 2021, Melbourne achieved the dubious world record of being the longest locked down city in the world;

(b) lockdowns have had a devastating impact on many Victorian businesses, particularly small businesses;

(c) the New South Wales road map is more ambitious than the Victorian road map;
(2) further notes the widespread call in the Victorian business community for the state government to:
(a) lift the vaccination rate at the fastest possible rate to achieve the 70 and 80 per cent benchmarks endorsed by national cabinet;
(b) reopen Victorian businesses and the Victorian economy as the national benchmarks are reached; and
(3) endorses calls by the Victorian business community for the state government to stick to its announced timetable for reopening.

Now, taking up that motion of Mr Davis’s today, we have gone from the world’s most livable city to the world’s most locked down city—what a world record we never wanted to have. Will you add to that a net loss of migration—there are more people leaving this state than arriving in this state. Can you believe that we would ever have a time in our lifetime when people are more interested in living under the regime of Annastacia Palaszczuk than Daniel Andrews. The world has gone mad—people are more interested in moving to Queensland than living in the proud state of Victoria. Well, that says a lot about the leadership of this Andrews Labor government—248 days as at today that we have been in lockdown. We outrank cities across the globe that have been in lockdown. This government should be so proud of itself. I am looking forward to speakers from the government side telling me just how proud they are to be the world’s most locked down city.

In doing so, in locking us down without clear explanation, without transparency of evidence, in locking us down for such a long period of time, it has had a devastating impact on Victorian businesses, particularly small businesses. It has hurt jobs, not just permanent jobs, mind you, but casual jobs—many casual workers who rely on those jobs in things like hospitality and retail to pay their rent, to pay their energy bill, to pay their internet bill, and to put petrol in the car as well. Those casual employees have lost shift after shift after shift. Pubs are shut. You cannot go and have a beer with your mates. You struggle to line up for a morning latte, because not many of the shops consider it worthwhile opening. You cannot go and buy the stuff you like to buy. It is hurting shopping centres. It is hurting those little food vendors at the shopping centres as well that cannot get any business. The airport has been a parking place for aeroplanes. Apparently if you can go back and play golf, you can. You can tee off but not pee off at the moment, and this unjustified curfew—

Mr Gepp interjected.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Thank you, Mr Gepp. I am not going to pick up that interjection, if that is all right. Why are we locked down from 9:00 pm to 5:00 am? When we ask for an explanation it is almost like the Sooshi Mango response, ‘I dunno, I dunno, I dunno’. We cannot get any response at all from this government on why we are locked down and why we have this curfew, particularly now that we have moved into that time of daylight saving. And do you know why? It is because No Plan Dan just wants to control us. He wants to be in charge. I know members on the government benches are highly embarrassed by this. They are highly embarrassed by the leader determining how people will live their lives. I will be interested to see if they get up tonight to defend Kim Jong Dan, because that is what it has come down to in Victoria. People have lost trust. They have lost trust in government. They have lost trust in politicians generally. They have lost trust in authority, in law and order. They have lost trust in everything, because, quite simply, this motion—

Mr Gepp: On a point of order, Acting President, I understand that this matter invokes a lot of spirited discussion and debate, but I think the reference to the Premier just a moment or two ago was most unparliamentary. I would remind everybody in the house that the standing orders require us when we are referring to members to refer to them with their proper title.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Mr Bourman): Thank you, Mr Gepp. You need to refer to the Premier by his name or his title, not someone else. In future please refer to him as either Mr Andrews or the Premier or something along those lines.
Mr ONDARCHIE: Thank you, Acting President. I will cede to your request. The Victorian Premier is all about control, all about, ‘I’m in charge, and this is the way we’re going to do it’. Forget about how he is saying that to Victorians, he says it to his own party room. He says to caucus, ‘This is the way it’s going to be’, and nobody on that side of the house has the gumption to take him on. And if you take him on in discussions around pay and conditions for certain union workforces, you get the Tijuana. If you take him on about other policy matters, you lose your ministerial job and you end up working for Australia Post for a little while and then going and doing something else. If you take him on in the party room, you are going to get affected by it—and that is why they do not do it. That is why they know it is wrong but they will not say anything to him—because ‘I could lose my ministerial post. I could lose my parliamentary secretary job. I could lose one of the jobs I’ve got’. So they will not say anything, and they know it is wrong. They do know it is wrong.

And the party that apparently stands up for the workers apparently today could not give a toss about the workers—they are not saying anything. This party that talks about freedom of choice and freedom for the individual is not saying anything about the workers and particularly the casual workers that are losing shifts because of the poor decision-making of this government. They are not saying a word. And why? Because they are not allowed to upset the boss. They say, ‘We’ll get in trouble if we upset the boss’.

We have encouraged the government to move as quickly as they can to achieve the benchmarks endorsed by national cabinet. And I would say to you that we need to encourage them to do that because there has been a monumental failure in getting the vaccination rate rolled out in Victoria. And what happens when they do that? They run down two courses here, or they have the option to run down two courses. One is to accept responsibility for their failings, but the ultimate road they choose is: ‘Let’s blame everybody else but ourselves. Let’s blame a man with a nebuliser. Let’s blame someone in Argentina. Let’s blame our multicultural community in Melbourne’s north for not taking up the vax quick enough’.

This is the same multicultural community that this government thinks watches the 6 o’clock news every night or buys the Herald Sun or the Age every day—they do not necessarily. And it was only last Thursday—last Thursday in this 18-month pandemic—that they decided to communicate to the multicultural communities in Melbourne’s north in their own languages. Last Thursday. And if they choose to deny this in the debate tonight, I will produce the evidence. I will table the evidence that came from the office of the member for Thomastown. I have a copy of the email where they advise local communities that they are going to advise them in their own languages. Last Thursday, Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McArthur: Eighteen months later.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Eighteen months later. And what do they do when the vaccination rates are not going so well and the pandemic is growing through Melbourne’s north at the highest rate? They blame the community. That is the same community, the same Sikh community, that wrote to the government and said, ‘Why don’t you use our temple as a vaccination hub? We can manage it. We on a Sunday manage thousands of people coming through here. We can manage it’. And do you know the government did not even respond to them, did not even go back to the Sikh community, those people who work so hard delivering meals across Melbourne in the south-east and in the north and did so through the bushfire period during the summer? That Sikh community that works so well to serve their communities did not even get a response from the government for their very kind offer to open their temple—and many of that community are medical practitioners—to say, ‘We can help you through this’. Not even a response. And when the numbers grow in Melbourne’s north, they point to the same community and say, ‘It’s all your fault’. That is what they do here: they adopt the blame game, the blame game that has hurt business so badly.

And I can just talk about my own electorate of the Northern Metropolitan Region, as many members can talk about their own electorate, and about how badly business is hurting. They moved to a regime
of allowing a bit of outdoor dining initially to try and help these businesses meet the quota in terms of space. And now today, or overnight, the People’s Republic of Yarra decided that they are going to charge people who are using outdoor spaces and car parks. This is the same council that does not want cars to come into their municipality, yet they are going to charge businesses for taking up car spaces—it is loonyville. And is the government saying anything about it? Is the government condemning Yarra council? Are the Greens members across the Parliament condemning Yarra council? It has gone mad.

One of the parts of this motion asked for the Victorian business community to be supported in their call for the state government to stick to their time line, to do what they said they are going to do. It is a bit of an anathema, isn’t it, to think that this government is going to do what it said it is going to do? And I do not take any pleasure in commenting on this government wanting to do what they said they were going to do, because you might recall, and I am sure members do, that the Premier of Victoria, when he was opposition leader, just prior to becoming the Premier, said that there would be no new or increased taxes under a government he leads.

Mr Finn: When did he say that?

Mr ONDARCHIE: He said it to Peter Mitchell the night before the election, Mr Finn. He looked straight down the barrel of the camera on Channel 7 news and said, ‘Peter, I give this commitment to Victorians. There will be no new or increased taxes’ under any government that he leads. Well, they have not been increased once, to be fair. They have not been increased twice, to be fair. The growth is 39 times. Thirty-nine times they have grown taxes in this state. New or expanded taxes under Daniel Andrews—

Mr Gepp: On a point of order, Acting President, and that is of relevance to the motion that the house is now considering, I understand, and I have heard this speech probably a dozen times from Mr Ondarchie. But it bears no relevance whatsoever to the motion that is before us today, and I would invite you to invite him to come back to the motion and stick to the topic at hand.

Mr ONDARCHIE: On the point of order, Acting President, this motion talks about the economic impact of Victorian government decision-making on Victorian businesses, and as the lead speaker on this motion it gives me wideranging capacity to talk about decisions this government makes and their impact on the Victorian economy vis-a-vis small business.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Mr Bourman): Mr Ondarchie, I will uphold the point of order. It is a fairly narrow motion about the lockdown and the economic effects of that, so if you could just come back to at least the more timely parts of the economic effects.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Thank you for your counsel, Acting President. I will follow what you have asked me to do, and I would expect all other speakers tonight to follow exactly what you have asked them to do—to stick to this motion—particularly my learned colleague Mr Gepp, who I know is just bustling to get out of the gates.

Hospitality has taken the brunt of this. Melbourne’s CBD has taken the brunt of this. You know, you walk around Melbourne’s CBD just before curfew, on the danger the Victorian Premier will swing by in his limousine and arrest you, and there is just nothing happening in the Melbourne CBD, nothing at all. During the time of this lockdown period we still had the so-called benefit of the grand final parade public holiday that would have featured in Melbourne’s CBD but did not even happen. Not only did it not happen here, it did not happen anywhere. What normally happened on a grand final parade day before it was a public holiday? Melbourne’s CBD would be alive. Workers would come out of their offices with their coffees and focaccias to join in the parade irrespective of whether their team was playing or not. And business thrived. Hospitality thrived. It was good for the Victorian economy. And this government has ruined it all—ruined it all.

There are so many small businesses, and I am not sure those who purport to stand up for the workers appreciate that many, many people put their houses on the line to open small businesses. And they
have got no revenue, and the government are saying, ‘Oh, well, it’s part of a worldwide pandemic. It’s a health order’. We are now the city that has been locked down for the longest in the world. ‘It’s your problem, it’s not ours’. Well, it is our problem because the effect of this is going to hurt our economy for years and decades to come. There are some businesses that will never recover from this. There are some reports that say one in eight businesses that are closed at the moment will never reopen. And when we talk about small business we are talking about people. We are talking about their lives. We are talking about employees. We are talking about people who service those shops through a supply chain—cleaners, electricians, telecommunications people, people who fix the fridge—who are all affected by this. This government has no appreciation for the workers. Can you believe that we would ever say that in this place: that a Labor government has no appreciation for the workers?

I commit this motion to the house. It is a very important motion that Mr Davis has brought and that I have had the privilege of bringing to the house this afternoon. I encourage all of the people in the house to vote to take note of these very serious issues, not just for the people in this chamber, not for the people in your immediate constituency where you live, but for all Victorians and for all Victorian workers.

