



# **Hansard**

## **LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL**

**60th Parliament**

**Thursday 18 April 2024**



# Members of the Legislative Council

## 60th Parliament

### President

Shaun Leane

### Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

### Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

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

Lizzie Blandthorn

### Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Georgie Crozier

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

Evan Mulholland (from 31 August 2023)

Matthew Bach (to 31 August 2023)

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

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

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

<sup>3</sup> LDP until 26 July 2023

<sup>4</sup> Appointed 7 February 2024

### Party abbreviations

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

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

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

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



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**Thursday 18 April 2024**

**The PRESIDENT (Shaun Leane) took the chair at 9:31 am, read the prayer and made an acknowledgement of country.**

*Announcements***Uncle Rick Ronan**

**The PRESIDENT (09:32):** I want to extend a special thankyou to Uncle Rick for his smoking ceremony today and also his welcome to country last night at the reception. As I said last night, I feel privileged, and I think we all feel privileged as members of Parliament, that we do get to attend a number of smoking ceremonies, and it was a perfect example from Uncle Rick today that we always learn. With every one of them we always learn. Uncle Rick, you were fantastic, and thank you so much.

**Bondi Junction attack**

**The PRESIDENT (09:32):** I want to make a short statement on behalf of all of the chamber to acknowledge that we are all shocked and saddened by the tragic events that took place at Bondi Junction in Sydney last Saturday. We note that one of the victims of that tragic event, Ashlee Good, grew up here in Echuca. On behalf of all of the members of the Legislative Council, I offer our deepest condolences to Ashlee's loved ones and to the families and friends of all the victims.

**Proclamation****Following proclamation read by the Clerk:**

I, Margaret Gardner, Governor of Victoria, acting under section 8 of the **Constitution Act 1975** and all other powers vested in me:

- (i) vary and alter the place for the despatch of business of the Legislative Council on 18 April 2024 and fix the Echuca Library, Echuca, situated at 310 Hare Street, Echuca, as the place for the despatch of business of the Legislative Council on 18 April 2024 until the completion of business agreed to occur at the Echuca Library, by the resolution of the Legislative Council on 21 March 2024; and
- (ii) confirm that once the Legislative Council has completed the business agreed to occur at the Echuca Library by the resolution of the Legislative Council on 21 March 2024, the despatch of business of the Legislative Council shall thereafter revert to Parliament House, Melbourne.

Given under my hand and the seal of Victoria at Melbourne, this 9th day of April 2024.

**Regional sitting**

**The PRESIDENT (09:34):** It is the Council's pleasure to welcome everyone to this sitting of the Legislative Council in Echuca. On behalf of all the Legislative Council, I really want to thank the people of Echuca and the Campaspe shire for their warm welcome, along with all the other local governments, all the local shires and councils, for their warm welcome and assistance.

Thank you to the shire for opening up the doors of your library for this sitting, and I want to give a big shout-out to the wonderful Campaspe library services team, who have gone to all ends to accommodate us this week. Libraries are a vital resource and much-loved part of the community. They keep people connected through a love of learning, community events and programs, and libraries provide a space for everyone that is welcoming and where everyone can feel that they belong. We are so grateful to the Echuca library.

I can say firsthand that the odd person that did not realise the library had closed kind of bumped into the front of the library. There were mixed reactions, from 'That's a terrific thing that the Legislative Council is here for the week to come to the region' to 'That'd be right, bloody politicians taking it over.'

We are also grateful to so many local organisations that have assisted us in this regional sitting, including the students from Echuca College who have prepared an amazing morning and afternoon tea today. We really look forward to that.

I want to, on behalf of all of us, pay tribute to the wonderful staff of our parliamentary departments – the Legislative Council department, of course, and we have had assistance from the Department of Parliamentary Services and assistance from the department of the Assembly. We have seconded some fantastic people to be able to put on this event. For the MPs, just to let you know, the who's who of Parliament have been up here – all the people that we love and rely on for all sorts of services have been up here and have worked like a well-oiled machine. But I single out two people who led the well-oiled machine: our Deputy Clerk Anne Sargent and Bronwyn Gray, who has been the regional sitting coordinator. This is a dedicated project for her, and she has done a power of work for the last six months. We seconded her from the Assembly. I would like to find a way that we can steal her permanently, but I reckon the Speaker and the Clerk of the Parliaments might fight us on that.

It is just so fantastic for us to be in this region. We feel privileged that we have been welcomed so warmly. It is just such a wonderful part of our great state. That is it from me.

*Address to Parliament*

**Tara Atley**

**The PRESIDENT (09:38):** I am really pleased that I can now call Tara Atley to address the house.

**Tara Atley escorted into chamber by Usher of the Black Rod.**

**Tara ATLEY:** Honourable President, honourable members, my name is Tara Atley. I am a year 12 student and school captain of Rochester Secondary College. Today I am here representing students and young people of the Campaspe shire.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet, and I pay my respect to all Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander peoples and carry that respect to any Indigenous people here today.

The presence of the members of Parliament today holds a significant value for me. I would like to express my gratitude towards them, as it demonstrates a genuine interest in our community and their willingness to listen.

In January 2011 Rochester and the surrounding areas were hit with the worst floods that the town had seen in over 100 years. With houses, sheds and livestock lost, the community created mappings and quickly learned what was considered to be the proper way to prepare for the future. However, 11 years later was the beginning of yet another change for most Rochester residents, like me. In October 2022 we experienced a one-in-1000-year flood. Eight houses in the whole town of Rochester were not inundated – eight. Living in a small town such as Rochester with a population of roughly 3000, word travels quickly. The weather had been unusually severe all week, so the residents were understandably concerned. I remember the day before the floods, a normal school day, before the warnings came: the rain pelted on our classroom roof and the grass overflowed with water. I was in denial of the inevitable: Rochester would flood again, essentially just a decade from the last.

On 13 October 2022 school buses were unable to run due to excessive water on the roads, consequently cancelling a day of school for all students. Rumours around town suggested that, yes, we were going to flood; however, it would not be as catastrophic as the previous one. Our town was hopeful, but that optimism would soon be sunk. My brother and I received a phone call from our dad, who was a police officer in Rochester at the time. We were given instructions to sandbag as much of our property as possible, pack light, leave our pets behind and leave. The roads were shutting swiftly with water pouring over them, and the rain was becoming so intense that we could barely look through the front windscreen.



With a few detours my mum, my brother and I safely evacuated to a relative's home in Koroop. Dad found himself staying in Rochester to work as a constant service to our community. However, as we made our way up our relative's driveway that feeling of the unknown struck me immediately. A few days later, as the water reached its peak in Rochester, the population had diminished. We held out hope as we returned that everything and everyone would have endured the storm to some extent. Walking through knee-deep water to access our house, the emotions of confusion, grief and sadness hit as we looked at the muddy floorboards and the watermarks on our walls.

Like countless others we stayed in emergency housing, first in Bendigo and then at multiple places across Echuca and Moama. The school became an unfamiliar environment reached after commuting 25 minutes from Echuca to Rochester and a journey by bus 45 minutes from Rochester to Bendigo, repeated back and forth for weeks. However, makeshift buildings were finally constructed at the school, and I lived in a caravan outside my Pa's house from late January through to Christmas in 2023. Studying VCE topics and combining schooling, part-time work and sports whilst living in a caravan was a difficult learning curve.

I am now fortunate to have been able to return to my home with my family, with builders and insurance agents still visiting regularly. With that, many people in Rochester have yet to begin renovating their homes or, similarly to my family, are still in the process of completion. Whether you live in a house, a caravan or a shed, whether enduring losses of pets, livestock or property, Rochester collectively continues its recovery process. In various natural disasters such as the October floods and the bushfires across Australia the media typically highlights the initial crisis. We understand that the reconstruction process is not always as newsworthy, but we live it every day. Although the floods occurred less than two years ago, Rochester and our residents are often overlooked. Young people's mental health is a challenge in our community, and we are looking for a restoration back into our normal lives. Through countless discussions it is evident that we must integrate a sense of belonging and accomplishment for the recuperation of young individuals in our society. This is attainable by increased utilisation of mental health services and establishing communal spaces beyond the home and school that serve as places for academic and emotional support.

Encouraging open communication and collaboration among all individuals is imperative for building overall wellbeing within our population. Our community, particularly the young people, demonstrate resilience. Nonetheless, we cannot face another crisis of this severity without the necessary support. Time is limited for addressing this issue. The impact of natural disasters, such as the loss of homes, belongings or loved ones, swiftly alters the lives of families and communities.

In the future of the Rochester community I am optimistic, and today I encourage you to share that hope. I cherish where I live and appreciate how it fosters a sense of unity. I would like Rochester and its residents to remain one in the hope that everyone can still enjoy the thrills and opportunities Rochester has to offer despite facing hardships. Thank you.

*Members applauded.*

#### **Cameron Barnes**

**The PRESIDENT (09:46):** I am now very pleased to call on Cameron Barnes to address the house.

#### **Cameron Barnes escorted into chamber by Usher of the Black Rod.**

**Cameron BARNES:** Honourable President, honourable members, I am very pleased to be here today. I have been invited to speak to you as the 2023 Young Citizen of the Year for Echuca and the Campaspe shire. I was a member of the local youth action group and am the current chair of the local Rover Scouts unit. Youth in Campaspe shire have an abundance of sporting opportunities – football, cricket, basketball, netball and many more. For youth that are not so sporting, there are groups such as the junior CFA, martial arts, Scouts and Guides. We are lucky to have not one but three rivers across the shire that provide youth with a place to swim, canoe, SUP, fish and camp. For many it is just a

short walk or bike ride to the river. Whilst these are all great activities, they mainly provide youth with one to two outings a week, so we need more variety of activities to keep youth engaged and active.

Our shire council, through the youth action group, has a number of great projects underway, including the *Campaspe Youth Charter*, media team, Get Cultured, leadership training, Make It Yours, Get Informed, Get Down to Business and community organisation development. These are also great initiatives; however, again, only a small number of youth engage in these activities, so we need to find a way to encourage more youth to participate. Many of the activities available to youth are run by volunteers. According to the 2021 census, 17 per cent of the population of the Shire of Campaspe reported doing some form of volunteer work. This shows how ready individuals are to contribute to their community. This includes sporting coaches, Scout leaders, firefighters, SES and search and rescue. We heavily rely on volunteers in our community, and these people are role models for our youth.

Sadly, there are youth that have not yet found activity that they enjoy, and with boredom comes crime. So we need to find more activities of a broader range to ensure that we engage all youth in fulfilling activities. Currently for some activities youth have to travel to larger towns such as Bendigo and Shepparton or even Melbourne. Not all youth would have the ability to travel, so we need to make these opportunities available to them locally. We also need to provide youth with a place they can gather – a youth hub – where they can have fun and support each other, so there is still work to be done to support youth in the area. We have started to address mental health issues with the opening of Headspace in Echuca, but there is still a need for more mental health services to support youth. There are also less opportunities for youth in regional areas when they leave school, so many move away for university or for better paying work. We need more employment opportunities locally so that youth stay within the community to become the next generation of volunteers that the community relies on so heavily.

The greatest advantage of growing up in a regional area such as Campaspe shire is that you get to know the people within your community. You become familiar with the staff that serve you at the supermarket and in the restaurants. They greet you with a familiar smile, and you feel like you are part of a community, not just a customer.

In closing, youth in the Shire of Campaspe benefit greatly from the activities and initiatives that are currently in place, and with continued development of youth activities we are on the right course for youth to grow into caring citizens of the future. I hope you enjoy your time in Campaspe shire. Thank you.

*Members applauded.*

**The PRESIDENT:** On behalf of all the chamber, I thank Tara and Cameron for their wonderful contributions to today's hearing. It is clear you are already leaders in your community, but it is probably clear to us all that you will be leaders of your community for the next 40-plus years, when I am 110. Once again, thank you.

*Bills***Climate Change and Energy Legislation Amendment (Renewable Energy and Storage Targets) Bill 2023****Firearms and Control of Weapons (Machetes) Amendment Bill 2024****State Electricity Commission Amendment Bill 2023****Private Security and County Court Amendment Bill 2024***Royal assent*

**The PRESIDENT** (09:51): I have a message from the Governor, dated 26 March:

The Governor informs the Legislative Council that she has, on this day, given the Royal Assent to the undermentioned Acts of the present Session presented to her by the Clerk of the Parliaments:

**9/2024** Climate Change and Energy Legislation Amendment (Renewable Energy and Storage Targets) Act 2024

**10/2024** Firearms and Control of Weapons (Machetes) Amendment Act 2024

**11/2024** State Electricity Commission Amendment Act 2024

I have received a further message from the Governor, dated 9 April:

The Governor informs the Legislative Council that she has, on this day, given the Royal Assent to the undermentioned Act of the present Session presented to her by the Clerk of the Parliaments:

**12/2024** Private Security and County Court Amendment Act 2024

*Petitions***Heathcote secondary school**

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) presented a petition bearing 313 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the need for a secondary school in the town of Heathcote. With two primary schools in the town, the town sees seven bus loads of secondary school children depart Heathcote every morning, for trips between 45 minutes to one hour each way. Most children on these buses are now required to leave home by 7.30 am and will not get home until after 4.30 pm. With a secondary school in Heathcote, the children would save over two hours a day in travel. Growth in the family aged demographic would increase even further if travel to a secondary school was not as demanding as what the children are currently required to do. With the current housing crisis in major cities, growth in rural towns is important to ease the housing burden.

**The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to conduct a feasibility study on building a state run secondary school in Heathcote and, should it be feasible, begin the process of having a secondary school built.**

**Daylesford Speedway**

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) presented a petition bearing 74 signatures:

The Petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that the oldest racetrack in Australia is Daylesford Speedway. The track is 73 years old and two diggers started it for returned World War II soldiers recovering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The track needs a safety wall for drivers, the crowd and the flagman who has almost been hit many times with only tractor tyres saving him. Not having a safety wall caused a driver to pass away from going up the bank and rolling over. The outside track is 604 metres and the inside wall is 400 metres. Only 300 metres of the inside wall requires fencing and posts. Drainage and a water tank are required as the pits get flooded. A solar farm should be installed to supply power to the racetrack and the Daylesford Football Club. A mobile tower is required to provide phone reception to contact emergency services. A skid pad would allow kids to get off the streets and enter cars in burnout competitions. The speedway is linked with Daylesford RSL and we wish to continue to work with them to help returned soldiers. These upgrades could allow for a sprint car race to be held which would bring \$300,000 per race to the Ballarat region.

**The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to upgrade Daylesford Speedway and install a safety wall, fencing, drainage, mobile tower and solar farm.**

**Wendy LOVELL:** I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration on the next day of meeting.

**Motion agreed to.**

### **Waste and recycling management**

**Sarah MANSFIELD** (Western Victoria) presented a petition bearing 1107 signatures:

The Petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that there is a proposal by Prospect Hill International to construct and operate a massive waste-to-energy plant in Lara, Geelong. The company is proposing to burn 400,000 tonnes of municipal, commercial and industrial waste annually for 25 years, equivalent to 10 million tonnes of waste. The construction is oversized and most feedstock would need to come from outside our region. The huge boiler room and 80-metre-high chimney that would need to be constructed would negatively impact the region's amenity. Incinerators do not mitigate the need for landfill and are the most expensive way to treat waste. All waste incinerators emit deadly forever chemicals and toxic pollutants that travel long distances and bioaccumulate in the environment. The community fears the impacts on human health and the environment. Lara's air pollution is already above safe World Health Organization levels. Seventeen schools or childcare centres are within 5km radius of the proposed construction site, and the Urban Growth Zone is 2.7km away. The community opposes the project. Of the 121 submission received by the Environment Protection Authority, 115 have already opposed the project.

**The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to not impose an oversized, unsafe and unnecessary waste incinerator in the region and reject planning permit PA2001035 and development licence APP1004200.**

### **Sydney Road tram stops**

**Samantha RATNAM** (Northern Metropolitan) presented a petition bearing 2407 signatures:

**BACKGROUND:** The Petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council that there are **5.5km** without ACCESSIBLE TRAM STOPS on Sydney Rd between Brunswick Road and Bakers Road, Coburg North!

Once the Upfield train line is closed to remove the train level crossings and build a Skyrail, there will be **NO** accessible public transport along the Upfield corridor for at least 18 months. *Where does that leave people with a disability, parents with prams, elderly people and anyone with temporary and permanent mobility restrictions?*

Under federal legislation, public transport in all states **was required to be fully accessible by the end of 2022.**

**ACTION:** The petitioners request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to act on its legal responsibility to make the tram stops on Sydney Road accessible before construction on the Upfield train line starts. The tram stops must be permanent to guarantee transport users' safety and not to waste taxpayers' money with temporary stops.

**Samantha RATNAM:** As this is a petition qualifying for debate under standing order 11.03(10), I give notice that I intend to move 'That the petition be taken into consideration' on Wednesday of next sitting week.

*Committees***Environment and Planning Committee***Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria*

**Ryan BATCHELOR** (Southern Metropolitan) (09:55): Pursuant to standing order 23.22, I table an interim report on the inquiry into the 2022 flood event in Victoria, including an appendix, from the Environment and Planning Committee. I move:

That the report be published.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** I move:

That the Council take note of the report.

It is an honour to be in Echuca today to table the interim report of the inquiry into the October 2022 floods in the presence of many who were involved. The report is an acknowledgement of their experiences and a voice for their contributions, so thank you to all who made a submission and who spoke to our public hearings in Rochester, in Echuca, in Seymour and in Mooroopna. These are just some of the towns in regional Victoria devastated by flooding in 2022, some of the worst flooding ever recorded. October 2022 was the wettest month ever recorded in Victoria, and as more and more rain fell on saturated ground, rivers, roads, homes and towns were under threat. This interim report acknowledges the enormous effort from communities right across the state but especially here in northern Victoria when they came together to meet this threat. We also acknowledge the tragedy of the lives lost and the ongoing trauma felt by so many.

During its inquiry the committee heard from many about their experiences during the flood period, their journey of recovery and their determination to put in place strategies to mitigate future flooding events. The inquiry received 880 submissions, many from experts and agencies, government and other, but the majority were from those who personally experienced flooding – people whose homes, businesses, schools and streets were flooded. Of the 880 submissions, 608 were from northern Victoria – 344 from Rochester, 58 from Echuca and others from Bendigo, Seymour, Kerang and elsewhere. It is never easy telling your personal story to a parliamentary inquiry, especially while still dealing with the ongoing challenges your community faces. The committee is especially grateful to those people who came and told us their story, because by doing so you gave us invaluable insights into how disasters are experienced by communities and the sort of support that is required.

The findings made by the committee in the interim report are focused on key areas where we think we can do better: ensuring effective and responsive support for communities facing the challenges presented by housing needs in flood-affected areas, ensuring that financial support aligns with the needs experienced and ensuring that processes for obtaining financial supports for recovery do not cause distress for individuals.

The committee's final report will be tabled in the middle of this year. That report will also look at the flooding experienced in Maribyrnong and will include further findings as well as some clear recommendations about how we can improve our processes and how we can better support people to recover from disasters like the October 2022 floods, which are becoming increasingly common. The recommendations in the final report will be across three key areas: mitigation, including planning and preparedness; recovery; and response.

In addition to thanking all those who contributed to the inquiry and gave us their stories, I want to thank the committee secretariat and staff across the Parliament for the work on the interim report but also in assisting us to facilitate the input of so many in the community in our deliberations. I want to thank my committee colleagues and also the previous committee chair for her work on the inquiry. It is very fitting to table this interim report in Echuca today, and I commend it to the house.

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (09:59): As a member of the committee it is a pleasure to speak to this interim report. I would like to thank all locals who contributed as witnesses or through the submission process. As Mr Batchelor said, we heard from numerous locals, particularly in Rochester, where people were able to tell their story of exactly what happened to them during the floods, how they felt about warnings and how they felt about the recovery process after. This inquiry generated huge interest from northern Victoria and from around the state as well. There were 880 submissions, 608 of which came from northern Victoria, including 429 from communities here in the Campaspe, and 344 – an incredible amount – came from the town of Rochester. That was no surprise to me as a local representative because I knew just how badly Rochester had been affected by the floods.

Our report today is an interim report; it is not our final report. It includes six findings but no recommendations. It is really a summary of what we heard from Victorians about the floods here in northern Victoria. I would say to locals, please do not be disappointed that there are no recommendations in here because there is a much more substantial report to come. There will probably also be several minority reports as well, I would imagine, to come. Our final report will include numerous findings and recommendations to government, but we wanted to have something to table here today in Echuca to demonstrate the enormous contribution made by this region to the inquiry.

I would like also, as well as thanking the locals, to thank our committee secretariat, led by Lilian Topic, who have put an enormous amount of work into this inquiry. I acknowledge that the committee also ran a submission workshop in Rochester – (*Time expired*)

**Samantha RATNAM** (Northern Metropolitan) (10:01): I too would like to commend this interim report and thank the chair, committee and secretariat for all the work that has gone into this interim report and most importantly thank the community of regional Victoria and northern Victoria especially for your honesty, courage and commitment, demonstrated both through the hearings and to the community during the 2022 flooding events and the aftermath.

We have heard through the hearings so far that the community was stretched and stressed to its limits by the catastrophic flood events in 2022. You have demonstrated and shown your resilience in the face of the crisis and the ongoing challenges since then. In trends and themes that are emerging from the inquiry to date, the 2022 flooding event must be a turning point in how we as a state deal with future climate-related disasters. The events in 2022 have highlighted the need for better early warning systems, better communication and coordination and more trust and reciprocity between communities and authorities. We also need more planning for future events that we know are going to become more frequent and more severe because of climate change. It is not just the emergency response system that needs to be strengthened, but the recovery, both long and short term, that also needs to be strengthened. So many people we heard from are still living in caravans, so many people are struggling with insurance and councils are struggling to get permission to support and rebuild infrastructure to a higher flood-proof standard.

It is quite clear that climate change is here and we are not ready as a community. We must get ready, or more communities are going to suffer with more of these events. I thank everyone who participated in this inquiry so far.

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (10:03): It is very appropriate to be tabling the interim report of the inquiry into the 2022 flood event in Victoria at this regional sitting in the northern Victoria region. The floods impacted 63 local government areas, and this inquiry took on a critical role of inquiring into Victoria's preparedness and response to the floods.

I remember when our committee held the very first public hearing in Rochester in August last year. Some said it was the first time they actually felt listened to. We also held regional hearings in Echuca, Seymour and Mooroopna and received 880 written submissions from across the state, including 608 from northern Victoria. Many of these were from Rochester, where nearly every home in the township,

over 900 homes, experienced over-the-floor flooding. Every submission reflects a unique experience, and slowly common threads begin to emerge that help shed a light on what happened and what we need to do better in future. Sometimes when life presents challenges it may seem easier at the time to stay busy and push through, but I especially want to thank all those who took the time to share their insights as part of this committee inquiry.

This report is an interim report which includes findings, and further details, including recommendations, will be included in the final report, which is now expected to be tabled midyear. I want to acknowledge my parliamentary colleagues and the committee secretariat for their extensive work on this inquiry. I know that we all feel a sense of privilege and feel the pressure of producing a report that accurately reflects what happened and provides a clear pathway forward to better equip Victoria's response to floods in future. But sometimes the best outcomes do not come through written reports; they come through the research, reflection, conversations and connections that happen along the way.

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (10:05): We are really blessed to be in this wonderful location, and I would like to acknowledge Tara Atley's contribution from her perspective of the floods. It is nothing short of quite emotional to sit in a room – as I did as a member of the committee, and I thank all the committee members for their sincerity and attention at the hearings – and listen to somebody whose farm has been flooded and whose cattle have been destroyed in the floods and whose houses have been decimated. But it is also inspiring to hear of the willpower and the human spirit to come together in preparing for the floods and during the events – for the sandbags and for not only that organised and coordinated volunteer effort in terms of the SES and the CFA and the Shepparton search and rescue but also that spontaneous volunteerism that we saw that so embodies the country spirit. We also heard about that spirit from the Maribyrnong community, and we thank them.

This is about listening to the country and representing the country in this interim report. There are findings. There are going to be very significant, and I think very important, recommendations for government to hear, listen to and address. There is still so much outstanding road infrastructure and other infrastructure that needs to be rebuilt, and this government does need to listen to these recommendations when they come out.

I want to also put on record my thanks to Lilian Topic and her committee secretariat. I think at no other time have we seen such effort, such real commitment, to the process of this inquiry, and I thank them for that effort.

**Motion agreed to.**

### *Papers*

### **Papers**

#### **Tabled by Clerk:**

Border Groundwaters Agreement Review Committee – Report, 2022–23.

Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978 –

Orders of 27 March 2024 giving approval to the granting of a lease and a licence at Albert Park.

Order of 12 March 2024 giving approval to the granting of a licence at Spencer and Drybrough Street Reserve and Miller Street West Melbourne Reserve.

Orders of 12 March 2024 giving approval to the granting of a lease and a licence at Point Leo Foreshore and Public Park Reserve.

Order of 8 April 2024 giving approval to the granting of a licence at The Pines Flora and Fauna Reserve.

Ombudsman – Reflections on 10 years, March 2024 (*released on 25 March 2024 – a non-sitting day*) (*Ordered to be published*).

Planning and Environment Act 1987 – Notices of approval of the –

Alpine, Ballarat, Benalla, Buloke, Campaspe, Central Goldfields, Gannawarra, Greater Bendigo, Greater Shepparton, Hepburn, Indigo, Loddon, Macedon Ranges, Mansfield, Mildura, Mitchell, Moira, Moorabool, Mount Alexander, Murrindindi, Pyrenees, Strathbogie, Swan Hill, Towong, Wangaratta and Wodonga Planning Schemes – Amendment GC222.

Bass Coast Planning Scheme – Amendment C165.

Bayside Planning Scheme – Amendment C201.

Boroondara Planning Scheme – Amendment C409.

Glencelg Planning Scheme – Amendment C109.

Glen Eira Planning Scheme – Amendment C259.

Greater Geelong Planning Scheme – Amendment C467.

Horsham Planning Scheme – Amendment C81.

Hume Planning Scheme – Amendment C266.

Kingston Planning Scheme – Amendment C215.

Maroondah Planning Scheme – Amendment C156.

Mornington Peninsula Planning Scheme – Amendment C293.

Moyne Planning Scheme – Amendment C79.

Victoria Planning Provisions – Amendments VC259 and VC261.

Warrnambool Planning Scheme – Amendment C212.

Whitehorse Planning Scheme – Amendment C230.

Statutory Rules under the following Acts of Parliament –

Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 – No. 16.

Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 – No. 20.

Land Conservation (Vehicle Control) Act 1972 – No. 19.

Social Services Regulation Act 2021 – No. 17.

Supported Residential Services (Private Proprietors) Act 2010 – No. 18.

Supreme Court Act 1986 – No. 15.

Supreme Court Act 1986 – Vexatious Proceedings Act 2014 – No. 14.

Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal Act 1998 – Guardianship and Administration Act 2019 – No. 13.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 –

Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule Nos. 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 22, 23 and 25.

Legislative Instruments and related documents under section 16B in respect of an Order in Council declaring the dingo to be unprotected wildlife in specified areas of Victoria under the Wildlife Act 1975.

Wildlife Act 1975 – Notices under section 86 of the Act –

Wildlife (Indigenous Game Birds (Quail) Hunting) Notice (*Gazette S155, 2 April 2024*).

Wildlife (Prohibition of Game Hunting) Notice No. 2/2024 (*Gazette S162, 7 April 2024*).

Wildlife (Closure of Moodie Swamp State Game Reserve and Lake Modewarre Reserve) Notice (*Gazette S177, 12 April 2024*).