Mr GEPP (Northern Victoria) (19:50): I rise to speak on the motion brought before the house by Mr Davis and just led by Mr Ondarchie. I think it is important for the house to just stop and pause for a moment and think about the pandemic and what has occurred around the globe in the 18 months or so since the news really started to break. You know, let us all remember where we were back in December 2019. But even then we did not get a real sense of it I think here in Australia, because here in Victoria we were dealing with devastating bushfires up in the north-east of our state, we had drought over in the Mallee—we had any number of things going on in our day-to-day lives. Since then, according to the World Health Organization as at 6.27 pm on 5 October central European summer time, there have been 235 175 106 cases globally of COVID-19, the world has experienced 4 806 841 deaths and there have been 6 188 903 420 doses of COVID vaccine administered around the globe.

Just to put all of that into a little bit of perspective, because of the question Mr Ondarchie posed a number of times—‘Why have we done what we have done? Why have we continued to do what we have been doing here in this state since the global pandemic really hit us in a catastrophic way?’—in terms of our nation the total cases per million here in Australia are 4554 cases. Contrast that with the United Kingdom: per million people, 116 601 cases. Deaths per million here in this country, based on the responses—

Mr Finn: Victoria.

Mr GEPP: Well, the World Health Organization does not break it down quite that far, but I will leave you to extrapolate further if you wish to. Per million people here in this country, there have been 53 deaths; contrast that with the United Kingdom—2007 deaths.

So one gets a little bit fed up when one hears what I heard when I listened to the last debate on Mr Limbrick’s motion. The Shadow Minister for Health of all people was congratulating the globe—everybody else—saying, ‘Look what they’re doing in other parts of the world. Look at the success that they’ve had’. If you contrast our performance here in this country and this state to most other developed nations in the OECD, we are a mile in front. Now, that is not in any way to diminish or discredit what people have been grappling with around the world, because this has been and continues to be an evil, rotten pandemic that has taken an enormous toll on everybody around the globe.

Our Premier stood up in front of the Victorian people on day one and said that his priority, his objective, would be the health and wellbeing of Victorians. He never resiled from that; he has not resiled from that for one minute throughout this pandemic. And he also said very, very clearly—and yes, he did say to the caucus, Mr Ondarchie; he absolutely did say it to the caucus—‘As your leader I will follow the health advice that is provided to me by the experts, by the scientists’. Again, he has not
wavered from that one iota throughout the course of this pandemic, and he still remains true to that position today. That is the true north about this—and thank goodness, based on the figures that the World Health Organization have published themselves. You contrast them with where we are at in this country and in this state. Thank goodness leaders like Daniel Andrews around this country have taken the steps that they have.

Now, we always knew that there would be consequences, economic consequences, of taking the action that we did. There is no doubt about that. We never resiled from that, never walked away from it. Each and every day the Premier and other ministers stand before the Victorian people—and they do, every day—and give an explanation about the progress of the pandemic, the restrictions that are in place and the road map, the way forward, on how we are going to get out of this particular pandemic.

Now, contrast that with the advice that we have been getting from those opposite. Where would we be? Let us imagine. They have carried on for a couple of days. Let us imagine that we rip the bandaid off and we open this place up tomorrow. Even with 83 per cent of the population having a single dose and just over 50 per cent—I think it is 53 or 54 per cent now—of people having a double dose, where would we be? Where would we be in two weeks time? We know the answer to that because our scientists tell us every single day. There is not a medical expert that has been commentating on this that does not say exactly the same thing: that if we rip the bandaid off tomorrow and open the place up then the economic carnage—put aside the health implications for the population of Victoria—would be catastrophic, absolutely catastrophic.

I have got to say that, having listened to the shadow health minister earlier, who is a former nurse, I have not spoken to one nurse, one doctor, one paramedic, one orderly, one admissions clerk—no one in the health sector—who supports the propositions that she is advancing. No one. Yet she comes in here, and she did earlier today, and says that thousands of people are contacting her, particularly from the profession, and saying we should do this: ‘Open the place up, open the place up’. She knows, I know and everybody else in this place knows that if you are suffering from cerebral palsy or cancer or if you have a heart attack or you have got some sort of kidney disease, whatever it might be, and if we opened the place up, as we are urged to by those opposite, rejecting all of the science, rejecting all of the medical advice, the impact on those people would be devastating because the nursing profession, the medical profession, the doctors and the orderlies would be so bound up trying to deal with the COVID cases that they could not possibly get to everybody else in the system.

So yes, there has been an economic cost, and we have contributed billions of dollars back into the coffers of businesses. Is it enough? No, it is not. We will continue to work with the industries, we will continue to work with the business sector, to get things done. We understand the impact of the pandemic on them economically. But I will tell you what we will not do: we will not put at risk the lives of ordinary Victorians, particularly the vulnerable Victorians. It galls you when those opposite start talking about casual workers. I have lived all my life with these people. This is what I have done for a job for over 30 years. Some employers use a piece of federal legislation that frankly is so flawed that it allows an employer to determine somebody’s livability based on a category of employment—and then those opposite come in here and pretend that they are the champions.

We may not have got everything right, but I can tell you what, we have stayed true to what we said we would do as a government to the people of Victoria, and we will continue to do so.

Dr CUMMING (Western Metropolitan) (20:00): You are a bit of a hard act to follow, Mr Gepp, but I am pretty sure I will do my best. You are right, Mr Gepp, the whole world is watching Victoria, and we have actually made the worldwide headlines for all the wrong reasons. Why would parents send their children to university here from overseas, to Victoria? Why would anyone come as a tourist to Melbourne, when it is a ghost town and police are patrolling the streets? People are actually protesting around the world at Australian embassies. You are right, the whole of the world is looking at Victoria, but for all the wrong reasons at the moment. And is the government proud of that? Are you proud of the ghost town that Melbourne has actually become? I would hope that you are not.
Mr Meddick interjected.

Dr CUMMING: Oh, come on! Please! So next, what has this government actually done in the way of impacting businesses and devastating small businesses? You, the government, have chosen who is essential and who is not. The government has actually been the one who wrote the road map out of this, and everybody would like to know: are you going to stick to the road map that you wrote? Nobody believes that you will. Everybody believes that you will change your mind or find another excuse to keep us locked down further than we need to be.

And your concerns about actually ripping off the bandaid today—well, please do. There are many people who have been vaccinated for a very long time who want their freedoms. And we have to remember that there are many people who will have the choice to stay home if they want to, but you are giving no-one the choice to actually take their own health and their own responsibilities into account when you lock down everyone. When you have continually put down blanket lockdowns, you have given nobody the choice. You are not trusting Victorians. You are not treating us like adults. There are options for others—who are worried, who are vulnerable—but they can make their own choices themselves.

There are not any scientific reasons why we are still in a curfew or why we ever went into a curfew. There are no reasons why we are the most locked down in the whole of the world. And being the most locked down in the whole entire world, we have no freedoms, where freedoms should be mandatory, where we should be able to travel. We should have those freedoms, but we do not.

With all due respect, lockdowns have not worked. We know this because of the case numbers. We know this. We also know that trying to chase COVID zero was ludicrous and never achievable and that we actually have to learn to live with COVID. We are going to eventually have to stop tracking and tracing. We are going to have to eventually realise everywhere is an exposure site and we have to trust the community, that when they are sick or when they know that they are infected they will stay home. That is how we are going to be moving forward, and that is how we are going to have to move forward, because we cannot continue to treat the community like this with lockdowns, treat them as if they cannot understand or cannot take responsibility for their own health.

Why at any stage healthy people have been locked down is beyond me. If you actually speak to any health-trained professional or anyone who understands anything around infectious diseases or pandemics, they know that you isolate the sick but the healthy are able to do whatever they want. They pose no risk. Healthy people have no risk. It is all proportionate to risk factors, and the risk is with the people who are infected. People will make their own health choices if you give them good information and speak to them and treat them with the respect that they deserve. They are intelligent enough to be given medical advice and to make their own medical decisions. It is as simple as that.

Are you proud, government, that we are the most locked down? Are you proud of the devastation that these lockdowns have actually created in the way of what they have actually done to Victorians’ mental health, to our children, to small businesses and to families? And now what you have actually levelled on top is a divided community, by talking about vaccination passports, with the vaccinated and the non-vaccinated, rather than actually understanding that we are going to definitely reach the 80 per cent mark if not the 90 per cent mark with vaccinations.

For that 10 per cent of the community that wishes to wait for whatever reason, we should respect their decisions, because the vaccinated should feel quite happy that they are vaccinated and quite safe that they have made those decisions for themselves and for the reasons that they have. But for that 10 per cent that you have now created by actually saying to them, ‘No jab, no job. No jab, no pay’, that cannot actually look after the health of their families in the way of shelter or food, you are making them worry for really no reason and creating a divided community that we do not need. We have seen it all around the world—as Mr Gepp said, talking about all around the world—that vaccine passports do not work. They set them up and they drop them. We do not need a divided society. So now we are looking at
going down a path that we know we should not, where we are going to have 10 per cent of the population and of each workforce not wanting to be vaccinated and becoming unemployed. From our police to our health workers to our teachers—you name the profession—there are 10 per cent, a small percentage, who do not want to be vaccinated at this time. They may get vaccinated in the future. Some are waiting for other vaccines—there are many—and I am sure others get emails about other vaccines that people are waiting for but that are not approved here in Australia. They want those or they are looking at other treatment methods.

Pretty much all Victorians realise that we are all going to get COVID eventually, and all Victorians will actually take their own individual health choices into their own individual hands. I believe and I trust that the Victorians that I know will make the right decision, will look after themselves and look after their community the best that they can, as they have so far. I trust my community. I 100 per cent trust my community to make their decisions for themselves. I do not want to be the government who locks the community down, who chooses who is essential and who is not, who divides the community between the vaccinated and non-vaccinated and then somehow believes that they are proud of what they have created in the way of a ghost town called Melbourne. You believe that it is just going to bounce back like nothing, like that; I do not believe so. I support the motion today. We should not be proud. The curfew should end, the lockdown should end and we should trust our community.

Mrs McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (20:10): I rise today to speak on Mr Davis’s motion. Businesses across the entire state have been crippled by this government’s extreme lockdowns. The damage done to businesses in regional Victoria is especially egregious given their complete lack of exposure in many cases to COVID-19 cases. In my electorate Hindmarsh shire and Buloke shire have never had one case of COVID-19. Queenscliffe borough and West Wimmera shire have only ever had one case. Yarriambiack, Southern Grampians and Central Goldfields have only ever had had two cases. Northern Grampians, Loddon and Hepburn shires have had only had five. Pyrenees has just had six cases; Moyne, seven cases; and Corangamite shire just 10 cases. So who can honestly argue that hundreds of days of lockdown were justified in these areas in western Victoria? West Wimmera, for example, covers 9000 square kilometres—one case across 9000 square kilometres. What a nonsense this has been. Hindmarsh is a 7500-square kilometre area, and Buloke is 8000 square kilometres. Both have never had one case of COVID-19, yet they have endured these extreme lockdowns that have been broadscale across the whole of country Victoria.