### *Petitions*

#### **Electricity infrastructure**

#### *Response*

**The Clerk:** I have received the following paper for presentation to the house pursuant to standing orders: Treasurer's response to petition titled 'Gippsland renewable energy zone project', presented by Ms Bath.



**Taxation***Response*

**The Clerk:** I have received the following paper for presentation to the house pursuant to standing orders: Treasurer's response to petition titled 'Reject new taxes', presented by Mr Limbrick.

***Production of documents*****Albury Wodonga Health**

**The Clerk:** I present a letter from the Attorney-General dated 16 April 2024 in response to a resolution of the Council of 6 March 2024 on the motion of Ms Lovell relating to Albury Wodonga Health. The letter states that the date for production of documents does not allow sufficient time to respond and that the government will endeavour to provide a final response to the order as soon as possible.

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

**Notices of motion given.**

**Adjournment**

**Jaelyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (10:16):  
I move:

That the Council, at its rising, adjourn until Tuesday 30 April 2024.

**Motion agreed to.**

***Committees*****Legal and Social Issues Committee***Membership*

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (10:16): I move, by leave:

That Mr Welch be a participating member of the Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee.

**Motion agreed to.**

***Members statements*****Aged care**

**Ingrid STITT** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (10:17): I rise to speak about our fantastic public aged care facilities here in the north of the state. Yesterday I had the pleasure of visiting five of our regional public sector residential aged care services: Dianella hostel in Kilmore, Grutzner House in Shepparton, Pioneers lodge in Numurkah, Banawah Nursing Home in Nathalia and Glanville Village right here in Echuca. Our government has a long and proud history of delivering public sector aged care beds, especially in rural and regional areas. Ninety per cent of our PSRACS are in rural and regional Victoria and provide local access to residential aged care places, and in many locations they are the only service in town.

We are continuing to invest in improving these local facilities. As part of the 2023–24 budget we are delivering three new public sector residential aged care facilities that are modern and dementia friendly and that support residents with complex care needs. This investment includes funding for two new facilities locally: \$41.1 million for a 24-bed, co-located facility at Cohuna District Hospital and \$54.3 million for a 36-bed facility at Numurkah hospital campus. It was an absolute pleasure to speak with staff at Numurkah yesterday about this investment and what it will mean for those residents in that community. I could not be prouder of the work that they do.

### Regional sitting

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (10:18): It is my great pleasure to welcome all members and staff of the Parliament of Victoria to Echuca and my electorate of Northern Victoria Region today. This sitting of Parliament has become a reality due to a motion that I moved on behalf of the Liberals and Nationals to bring Parliament to an area of the state that was badly affected by the October 2022 floods. The motion was based on a motion I moved in 2020 that resulted in a regional sitting in Bright, an area that had been affected by bushfires, and now here we are in Echuca and the Shire of Campaspe today.

I would like to thank mayor Rob Amos and the Campaspe shire for their warm and generous welcome. As locals, we are well aware of the devastation the floods created in vast areas of northern Victoria, but it was here in Campaspe and particularly in Rochester that the floods had the most devastating and lasting impact. Having the Parliament here today and other activities over the past couple of days has ensured that all MPs have been exposed to the lasting effect of the floods and the struggle to recover that our communities still face today. The regional sitting, committee hearings in Bendigo and Shepparton and youth forums in Kyabram and Shepparton have provided a huge boost to local economies. The sitting involves around 150 people; all of them have booked at least one and some up to five nights accommodation. They have purchased coffees and meals and visited other shops. All of this will provide a great economic boost.

### Supermarket prices

**Aiv PUGLIELLI** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:20): Recently the CEO of Woolworths was threatened with jail time as he refused to answer questions at a senate committee hearing. Greens senator Nick McKim took on the CEOs of Woolies and Coles to question them on price gouging, a topic I think would have made them squirm. The outgoing Woolies CEO just would not answer Nick's questions about return on equity. Effectively, this measures the profitability of a corporation. He probably did not want to share that it is likely to be more than 2½ times the return on equity made by our big banks, which are the most profitable banking corporations in the world. The supermarkets have gotten away with far too much for far too long. The game is up.

### Housing

**Sonja TERPSTRA** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:21): I rise to talk about the absolute pleasure I had a few weeks ago of visiting the recently completed housing development in Lusher Road, Croydon, with Minister for Housing Harriet Shing. The development features 137 new social and affordable units, which will give up to 250 people on the Victorian Housing Register a place to call home. More than 60 households have already moved in, including the wonderful Joy, who we got to tour her lovely unit with and to hear her amazing story. The Croydon site is the largest development to be completed under the Social Housing Growth Fund for around 3300 new social homes across Victoria. The new one-, two-, three- and four-bedroom homes are modern and energy efficient, meaning renters will be warm in winter and cool in summer while saving on their power bills. The site also features a communal garden and courtyard, a secure basement car park and bicycle spaces, and it is in walking distance of the local shopping plaza and Eastfield Park. But not only that, it is in really close proximity to Swinburne TAFE, and I know that many people who are living in these new, beautiful homes will be able to access the many things that Croydon has to offer.

### Flood recovery

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (10:23): At the civic reception in Echuca last night I was speaking to several CFA volunteers who assisted during the 2022 floods, and one said that different brigades in different towns had become more like a family because they had supported each other during the floods. I recently met with residents of Huntly who have been impacted by the floods and witnessed people who live near each other meet for the very first time. Through their common experience they found connection, exchanged phone numbers and offered each other support.

It can be hard to find any bright side following a natural disaster like a flood when you have lost your home and your belongings and your kids keep asking when they will be back in their own bedroom again. Flooding can divide neighbours, but as I have met people impacted by floods across northern Victoria, I have seen neighbours, communities and towns come closer together. The silos that often keep people apart start to break down as people go out of their way to help one another.

It has been over 18 months since the floods, and unfortunately silos still exist when it comes to an all-agency response, especially between government authorities. Emergency radio broadcaster KLFM in Bendigo has raised concerns that the Emergency Management Victoria database stores information entered by emergency organisations like the CFA, VicRoads, SES, Victoria Police and others and that permission is still needed for the collected information to be disseminated to authorised organisations, such as local councils and health organisations. When it comes to flood data, we need accurate local data to inform decision-making. It is important to break down the silos and provide greater transparency between different agencies and authorities.

### **Bill Greenfield**

**Jeff BOURMAN** (Eastern Victoria) (10:24): Today I want to talk about a friend of mine who died recently. If he was still with us, he would beat me senseless for bringing his name up. He was a very low-key individual. But Bill Greenfield died a few weeks ago of cancer. We knew he was sick, but we did not realise how sick. I first met Bill 15 years ago. He was my wife's work husband. How should I put it? Initially I was a little bit unsure about how to take this, but then I met Bill and I have never met a more gentle, well-natured giant of a person. I am not a small person myself, but he eclipsed me. I could not believe what a nice person he was. My condolences go to Sharon and the boys. Bill will be missed. Vale, Bill Greenfield.

### **Regional Victorians**

**Tom McINTOSH** (Eastern Victoria) (10:25): I would like to use my members statement today to acknowledge regional Victorians. Our regions are a vital part of our great state. Our cities value our regions. We get out to our mountains, our rivers and our beaches. We get out and enjoy the space and spend money in local areas. Our regions, with their world-class agriculture, feed our cities, and their industries underpin our economy.

It was moving today to hear from Tara and Cameron as local youth here in this area of regional Victoria. There are always challenges. I grew up in the regions in the 1990s. We had services closing and train lines getting pulled out and footy clubs merging and things contracting, and we still have challenges today. But it is great that we have growth and that unemployment is low. This side, this government, will continue to invest. Whether it is in our education, our training, our health care or our infrastructure, we will keep on getting on with doing that, and we are committed to it. For the last quarter of a century our leaders have all been from regional Victoria, and that continues today with Premier Jacinta Allan.

I want to say thank you to all regional Victorians for everything you do and for the communities that you build. We will continue to put the services in around you and put the infrastructure in around you through the \$2 billion regional fund. We will invest. Whether it is tourism bringing people into the local economy, whether it is housing, whether it is infrastructure, we will stand by you and support you. Thank you for all that you do.

*Members interjecting.*

**The PRESIDENT:** I do not think Mr McIntosh was being too provocative. In members statements we try and let people have a free run. Let us give that a crack in the future.

### Western Victoria Region multicultural communities

**Joe McCracken** (Western Victoria) (10:27): I would like to recognise a number of multicultural Victorians, particularly the Indian community around my patch in the Melton area. I recently attended Holi celebrations over the Easter weekend. I was there with my colleague Trung Luu and also the member for Melton. I have got to say that the celebrations were absolutely fantastic – full of colour. I will know to never, ever, ever, ever again wear a white T-shirt, although I did bring a change of clothes times three. But it was really a wonderful celebration of all that Hinduism has to offer.

I will say too that the Hindu community, particularly around the Melton area, are looking to have culturally appropriate burial ceremonies, and that would include a crematorium that is well needed. That crematorium would also be envisaged to be used by other cultures, such as Sikhs or Buddhists.

I want to congratulate Sri Durga Temple committee president Mr Joshi along with the entire committee and the community for the outstanding event they ran. It was an amazing celebration, and I pay tribute to them, as a humble person who went there and enjoyed the celebrations.

### Regional health services

**Sarah Mansfield** (Western Victoria) (10:29): It is so refreshing to be out in the regions here in Echuca. I really thank the community for their warm welcome. While this is an opportunity to listen to and learn from the community and hear about their needs, I think it is really important that this attention persists beyond a singular sitting day. For me, this is especially important when it comes to regional health. I want to acknowledge the work that has been done by local health providers in town, like Echuca Regional Health and the community nurses, GPs, allied health workers, aged care workers, optometrists, dentists and psychologists. I see your commitment and your care for this community, and I understand the challenges that you face in a constrained regional environment.

People living and working in regional communities have the same right to a healthy life as any other Victorian, but too often inequalities persist as a result of barriers such as cost, travel time and limited government investment, and this is borne out in poorer population health outcomes in things like physical, mental and dental health. Almost one-quarter of Victorians live in the regions, yet policies, politics and funding decisions do not always reflect that. Ending the postcode lottery that exists when it comes to accessing health care in regional Victoria is possible, but it requires the government to commit to making this a priority.

### Regional sitting

**Jacinta Ermacora** (Western Victoria) (10:30): I want to thank the Yorta Yorta people, Uncle Rick and the people of the Echuca community for welcoming me and also the Parliament to Echuca this week.

### Budj Bim

**Jacinta Ermacora** (Western Victoria) (10:30): Also I want to draw attention to a visit that I made to another regional community last week, and that was to the Budj Bim cultural heritage landscape. That landscape is ancient and a powerhouse of economy for the Gunditjmarra people. It was particularly important to bring along the Minister for Environment Steve Dimopoulos from the other place. I must say that I have been now visiting there for about 20 years, and again every time you go there you learn more about the Gunditjmarra people's hydrological knowledge around constructing an extensive eel breeding and manufacturing enterprise. We saw houses that were thousands of years old and housing construction knowledge, and we also saw their landscape management expertise. We sat down and we discussed the challenges that they face as well, which is very important in the context.

I would like to thank Aunty Eileen Alberts, Denise Lovett, Erin Rose, Uncle Denis Rose, Levi, Adam and all the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action staff for their contribution on the day.

### **Barmah Muster**

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (10:32): The Barmah forest is a special place. In addition to recreation, for over 100 years it has been, until recently, used as a productive forest, the home of brumbies and a place of cattle grazing. On a visit to this special place 80-year-old river red gum sleeper cutter Doug Rosenow shared with me his long history in this space. He shared with me how cattle, horse and harvesting had not ruined the forest up until now but it is now under threat from invasive weeds. This government has closed down the Barmah forest muster yards, which had been in continuous operation and use since the late 1800s. Now the three-day Barmah Muster is held outside the forest in a paddock on a racetrack, lacking that wonderful ambience. The muster showcases life in country, including campdrafting, dog trials and woodchopping.

Last year I attended the muster with the local member and my friend Peter Walsh and caught up with Doug again. Doug is concerned that the Barmah woodchop is under threat because of this government's decision to close down the sustainable native timber industry. For more than 150 years we have seen competitive woodchopping in Victoria as an amazing sport. I congratulate all of the members who continue to keep this historical event, the Barmah Muster, alive. I wish them all well in a couple of weeks when they are holding their next one and call on the government to reopen those yards.

### **Violence against women**

**Rachel PAYNE** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:33): We have all been confronted by recent scenes of vicious acts of violence in Bondi. Many of the victims were women, killed at the hands of a man. Violence against women takes many forms, and it is a pervasive stain on our society. Last Friday hundreds marched through the streets of Ballarat calling for action on violence against women. In recent weeks this region has been the site of multiple deaths: Rebecca Young, Samantha Murphy and Hannah McGuire. With every name there is a story. Hannah McGuire was just 23. She worked as a teacher's aide and studied education. She liked to play netball, go to the gym and travel.

But for every story that we do know there are thousands that we do not, particularly for First Nations women and for those with disability. These women live day in and day out often facing violence at the hands of those who are meant to love them. The feeling of helplessness in the face of this kind of violence can be overwhelming. But violence against women is preventable. With greater investment in support services, prevention and early intervention, we can do this.

### **Aunty Kella Robinson and Aunty Hazel Atkinson**

**Sheena WATT** (Northern Metropolitan) (10:35): My thanks to Uncle Rick for his welcome to country and for smoking us into our parliamentary proceedings today. This is the first opportunity to speak on Yorta Yorta country, and I want to put on record my thanks to the elders and ancestors of the lands of my mother's birth; lands I have always felt a deep and spiritual connection to. But amongst the tragedies of the stolen generations my mum was removed from this beautiful country at only six weeks of age, so whilst it is really special to be here, this place is tinged with sadness. She was removed to be raised away from country, kin and culture. I grew up never thinking that I would be able to forge these connections, but last year my hopes were answered when I discovered not only that my grandmother is alive but she lives just up the road in Mooroopna. She is an elder of the Koori Court, a volunteer award winner, an artist and a celebrated author. Aunty Kella Robinson has opened her arms to our family, and I cannot wait to learn more about what it means to be a Wemba Wemba woman.

With that, can I also honour Aunty Hazel Atkinson for her recent elevation to the Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll. I cannot wait to see what our community does on the path to treaty.

### **Beaconsfield Reservoir**

**Renee HEATH** (Eastern Victoria) (10:36): Last week I was delighted to join Shadow Minister for Water Tim McCurdy to speak with the Save the Beaconsfield Reservoir Group. This group is passionate about protecting a local resource which is now destined to be demolished due to a controversial decision by Melbourne Water. Not only is this reservoir absolutely stunning, it is also a home for ecological and biological diversity which has remained for 105 years, a much-needed water resource for firefighting and a magnificent scenic body of water that is unique to the area. Locals deserve to be listened to, and this is a wonderful asset that should be protected, so keep up the great work.

### **Member for Pakenham**

**Renee HEATH** (Eastern Victoria) (10:37): I also want to send my best wishes to Emma Vulin the member for Pakenham, who shared a devastating diagnosis this week of motor neurone disease. Emma is opposite to me in politics; in the battle of ideas, she is my opponent. However, some things are above politics and this is one of them. Emma is a beautiful, sincere and genuine person who has faced some significant health battles in the past, and she has overcome them. I cannot imagine what she is feeling at the moment. I am sure that there is an incredible amount of fear, and if I could lend some of my strength to her at the moment I would. That is not how things work, but my prayers are with her, her family and her children as she faces this next battle. I wish her all the strength and courage to overcome.

### **Gender transition**

**Moira DEEMING** (Western Metropolitan) (10:38): I would like to begin by congratulating my friends and fellow parliamentarians in the UK for all of their work in getting the Cass review up and going and finished in the face of vicious, malicious abuse made only worse by the cowardice of all those around them who knew the truth and instead chose to protect themselves over children. To all the clinicians, teachers, lawyers, MPs, ordinary people, parents and brave detransitioners who have been raising their concerns for years about the unethical and unsafe practices of putting vulnerable children on irreversible and unevidenced medical pathways with the aim of achieving something that can never be achieved, which is to live as the opposite sex, because it is impossible to change sex. Like them, I warmly welcome the Cass review and its findings and look forward to the inevitable end of one of the worst child-safeguarding and medical scandals of our generation not only in the UK but all around the world.

### ***Business of the house***

#### **Notices of motion**

**Lee TARLAMIS** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:39): I move:

That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 230 to 370, be postponed until later this day.

**Motion agreed to.**

#### ***Motions***

#### **Floods**

**Jaelyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (10:40): I move:

That this house acknowledges the October 2022 flood event and the devastating impact it had on communities in Victoria.

In doing so I acknowledge that we are here in Echuca today as part of a regional sitting – a town that I know well. I had a lot to do with the basketball court growing up, as Echuca had some mighty play-offs with Benalla back in the day when I was representing Benalla and visiting Echuca – always a

town that I loved to visit as a child and also now as a representative. It is a town that is part of a region that I share with four other upper house members for Northern Victoria, and it is an honour to be able to have every member of the Legislative Council in our beautiful part of the state today. Echuca is of course the host town, Campaspe is the host council, but they do this on behalf of and as a representative of all of the impacted councils from the October 2022 floods. It was lovely to have so many of them at the reception last night, and I do thank the President for acknowledging the broadscale impact across much of northern Victoria in his address.

In commencing debate on this motion, I need to begin with some sadness and a tribute to the two individuals who tragically lost their lives during the disaster. To their families, to their friends, to their co-workers and to their direct communities I offer my deepest condolences.

The effects and impacts of the 2022 floods we know from talking to people – and that is one of the reasons it is important to be here on the ground – are immense and ongoing. The devastating impacts are felt right across regional communities, especially here in Campaspe shire. Many of us, including me as a local member but also as Minister for Emergency Services, have had the opportunity to talk with people over the past 18 months – many hours of acknowledging the hurt, the loss and particularly the efforts of those who have been involved in the immediate response through to recovery, now and ongoing.

I want to put on record, because I know that there is probably a fresh audience today, that the Legislative Council as a group of people has been talking about families who have lost their homes and livelihoods. We have spoken about the loss of natural environment and farming land, and we have acknowledged the communities in our words in Parliament previously. But I do acknowledge that not everyone live streams Parliament from Spring Street, so to be able to have people here in person – and I know probably people tuning in who normally would not – is a great opportunity for us to reflect and repeat a lot of those messages.

As I said, I have spent a lot of time recently visiting impacted communities, particularly Rochester, Shepparton, Mooroopna, Echuca and Seymour. After the initial impacts there was just that slow, dreaded blue flood, as we call it, when the skies are clear but the water is still moving, visiting the communities along the Murray up to Mildura many, many weeks after the direct impacts that were further away. This was something that went on for a very long time. Floods are painfully slow, and the impact therefore can be really devastating both physically but also emotionally when you have got that dread hanging around for such a long time.

Seeing the effects of natural disasters on our communities is always devastating. I think the words of Tara today really brought that home. For me personally, my history is a good reminder. I am well placed to understand many of the impacts because, listening to Tara's words from the voice of a young person, the exact same thing happened to me when I was in year 9. My family home in Benalla got flooded, which I remembered as I was listening to her words reflecting on the impact that it had on schools. I was in year 9 when we were flooded, but it took many years for my dad, who was a builder – and any child of a builder knows these things take a very long time because he helps everyone else before he sorts out Mum's kitchen – to renovate the house. I had to move out of my family home in year 12 because that was the time Dad got around to it; I moved in with a cousin so that my studies were not interrupted during those years. I had almost forgotten that until hearing Tara's story about the impact that it has on young people, and I want to thank the Rochester school community in their efforts to ensure that support could be provided for young people. Thinking about some of the requests and issues that Tara raised as well as those raised at many of the youth forums that we have been having, young people are very clear on what their needs and wants are for recovery, and it is certainly incumbent upon us as MPs to listen to those voices.

Between 12 October and 16 December – coming back to the duration of this event, which I was reflecting on earlier – there were over 17,000 requests for assistance received by Victoria State Emergency Service, and that is the most in their history for a single event. The event severely impacted

more than 1000 properties, and over 2000 people accessed emergency and temporary accommodation support. Commonwealth–state disaster recovery funding arrangements (DRFA) were activated for 63 local government areas and one alpine resort – that stat alone demonstrates the geographical extent of the impact of the floods. We saw nearly 1000 water rescues, and I certainly want to thank the staff and volunteers who saved so many Victorians in dangerous situations.

Although there has been enormous tragedy and loss, I am incredibly proud of the communities and their response to the floods. There are a lot of resilient communities. We use the word ‘resilience’ a lot, but you see it when people rally together and really pull each other along. It is not easy; resilience is not something we should take for granted. We often say country communities are resilient. Yes, they are, but sometimes resilience comes with a lot of pain and a lot of effort as well. It is not just a natural reaction; it takes effort and endurance. And we should never criticise those that are not resilient. We should not expect resilience in country communities, although we often see it. I think that comes from the fact that country Victorians are incredibly special people. We see time and time again that they help out neighbours and they roll up their sleeves when someone needs help. As Victorians we should be very proud of the culture that we have in the whole state but is particularly evident in country communities.

I want to thank our emergency services workers, particularly VICSES – obviously they were the primary responder to the floods; on the stats they contributed over 400,000 hours of service – and obviously the CFA, Forest Fire Management Victoria, Triple Zero Victoria, Life Saving Victoria, Fire Rescue Victoria, Victoria Police, Ambulance Victoria and the Australian Defence Force as well as Shepparton Search and Rescue.

We also had interstate emergency services lend a hand. I particularly want to thank the Western Australian Department of Fire and Emergency Services, Queensland Fire and Emergency Services and the South Australian Country Fire Service, which were all on hand to respond, in effect repaying a lot of the efforts – it is amazing every time there is a call in from interstate the amount of Victorians that put their hands up to leave their families and go and help interstate neighbours. It is always something that I am incredibly proud of.

I want to thank and acknowledge the councils and their staff and the community organisations and local businesses that have provided and continue to provide support and care following the floods. I want to say thank you to all of my parliamentary colleagues from all sides. I regularly say that emergencies should not be politicised – they are beyond politics – and more often than not that advice is heeded on the whole. I am certainly grateful that members in this house and the other place have ensured that no matter who elected us, the community was front and centre during the response and the recovery. We all have certainly responded to the communities in that way, and I thank all members for that.

You are always at risk of not thanking everyone, and I am sure I will miss some people, but I want to use the motion as an opportunity to really call out some individuals and some organisations. It is like the farewell tour that never ends, but I have got to mention the emergency management commissioner at the time Andrew Crisp – we have spoken a lot about him – an amazing individual who was very valued by communities during that event. Tim Wiebusch, I think, did not necessarily want to be a household name, but he is pretty well known now in Victoria for his calmness, his steadiness and his leadership of the VICSES – an exemplary leader, listening to and engaging with people often during a very terrifying time. I want to extend that thanks to everyone who worked in the State Control Centre. This is an amazing facility that we have in Victoria, with many experts that do an incredible job, from our federal colleagues from the Bureau of Meteorology to our flood modellers and all of those who are there ensuring that we are learning, listening and responding and always improving our response to events. During the time the State Control Centre was activated at tier 3 for three weeks. It is a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week centre anyway, but when you are at tier 3 it is full capacity every hour of the day, and that was for three weeks, responding and supporting people during that event.



I would like to reflect on the hard work from day one – probably earlier than day one – of the amazing women at the Rochester Community House: Amanda Logie, Jenna Harvey, Jodi Dobson and Jodie Parker. We know, and we have heard today from Tara and we have heard from others, about the enormous impact on the community of Rochester. We know the stats; there are very few homes that were not impacted, and when you have got a community that small that is an enormous blow. But what a fantastic community. Rochester people are amazing, and they continue to be so. It has been an honour to get to know a lot of people in that community – people such as Leigh Wilson, chair of the Rochester recovery committee. Leigh will forever be the mayor of Rochester or the king of Rochester. He is amazing. I love just walking down the street with him. People stop to say hi and see how he is going. He never, ever rests a moment when there is somebody in his community that needs assistance. I would really like him to take a break at some stage soon, so hopefully that is on the cards, but he is an amazing individual.

I do say it often, and that is because it is absolutely true, but the best thing about being the Minister for Emergency Services is meeting the beyond exceptional and ridiculously modest volunteers in the emergency services family – local treasures like Judith Gledhill from the Rochester SES and anyone in SES and CFA. They are amazing every day of the week. To know that they are there when their communities need them is a great comfort to the communities and also to us who are in positions of leadership who are responding to these events. Without them it would not be possible to support the communities in the way that has been done.

On that note, in terms of Rochester, I will get an opportunity to touch base with them tomorrow as beneficiaries of Labor government investment for a new co-located, fit-for-purpose venue for those organisations, which is a fantastic well-deserved opportunity. Also Shepp search and rescue – I am sure Ms Lovell will go into acknowledging that amazing organisation as well. Shepparton on the ground, in terms of the sandbag operation in that community, was something to see, I have got to say. So just being able to have an organisation that is focused on the Shepparton community, working hand in hand with our other emergency services volunteers, is a great asset for that community. We saw it again in January this year in terms of them just dropping everything and going off to support the community.

There is another person I want to speak about who flies under the radar a little bit – she would probably hate to be mentioned; she could not get along to last night's event or this week; she is a busy mother of four young children who was impacted by the floods – and that is Eliza Watson. She is known as Podgy Hodgy online. Eliza is a local teacher, and she used social media during the floods to bring a lot of comfort to her community. She is also someone that encouraged people to get involved in the parliamentary inquiry to have their voices heard. She and her husband and her family are proud Rochester people. After the floods I sat with her in her backyard, where she had the caravan set up. They were living with four little kids – I do not reckon I could have done it with one let alone four little kids – in a caravan in the backyard while they repaired their house. It took some time, as we know, and there are lots of people that are still out, but having someone to talk to about their firsthand experiences is invaluable as an MP and invaluable as we make our decisions, in listening to the community, about what is required from us. But as to Eliza, she is compassionate, caring, understanding and incredibly funny – just a wonderful person – and Rochester really benefits from her.

No-one should underestimate Maree Traill's passion for her community and her commitment to providing accurate information and details to Rochester through the Rochester community Facebook page. I have got to say, I got a lot of my information on contemporary issues directly from Maree. She is another person who, probably more than Eliza, tries to ensure that she is behind the scenes, but she does a power of work for that community. I also want to acknowledge Hannah Fuller, who produced daily newsletters during the flood event.

Other people that have particularly stood out during the period would include the mayors and CEOs of numerous shires. As I said, 63 councils were activated under the DRFA; they were impacted by the floods. Shepparton and Mitchell shire councils and their teams were amazing. They worked to set up

emergency relief centres at the epicentre responding to on-the-ground needs, and there were all of the resources and community groups that they drew in as well. I could reflect on every visit to an emergency centre, but for Shepparton, for example, the Red Cross were there, the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria and the government departments – the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and Centrelink. When someone walked in the door, they were greeted by really friendly security guards who were making sure that people felt safe when they were there to access services, whether they were directly impacted or had been isolated, ensuring that they knew what payments they could get. Just the effort that people put in to ensure that communities felt supported was amazing.

Local councils are at the forefront of the response to emergencies such as floods. It is an appropriate model because it can be quickly implemented and effective and councils know their communities; councillors live in their communities. I want to thank Bendigo council as well for their amazing support for impacted communities outside of their direct footprint, making sure that their neighbours felt supported throughout with their expertise. A large council obviously has more resources, and the fact they could divert them to help others is pretty special. Pauline Gordon commenced her role as CEO of Campaspe days, if not just short of a week, before the flood, so what a star. I first met her at the Echuca Basketball Stadium emergency centre. She hit the ground running. She has been an exemplary country leader and has an amazing team that are focused on recovery – people like Shannon Maynard in the role of director of emergency management. I really want to acknowledge the parks and garden crews from across our council areas. They shifted to an emergency services type organisation in responding to floods as well.