This government thinks that every school was rightfully shut and virtually every business rightfully closed down. Masks were and still are necessary outdoors. Every church had to be shut, and nearly every aspect of regional Victorians’ lives has been shut down. In Melbourne it seems they do not like you using toilets, and you have got to drink through straws. This deranged logic is indefensible. No one can seriously believe that the devastating impact inflicted on regional businesses by these lockdowns has been justifiable unless you are ideologically married to false notions of COVID zero or irrationally terrified about the transmissibility of this virus.

For most of this pandemic I have been calling for targeted lockdowns, if you had to have them, by local government area or by postcode. It is an obvious solution to this pandemic that is more proportionate and less damaging to areas in regional Victoria that have been unaffected by the spread of the virus. In June last year, before the government’s hotel quarantine disaster, I asked the Minister for Health in this place:

… has the government considered relaxing restrictions by rural local government area, and within a local government area, earlier than the rest of the state so our country businesses can be saved and we can all get on with living?

The impact on country businesses has been horrific. Many of them are just husband-and-wife operations, and they have actually had to close down. Their houses have been put on the line because that is how they have funded their businesses.
In over a year, though, nothing has changed. All businesses need to urgently reopen—those that are left. Many, so many, have gone to the wall. It is not just their owners who are hurting but their staff members too, along with their customers. Mr Ondarchie, my colleague, has quite rightfully called out the fact that this government clearly have no sympathy for workers, except maybe if you are in a big union.

Small business and enterprise are the drivers of employment and wealth creation, not government. We cannot keep the doors shut in perpetuity and expect our society to keep functioning. And it is not just the lockdowns which have shut their doors completely. In most recent times the restrictions and regulations have been far more onerous with a fairly high rate of vaccination than when we had no vaccination in the height of the pandemic. So we now have space regulations based not on square metreage but on 10 people inside and 20 outside. Some hospitality businesses in the country do not have an outside venue anyway, so it is totally unviable for them to operate with 10 people. Sam Benjamin from the Austral Hotel in Colac said about this unfeasible restriction of caps on patrons, I quote:

For a venue with a footprint of our size, it is not viable to open for on-premise drinks or dining. We are licensed for 200 people …

So how could you possibly open for 10? It would not pay to turn the lights on. In Ballarat, Brian Taylor, the owner of a popular licensed venue—three of them in fact: Hop Temple, Aunty Jacks and the Roy Hammond—said:

We’re losing the confidence of staff—

these are the workers that this government is meant to represent—

They’re scared, they’re worried, they want to leave the industry to jobs that are secure.

They would have to go interstate to find them, maybe overseas even, if they could get out of the country. He continued:

It’s madness, money is going out the door quicker than we can imagine. The question is, are these support payments going to continue?

Well, of course they cannot, because somebody has got to pay for them and that is those few people left in work. Mr Taylor said:

And when we re-open, there won’t be staff to open with. We’re losing our skilled staff. It hurts us because customers demand quality staff who know their product.

These are the costs of this government’s heavy-handedness and recklessness in their approach to the pandemic.

If the government does not stick to the announced timetable for reopening, the impact on businesses across the state will be even more catastrophic. Endlessly through the pandemic this government has shifted the goalposts. First it was two weeks to flatten the curve so that we could let the hospital system cope. Well, now we are told the hospital system cannot cope. You have had 18 months to get the hospital system coping. What have you been doing? You promised 4000 beds. You spent $1.3 billion, or you said you did. Where has the money gone, and why is there a problem in the hospital system after 18 months? And then we had the story of, ‘Well, we had to get to COVID zero’. Well, that has gone out the window because everybody has realised that is just fantasy land. Yet we were always told this was based on medical advice—what a load of baloney. Clearly it was not, because now it is just no longer a proposition. Then we were going to allow you to have a bit of freedom with 70 per cent vaccination. Oh, no, that was not good enough. We are now going to 80 per cent vaccination. And now we will need to have all children vaccinated over 12, and goodness knows you will probably change that goalpost as well. What is the incentive for people to get vaccinated when you move the goalposts? If you do not give those that are vaccinated freedom, why should their friends and family get vaccinated? You have got to have reward for effort in this game. You have got to incentivise people
to get vaccinated if that is going to be your benchmark. But no, you punish people all the time. You berate, you attack people, you blame people and you punish people. So why is it that we are so far behind the eight ball compared to New South Wales? Well, because of our belligerent approach, blaming everybody else. Remember, we have got the most deaths in this country and the most days in lockdown in the world. We are the laughing-stock of the world.

The only way that this state will recover from COVID is if the rules for businesses are returned to those from before the pandemic. We have to be able to operate as pre the pandemic, as normal, and we have got to end this lockdown. And of course curfews should be shelved forever. We are not at war. Whoever dreamt up the idea of curfews? The alternative is economic destitution, severe unemployment and a crippled state unable to revive itself—apart from the fact that we have got children suffering because of a lack of education and we have got people with severe mental illness because they just cannot survive in this isolation regime that you want to place everybody in. I urge you to support Mr Davis’s motion, because it is important that we actually send a message to this government about being decent for the Victorian people.

Ms TERPSTRA (Eastern Metropolitan) (20:20): I also rise to make a contribution on this motion, motion 627 on the notice paper, moved by Mr Ondarchie on behalf of Mr Davis. I note the motion has a number of sub-parts. I have also had the opportunity and the benefit of listening to the contributions this evening that other members have made. Again we seem, sadly, to be in a world where the contributions of some of the members opposite today seem to imply that if you say something often enough that is not true, people will simply believe it. What we have heard this evening in this debate is a whole bunch of things that those opposite, being on the opposition benches, can say with the luxury of never having to be accountable for their actions. It is very, very nice to have the luxury of being able to say whatever you like without having to face any scrutiny.

What is littered and woven throughout this motion is a whole range of false assumptions. I might start with one of them. This example is in part 2 of the motion. It talks about a call by the Victorian business community:

... for the state government to:

(a) lift the vaccination rate at the fastest possible rate to achieve the ...benchmarks endorsed by national cabinet …

The problem with that statement is there is an assumption that we are actually not adhering to the national plan. Victoria has signed up to the national plan. We are following the national plan. This is a plan that was endorsed by all of the state and territory premiers and endorsed by the national cabinet.

Again they simply say that our vaccination rate seems to be a problem—and, might I add, the vaccination rollout was not a state government responsibility. The vaccination rollout was indeed a federal government responsibility, and what we learned was that the federal government was giving the Victorian share of vaccination stock or supply to New South Wales. Again it was our Premier who called that out. Without that, perhaps we would have been a little bit further ahead compared where we are right now, but to simply say that that is the Victorian government’s fault, again, is just a classic example of gaslighting. This whole debate has been about gaslighting the Victorian government from the beginning, from the get-go.

When we talk about the lack of standards in politics these days, what we have seen tonight and throughout this debate is a classic example of the lack of accountability and the lack of standards that have been applied to the way this debate is being conducted. There have been so many half-truths and falsehoods, all designed to imply to the Victorian community that this government is failing at every step. Measures have been taken based on public health advice, and as Ms Taylor commented on earlier, you can google it yourself and you can find it all. Despite Mr Davis’s earlier calls that this is not true, that is absolute rubbish. People on the opposition benches have been invited to public health briefings. They do not turn up, they do not want to come, but they want to say that it is our problem and our responsibility and that we are not making all of this public. Again, people are not buying it.
I think Mr Tarlamis said it earlier in another debate today: all they are doing is talking to themselves. Keep talking to yourselves, because no Victorian is listening—no one is listening to you. You are embarrassing yourselves with the absolute rubbish that you are peddling—for you to think that people actually listen to you. The height of hypocrisy this evening was to hear those on the opposition benches, and some of the crossbench I might add, seek to talk on behalf of working people. They would have no clue about what it is like to work in insecure employment. I do not think any members on the opposition benches have ever worked in insecure employment.

I know I and others like Ms Stitt and Mr Melhem have spent many, many years, decades between us, and I know Mr Gepp spoke on this earlier—I would say that between the four of us we would have over 100 years collectively of representing working people in a range of industries. And for those opposite to try and suggest that they are now the worker’s friend and somehow can represent the interests of working people and that working people are falling over themselves to ask for those opposite to help them—what a ridiculous motion. Let us talk about the sorts of things that Jeff Kennett did, and I note this has been commented on earlier—sacking thousands of teachers. I did not see—

Mr Ondarchie: On a point of order, President, it goes to relevance. I draw your attention to the ruling of Acting President Bourman some time ago that asked that the debate be brought back to the motion before the house. Ms Terpstra is now talking about a period between 1992 and 1999 that has no relevance to the motion before the house.

Ms TERPSTRA: Further to the point of order, I did have the benefit of listening to Mr Ondarchie’s contribution, and I note that Mr Gepp also called a point of order on him for his broad-ranging and quite far afield contribution this evening. So, President, I point out to you and the chamber that Mr Ondarchie in fact opened the door for a much broader ranging—

Mr Finn interjected.

The PRESIDENT: No further. Thank you, Ms Terpstra. Mr Finn, thank you very much. I have to follow the Acting President’s ruling when he brought Mr Ondarchie back to the motion, and so, Ms Terpstra, can you please get back to the motion.

Ms TERPSTRA: What I was trying to point out to the house was the previous actions by those opposite in terms of the devastating impacts that their previous governments have had on the mental health of people and the employment prospects of people, which is something that goes to what was discussed in earlier contributions by those opposite. You cannot at all purport to speak on behalf of working people, because of the devastating consequences and impacts that previous governments rendered on people. To say that you are concerned about the economic impacts, to say that you are concerned about the Victorian business community—again, absolute rubbish.

This government has done so much to support the Victorian business community. To simply sit in this chamber and say that you know more than expert epidemiologists and medical professionals—the best medical expert advice that this government could get, that we have based everything upon; our road map is a way out of that, and vaccination is part of that—and to simply try and pitch the whole health orders to employers about who can and cannot come in the workplace: I think I will refer to Sally McManus’s comment from the ACTU on this, that this is about workplace safety. Again, you know nothing about that, those opposite, because ensuring that people come to work without carrying a virus with them is indeed about making their workplace safe to ensure that everyone can come to work and work in a healthy and safe working environment.

Employers already have those obligations. So, you know, the public health order is designed to ensure that employers carry out those obligations. There are a range of things that are open to employers to help them manage these things, but again you do not want to talk about that, those opposite. All you want to talk about is things that, again, you have no basis in fact to say. You make things up and keep saying that there are other alternatives. I have not heard any other alternatives from any of you other than to simply say that the Victorian government is not doing enough. The earthquake was Daniel
Andrews’s fault as well. Everything is this government’s fault. It is not good enough. You are not providing an alternative to this road map. I have not seen a plan from those opposite. Where is your road map? If you think you can do better, if you think you have got absolutely critically important health advice that you can base a claim on—

**Mr Finn:** On a point of order, President, apart from the fact that Ms Terpstra is flouting your earlier ruling, she is now directing her comments directly to members on this side of the house when in fact she should be directing her comments through you, as is the normal practice of the house.