There are a couple of other people, and I probably will miss some, As I said, there were Mitchell shire and Shepparton council, but there were also the likes of Geoff Rollinson, Wayne O'Toole and Lincoln Fitzgerald from other councils that have been impacted. I thank them for their efforts during the floods, and also their communication and efforts for advocacy on behalf of their communities with government and beyond has been very much welcomed.

It would also be appropriate to mention the local businesses and individuals who played such an important and often understated role in flood response. There were the football and netball community groups that pulled up their sleeves. Seymour Football Netball Club were on the ground as soon as they could be – probably before it was technically safe, I have got to say. They did not want to waste a minute, and they wanted to get out and help their community, whether it was the caravan park or the local motel, and ensure that people felt supported. Many, many businesses – like the Elmore Bakery and Monkee & Co here in Echuca, where the government MPs had the benefit of enjoying an amazing banquet dinner last night – were giving free coffees to volunteers and tradespeople that were here. Also evident in a lot of communities were the pay-it-forward initiatives. A lot of people have been coming through town wanting to do their bit and ensuring that people from the community of Rochester, for example, can pop in and get a free coffee because someone has put it on their tab previously. These are wonderful gestures and are really valued by communities who need that little bit of support to brighten their day. It has been great to see a lot of that.

In terms of recovery, we know it is a long slog and there is still a long road ahead, but I am incredibly proud of the work that Emergency Recovery Victoria have done over the past two years. It is a good opportunity to reflect on that. This is a part of government that has been established predominantly to ensure that our recovery efforts are well resourced and supported but also to give us the opportunity to respond to what communities want. In partnership with councils, neighbourhood houses and community members we have achieved a lot, particularly in terms of accommodation and housing and other supports for impacted individuals.

As I think I indicated earlier, over 6000 people were displaced, 748 homes were destroyed and more than 1500 homes were left damaged. Looking out there at the lovely water, it is a great place to live, but there was an impact obviously on many houses right here in Echuca. I think I have spoken about the temporary village at some length, and I could probably spend the entire motion talking about the

village at Elmore that gave 216 people a roof over their head. That was a direct response to what the Rochester community wanted. They were very, very adamant that they did not want their community split up. They wanted to make sure that people had an option to stay closer to home and thought that was best. I think having so many people take up the option is testament to the fact that that community knew what they wanted and it was probably right, because that was the level of interest that they got. I had the opportunity to visit the Elmore village many times and speak to people that were just so incredibly grateful to be able to have accommodation and support so close to home.

We also had, with the help of Michelle Osborne, the Centre for National Resilience at Mickleham activated to ensure that we could have accommodation to support flood-displaced people. Importantly there it was about making sure that we had the right supports to provide a really trauma-informed response to people that were requiring not just accommodation but food, health check-ups, education and indeed the ability to travel to and from their communities. That was something that staff at Mickleham were really focused on. It was a great opportunity to work through people's immediate and long-term needs by having that model.

We also launched the Homes at Home project, which delivered temporary units to properties across Greater Shepparton, allowing flood-affected home owners who wanted to remain on their land to do so while they carried out essential repairs. I think, for example, being able to have a caravan on your property so you could use a kitchen and bathroom while you were fixing yours was something that was a good option for some people.

We know that it has been tough and that in terms of the recovery one of the most frustrating elements that we hear time and time again is insurance. It has been difficult for many people to negotiate with their insurance companies. A lot of people are underinsured, and we are very pleased to see the federal Parliament have an insurance inquiry at the moment – I understand they are in Rochester today hearing firsthand about that – because it is a national issue. After every emergency we know that there are insurance issues, and it is a very complex problem for not just government but insurers and the like to respond to. It is something that I hear time and time again and is something that I am working with my federal colleagues on – ensuring that if there are any fixes that are going to bring about better outcomes for local communities, then that is something we should be focused on.

In terms of recovery, I just want to run through a little bit of the economic stimulus packages that have been available. As we know, there is going to be a fantastic farmers market in the break that people can access. Many of those producers were impacted. It is pretty devastating when you rely on the environment to have that taken away from you by a natural disaster, so having the ability to access grants of up to \$75,000 for primary producers, \$50,000 for eligible households, and business support, goes some way to helping people get back on their feet after these types of events.

Also, quickly, I do want to acknowledge the contribution of many Aboriginal communities and leaders in response to the recovery efforts, ensuring that we were given good advice on culturally appropriate responses in many instances.

I am very, very proud of this region. Much of northern Victoria is great, but we are in a particularly special part of our electorate today. I am proud to be able to showcase this area alongside my Northern Victoria colleagues. Many, many ministers visit this region regularly, and I want to thank them for that as well. Obviously when you have a flood impact, whether it is housing, whether it is insurance issues, whether it is mental health ministers or health ministers, we have had a large presence in this area from day one, and that continues. Obviously a lot of us are here again as part of the regional sitting, but a regional sitting is not the only reason to visit this area. As a government we have many, many regional MPs and many ministers from country Victoria who love getting out and about as much as possible, so continuing to connect with these communities is something they continue to do. I will give special mention to the Minister for Water, who I think has become an honorary resident up here. She is up here regularly –

**Melina Bath** interjected.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Of course, and Walshy is always welcoming of us and our massive investment in his electorate, so it is always good to see.

**Melina Bath** interjected.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** I have delivered his school, his bridge – anyway, I will give you the list later. We want to work with recovery projects, which is a good segue from that. There is always a list, and we will respond and work with locals on their priorities.

I think a major takeaway from the members of Parliament here today visiting the region and meeting with so many amazing people, inspiring community leaders and just humble people that they will come across is to take the opportunity to chat to people. Country people are always up for a chat. They will tell you about how proud they are of their region. But I want to thank them for having us and thank them for demonstrating that in the very worst of times they are a community that come together and respond appropriately. As a government, with the backing of local councils and continued support working directly with community, we are confident that we will continue to overcome many of the challenges that are obviously evident and enduring post the flood. We are here today, and we will continue to come up as much as possible.

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (11:09): I rise to join in this motion that acknowledges the devastating impact that the October 2022 flood event had on communities in Victoria. In commencing my contribution I would like to start by acknowledging that here in Northern Victoria two members of our region lost their lives in the floods. They were 71-year-old Kevin Wills of Rochester and 65-year-old Bryan Hack of Nathalia, and I would like to extend my condolences to their families, their friends and their communities.

The effects of the floods certainly were widespread right throughout Victoria. Sixty-three of Victoria's 79 local government areas, plus the Falls Creek Alpine Resort, suffered during those floods. Every local government area in my electorate of Northern Victoria Region was affected by the floods, but it was here in Campaspe that the floods had the most devastating impact. That was reflected in submissions to the Environment and Planning Committee's inquiry into the 2022 floods, with 608 of the 880 submissions coming from northern Victoria: 429 from Campaspe shire, 36 from the Murrindindi shire, 27 from Greater Shepparton, 25 from Gannawarra, 22 from Loddon, 19 from Bendigo and 16 from Seymour in the Mitchell shire.

For the first 10 years of this century we saw very little rain in northern Victoria. In fact we were told by the so-called experts that our new reality was to expect very little rain, and it was speculated that our dams may never fill. The next decade proved them wrong, with rainfall returning and dams filling, but it was when the rain started falling in early October 2022 that we really felt the rain. It did not just rain, it poured for days on end, and we started to wonder if it would ever stop.

Unfortunately, our communities were not the only ones who had not expected this downpour. Water authorities had our storages almost full and had to increase releases from the dams, and that flooded some landholders, with very little or no warning at all. Unfortunately, that was the experience of those in the Upper Goulburn area just below the Eildon Dam, who were the first to be flooded, at around 3 in the morning, with no warning whatsoever of the increased releases from Lake Eildon.

Seymour was the first major town to experience flooding when the Goulburn peaked at 8.26 metres in the early hours of 14 October. The October 2022 flood was the second worst in Seymour's history; the worst was in 1916. Water flowed through the central business district of Seymour and the residential areas, and it inundated homes, businesses and the community's main sporting facilities. More than 254 homes and businesses experienced above-floor flooding, hundreds of kilometres of roads were significantly damaged and Seymour's SES received 254 calls for assistance.

There is no doubt that Rochester was a community that suffered the greatest impact during the floods, and we heard this morning from Tara Atley her firsthand account of her family's experience during those floods. It is estimated that 90 per cent of the town of Rochester, both homes and businesses, experienced above-floor flooding. But as the locals will tell you, 100 per cent of the town was affected, because those whose homes were not flooded suffered feelings of guilt for being among the lucky few that did not experience the flooding.

The Campaspe River peaked at midnight on Friday 14 October, and unfortunately the water took several days to recede. The Rochester community largely managed the response themselves. The SES unit received 350 calls for assistance and managed to operate even though their own facility and the CFA station had been affected by the floods. Community members all pitched in and helped each other to rescue stranded residents and to get in and strip carpets and furnishings as soon as possible. At one point they watched as defence force trucks drove through their town heading to Echuca but did not stop to assist them in Rochester. There has been no official count done of the number of inundated homes in Rochester, but the best estimates are those the community have put together themselves, and they have now counted more than 1000 homes that suffered above-floor flooding.

Rochester is an amazing community that has come a long way but that also still faces many challenges. It is estimated that 18 months down the track over 30 per cent and probably closer to 40 per cent, or 600 to 800 residents, are still not back in their homes. It is also thought that about 200 homes have still not had any or have had very little work done to them, and in trying to rebuild, the residents have faced many challenges, including difficulties dealing with insurance companies and difficulties obtaining tradespeople. With so many areas affected by flooding, it is almost impossible to get local builders due to the sheer volume of work across so many local government areas. This has led to some out-of-town, less than reputable companies taking advantage of vulnerable residents. These dodgy operators have overcharged and underdelivered and provided poor workmanship. I have even heard a story of one resident not being able to fully open the oven door as the distance between the wall and the island bench is so narrow the door hits the bench on the other side of the kitchen. It is sad to think that some people would take advantage of others who have already suffered so much.

Another sad reality is that some homes in Rochester may never be rebuilt. Residents do not have the capacity to take on the volume of work needed on those homes, but in the meantime they cannot sell them in the state that they are in, and therefore they cannot re-establish themselves elsewhere. This is where governments need to provide additional assistance, whether that be through some sort of buyback scheme or something else. Government need to find an answer for these people.

The Rochester community are rightly concerned that floods will affect them more often, and they have asked the government to consider reducing the level at Lake Eppalock to 90 per cent. Unfortunately, when the Minister for Water visited the community last July she told them, very bluntly, no. She did not even offer to explore whether the option was possible or whether it would assist or not, she just said, bluntly, no. This left the community extremely angry.

Rochester is fortunate to have some amazing residents who have formed the Rochester recovery group. It is led by Leigh Wilson, and I thank the entire committee for their work that they do. However, the government need to know that Rochester is still hurting and needs ongoing assistance with mental health support and financial counselling. Most of this support is due to finish in June, even though experts tell us that ongoing support is needed for a minimum of three years post a disaster. Funding for these vital services in Rochester must be extended.

The swimming pool in Rochester has traditionally been an important gathering place for residents during the very hot and long northern Victorian summers. Unfortunately the swimming pool was destroyed during the floods, so the residents have been through the last two hot summers without a pool. Funding must be provided to help the Shire of Campaspe to build a new pool to replace the old Rochester pool that was destroyed in the floods.

Whilst all eyes were on Rochester, the Goulburn River flood continued downstream, inundating communities along the way – Murchison, Toolamba, Mooroopna and Shepparton in the City of Greater Shepparton all suffered widespread damage. In Shepparton, the Goulburn peaked in the early hours of 17 October. The official measurement at the gauge was 12.03 metres, 3 centimetres below the 1974 peak. But the gauge was actually moved during the 1980s from upstream of the bridge to downstream, and if the gauge had been in the same spot as it was in the 1974 floods, the peak would have been measured at 12.10 metres, which is 6 centimetres higher than the 1974 floods. Approximately 4000 homes were isolated or inundated in Greater Shepparton, with Mooroopna suffering the biggest impact. The Shepparton Search and Rescue Squad received 980 requests for assistance; this was the most of any organisation in the state. The Shepparton Search and Rescue Squad did an amazing job leading the volunteer response. Some of those members were cut off from their own homes and could not return to their own homes for several days during the floods, but the volunteer response was actually coordinated out of the search and rescue squad headquarters and led by Nacole Standfield. That volunteer response was absolutely amazing in the Shepparton community.

The Mooroopna CFA provided the core response in their community, and they did this despite the CFA station being inundated, several of their members having their own homes inundated and one of their members losing his home to a fire during the floods. Our volunteer emergency services, whether it be SES, CFA, search and rescue squad or coast guard, all did an amazing job in every town right throughout the flood region. I thank our volunteers. They have my ongoing gratitude for what they do for us during emergencies and what they do for us each and every day of the year. Almost 5900 homes in the Mooroopna, Tatura, Toolamba, Dhurringile, Arcadia and Murchison area were without power for several days due to the flooding at the Mooroopna substation, which demonstrates a need to flood-proof some of our major utilities infrastructure to prevent this happening in the future, and some of that work has actually been carried out in Mooroopna.

At the peak of the floods there were over 800 road closures in the Goulburn–Murray region, and one of the major concerns for the Greater Shepparton community was the closure of the Peter Ross-Edwards Causeway, which forms part of the Midland Highway and is the major connection between the two towns of Shepparton and Mooroopna. The only other connection, Watt Road, which includes a single-lane, low-limit bridge, is well and truly under water in moderate flood levels. With the causeway closed, Mooroopna, Tatura and other communities west of the Goulburn were cut off from the hospital and other services located on the Shepparton side of the river. The causeway closure also caused a paralysis of freight mobility on a major freight route. The 2022 floods demonstrated the need for the government to get on with prioritising the Shepparton bypass, which would provide a genuine second river crossing built above flood levels.

On 17 October a decision was made by Emergency Management Victoria, the lead agency for floods, to construct a levee to protect Echuca. The levee was constructed within 48 hours and protected the majority of the town, but approximately 190 properties on the wrong side of the levee were inundated here in Echuca. The levee was quite controversial and divided some members of the community. This demonstrates a need for further work to be done on flood mitigation measures and plans here in Echuca.

As I said at the beginning, the devastation in northern Victoria caused by the 2022 floods was widespread. Agriculture Victoria estimates that some 500,000 hectares of farmland were affected and approximately 12,230 agricultural properties were impacted by flooding across northern Victoria. 17,500 livestock were dead or missing and the flooding affected 5017 residential and commercial buildings, leaving 976 buildings uninhabitable, 569 habitable with damage and 3472 with minor damage. There were 4419 kilometres of public roads that were damaged by those floods.

So where are we now 18 months after the floods? Many Rochester residents are still living in sheds and caravans, waiting for insurance settlements or access to tradesmen or because they cannot afford to rebuild their homes. To fully appreciate where Rochester is on the road to recovery, you need to drive through the town at night, because that is when you will really appreciate the number of empty

homes with no lights on. There are homes in my own street in Shepparton that are empty awaiting renovation, and sadly there are now places in my neighbourhood where friends once lived that are just vacant blocks and remain a constant reminder of how devastating the October 2022 flood was. This is replicated in every street in every community where homes were inundated in October 2022. Our roads are still a disgrace. Repairs have not been done to adequate standards, and in some areas the same strip of road has had to be repaired several times but has never been repaired properly. There are still road closures, speed reductions and traffic light controlled areas of roads that have not been repaired since the October 2022 floods.

In the Indigo shire the Rising Sun bridge on the Beechworth-Wodonga Road at Wooragee was only just reopened last week after it was damaged in October 2022, but there is still a diversion on the road where the culverts at Star Lane have not been repaired. This is an arterial road that is the responsibility of the state government. In the north-east there are more traffic lights on country roads than there are in the city of Wodonga. Some of the roads that still have traffic lights controlling vehicles include the Beechworth-Wodonga Road at Star Lane in Wooragee; the Murray Valley Highway at Tallangatta East – there are two sets of traffic lights on that road; the Omeo Highway at Tallandoon; and the Granya Road at Granya.

When I speak with local governments, they all express their frustration at the slowness of road reopenings and repairs. They are sick of travelling on dangerous pothole-ridden roads, and unfortunately some of the smaller shire councils do not have the capacity to fund the repairs themselves. And if they do, they fear they may not be reimbursed for the work they undertake. The Municipal Association of Victoria has been critical of the slowness of the state government's process to reimburse payments to councils for work undertaken. Even the mayor of Greater Shepparton was doing media last week about the amount of funds the city has not been reimbursed to cover roadworks that they have undertaken.

Drainage is another area that councils require assistance with. The floods have highlighted the need for investment in better drainage in many areas. And while we are talking about 'better', it is appalling that the state has not been prepared to fund betterment of infrastructure. In order for local councils to access funding, they have had to build back exactly as things were before, which in many cases will be a waste of money because roads, bridges and other infrastructure that were inundated or washed away during the floods will be inundated or washed away again, whereas if betterment funding was available they would rebuild to a better standard above flood levels.

I have a series of photographs of roads in the Mitchell shire that prove this point. The photographs show the state of the road after the 2022 flood, the repaired road and then the state of the road once again damaged post the January 2024 floods. The roads damaged in 2024 are exactly the same roads that were damaged and repaired from the 2022 floods. Again in the Shire of Mitchell, the Bidstrups Bridge at Sugarloaf Creek was damaged in 2022, repaired and then damaged again in January 2024. Local government want funding for betterment, and they must be funded to ensure that they can do the job once and that it will last past the next flood event.

Local councils have also reported that the amount of reporting and data required has been onerous, time intensive and expensive. They have also found it difficult and expensive to access contractors to undertake work due to the sheer volume of work and having to compete with each other for contractors. Some have been forced to redirect their own workforce from other areas to undertake some of the work, but if they do this they cannot claim funding to cover it.

I want to thank local governments from right across the region who provided leadership during the floods and who have led the recovery efforts. They deserve better than the treatment they are receiving from the state government, and the funding for projects must flow to them more quickly.

I also want to thank community and neighbourhood houses from across the electorate and particularly make mention of two: the Rochester Community House led by Amanda Logie and the Mooroopna

Education and Activity Centre led by Jan Phillips. Both these organisations have gone above and beyond in their efforts for their community.

I also want to thank community organisations and service clubs that have pitched in with the sandbagging, clean-up and recovery. There are too many to name, but three football–netball clubs do deserve special mention, and they are the Seymour Football Netball Club led by Gerard O’Sullivan, the Mooroopna Football Netball Club led by Bill Dowling and the Rochester Football Netball Club led by Justin Cleary. These three clubs have not only pitched in, they have been the glue in these communities since the floods.

I could go on and on, but I will stop there, other than to ask the government: when the rain fell in January this year, did the government really think Victorians felt we were better placed to deal with floods than we were in October 2022? I can tell you that the answer from northern Victorians is a resounding no.

**The PRESIDENT:** Can I acknowledge some members of our Assembly: Mr Peter Walsh, who of course is the member for Murray Plains, and Mr Tim McCurdy, who is the member for Ovens Valley nearby. We welcome them in the gallery.

I kind of feel a little bit cheated, because 2 minutes ago the cookery students from Echuca College were in the gallery and I was going to give them a shout-out, but I am sure we will all during the day air our appreciation for what they have prepared for us, which has been fantastic.

**Business interrupted pursuant to resolution of Council of 21 March.**

*Questions without notice and ministers statements*

**Echuca Magistrates’ Court**

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (11:30): (485) My question is for the Attorney-General. As the Attorney would be aware, the Echuca courthouse is located in the Campaspe Shire Council offices at the end of this building. There have been ongoing community safety issues where those waiting to appear in court are milling around in a shared space with ratepayers using the council services office. In 2016 the government announced a \$1.1 million upgrade to provide separate court access and safe interview rooms as part of the response to the family violence royal commission. Eight years on, why hasn’t the promise of separate entrances to the courthouse and council service centres been delivered?

**Jaelyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (11:31): I thank Ms Crozer for her question, and indeed I had the pleasure of visiting the Echuca courthouse yesterday and hearing firsthand of the amazing work they do. The newly opened Koori Court is providing an amazing service to Indigenous Victorians in this region, a model that we know is responding to specific communities, and Aboriginal Victorians are receiving that service now here in Echuca. It is obvious when you enter the Echuca courthouse that its facilities are not modern and not up to date, and they are doing an amazing job to work around those constraints. They did all reflect on the brand new Bendigo court facility that has been recently opened, an amazing facility that does benefit the broader region and brings through other jurisdictions in relation to that. There have been minor upgrades to the Echuca facility, and I remain in conversations with the Magistrates’ Court, with Court Services Victoria and indeed with the hardworking registrars, court staff and magistrates at the Echuca courthouse.

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (11:32): Attorney, it was eight years ago that you made that announcement, and you are failing the community in not delivering what you promised. In the May 2018 budget the government announced an additional \$5 million for upgrades to the Echuca courthouse. Four years later this project has not even started. So again I ask: when will the work on the Echuca courthouse start?



**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (11:33): Thank you, Ms Crozier, for your question. It is a difficult site to work around. It is obviously, as you have indicated, a facility that has been in existence for some time. It has some history – obviously its partnership with the council. In relation to specifics around projects, you would appreciate that Court Services Victoria, not the government, are the –

**A member** interjected.

**Jaclyn SYMES**: I will continue to work with, as I said in my previous answer, Court Services Victoria and the amazing court workers out here in Echuca.

### Water policy

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL** (Northern Victoria) (11:33): (486) My question today is for the Minister for Water. We all saw the media last week with the Commonwealth saying that Victoria has compromised and signed up to an amended agreement on the Murray–Darling Basin plan in order to get funding for work to continue on the Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Project. Minister, why has the Commonwealth changed its tune and what did you give up for this funding?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (11:34): Thanks, Mrs Tyrrell, for that question and for your interest in the Murray–Darling Basin and all of the contributions that it makes to Australia’s food bowl, to export opportunities, to jobs and to communities. Victoria has a very longstanding commitment to the communities in the Victorian part of the basin. We are Australia’s food bowl. We know that 75 per cent of Australia’s grapes and wine, around 50 per cent of fruit and around 30 per cent of dairy is produced in the basin, and we also know that it is home to thousands of jobs which rely upon the best use, the best efficiencies and the best return on investment for environmental outcomes and for food producers.

Victoria remains opposed to buybacks. Our position in this regard has not changed. It will not change. We know that the impact of buybacks continues to be felt across communities in this part of the state. We know from previous experience – bitter experience, lived experience – when 550 gigalitres of water was purchased to ensure that we could meet the requirements and the commitments under the 2018 plan that thousands of jobs were lost. We know that where there is 100 gigalitres taken out of any system we lose about \$140 million in production.

We also know that the Commonwealth has taken far too long to recognise the value of the Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Project, and indeed it would appear to some – there was extensive commentary that asserted that the Commonwealth was withholding funding from the VMFRP for purely political reasons – that this was a knee-locked opposition to projects that would deliver around 60 gigalitres of water in environmental returns to some of the most precious flood plain environments across Victoria. These 14,000 hectares, including those that cover Ramsar-listed wetlands, are home to black box, to migratory birds, to fish, to reptiles and indeed to some of the most important flood plains that we have across Australia, and it is really wonderful to see that the Commonwealth has finally come to the table to agree to fund these important projects. It is in everybody’s interests, particularly Victorian environmental interests, that where we have a Murray–Darling Basin plan it delivers for all environments and not simply for one part of the basin.

To your question, Mrs Tyrrell: what did Victoria give up in order to sustain and to guarantee funding for these projects? The answer is nothing. We were determined to continue with our position in opposition to buybacks and to continue to negotiate for better outcomes for Victorian communities and environments. That is exactly what we have done, and it is really wonderful that at last the Commonwealth has recognised the value of these projects.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL** (Northern Victoria) (11:37): I thank the minister for her reply. How will the communities I represent benefit from delivery of the VMFRP?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (11:37): Thanks, Mrs Tyrrell, and thank you for your interest in and advocacy for your communities. The VMFRP will reduce the quantum of water that needs to be bought back by around 70 gegalitres. This is of vital importance. But we also know that where we invest in environmental projects that supply water to our flood plains much less water is required, through a series of pumps and regulators – established technology and plant – and that we can in fact get those long-term outcomes that we know everybody benefits from where we have healthy environments, we have healthy land, we have good, sustainable practices in primary production and we sustain communities and jobs that proudly call this part of the world home.

Again, I have been very, very clear that we oppose buybacks. I have been very clear that in applying the terms of the federal legislation we will make sure that the Commonwealth must have regard to socio-economic impact, as was set out in the amendments that formed part of the passage of this legislation, and indeed the Commonwealth will be held to account to those particular responsibilities.

**Ministers statements: flood recovery**

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (11:38): I would like to update the house on the progress of the Allan Labor government’s commitment to the communities of Rochester and Heathcote, following the flood event, to rebuild the VICSES and CFA facilities which were severely damaged in October 2022. These communities are one step closer to receiving their brand new co-located emergency service hubs, with sites now identified –

*Members interjecting.*

**Jaclyn SYMES:** You don’t want this investment in your electorate? The new facilities will be jointly owned and utilised –

*Members interjecting.*

**The PRESIDENT:** Order! Members, we are supposed to be putting on our best face in a regional sitting. I do not think the minister was being provocative, so I ask her to start from the start of her statement and I ask members to be silent during the statement.

**Jaclyn SYMES:** Talking about the commitment from the Allan Labor government to the Rochester and Heathcote VICSES and CFA facilities, which as we know were damaged in the October 2022 floods, these communities are one step closer to receiving their brand new co-located emergency services hubs with sites now identified for the construction of both facilities. The new facilities will be jointly owned and utilised by VICSES and CFA, equipping volunteers with the resources they need to carry out their vital role of protecting Victorian communities. And everyone here knows just how vital that is.

The Victorian government provided just over \$23 million in funding for these redevelopments, which will be delivered by the Community Safety Building Authority, known as CSBA. They have worked closely with CFA and VICSES members in Rochester and Heathcote to identify appropriate sites, with planning work and concept designs already well underway. CSBA are currently in commercial negotiations with vendors in relation to the Rochester site, and we will have more to say about that regarding the chosen location in the very near future. The Heathcote site is also very close to being finalised, with CSBA working closely with the City of Greater Bendigo regarding that suitable site.

Each emergency services hub will have six motor bays, fit-for-purpose amenities and ample space for training new and existing members. As we know, when you build new facilities it is a great opportunity to attract new volunteers to those organisations, so this is not only providing for current volunteers but hopefully for future ones. They will also have upgraded communications and equipment storage facilities. I look forward to meeting with the Rochester volunteers tomorrow to give them a personal update in relation to the progress of their important project.

I would also like to update the house briefly as I finish that on the way here yesterday I visited Tatura CFA brigade to hand over a brand new heavy tanker, one of 48 that are being rolled out across the state. I look forward to returning to one of the best parts of Victoria to hand over further tankers to Euroa, Shepparton, Seymour and Wangaratta, which are all currently undertaking training and final checks on their trucks.

### Flood recovery

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (11:42): (487) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. The Gannawarra Shire Council area suffered significant damage to its road network during the October 2022 flood. Under the government's natural disaster funding program, the council lodged certified claims for \$8.6 million in October 2023. The contractors for these works were appointed in December 2023, and to date the council has only received authorisation for \$1.6 million of these works. When will the council receive authorisation for the other \$7 million of urgent works to repair their flood-damaged roads?

**The PRESIDENT:** I am concerned that that should be directed to the minister for roads, but, Mr Mulholland, the minister has indicated she is prepared to respond.