**The President:** There is no point of order.

**Ms TERPSTRA:** I will return to my earlier comments where I was talking about the road map and saying that our road map is, again, endorsed; it is part of the national plan. So, again, to simply have the luxury of saying that there is some other alternative when we see none is the point I was making. Again, this motion is ill-conceived, it is ill thought out and it is a divisive motion designed to wedge and drive fear and division within the Victorian community. It is designed for those opposite to continue talking to themselves. The base that you have is getting narrower and narrower. So keep going down that path, because you are making fools of yourselves really. But we look forward to seeing you being resoundingly defeated at the next election. I would urge the house to vote against this motion. And I thank you, President, for your indulgence.

**Mr Finn:** On a point of order, President, I just wish to clarify your earlier ruling. I have been in this house, as you know, as long as you have, and it has been my understanding that we are to direct our comments through the Chair. Your ruling seems to have overruled that, and I am just wondering if a precedent has been set and we have a new path to lead.

**The President:** Thank you, Mr Finn, for your explanation. The reason I said I do not uphold your point of order is that I did not think that the member was directing her comments to you or to any member. Especially as she is in a hybrid sitting, it is hard to tell. I think she was addressing the Chair. That is why I said there was no point of order.

**Mr MELHEM** (Western Metropolitan) (20:31): I am trying to work out the purpose of that motion. I read again and again about what this motion is trying to achieve. Here it is talking about 3 September and Melbourne becoming the world record for lockdowns and how it is devastating to many Victorian businesses and how the New South Wales road map is more ambitious than the Victorian map—which is not correct—and it is talking about the vaccination rate and it is talking about reopening businesses and it is talking about the state government sticking to its announced timetable for reopening.

What I have heard from the contributors, particularly from the coalition—and some of the crossbenchers—about why we are having lockdowns, the only thing I actually took from it is, ‘Let it rip. Let’s not have any lockdowns. Let’s have people die in the street, like what happened in India’. Let us talk about the nearly 5 million people worldwide who have died so far from this awful disease. That is their answer. That is their answer: let it rip. I will never forget the horrible images from India and many parts of the world—and the US—and I do not want it to happen here. Every scientist, every person with real medical qualifications—not some people who call themselves doctors, I am talking about real doctors—says if we do not have lockdowns, we will be talking about 100 000-plus deaths in Australia and over 30 000 in Victoria.

There are some things that we agree on, which I will come to, but what you are trying to preach here—and you want to be the alternative government—is basically: no lockdown, let it rip, let us destroy the whole system. It is not only people suffering from COVID I am worried about. What about if someone just had a heart attack, someone is having a baby or someone had a car accident? If there is no room in the hospital system, how are we going to treat them? No, we do not care about that. Let it rip.

The second point that was made was, ‘Let’s have localised lockdowns’. Well, localised lockdowns—who is going to cop it in the neck? Mr Ondarchie, your constituents are going to cop it, and mine. They
are the workers who do all the heavy lifting, blue-collar workers. They are the ones who put food on the table for Victorians. They prepare the food, they make the deliveries. They are not like the people living in Toorak that can work from home. They do not have to go out and expose themselves, but my constituents do. They are the ones who are going to cop it in the neck. They are the people who perform factory work. They go and do all the essential services so life can go on. The bulk of nurses and medical staff are in these sorts of suburbs, north-west Victoria and south-eastern Victoria. They are the working suburb people. They are coping it the most because they are there at the front every day.

Yet what do we do? Every time we conduct ourselves the way we have done today we slap them in the face, instead of saying, ‘Thank you’, instead of saying, ‘We’re going to support you’. Yes, there is a lot of pain, people suffering, absolutely. We are the lucky ones. We are not suffering. We might have some psychological suffering because we cannot go out and we cannot go to the pub. Mr Ondarchie was talking about having a cafe latte, but we are still getting paid, our families are still living well. I know there are other people suffering, but what is the alternative? The alternative is that people will die. It is no longer confined to old people—to older people—like what happened last year. Younger people are dying, so I think we need to start being fair dinkum about sticking to the plan—and yes, we do have a plan. I would have actually liked not to have the current lockdown. I think it has been one of the most difficult ones psychologically on everyone. It has been really hard on everyone.

But we have a national plan, which was agreed by the national cabinet, and we are sticking to it. It would have been a hard decision for Victoria to basically move away from zero cases to living with the virus. The national plan—we are on target to achieve that. We are on target to achieve 70 per cent come 26 October, and maybe earlier than that date. We are on target to achieve 80 per cent on 5 November. I think we might even hit that target before that, and we can enjoy our freedom again. It is always difficult. We are just on the last lap, and I think that is why it is so hard. It is hard.

The other thing is that I have not heard a single member of this house criticise the people who were actually in charge of acquiring the vaccines and supplying the vaccines to Victoria and the rest of the country. I have not heard a single member of the coalition criticise Scotty from marketing, the one who is actually in charge and had only one job to do. The premiers in every state—

Mr Finn: On a point of order, President, I think it was Mr Bourman when he was in the chair who suggested to Mr Ondarchie that he refer to political leaders by their title or by their name, not by some reference to whatever, and I am suggesting to you very strongly that you might like to bring Mr Melhem along those lines as well.

The PRESIDENT: I uphold your point of order. Mr Melhem, please address—

Mr MELHEM: Mr Finn obviously is still part of his team. Prime Minister Morrison had one job—one job only throughout the whole process—basically to get supply to Australia, to get some vaccine supply. The premiers had their job in doing the heavy lifting on everything else, and that single job, he managed to stuff it up. When Pfizer tried to meet with Minister Hunt to actually offer their services—they offered us 40 million doses—we said, ‘No, we don’t want them’, and then did a great job on AstraZeneca. That is a person coming from a marketing background. He did not want to have a bar of it. So what did we have? Vaccine shortages.

The second one, to add salt to the wound, was New South Wales, because they have a Liberal government in New South Wales. They did deserve to get extra vaccine early on because they went through a very bad period of time, but they were given that extra vaccine at the expense of Victoria, and they were given special treatment. What did we get? Finally the vaccine is flowing into Victoria freely. The agreement with the federal government was that the state hubs would do 25 per cent of the vaccinations in the state of Victoria and the other 75 per cent would be through the pharmacies and GPs, which are controlled by the federal government. And guess where the number is now? It is about 50 to 60 per cent state hub, with GPs and pharmacists doing the balance, and that is no fault of the GPs and the pharmacists at all. They are doing some fantastic work, but they had no vaccines.
So let us be honest about it. Let us actually stand up. If you want to criticise something, do it properly. We all agree. No-one wants to go into lockdown. We all want to be open. We all want our people to be healthy and safe. We do not want businesses to go under. Many businesses will go under. Many workers are suffering. But offer some positive criticism and solutions. Do not play politics. That is what you have been doing on this motion—just playing cheap, dirty politics. That is disgusting. That is a shame, really.

With the last 50 seconds I have got, I just want to say this: I want to take this time to congratulate the Andrews Labor government and the Premier on the courageous decisions he and his ministers and the chief health officer and his staff have been making day in and day out.

Mr Finn interjected.

Mr MELHEM: I am number one on the ticket, Mr Finn. I wonder whether you will be on the ticket at all next year.

I want to finally congratulate and acknowledge the heroic work of our emergency services, our nurses, our doctors and our ambulance and police members. I love our police members; they keep us safe. But unfortunately members in this house did not see it that way when thugs roamed the streets of Melbourne and these people stood up and defended us. I am proud we have got such a wonderful police force in this state.

Mr LEANE (Eastern Metropolitan—Minister for Local Government, Minister for Suburban Development, Minister for Veterans) (20:41): Can I follow on from Mr Melhem and his sentiment that no-one wants anyone to be in lockdown. We all wish there was not a global pandemic. We all wish that we were not enduring the current lockdown due to the New South Wales COVID outbreak—the New South Wales COVID outbreak which we all wish the previous Premier of New South Wales actually acted a bit quicker to contain. We wish the Prime Minister did not actually cheer on the previous New South Wales Premier in not locking down and then infecting not only us, not only Victoria, but New Zealand—they managed to send them a present. We wish there was not a New South Wales outbreak.

I am with Mr Melhem. I wish we actually were at the front of the queue. Remember when we were at the front of the queue for the vaccine? Remember when the Prime Minister said we were at the front of the queue? We were all applauding him, saying, ‘Yeah, that’s good. That’s great, Prime Minister. Thank you for that’. But we were not at the front of the queue; we were one hundred and something in the developed countries. And I wish—I seriously wish—that the federal government actually took responsibility under the constitution for quarantine. We all wish that as well. Getting back to the motion, we wish there was not the New South Wales outbreak we are suffering now. We wish we were not in lockdown, but we have actually worked on a road map that was agreed to at a national level.

I like this new opposition, where they come out and they say, ‘We’re going to be serious and positive, and we’re going to frown on the politics of the pandemic’, when we have had 18 months of them just playing the politics of the pandemic, talking against every bit of health advice, every provision to actually stop people catching this horrible virus and dying or getting what is called long COVID, where you get people that are sick for a long time with all sorts of terrible adverse effects. Now, I do not know, I cannot keep up with the opposition’s position around lockdowns and whether they supported lockdown at any time or not. I do not think anyone can keep up with it. I think they support the national plan—it is really hard to tell. I think they support the national plan.

But one thing actually Minister Stitt and I were just talking about before my contribution was it has only been recently that young people over 12 years old have had a vaccine available to them, so I do not know what the opposition position was about, ‘Well, we’re not going to worry about them. We’re just going to open up and forge ahead and, you know, we’re happy to take risks for kids over 12—happy to take those risks’. It would be a shame if it was that.
And what is sort of disappointing in all of this is the politics of the pandemic that the opposition are playing. They are sick of that now apparently. The people in this chamber, including the opposition members of this chamber—I would never say would agree to some of the worst scenes in recent times that we have seen. I know they would frown. The people in this chamber would absolutely frown on the worst of the scenes we have seen—you know, terrible things like health workers at vaccine centres getting spat on. We have seen some terrible things. And taking up Mr Melhem’s point on some of the violence towards the police—I mean, they are workers doing their job. They do not want to be there. They do not want us to have to suffer through a pandemic like every other jurisdiction and every other police force.

So I think that the problem is that messaging around the argument about health provisions actually can give strength to the arm of some people who just do not believe this is real, that COVID is real. And the sad thing is that people who are convinced of these arguments, whatever arguments they are, when we do open up, and we are going to open up—people that have been convinced that maybe you should take horse-worming pills instead of a vaccine—are going to be the ones that the pandemic is going to hit. It is going to be them and their families, and they are going to infect other people. If you look at the plan of opening up, I actually feel really sorry for them. I feel sorry for the people that have been led down a rabbit hole into all sorts of bizarre arguments around being convinced that you should not get vaccinated, because the proof is there now. I think Dr Kieu mentioned of the people in hospital, 95 per cent of them have not been vaccinated, some of them through circumstances outside their control. It is just really sad. And I think if circumstances are within people’s control, they should really consider taking up the vaccine.

Now, Mr Davis brings motions like this all the time and pretends that he supports health measures, but he does not. The thing about Mr Davis is he has been here a long time. The thing that gets me about Mr Davis is whenever there is a change in the opposition or a change of leaders or ministers, he always survives. Mr Davis should seriously consider going on next year’s series of Australian Survivor, because he always survives. I mean, it does not matter who the leader is, he will change teams. He has turned his coat that many times his coat must feel dizzy. I mean, seriously, his coat should become a ride at Luna Park—one of those ones where you get off and you feel all sick—because he is the ultimate survivor all through their ructions. Mr Finn a few weeks ago was not far right enough for some of the Liberal Party. Now you read that there are people in his party room saying he is too far right for some of the Liberal Party. Now you read that there are people in his party room saying he is too far right.

Mr Ondarchie: On a point of order, President, which goes to relevance to the motion, Mr Leane is on the golf course. He is that far out off the fairway it is not even funny here, so I would ask you to bring him back to the motion.

The PRESIDENT: Minister Leane, can you come back to the motion, please.

Mr LEANE: I am doing my best, but you know, with these things sometimes I stop and think about it. I know I should not. Mr Finn has been put in the gun because he has externalised things that a lot of them actually think.

Getting back to the motion, we all have responsibility. People can talk about freedom, but with freedom comes responsibility—and responsibility for other people. On the arguments about whether or not people should be vaccinated in different workplaces, this is a safety provision to enable people to work. These provisions are not about stopping people working, these health provisions are about getting people back to work during what we all agree has been a terrible time for the world as well as Victoria. Every jurisdiction has struggled with this. There is all this angst about how we are stopping people from working. Well, it is actually the opposite. We are making it safe and we are making it healthy for people to work in many industries. We will open up, and we will see that. I have got to say, plumbers get an injection for different diseases every year. The ones that are employed get their employers to pay for it, and the ones that are employed by themselves claim it on tax. None of this is new to keep workers healthy. It has been happening for years.
Ms STITT (Western Metropolitan—Minister for Workplace Safety, Minister for Early Childhood) (20:51): I would like to acknowledge the contributions of my colleagues in this debate. I want to make a few brief comments about the motion and make a few observations about some of the content of the debate today.

I think it is a really important point to emphasise that of course we understand that the Victorian community have been through such a difficult period of time. It goes without saying that there is enormous pain right across the Victorian community. This is a global pandemic. No-one has ever dealt with this kind of public health emergency—not for a hundred years. There are really difficult decisions that are being made day in and day out by many, many thousands of people at the front line fighting against this pandemic. It has been an absolutely mammoth effort. There have been many, many curve balls. The delta variant has taken a huge toll right across the globe, and Australia is not immune from that. That is why it is so important that we have a carefully planned and articulated road map, so that we can be hopeful about the months ahead and that 2022 and 2023 can be so much better than the last two years that we have endured in Victoria. So it does kind of irk me when I hear some of those opposite trivialising some of these issues, making jokes about the parliamentary bar being shut, making jokes about not being able to have a pee when you are on the golf course.

People in our communities are suffering. In the western suburbs I see it every day. People are incredibly fearful of this virus. People are going through the wringer. It is incumbent on all of us to actually show some leadership and help the Victorian community get through some of its toughest days. That is why we have the road map. That is why our government and the Premier have committed to the national plan to reopen the economy. We understand that we cannot be locked down indefinitely, but there have to be decisions made about protecting the health and wellbeing of Victorians.

I do talk to a lot of people who work with nurses, with allied health professionals and with people in our hospitals and emergency services regularly, and they tell me that they are incredibly fearful of what will happen to the hospital system even at 80 per cent double dosed. Even at 80 per cent double dosed our hospitals are going to be under the pump. I have no doubt that we will get there, because Victorians are coming forward in tremendous numbers to get vaccinated, and we will continue to do everything we can to encourage them to do so and to facilitate that. But even at 80 per cent double-dosed the world is not just going to snap back. We are still going to have to take COVID-safe measures to make sure that our youngest are protected. I just want to remind those opposite that children under 12 are not eligible for the vaccine yet. Let us hope that science moves quickly—and it has during this pandemic—and let us hope that the medical experts approve a vaccination for our children. But at the moment their only protection is if we all get vaccinated, if their teachers, their carers, their early childhood teachers and educators, their families—the adults in their life—get vaccinated.

So we are absolutely determined as a government that this road map will be a success, because it is about giving Victorians back their lives. We understand the lockdown has been incredibly difficult, but we need to make sure that it is done in a way that protects the health and safety of Victorians and protects our health system for the many, many other challenges and pressures that the health system will come under. We saw after the second wave that there was a spike in hospital admissions because people had been putting off urgent health care because we were in lockdown. That could happen again. So it is incredibly important that we protect our health system.

The PRESIDENT: Minister, I am sorry. I have to interrupt and allow Mr Ondarchie to sum up.

Ms STITT: Certainly. I will just finish on this note, President, if you will indulge me. I think that it would be great if we could all work together to give the Victorian people the confidence to reopen. That is what we are committed to doing. So instead of seeing things through the political prism of your political fortune, let us think about the welfare and the safety of Victorians.
Mr ONDARCHIE (Northern Metropolitan) (20:57): I thank all those who have taken time in the house today to speak to this important motion, a motion that asks the house to recognise and acknowledge some things. The government have failed to recognise and acknowledge that we have achieved the dubious record of being the longest locked down city in the world. The government have failed to acknowledge that fact, and they do not want to acknowledge it.

They have failed to acknowledge that the lockdowns have had a devastating impact on Victorian businesses, particularly small businesses. They have failed to endorse the calls from business communities to stick to the plan. And they have failed to recognise and acknowledge the call from Victorian business communities to lift the vaccination rate as quickly as possible and help them to recover. I do not know why the government have gone around failing to recognise that tonight.

This motion is a very simple one in its structure. It asks the house to recognise these things. And they are a matter of fact, so to deny they exist is just ludicrous. But I have to say in saying that, they have failed on a number of fronts. They have failed to deliver 4000 ICU beds that they promised. Now, I will note that they promised this on 1 April, and if their intent was to make the worst April Fools’ Day joke that has ever happened in the state of Victoria, they delivered it. To acknowledge something and announce something on 1 April about 4000 ICU beds that still have not been delivered—and the response is, ‘Oh, that was last year. We talked about that last year. Now we’re talking about this year’.

This motion constructed by Mr Davis that I had the privilege of putting on his behalf simply asks this house to acknowledge these things, and the government today failed to do that. I commend the motion to the house.

Motion agreed to.

Business interrupted pursuant to order of Council of 5 October.

Statements on reports, papers and petitions

AUDITOR-GENERAL

Major Projects Performance

Mrs McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (20:59): I wish to make a statement on the Victorian Auditor-General’s Major Projects Performance report. As of July 2021, Victoria had $144 billion invested in public sector capital works. The Victorian Auditor-General’s Office has investigated the Department of Treasury and Finance and its subsidiary the Office of Projects Victoria. The report covers 16 public sector entities delivering 110 projects over 2019–21, covering $99.31 billion of total value, and the effectiveness with which Parliament has the information it needs to understand the project’s performance. VAGO found that the public sector reporting to Parliament was not, quote, ‘timely, relevant or sufficient’. Of major projects greater than $100 million, 40 per cent had a change in total estimated investment, 31 per cent had a change in estimated completion date and 29 per cent changed the scope of the project. The number of major projects has steadily increased from 41 to 101 from 2015–16 to 2021–22. All have increased during the period of successive Labor governments.

The report notes that an over $1.3 billion blowout for the Metro Tunnel project exists due to, quote, ‘increased scope’. It refers to the Chisholm Road prison project, a $429 million blowout, with a total cost increase of over half, to a new total of just over $1 billion. The car parks for commuters program is now three times over the original costings of the previous financial year, from $150 million to $486 million. The Mordialloc Freeway blowout is from $375 million to $522 million, an increase of $148 million—
however, with the completion date being brought forward to the second half of 2021–22. Transurban has advised the Australian Stock Exchange that it no longer believes it can complete the West Gate Tunnel by 2023.

VAGO’s report in its findings says there is no easily accessible or timely public reporting that gives a holistic understanding of major projects performance across the public sector. The only document that supplies public information about the performance of all major projects is budget paper 4. Up until 2018–19 the Department of Treasury and Finance did not publish any data for completed projects other than the project name. Budget paper 4 in 2021–22 is more detailed, but it does not have enough information to provide to Parliament. Some major projects are not fully disclosed in the budget paper, including some transport sector projects worth more than $100 million and subprojects within health, housing and education sector infrastructure and maintenance funds. And finally, six water projects with sufficient value to require the Treasurer’s refusal were also not disclosed in the 2019–20 budget paper.

This is an extraordinary situation, an extraordinary report by VAGO. They recommend new ways of doing things, and we can only hope that the government takes note of the VAGO recommendations.

LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Management of Child Sex Offender Information

Mr GRIMLEY (Western Victoria) (21:04): I rise today to speak on the report on the inquiry into the management of child sex offender information tabled in this place recently. This inquiry was born after a motion agreed upon in the house which was introduced by me on behalf of Derryn Hinch’s Justice Party. During the inquiry we heard from victim-survivors, previous offenders, academics, local and international justice agencies, advocates for child safety and many, many others. A special thanks goes to Bruce Morcombe from the Daniel Morcombe Foundation, who made a submission and appeared before the inquiry. It is those with the lived experience of how the mismanagement of child sexual offenders can have tragic consequences who are powerful advocates for change.

Although the responses were quite mixed in terms of a public sex offender register—we had some in favour and we had some against—I was quite surprised at the level of interest in a limited disclosure scheme overall. In fact most submissions, including those from the Law Institute of Victoria, Victoria Police and the Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner, were in favour of exploring a limited disclosure scheme.

Studies conducted have indicated broad community support also for a limited disclosure scheme. Dr Karen Gelb in her submission spoke of an Australian study which examined the perception of sex offenders that found that around 73 per cent of participants supported access to sex offender registers by parents or carers of children. Interestingly, even those opposed to a public register did go on record as stating that there were situations in which having the knowledge of the whereabouts of convicted child sex offenders would be useful. This point was reiterated in evidence provided by Carol Ronken from the Bravehearts Foundation, who stated, and I quote:

… who would not want to know if they had a convicted child sex offender living next door to themselves and their children?

Also Dr Michael Davis from the Australian Psychological Society stated that on one occasion in court he said, and I quote:

Your Honour, as a citizen I think I would like to know, but as a forensic psychologist I know I am probably better off not knowing …

We also found that the usual arguments against the public sex offender register were rebutted with statistics, including that of vigilantism. The Western Australian Community Protection website, since the commencement of the scheme in October 2012, has been accessed many hundreds of thousands of times in just under a decade, and only three people have been charged with a vigilante offence. That
is 0.0000075 per cent. Also from the review of the Western Australian model it was identified that the scheme had not resulted in many of the adverse consequences that were previously anticipated, so with all of the scaremongering about giving those caring for children access to information about potential threats to their safety, it seems that this has been unfounded, particularly with the Western Australian disclosure model.