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (11:43): Thank you, President. You are right, the minister for roads would be better placed to provide an update in relation to specific projects, but what Mr Mulholland is referring to are the disaster recovery funding arrangements in relation to the ability for councils to repair flood-damaged or emergency-damaged assets and the hurdles that they have to jump in relation to the parameters to access that joint funding. I am on the record as sharing that frustration, and I am very optimistic that the federal review of the DRFA is going to help streamline these processes.

Of course I have regular conversations with councils, and Gannawarra have been at the forefront of advocacy in relation to the fact that this is a difficult system to navigate. You have to provide evidence and you have to demonstrate that the damage was not pre-existing. There is a balance here. You can understand why the federal government's eligibility requires some evidence that it is a consequence of an emergency, which is what the fund is provided for, but we are also championing better, more streamlined, easier processes. I want councils to have the confidence to go ahead and fix damaged material with the knowledge that they are going to have that money recompensed. I continue to work with council and join in their advocacy, making sure that we do what we can to ensure that they are best placed to meet the federal government's requirements.

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (11:44): I am sure they would have been able to get on and fix those roads if they had received the other \$7 million. The cost of road maintenance continues to increase every month, and there is a risk that contractors may not do these urgent road repairs for the original tender price. Will the government pay escalation costs to councils for these road repair works given it is the government that has been so slow in approving the funding applications under the natural disaster arrangements?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (11:45): Mr Mulholland, what I might do is offer you and any other of your colleagues a briefing on how DRFA works. I am not saying that I am particularly happy with how it operates, but that is the system with which we are having to operate now. Perhaps we should do that offline, because your question actually does not make any sense as it is based on a misunderstanding of how the federal–state relationship works and the fact that the federal guidelines are what we have to work within. As Minister for Emergency Services, I am well placed to assist councils, and ERV and EMV are standing side by side and ensuring that we get the best bang for buck from the federal government, but I cannot step outside of the process. Your suggestion that perhaps I can demonstrates a lack of understanding about how this works.

**Water policy**

**Sarah MANSFIELD** (Western Victoria) (11:46): (488) My question is for the Minister for Water. In 2022 your government released the *Water Is Life* road map. It is an aspirational document that sets out the ways in which water can be recovered by traditional owners across Victoria. While the plan is commendable, it has led to limited tangible outcomes to date. This is particularly evident for target 7, which refers to water returns to traditional owners. Part of the issue is that the process is incredibly lengthy and difficult and only applies to unallocated water, of which there is a negligible amount available. For example, the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action currently holds 1.4 gigalitres of water as a section 51 licence on the Birrarung which it committed to return to the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung in 2020, but as at the end of last year this still had not occurred. Since 2021 there have only been three water entitlement transfers to traditional owners. What is your government doing to speed up this process?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (11:47): Thank you, Dr Mansfield, for your question and for the opportunity for us all to reflect upon a series of systems, regulatory frameworks and legislative arrangements that have led, over many generations, to systematic exclusion of First Peoples from the way in which water entitlements and access to water country have been granted. In fact it is hard to imagine a design of systems that could have excluded more fulsomely the voices, experience and priorities of First Peoples from it than that which we see in the water sector not just here in Victoria but indeed around Australia.

We have come a significant way since the work that was first identified as needing to happen around even a consideration of the connection that First Peoples have to water as being essential for health and wellbeing, of essential importance to connection to country, and that the oldest continuous culture on earth was denied the opportunity to even access water, whether bundled or unbundled, in the way in which the entitlement framework operated. When we think about the Echuca declaration in 2007, relevantly to the place that we are at today, the consideration of First Peoples rights did not extend to water use for other purposes beyond the cultural.

*Water Is Life* takes us some way from what has previously been the case in our understanding of and appreciation for that innate, multifaceted connection to water of traditional owner communities, story, lived experience and culture. In 2022 when this was launched, relevantly to Ms Ermacora’s comment earlier, Budj Bim and water being returned to Tae Rak in the west of the state were of essential importance in indicating a changed approach to the way in which a road map for traditional owner access to water could and indeed should be developed and delivered. It was also a recognition of the importance of a move to self-determination. This is about partnerships. It is about making sure that self-determination around the way in which water is allocated and made available is guided by and for and with traditional owner groups and communities. I do note that there are a number of First Nations communities, whether recognised formally or not, who do not agree with the principles and approaches and processes set out in *Water Is Life*. We are, however, determined to walk this path and to undo these generations of denial of opportunity and access to water. It is central to the Aboriginal water program. I am very happy to take you through the detail of the progress of works to date and the ongoing commitment that we have to ensuring that this continues into the future.

**Sarah MANSFIELD** (Western Victoria) (11:50): I thank the minister for her answer and look forward to ongoing discussions about how those processes may be potentially improved. Victorian traditional owners currently hold just 0.18 per cent of water entitlements in Victoria, and on Monday the Yoorrook Justice Commission heard that currently there is no clear pathway to surface water access rights for traditional owners and that direct funding to traditional owners to purchase these rights via the water market is long overdue. The current position as set out in *Water Is Life* is that the government will not establish a direct water entitlement purchase program for traditional owners. Given the limitations in the current process of transferring unallocated water entitlements and in light of this evidence presented at the Yoorrook Justice Commission, will the government reconsider their position?

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (11:51): Thank you, Dr Mansfield, for that further question. I do not wish to interrupt the process of the Yoorrook Justice Commission, and to that end, without wanting to circumnavigate the process of answering this supplementary, I do want to foreshadow that I am appearing before the Yoorrook Justice Commission next week. It will be a privilege and an honour to meet on country at Robinvale to talk further about the work on water and on country as part of truth telling.

We are already seeing some traditional owners across Victoria accessing water entitlements. That might be 2000 meg in the Mitchell River, 200 meg in Buchan Caves, 500 meg in the Tambo for Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation and 2500 megalitres in the Palawarra for the Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation community representative. As at 28 August last year, traditional owners and Aboriginal Victorians held 7592 megalitres of water entitlements. We have a long way to go, and the work goes on.

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

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (11:52): It is fortuitous that I am already here at the table today. I do rise, further to Mrs Tyrrell's question today, to advise that the Allan Labor government has finally secured Commonwealth funding for work to continue on the Victorian Murray Floodplain Restoration Project, without giving up anything, including legal standing, in the process. It is wonderful that the Commonwealth has finally recognised the value of these projects that will return about 70 gigalitres of water to the Murray–Darling Basin. That is 70 gig that will deliver better environmental outcomes not just for Victoria but for the whole basin.

We know that Victoria has contributed more environmental water than any other jurisdiction. We have the best system of compliance, of accountability and of transparency out of any of the basin states. We have ensured that flood plain harvesting and water theft are cracked down upon and are not accepted or tolerated. The Pearson review in 2018 found that Victoria's compliance system of 96 per cent of metering has enabled primary producers to make better outcomes and better decisions in real time for the allocation of water that they have.

We are still opposed to buybacks here in Victoria, as I indicated in my statement issued on the 11th of this month. Victoria has not ceded any rights in relation to the way in which the basin plan, as governed by Commonwealth legislation, will be rolled out, noting that there are amendments that apply now to this legislation that require the Commonwealth to consider socio-economic impact in the way in which it undertakes the process of recovering water. I am looking forward to seeing the Darling flow again. I am looking forward to seeing the Baaka, Menindee and the projects down in South Australia being able to deliver and return environmental benefit as that work continues. The resounding message from communities, including here in Echuca and further afield, is that communities need and deserve advocacy around the importance of primary production and the return of environmental water in a way that does not sell these communities down the river. I am looking forward to that work continuing.

#### **Rochester swimming pool**

**Gaëlle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (11:54): (489) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. When floodwaters engulfed Rochester in October 2022 the Rochester pool was destroyed. Eighteen months of empty Labor promises later, the pool remains closed and is an eyesore. In April last year \$9 million of joint Commonwealth and state funding went to Campaspe shire for flood recovery works at Rochester, including for the pool redevelopment. Last December the council advised the shire will need between \$8 million and \$13 million to replace the pool, and council officers are preparing detailed design and costings for a new aquatic facility in Rochester. Local residents have made it clear that a community pool in Rochester is a top priority. Minister, when will all the money be made available to resurrect this vital community asset?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (11:55): I thank Mrs Broad for her question. There is a lot of investment that has been made available. Since the floods of 2022, \$2.5 billion from state and federal governments has gone into the region in relation to recovery. I know that is not a direct answer to a specific project that you are inquiring about. I do have a role as Minister for Emergency Services in relation to recovery, but that does not mean that I step into the shoes of the sports minister or the regional development minister when it comes to community projects.

I, like you, have heard from the community of Rochester that the pool is their number one priority. The telling point in your question was the final part of it: that council are in the process of designs and seeking exactly what they want to ask from government. I was quite surprised to hear the mayor using his introduction to the recovery event last night to put a figure on the table, because I have not yet received a figure from the council in any formal way. I double-checked that with ERV this morning, because I was like, ‘I haven’t seen the direct request in relation to the specifics.’ I am advised – and your question confirms that that is your advice as well – that the work is not complete yet in relation to what the requests of the community and the council exactly look like. Because we have provided support in relation to the development of the ask, I think that is a pretty good indicator that we are very receptive to receiving that ask. We have not yet received that ask in any formal way other than through some words of the mayor in a speech last night.

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (11:57): Thank you, Minister. I appreciate the response to that question. As you look to receive the further detailed costings from the council, will you commit to the government providing the funding to see this pool rebuilt?

**Jaclyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (11:58): I will always have conversations and talks about the priorities of communities as a local member. The Attorney-General or the Minister for Emergency Services does not provide funding for pools; that would be another ministerial responsibility. But as I made very clear, Rochester have made it abundantly clear to government and to visitors that the pool is their number one priority. I think that in terms of a project that not only meets the needs of a community but is symbolic of a recovery project, it is a project as a local member that I am pretty sure I will get behind. I cannot give you a commitment when it is not yet even formulated as a formal ask, but the fact that we are supporting the development of that request is probably a good indicator that it is on the right track.

#### **Wild horse control**

**Georgie PURCELL** (Northern Victoria) (11:59): (490) My question is for the minister representing the Minister for Environment. Horses have been present in the Barmah forest here on Yorta Yorta country for over a century and a half. According to Parks Victoria’s inflated and flawed counting system, there were 540 brumbies in 2020, with locals now saying only a herd of approximately 100 have survived the mass flooding and shooting in the Barmah area. Yet this government has embarked upon indiscriminate slaughter of brumbies. Highly inaccurate aerial and ground shooting leaves brumbies horrifically injured, with missing eyes, bleeding out to a long and painful death and left to rot in the forest. Will the minister issue an independent re-count to determine the remaining population of brumbies in the Barmah forest?

**Gayle TIERNEY** (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:00): I thank Ms Purcell for her question. Consistent with the standing orders, I will refer that question to the Minister for Environment, and I am sure that he will provide you with the appropriate written response.

**Georgie PURCELL** (Northern Victoria) (12:00): Thank you, Minister, for referring that on. Let us be clear: this is not a culling to control the brumby population. Parks Victoria itself has expressed its plan to eradicate all of the brumbies from the Barmah forest. This government sees fit to go against the wishes of local residents, business owners and farmers who disagree with the eradication of brumbies. This suburban government thinks it knows better than those living near the Barmah forest.

There are 76,000 acres in the Barmah Forest and less than a hundred brumbies. The remaining small brumby population deserves protection, not slaughter. Will the minister commit to investigating alternative population management methods, such as immunocontraception?

**Gayle TIERNEY** (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:01): I thank Ms Purcell for her supplementary question. I could not hear it, but I am sure it will be in *Hansard* and that the Minister for Environment will get to see it, and he will respond accordingly as per the standing orders.

#### **Ministers statements: early childhood education**

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:01): I rise to update the house in relation to the Allan Labor government's continued investment for regional Victorians through our Best Start, Best Life reforms. Since 2021 the Labor government has delivered 39 kindergartens on school sites, creating 79 rooms and an extra 2607 licensed places. Just yesterday I was very pleased to join one of the local members for the region, Ms Symes, at the kindergarten on a school site at Kyabram, at the P-12 there. Thank you very much to Robyn and her amazing teachers and educators from Shine, who introduced us to the service. They were very pleased to let us know they had also just received notification that they are exceeding on all measures, which is an absolutely amazing achievement and a testament to those who are working at Shine as a whole and certainly in this service in particular.

Across regional Victoria we are upgrading kindergartens across the board. Just last week the Premier and I were in Macedon with the member for Macedon. It was a pleasure to yesterday be here as well in the two-room facility, which also has outdoor learning areas and a play space, which is delivering modern facilities for local children who are connected to the school community. This facility in particular has beautiful big windows and big wide fences, and the capacity for the children to engage with the school community from the kindergarten through to those who were in the Kyabram P-12 will be of enormous benefit for those families who transition from early years education through to school education and obviously beyond. The educators and school staff really emphasise that connection from the kindergarten to the school for our littlest learners so that they can effectively make those transitions. This on-the-ground report of how successful they anticipate that this will be in this new kindergarten is evidence that we are hearing right across the board in relation to our kinders on school sites, and we were really pleased to discuss with them, Ms Symes and I, the benefits that Best Start, Best Life reforms are delivering. Indeed just across – (*Time expired*)

#### **Supported residential services**

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (12:04): (491) My question is to the Minister for Children and Minister for Disability. Minister, Echuca-based Community Living & Respite Services provide residential services to 41 people living with a disability. At the time of the 2022 floods they supported 29 of their residents to evacuate. During the Echuca hearing for the flood inquiry CEO Leah Taaffe gave evidence that they received no support from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing or the state government. CLRS had to determine who needed to leave, secure safe accommodation for the clients and supply all equipment, including hoists, wheelchairs, shower stools et cetera, that would be needed at the temporary accommodation. Minister, the state is the legal guardian for six of their clients – three adults and three children – and yet no-one from government or the department contacted CLRS to assist or even inquire about their welfare. Minister, why did the government fail to ensure vulnerable residents entrusted to the state's care were being provided for during the emergency evacuation?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:05): I thank Ms Lovell for her question and for her commitment to and passion for people with disabilities, which is something I am very pleased to discuss with her here in the house today. I was actually very pleased last night to have a discussion with Leah Taaffe, from the very organisation that you are referring to, in relation to the disability services that are provided here and indeed in the context

of the NDIS review, the disability royal commission and many of the other changes in this certainly very unpredictable time for the disability sector and people with disabilities more generally.