Additionally, reviews of current disclosure schemes in operation in the UK and also in Western Australia indicated that the adverse impacts upon sex offenders had been negligible and significantly less than anticipated. We heard about the success of the pilot of the limited disclosure scheme in the UK, which has since been rolled out across England, Wales and Scotland. The scheme has allowed many thousands of applications. Mr Robert Jones from the National Crime Agency in the UK spoke to the inquiry and expanded on the Child Exploitation and Online Protection centre app designed to keep kids safe on a social network and primarily aimed at safeguarding children from online child sexual exploitation. Mr Jones stated that in 2020–21 there were over 1200 children safeguarded as a result of that reporting tool, a fantastic result. 1200 children kept safe from sexual abuse—just think about that.

What was also common through the majority of submissions and hearings was the lack of data available in terms of sexual assault reporting. This is something that I have been calling for and raised in a motion not too long ago in this place, which was voted down by the government and certain usual crossbenchers, something which is a total blight on this chamber.

On this note, I was pleased that the committee recommended developing a best practice model for online grooming education in Victorian schools as part of the wider curriculum. There has never been a more important time, with every child since COVID having access to an online platform. With this comes responsibility for every child to know the signs of online predatory behaviour. Having information available to members of the public who are concerned for the safety and wellbeing of children in their care must be prioritised above all else.

We in Derryn Hinch’s Justice Party are all about putting children first, above the rights of convicted child sex offenders, and we will not stop advocating for the rights of all sexual abuse victims and all those who are vulnerable to the exploits of these hideous creatures. Sexual abuse against children continues. Sexual predators are out there, grooming those whose innocence has been exploited, and waiting to strike. They are out there, and you are kidding yourselves if you think otherwise. I welcome this report and look forward to seeing the recommendations implemented as soon as possible for the safety of our children.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Report 2019–20

Dr BACH (Eastern Metropolitan) (21:09): I want to make a few brief comments this evening about the most recent annual report of the Department of Education and Training. In many respects the goals and aspirations that are encapsulated in the report and therefore espoused by the department are laudable in my view. In particular I was pleased to read some time ago when this report was tabled in this place that there was a strong focus on the wellbeing of children and the mental health of children. References to this are littered throughout the report. On page 7, for example, there is reference to pilot programs to improve student health and wellbeing. On page 8 there is reference to mental health practitioners—that is something that we have been discussing and debating in this place at length today—and also to a broader principal health and wellbeing strategy, which, again, sounds like a laudable program. At a broader level on page 11 of the report there is a quite appropriate objective regarding student wellbeing. What the report says is that the department seeks to:

Increase the contribution education, training, and early childhood development services make to good health and quality of life for all Victorians, particularly children and young—
Victorians. Well, that is excellent. Now, of course the department has been hamstrung in its ability to deliver on this objective this year because of the fact that schools have been closed for so long. Teachers have done their level best through this long period of lockdowns—seven highly interrupted school terms in a row. But despite their best efforts, being at home away from school, away from friends and broader networks and away from teachers has been incredibly difficult for the vast majority of Victorian students.

That is why I was pleased to join the Leader of the Opposition and also Mr Hodgnett, the Shadow Minister for Education, this morning to release the coalition’s back-to-school road map, a more ambitious road map than the government’s road map, that would see children in regional areas back to school with face-to-face learning full time two weeks earlier, on the 11th of this month, and then all students, including those in metropolitan Melbourne, back by at the latest 25 October. This is a plan that is based on the very best medical evidence, in particular from the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute.

I note that in the other place the Minister for Education has recently been—again I think quite rightly and quite appropriately—talking about a partnership that the government has actually in primary education with the Murdoch institute. We heard the Murdoch institute referenced by government members today in earlier debates. That particular body has said that:

COVID-19 disease in children—

and I am quoting from a recent report from last month—

Children and adolescents who have COVID-19 will commonly have no … symptoms …

If they do have symptoms, so says the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, they are likely to be ‘similar to a cold’. All of this means, as I have stated before, that the institute was able to find just last month, based on the very best evidence, that:

The main risks to children and adolescents’ health in this pandemic continues to be due to indirect effects on mental health, wellbeing and education, which are worsened by continued lockdowns and school closures.

I await any broader commentary from the Minister for Education in the other place or any other members of the government about our plan that we put forward today. We put forward that plan in good faith. We have been engaged—Mr Hodggett, Ms Kealy, Mr Guy and I, a whole range of members of the coalition team—in very fruitful discussions over a significant period of time now with experts like those at the Murdoch institute about how we can safely put together a package to bring students back and bring on board rapid testing. The government has had a road to Damascus experience on rapid testing. That is excellent. I welcome that. I do not criticise the government for that. Other measures are encapsulated in our plan that have convinced me and I think would convince all right-thinking people that this is a safe and appropriate way forward in order, among other things, to aid the department in the achievement of its objectives.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

WRITTEN RESPONSES

The PRESIDENT (21:14): Earlier during question time Mr Ondarchie raised a point of order on a question that was not answered, and I promised I would check. I have checked Hansard, and I have checked the responsibility of the minister. It was the responsibility of the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change, which Mr Leane represents. But then the minister in the supplementary said she was happy to provide an answer for him, so I gave her two days for the supplementary, not for the question. My ruling stands. It is only the supplementary, not the question.
Adjournment

Mr LEANE (Eastern Metropolitan—Minister for Local Government, Minister for Suburban Development, Minister for Veterans) (21:15): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

WASTE AND RECYCLING MANAGEMENT

Mr FINN (Western Metropolitan) (21:15): (1543) I wish to raise a matter for the attention of the Premier, and it is an issue that has been brought to my attention by a constituent who of course has been in lockdown now for some time. She took—with vigour, I might say—to cleaning up her house and also to buying a number of things online, which led to a good number of cardboard boxes being found and being added to by the online buying. So what she did was one day she got busy and she packed it all into the car, a wagon, and she headed off to the tip, only to be told when she got to the tip that she had to turn around and go home again because the tip was not taking rubbish from residents of that particular municipality because of the lockdown.

Now, this seems to me to be quite ludicrous. The tip, of course, is in an open area. It is rare that huge numbers of people gather at the tip, and it could be easily organised anyway, I would have thought. So the woman involved, my constituent, turned around and went home, and she tells me that the great pile of cardboard that she had accumulated and that she had found is now sitting at her back door and is clearly a fire hazard and indeed possibly a hazard for mice and rats. That is something we just do not want to see.

What I am asking the Premier to do is to lift the ban on tips being used, because this poor woman is concerned for the health of her family. Particularly with the rats around the place, she is very, very nervous about that. I just cannot see any good reason to ban the use of tips during this lockdown. It just does not make any sense to me at all. If the Premier has some good health reason for doing it, I welcome that information, but for the life of me I cannot understand why you would not be able to go to the tip. If anything else, it is a health issue. If the Premier is concerned about our health, this is something he should be considering as well.

A member interjected.

Mr FINN: Yes, absolutely. So, Premier, I ask you to remove this ban on people using their municipal tips.

GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

Mr BARTON (Eastern Metropolitan) (21:19): (1544) My adjournment this evening is for Minister Pakula in the other place. Last week the federal government announced that they will be ending financial support for COVID-affected businesses and individuals in Victoria once we reach 80 per cent double dose rates. These payments have provided a lifeline to Victorians during these lockdowns. The end of these payments is coming at a time of great uncertainty. We still face the prospect of restrictions in the weeks ahead, and with the diminishing financial support this could be very scary for many. It is our understanding that the Victorian business support packages will also be ending at the end of October. This is despite the fact that we know capacity limits, movement restrictions and travel bans will continue to damage Victorian businesses well into the next year. This is too soon and ignores the experience of Victorian businesses.

Prior to this pandemic Victoria was already in the midst of the homelessness crisis. The ABS found nearly 24,800 people were experiencing homelessness in Victoria on census night in 2016. With rents continuing to increase further, it is even more difficult for at-risk Victorians to access safe and affordable housing. Infrastructure Victoria found only 11.5 per cent of all Victorian rentals are affordable to someone receiving Centrelink benefits. The coronavirus supplements to JobSeeker and support payments were critical in staving off a new recession-induced homelessness crisis through last
year’s and this year’s colder months. However, this is a problem that has only been deferred rather than solved. As these payments are cut back, many will be in need of assistance.

Earlier this year I visited Box Hill Community Information and Support, an emergency relief organisation that provides those in need with food and essentials. During this visit I learned that last year when JobKeeper and JobSeeker COVID supplement payments were in place their organisation saw a significant decline in the number of people seeking emergency services, despite remaining open in an essential service throughout all the lockdowns. Unfortunately when the support payments ended last year the demand for emergency food and supplies increased again. Why should our most vulnerable have to rely on food banks when the payments stop? Nobody in Australia should have to be making choices between medication, bills, food and having a roof over their heads. We need a plan and supports in place for when these payments come to an end. In my own industry we are struggling with the legacy debts of the reforms of 2017. We cannot let people slip through the cracks again. So the action I seek is: will the government implement a plan to support Victorians who will face incredible financial hardships once these COVID support payments end?

MENTAL HEALTH FUNDING

Ms LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (21:21): (1545) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Mental Health, and it concerns the undeniable lack of adequate services to help children and adolescents suffering from mental illness within the north-east Victoria region. The action that I seek from the minister is for him to give a commitment to increase funding for child and adolescent mental health services throughout the north-east and also establish a dedicated child and adolescent inpatient facility at Goulburn Valley Health in Shepparton to help treat the region’s children and adolescents currently suffering from mental health problems. It has been well documented that mental illness is more prevalent in our young people than ever before. There are a myriad of factors that have contributed to the rise of mental health issues experienced by our children and adolescents—to too many to list individually. From cyberbullying to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pressures of life are being felt by most of our kids, often silently without access to the services that they need.

Recently I was contacted by a constituent, Jen, the mother of a 15-year-old son who suffers from depression. Jen’s lived experience of dealing with her son’s illness is a stark reminder of the lack of mental health services available to our youth in north-east Victoria. Jen first sought help for her son in October 2020 but had to wait until January of this year to get an appointment with Headspace. After four sessions with Headspace her son was deemed to be not severe enough to be referred to a child and adolescent mental health service. Sadly just four months later Jen’s son attempted to take his own life. He was subsequently admitted as an involuntary patient but, without any inpatient services local, was transported to Box Hill Hospital, which is the only inpatient service for children from the eastern suburbs of Melbourne and the entire north-east of Victoria. After a short stay Jen’s son was discharged, and he has attempted suicide on two further occasions and has returned to Box Hill three more times. His mental health has deteriorated even further in recent times, and with no local inpatient facility his condition has been deemed too high risk for any other local services. The reality is that Jen and her family live every day with a suicidal teenager and the entire family’s daily lives revolve around the welfare of their son, brother and grandson. Jen has taken six months leave without pay from work to care for her son, who has been unable to attend school for over 12 months.

Jen’s story is a real-life example of the plight of young people living in north-east Victoria who are suffering from a mental illness. The sad reality is that there are many more regional Victorian families living with the same experiences as Jen and her family. The Andrews Labor government must invest funding that delivers the facilities and services required to help the many young children from the north-east suffering from mental illnesses, and I call on the minister to act immediately.

COVID-19

Ms PATTEN (Northern Metropolitan) (21:24): (1546) My adjournment matter is around pandemic stress leave, and it is directed to the Premier. The press conference that the Premier held on
Sunday, 3 October, put nurses front and centre. Their stories were harrowing, and it sent a strong message about getting vaccinated. Our nurses, our allied health and every healthcare professional, as we know and as we have been speaking about for much of today, are doing it really tough. I had a call from a nurse who had just finished a double shift, had gone home at 3.00 am and was called back to fill another shift. These teams are so stretched. The nurses are covering far more patients than they should be. Those in allied health are being asked to attend situations far beyond their training. It is scary and it is troubling. They have been going through it now for 18 months, and they are stressed beyond belief. They are at their wits’ end, and they know it is going to get worse before it gets better.

These workers certainly need to be paid more, but actually what they need is a break. It is time for us to show that and give them that break. We must compensate our healthcare workers, but more importantly—and more importantly almost than money—they actually just need a break. So the action that I am seeking is for the government to create two-week pandemic stress leave for all healthcare workers. It might be many months before they are able to take that leave, but it is a much-needed holiday, and it should not have to come out of their annual leave. We are seeing now nurses and other healthcare workers taking sick leave so that they can just get a break because they have had to do so many double shifts, so much extra time. So to the Premier, the action that I seek is that he directs his department to create a policy of pandemic stress leave for those on our front line.

COVID-19

Mr DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan—Leader of the Opposition) (21:27): (1547) My matter is for the Minister for Local Government, and I am pleased to see that he is back and well and note that. But my matter relates to the City of Yarra, and he will be well aware of the issue that I am about to raise. I should preface this by saying I am a very strong supporter of local government. I think local government has every right to be a very strong advocate for their local community. But it is also important for local government to be sensible, and the idea that we would whilst a pandemic is running, whilst small businesses are being crushed, whilst small businesses are struggling, introduce new charges for access to parking spaces is truly bizarre and wrong.

Dr Bach: Even for Yarra.

Mr DAVIS: Even for the City of Yarra.

Ms Crozier: What about Stephen Jolly?

Mr DAVIS: Well, he has good political antennae, if I can say that about Stephen Jolly. There are many things I disagree with him on, but he does actually have quite good political antennae.

Minister, you are actually in a position either to gently persuade Yarra to remove this absurd charge that has been placed on small businesses or, if necessary, to take more direct action. So what I am asking you to do is to intervene gently at first and to talk to Yarra and to encourage them to remove this absurd charge. If they are not prepared to remove the unfair, cruel, vindictive charge on struggling small businesses, I would ask you to go further. So I am really seeking from you a direct intervention, at first generously and collaboratively and constructively, but if that does not achieve the outcome, an intervention that will ensure that those small businesses are not crushed into the dirt, or should I say into the asphalt, by this cruel, nasty and vindictive policy of slugging them in the middle of a pandemic.

POLICE CONDUCT

Mr QUILTY (Northern Victoria) (21:30): (1548) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Police. I will preface this by saying I do not relish coming in here and holding the police to account. I always thought that kind of thing was a role for the Greens, but it seems recently they have abdicated their responsibility. Indeed they seem to have become advocates for harsh policing, and someone needs to be prepared to stand up for Victorians’ civil liberties.
In September last year the police were called to assist a man suffering a mental episode in Epping. The officers who arrived at the scene found a distressed man weaving in and out of traffic. Police deemed he was a threat to himself and set about helping the man. So far so good, except the way they decided to help the man was by running him down with a police vehicle.

They doused the man with capsicum spray and then, while he was on his hands and knees, restrained by six officers, one officer stomped his boot into the back of his head. The force from the blow slammed the man’s head into the ground and he was put into a coma. Remember, police were called to help this man and to protect him.

IBAC began an investigation. The officer who ran the man down was banned from driving a squad car. The other officer was placed on paid suspension for the duration of the investigation. IBAC found that the officers failed to inform the man of the reason for his arrest and failed to provide care after the violence they inflicted. Several officers also apparently failed to turn on their worn body cameras, or at least no footage was recovered by investigators. Despite these findings and the excessive violence shown in video evidence, in July this year IBAC found that both officers acted lawfully.

To my mind this ruling is incomprehensible. If these acts of gratuitous violence were lawful, then the law is wrong. Following on from this ruling, it seems that Victoria Police have been empowered to openly attack the Victorian people. We have seen one violent and unjustified assault after another in recent weeks by Victorian police officers against ordinary Victorians.

There is clearly a culture of impunity at play. The standard we walk past is the standard we accept, and it appears we have been walking past these standards for far too long. A few weeks ago the minister responded to a question I asked regarding police violence with the statement ‘I support Victoria Police’s judgement when it comes to how best to use their powers’. In the face of this incident from last September and in the face of the violence we saw during the protests this month, the action I seek is for the minister to clarify whether she still supports Victoria Police’s judgement in the use of their power. Will you walk past this standard, Minister?

AMBULANCE RESPONSE TIMES

Ms CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (21:32): (1549) My adjournment matter this evening is to the Minister for Health, and it is in relation to ambulance response times. Victoria as we know is having a health crisis. It has been having a health crisis since before COVID. Our elective surgery waitlists were at record levels before the suspension of surgery last year. That is only getting worse. Those elective surgery waitlists are growing, and it is really distressing, I might add, that private hospitals have been told to curb their elective surgery, putting more pressure on the system, as we are dealing with the current COVID crisis but also when we come out of that in the short, medium and longer terms.

But we have also got a crisis in other parts of the health system, and certainly the ambulance crisis is there for everyone to see. Last week there were dozens of ambulances ramped outside hospitals every single night. But the response times have been getting worse for many months too, and I was distressed to read yesterday a story in the papers about a poor father who had dialled 000, who feared for his choking baby’s life, and he was put on hold for over 2 minutes. Now, the ambulance union secretary, Danny Hill, has said this is not unusual. Those are not his words, but he said:

We’ve heard of delays of up to 10 minutes, even one case of up to 16 minutes …

Now, you might recall that the Premier has been very forthright in saying that every second counts and that when that happens, when you miss out, that is the difference between life and death. There are too many instances. I know that Mr Quilty actually is aware of a tragic circumstance in his electorate of an ambulance delay. Certainly there was one in my electorate, in Caulfield, where tragically people did not survive; the ambulance did not arrive in time. And we know this is happening in other cases across the state. These are very concerning issues that the government has failed to address.
The ambulance system is in crisis. It is putting Victorians’ lives at risk. Whether it is this young baby choking and the father being on hold for over 2 minutes or other people waiting for 10 or up to 16 minutes, it is not acceptable. I note that the Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority has said in response to this that they were putting 43 new full-time equivalent call-taking dispatch mental health staff on in 2021–22. So the action I seek is for the minister to provide to the house and provide to the community exactly what resources are going into ESTA so that those response times will improve and not get worse and we will not have reports like we read yesterday.

COVID-19

Ms Maxwell (Northern Victoria) (21:35): (1550) My adjournment is to the Minister for Corrections, and the action I seek is for the government to reverse pandemic-related discounts applied to sentences for offenders currently incarcerated for violent and sexual offences. I raised concern in February this year about pandemic sentence reductions following reports that approximately 5000 convicted criminals were released early because of the special COVID-19 emergency management day rules. More recent reports suggest around 380 offenders of federal crimes, which include terrorism and child sex offences, are receiving significant discounts to their sentences under emergency management days in Victoria. Victoria is the only state that hands out this type of discount, giving prisoners up to four days for every day of disruption to their incarceration. Public Accounts and Estimates Committee transcripts from the inquiry into the Victorian government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic note that as of 26 August 2020 more than 70,000 days were granted to over 4000 sentenced prisoners. A further 106,874 days have been applied to prisoners on remand. We can probably safely estimate that figure is now at least double.

Law-abiding citizens of Victoria have had their ordinary freedoms substantially curtailed during this pandemic. They have been confined to their homes, subjected to curfews, unable to work, unable to play sport, banned from playgrounds and schools, unable to cross borders and unable to see family and friends. We have been told that it is necessary—unfortunate, but unavoidable. Law-abiding citizens have not received any special treatment or concession for this disruption—far from it.

A question for another day may also be the further impact of delivery of rehabilitation programs as a result of these sentence discounts. What is certain is that for every crime there is a victim. They are often forgotten in our justice system. A recidivist child sex offender with a history of breaching community correction orders and a criminal record across three states had 300 days wiped off his sentence. What justice does this deliver for those victims?

Victoria has experienced the highest COVID numbers of the pandemic so far in this state. Prisoners are no exception to this. Everyone is dealing with those inconveniences, and it is an affront to victims that criminals should receive special treatment as a result. The federal government has indicated that they will introduce legislation to prevent offenders of federal laws from access to emergency management days. The Victorian government has tightened some aspects, but I implore them to do more and immediately reverse this practice, particularly for violent and sexual offenders.

BANYULE PLANNING SCHEME AMENDMENT

Mr Atkinson (Eastern Metropolitan) (21:39): (1551) My matter is for the Minister for Planning, and what I seek is for him to have a meeting with Carol McColl and residents of Rosanna in respect of a problem that is arising there with the lack of engagement and effective consultation with the community on a proposed combined planning permit application P384 of 2021 and amendment C160 to Banyule’s planning scheme. Now, the consequence of both of these proposals is that a seven-storey apartment complex would be allowed to be built at Rosanna in a zone that currently only permits four storeys.

Now, interestingly I think Ms Terpstra actually belled the cat during an earlier debate today—it might have been yesterday—when she indicated that the government was keen to see greater density in our suburbs and that they did not believe that we should be continuing to build suburbs. I understand part
of that argument, but certainly it would seem that by subterfuge there is this effort to densify some of our suburbs and in some cases in quite inappropriate locations. Certainly for Rosanna this is an urban village area—it is not one of the major hub centres—and the amenity of this area would be significantly impacted if this seven-storey development was to proceed. There is an advisory committee that the minister has appointed which is about to report or may already have reported to the minister in terms of its consideration of the applications. I would ask that the minister, before he makes a final determination on their recommendations, meets with Ms McColl and residents.

COVID-19

Dr CUMMING (Western Metropolitan) (21:41): (1552) My adjournment matter is to the Minister for Health, and the action that I seek is for the minister to release the correct figures concerning cases and compliance in the building and construction industry as well as the health advice informing the decision to close the industry.

On the evening of 20 September the Minister for Industrial Relations announced the immediate shutdown of the construction industry in metropolitan Melbourne, Ballarat, Greater Geelong and the Surf Coast and Mitchell shires. At the next morning’s press conference he announced that there had been 403 cases of COVID across 186 worksites. Later, that afternoon, the Department of Health amended the figures to 337 cases across 154 worksites. The following day the Premier said that there were 350 cases across 150 sites, and the week before, the COVID-19 commander had said that there were 456 cases.

On 13 September the Minister for Industrial Relations and the Minister for Health announced a massive construction compliance blitz across the state. The media release goes on to say that this was, and I quote, ‘to ensure the sector remains open and COVIDSafe’. A few days later the Age reported that following recent inspections 75 per cent of the building industry was non-compliant with COVID-safe regulations and the non-compliance rate in other industries was 19 per cent. Yet the Premier, on the day of closing down the industry, announced that nearly 50 per cent of building sites were non-compliant.

These figures, the number of cases and the compliance rate were all used to justify shutting down the industry, and again the government could not even get their story straight. The blitz was for four weeks, yet a week later the entire industry was shut down. Why did the entire industry have to shut down? Why couldn’t those that had been found compliant continue to operate? Why couldn’t smaller sites with a maximum of five workers and minimal transferring of trade continue to operate? Once again the government would have been happy for their own worksites to be exempt and keep going if the unions had not stepped in and said ‘Stop it’ because they were frightened of more protests on their particular sites. This has upset tradies everywhere—the ones that live in metro and work in regional and the ones that live in regional and work in metro. The tradies, as well as the construction industry, would like to understand which figures are correct.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Dr BACH (Eastern Metropolitan) (21:44): (1553) I got, as normal, this morning my copy of the Age newspaper. I unwrapped it with difficulty—again, as normal—and then as I perused the front page I nearly choked on my crumpet. There, underneath another important story about how the Premier is potentially a crook, was a story that made me incredibly happy. It was a story about international students. Members will recall I was in this place yesterday urging the government to finally take on board the Liberal-Nationals longstanding plan to see a safe return of international students, and the Age has reported exclusively today that apparently this is going to occur. And so as I read the article I read that the government is seeking to put in place a pilot program just like the one the Liberals called for many months ago—fantastic—to bring back small numbers of international students, initially only a tick over 100 per week. Well, okay, that is fine. That is a very conservative plan, but that is all right. Let us start it up and let us get going. This is something that we on this side
of the house, along with vice-chancellors and many others not only engaged in the sector itself, which is such a vital sector for our state, but engaged in small business, have been calling for so long. There are many details that we are not yet aware of, and so while I welcome the news—I wholeheartedly welcome the news—that the government has finally apparently approved a plan—

Mrs McArthur: Seen the light.

Dr Bach: seen the light and approved a plan to seek to bring back international students in a COVID-safe way, there is far more detail that we need to see. So the action that I seek tonight is actually from Minister Pakula in the other place. He has responsibility for international students, and what I would call on him to do is to release more information, certainly to the Parliament, to the Victorian people, about this plan—to confirm the story in the Age today and to release some more information so that we can see that plan.

On this side of the house we will do everything possible to support the government in its newfound desire to bring back international students. We think that is so important. Eighty thousand Victorian jobs depend on international students. Before COVID it was our state’s number one export industry, and I concur with the comments of the vice-chancellor of Deakin University today. One of the reasons why I will continue to say, however, that we needed a plan months and months ago is that these kids needed to have certainty that they would be able to come back to Victoria. Our universities have been bleeding enrolments. They have seen 8000 job losses over the course of this pandemic. Other states have not seen job losses so bad or losses to enrolments that are so bad because they have had greater certainty. So it is great now—apparently, according to the Age newspaper, and I believe most things I read in the Age—that there is a plan. Let us see some more detail, because I for one, and I speak for my colleagues, would love to do everything I can to support the government in this endeavour.

The President: Before I call the next member, for members referring to quotes, even if the quote uses a word that is unparliamentary, I advise them not to use it in the chamber. And I have done this in the past, I have warned members, so I am warning again: members, if you are using quotes from the paper, from whatever, if there are unparliamentary words, do not use them here.

SCHOOL CAMPS AND EXCURSIONS

Mrs McArthur (Western Victoria) (21:48): (1554) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Education. Last week the Herald Sun revealed that it had obtained high-level leaked documents from the Department of Education and Training. Those documents reportedly state that school camps and excursions will be prohibited in 2022. Now, this is appalling. Camps and excursions are a vital part of our children’s education. Students cannot learn everything they need to know about the real world by sitting in a classroom. Perhaps the planned prohibition is due to the fact that only in the seclusion of a classroom can children be indoctrinated into white guilt or boys made to apologise on behalf of their gender, as we have seen in Labor’s ‘Re-education State’ over recent months.

2022 must be a year of returning to normality. In fact it should come much, much sooner. However, two whole years after COVID-19 arrived on our shores you would expect next year to be the very latest that we move past this pandemic, given that much of the rest of the world has done so already. Look at Denmark. They have decided to end all COVID-19 restrictions forever. Meanwhile in Victoria we have an education minister planning to weld the classroom doors shut next year. This ban would be disastrous not only for the students but also for the hundreds of fantastic businesses that run school camp locations around the state or benefit from the influx of people into often rural areas, especially in my electorate.

Those documents also reportedly state that mingling of parents at school pick-ups or drop-offs may also be banned next year. This is also ridiculous. If parents want to meet one another and converse in or around the school gates, of course they should be allowed to do so. The government has been unable to show evidence that there has been any community transmission occurring outdoors in Victoria except maybe at the odd protest. Furthermore, the socialising of parents is absolutely fundamental to
strengthening the bonds of school communities. It is the backbone of local areas. It underpins accountability for school curricula and promotes trust between parents and children. Parents should be encouraged to get to know one another, not banned from interaction under the guise of public health. These allegedly planned restrictions for next year are outrageous, and the minister must immediately clarify these matters. So the action I seek is for the minister to confirm or deny that the government does intend prohibiting these activities in 2022.

CENTRE FOR MULTICULTURAL SPORT

Ms VAGHELA (Western Metropolitan) (1555)

Incorporated pursuant to order of Council of 7 September:

1. My adjournment matter is directed to the Minister for Community Sport, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, and Minister for Youth, the Honourable Ros Spence, MP.
2. My adjournment relates to the minister’s portfolio responsibilities for community sport.
3. The Andrews Labor government has always considered Victoria’s multiculturalism to be a huge part of our identity as a state and one of our strongest assets.
4. I am proud to see the Andrews Labor government continue to provide various and many ways in which to bolster our multicultural identity and underscore that here in Victoria we have a zero tolerance for racism and discrimination.
5. This latest initiative surrounds boosting inclusion for multicultural communities in sport through the recently announced CMSport program.
6. Young people from multicultural communities have lower participation rates in sport, often due to negative experiences of racism and other barriers.
7. This program will promote more inclusive organisations and encourage young people to try new experiences and learn new skills, while building a sense of belonging within their own communities.
8. The Centre for Multicultural Youth, through CMSport, will provide training in inclusion and diversity for sporting associations, regional sports assemblies and local sporting clubs across the state.
9. It will also assist with the development of mentoring opportunities for multicultural young people.
10. The program will also deliver multicultural community forums and build partnerships to boost good practice across the sporting sector and increase inclusive opportunities for multicultural young people.
11. This program presents a great opportunity to get our kids active and equip local sports clubs with the training and resources to foster an inclusive and friendly environment.
12. The government has pledged $300,000 to kickstart the program, which builds on the $450,000 earlier this year to support sporting organisations to deliver mentoring and skill-building activities to young African and Muslim Victorians.
13. The action I seek from the minister is to provide me with an update on how young multicultural constituents in my electorate of Western Metropolitan Region will be able to reap the benefits of this fantastic program.

EPPING ROAD DUPLICATION

Mr ONDARCHIE (Northern Metropolitan) (1556)

Incorporated pursuant to order of Council of 7 September:

My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. The Minister for Roads and Road Safety requested that I direct this question to your department.

Epping residents do not like the raised intersections or speed humps on Epping Road. My office has recently conducted a community survey in Epping. The majority of residents said they just do not like those speed humps and that they are dangerous.

The raised intersections lack logic and have yet to prove their value. They should be ruled out as part of the Epping Road upgrade. I have talked to the emergency services in that area, and they tell me time and time again that these speed humps are horrendous on their emergency vehicles when driving to and from an emergency.
Many residents were glad to hear that the raised intersections were ruled out on the Childs Road’s upgrade after a lot of local campaigning, but in responding to my question the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, when I asked this question in March, said she had ruled out the raised intersections or speed humps on Childs Road and said to me, and I quote, ‘As always, these decisions are made on the very best safety advice from our expert teams’. But we are yet to see this advice.

Minister, the action I seek from you today is for the government to respect the wishes of the community, get rid of those raised intersections or speed humps on Epping Road and investigate other safety measures to save lives.

RESPONSES

Mr LEANE (Eastern Metropolitan—Minister for Local Government, Minister for Suburban Development, Minister for Veterans) (21:51): If my maths is right, I believe that 12 MLCs have externalised adjournment matters tonight to nine different ministers, including one to me, and I will dispatch that in a minute. I will comment on a couple of other adjournment matters.

I know Mr Finn had an adjournment matter for the Premier. I think I should take the chance to finish what I was saying before I was rudely interrupted. Mr Finn, in less than 12 months, has been accused of not being far enough right by some of his colleagues in the Liberal Party and then has been accused of being too far right in recent times. If I was Mr Finn, I would apply the Goldilocks principle and consider myself just right.

Mr Quilty had an adjournment matter for the Minister for Police, which of course I will pass on to the police minister. In his narrative—and I agree and everyone agrees with him that police have to be accountable for their actions, particularly if they are very ordinary, violent actions—Mr Quilty referred to police behaviour in recent weeks. I know that police do not want to be at those sorts of events. Police officers hate to have to go to those sorts of events. Mr Quilty talked about walking past a standard. Well, I would hope no-one in this chamber would walk past a standard that thinks it is acceptable for people to spit on health workers at vaccine centres, to kick dogs, to urinate on monuments, to bring pre-packaged urine to throw on media crews and to be very violent towards police officers themselves, which has resulted in broken arms and a number of broken noses. I hope all of us in this chamber would not walk past that standard.

Mr Davis had an adjournment matter for me about the City of Yarra and the recent announcement that they plan to charge particularly hospitality enterprises for the use of car parks and footpaths for outdoor dining. Since I have been in this position I have been very loath to be critical of local government, because I know local government has done a great job across the state in dealing with the pandemic, and they do a great job in general. They get a bad rap when they do a lot of great work at a local level and they do great work for people in their local government areas (LGAs). But in this case I am happy to express my disappointment in the City of Yarra’s actions in recent times in flagging that they will charge hospitality enterprises for areas that they are going to utilise for outdoor dining, particularly when outdoor dining is actually an answer to increasing patronage during this time and as we come out of lockdown.

Mr Davis asked for certain actions by me, and one of the actions was to interact with the City of Yarra. I am more than happy to do that. I have got to say and put on the record that there was a round of funding towards local governments for outdoor dining in the last spring and summer period and the City of Yarra received half a million dollars from the government to facilitate that. I am working with Minister Pulford on whether we can have a similar package for this spring and summer, considering that the pandemic is still—and we all agree—really adversely affecting the hospitality sector in all LGAs. I will flag that if I and Ms Pulford are successful in a second round being announced soon, the guidelines will state that unless those local governments are prepared to support their hospitality industries they will be ineligible for funding of this kind in the future.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 9.56 pm.