I absolutely reject the premise of the question, and as has been outlined, I think, both in the contributions on the motion this morning and certainly in many of the contributions indeed in this very question time –

**Wendy Lovell** interjected.

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN:** Ms Lovell, would you like to hear the answer to the question? As has been outlined both this morning in contributions to the motion and also in people's contributions to question time today, the government has in many ways provided for many of the Victorian communities who have been impacted by the devastating natural disasters, including the floods. Certainly when it comes to vulnerable people, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, in line with other relevant departments, including the Department of Health and DEECA, have very specific protocols that are followed in relation to vulnerable clients, so I reject the premise of the question that vulnerable people and indeed people with disabilities were left behind in any way in addressing the situation that arose as a result of the floods.

Certainly since October 2022, in addition to funding social recovery programs, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing has also provided for the personal hardship assistance program, emergency relief and re-establishment for vulnerable Victorians. We have processed more than \$38.5 million in relation to the hardship assistance program payments. As an example of this, households in the Campaspe shire received almost \$12 million in those payments. Also, in terms of going specifically to assisting those who might have particular vulnerabilities in relation to evacuation or housing post the disaster, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing does continue to work with local government in the delivery of those services.

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (12:08): Minister, six of those people were entrusted to your care, and neither the government nor the department even bothered to inquire, let alone provide any assistance. It would be reasonable to expect that there would be vulnerable residents for whom the state is the responsible guardian in nearly all communities affected by disasters requiring evacuation, such as floods and bushfires. So, Minister, since the floods and the government's neglect becoming public in evidence given to the flood inquiry in August last year, what action have you taken to ensure protocols are in place to guarantee adequate assistance is provided by the department to all vulnerable residents, particularly those for whom the state is the responsible guardian, during an emergency evacuation and relocation?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:08): Perhaps if Ms Lovell had not been talking over me while I was attempting to give the first answer, she may well not have needed to ask the supplementary. As I indicated at the outset, there is indeed a very specific protocol in dealing with vulnerable clients, particularly those who might be reliant on equipment, during a natural disaster, whatever that natural disaster may be. Those protocols were followed in that disaster, and they were followed in previous and subsequent disasters as well. The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing is one part in that protocol. They very capably complete their part in that protocol, and I am very pleased that that is the case, because it ensures that vulnerable people in a disaster are indeed looked after. I absolutely rejected the premise of the question in the first instance, and the supplementary was based on the same premise and I also reject that. The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing in a disaster does implement a number of programs and protocols in order to ensure that vulnerable people are looked after.

**Disability services commissioner**

**David ETTERSANK** (Western Metropolitan) (12:10): (492) My question is to the Minister for Disability Minister Blandthorn, and it relates to Deputy Premier Carroll's recent announcement that the office of the disability commissioner will be abolished because the role is 'very small and is no



longer viable as a standalone entity'. The commissioner is responsible for the oversight of 173,000 Victorian NDIS participants, some 68,000 disability service providers and up to 100,000 workers. Despite this, the government has undertaken no consultation with any of the many stakeholders. The commissioner is essential to ensuring the safety of participants and workers employed within this largely unregulated sector. Indeed disability advocates have called for the role of a specialist commissioner to be both fully funded and indeed expanded. Can the minister explain why participants, families, advocates and the union were not consulted on this reform, particularly as the proposed changes expressly contravene the recommendations of the disability royal commission and the NDIS review?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:11): Can I first, at the outset, thank Mr Ettershank for his question and certainly for his ongoing and passionate advocacy for vulnerable people and ensuring that we have accountable and transparent systems which provide services for our vulnerable people across my portfolio responsibilities whatever circumstances in which that might be.

I thank him for his advocacy, but I do think Mr Ettershank's question epitomises the rationale for the very reform that is currently proposed. It is a reference to a bill that the Deputy Premier Minister Carroll has introduced in the Assembly as my representative, but there is absolutely a misunderstanding regarding the role of the disability services commissioner, which relates specifically to non-NDIS services, the Victorian Disability Worker Commission and the Disability Worker Registration Board. That misunderstanding in itself is exactly the challenge that people with disabilities face every day. We do need to address it, and we as a government do not shy away from that.

There is currently – as I was very pleased to discuss with Leah Taaffe last night – a very disaggregated and siloed approach to regulation and oversight in the disability sector. One of the things that became really apparent to me when I first took on this portfolio is that there really does need to be a one-stop approach to social services regulation, which is what we are attempting to achieve, and certainly to the complaints and oversight functions of that, including for those with disability in Victoria, because those with disabilities face many other issues as well as dealing with and living with their disability. They are complex issues; they are intersectional issues.

To be clear, the scope of the disability services commissioner has reduced since the transfer of services to the national disability insurance scheme. The office of the disability services commissioner is now a very small operation, and it is not viable as a standalone regulatory entity. We are not proposing to in any way diminish the functions of that role; indeed we are seeking to strengthen them by merging the functions. Merging the functions provides a very important opportunity to ensure that the disability services commissioner role intersects better with those of broader social services regulation.

This change also provides the opportunity to make the system simpler for people with disability and for the organisations that represent them to navigate. The system can be confusing for service users as there are multiple avenues for raising complaints about disability services, let alone when their issues intersect with other service issues. What happens is people fall through the gaps, and that is exactly what we are seeking to address here. The changes reduce the number of separate entities overseeing disability service providers, preventing complaints falling between the cracks. It is not at odds with the recommendations of the disability royal commission; indeed it presents an opportunity in which to consider those more broadly.

**David ETTERS HANK** (Western Metropolitan) (12:14): I thank the minister for her response. By way of a supplementary question, the disability sector is arguably one of the most important and complex sectors within the health and caring industries, and I do not think we are looking for a one-stop shop that can purport to cover the complexity of not only that but also a broader range of service areas. So can the minister please explain how abolishing a specialist service and a reporting mechanism for the disability sector will actually provide better outcomes for participants, their families

and disability workers if there is no dedicated disability commissioner to whom they can report poor conduct within the sector?

**Lizzie BLANDTHORN** (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:15): I am very pleased to say that we agree with Mr Ettershank in relation to the complexity of issues that people with disabilities face, and we think that merging the functions of the disability services commissioner and, as we have foreshadowed, later the disability worker commission and the Disability Worker Registration Board will ensure that we can have a response and a complaints mechanism that ensures that issues which are intersectional can be dealt with in a much more holistic way.

In relation specifically to the disability worker commission and the registration board, their proposed merger into the Social Services Regulator is appropriate, but it is important to consider that currently, as at their 2022–23 annual report, there were 63 complaints received but there was only one prohibition order made. If we are to look at the number of people that potentially fall through the gaps with the system as it is at the moment and look at the proposal on the table and that which we have foreshadowed for a future bill, what we are seeking to do is provide a holistic response that addresses the issues that people with disability might face in a holistic way, not in a siloed way – that we ensure that people with disability are heard.

**Ministers statements: TAFE sector**

**Gayle TIERNEY** (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (12:16): Today I rise to update the house on the importance of regional TAFEs for local communities. Bendigo Kangan Institute (BKI) Echuca campus is a vibrant, modern facility providing a local hub and resources for students. Just last month the jobs and skills centre opened, and this has been a resounding success. Over 70 community and industry connections have been made, and a partnership with five schools across the Campaspe shire will provide job readiness workshops to over 185 year 9 students.

That is not all. The BKI 2024 Student of the Year winner was a local Echuca student. Kiara Dean was recognised for her remarkable achievements, completing a certificate IV in veterinary nursing while juggling work and a rigorous schedule in clay target shooting. For Kiara, working with animals was a lifelong ambition. However, six months into her university degree the pandemic put a hold on her plans. Not knowing when she would be able to return, Kiara enrolled in veterinary nursing at BKI, and then she never looked back. When talking to Kiara, she said:

Everything I know about veterinary nursing, I know through TAFE. The facilities there are world class ...  
The education was very hands-on ...

...

My teachers were really understanding and really willing to go out of their way to accommodate me. I could not have done it without them.

This is further proof that TAFE is an equal choice to university and highlights the importance of our regional TAFEs, ensuring Victorians can balance their dreams and get the skills they need to work and live right in their own communities.

**David Limbrick:** On a point of order, President, I would like to bring to the Attorney-General's attention question 470, which was asked by me in the last sitting week. The response to that is overdue. It was due on 21 March. This is regarding conversion practices legislation. I would also like to bring to the Attorney-General's attention that since that question was asked the Cass review in the UK has been published, which named the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne. I think this has become an urgent matter of public interest.

**The PRESIDENT:** I am sure the minister will take that on board.

**Written responses**

**The PRESIDENT** (12:19): I thank Minister Tierney, who is going to get both answers, including to the question that she did not hear, from the Minister for Environment for Ms Purcell.

*Questions on notice*

**Answers**

**The PRESIDENT** (12:19): I have received a written request from Mr Davis seeking the reinstatement of a question on notice directed to the Minister for Disability. Having reviewed the response, I order that question on notice 1415 be reinstated in full as the data for the information that is sought is not available from the department's annual report.

*Constituency questions*

**Eastern Victoria Region**

**Tom McINTOSH** (Eastern Victoria) (12:20): (785) After hearing Minister Tierney's contribution before, my constituency question is: how is the government assisting people in Eastern Victoria to get into TAFEs and do apprenticeships and traineeships? Those opposite like to give me a hard time for mentioning what they did in the 1990s when they got rid of job pathways and privatised and stopped people having jobs for life, but let us talk about in 2010 to 2014 what you did to TAFEs.

**David Davis**: On a point of order, President, this is a constituency question. It is not an opportunity to attack the opposition. He is going over old terrain, and it is not relevant to the constituency question.

**The PRESIDENT**: I apologise. I was a little bit distracted at the start of Mr McIntosh's contribution, so it is very hard for me to rule on that. But I will call Mr McIntosh to his constituency question.

**Tom McINTOSH**: Thank you. The cuts that occurred between 2010 and 2014 to TAFEs we have been rebuilding from ever since. We are ensuring that people who want to go to TAFE and who want to work in the regions have the best quality and best skills possible. I am thankful I got to go through TAFE at a time when there was a Labor government, because this side is absolutely committed to TAFE. You are absolutely opposed to it. As I said before, can the minister please inform me and my constituents in Eastern Victoria, like here in Echuca, of the incredible opportunities people are getting, which those in Eastern Victoria have too?

**Western Victoria Region**

**Bev McARTHUR** (Western Victoria) (12:21): (786) My constituency question is for the Minister for Health, and it concerns the disastrous financial situation of hospitals across my electorate. We know that the Treasurer has already demanded cuts – 'financial management' and 'improvement plans', as the doublespeak goes – but the upcoming budget is inspiring real fear. The catastrophic impact of Labor's inability to manage money becomes clearer by the day, and regional Victorians suffer most. In Western Victoria I hear alarming reports that money given by local benefactors for specific requests will be siphoned off as operational cash – this at a time when forced amalgamation of rural and regional hospitals is threatened. So, Minister, can you confirm that current regional health service board members have been required to sign non-disclosure agreements preventing them from sharing information with communities they represent on what would be deeply unpopular and damaging mergers?

**Southern Metropolitan Region**

**Katherine COPSEY** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:23): (787) My constituency question is to the Minister for Consumer Affairs. An apartment resident in my electorate, Rocco, lives in a complex that has endured years of disruption from two apartments used full-time as short stays. As well as these dwellings not being available to provide much-needed homes, neighbours have suffered loud music,

litter, vomiting and passing out in the common areas, verbal abuse and threats from visitors. Rocco says 2021 changes to the Owners Corporation Act 2006 have not improved the situation and VCAT is not able to deal with the issues in a cost-effective and timely manner. We need reform to rein in short stays' impacts on housing supply, including an annual 90-day cap on listing a property as a short stay and a mandatory public register of short-stay properties. And, Minister, when will you amend the Owners Corporation Act to let apartment owners decide if they want short stays in their building – to decide if they live in a hotel or a community?

#### **Eastern Victoria Region**

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (12:24): (788) My question is to the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence. Family violence and sexual assault continue to cast a dark shadow over far too many women in my Eastern Victoria electorate. Latrobe and Wellington LGAs are over-represented in sexual offences. Gippsland Centre Against Sexual Assault CEO Jane Barr highlights the desperate need for more specialist sexual assault services. Oversubscribed and underfunded, support services cannot keep pace, with children and adults on waiting lists. Progress has stalled on the sexual violence strategy, and peak body funding runs out in June, with no indication that it is going to be renewed. We also know that one in four children, including one in three girls, has experienced sexual abuse. On behalf of GCASA, I ask the minister to commit to the \$9 million of funding in the upcoming budget to allow the specialist sexual assault sector to continue to deliver quicker, flexible support and responses for survivors of sexual violence.

#### **Western Metropolitan Region**

**Trung LUU** (Western Metropolitan) (12:25): (789) My question is directed to the Treasurer, Tim Pallas. Can the Treasurer reassure my constituents that a payroll tax on GPs will not be passed on to patients? Local GPs have expressed that under new rulings doctors working in GP clinics are employees and therefore liable for payroll tax. Information from GPs indicates that in order to keep their practices operational, these additional costs will need to be passed on to patients by charging them up-front if the new tax on doctors continues. GPs have described this ruling as a tax on bulk-billing. Treasurer, our electorates – yours and mine – have the second-highest bulk-billing rates in this state. According to modelling from the Primary Care Business Council, a reduction in bulk-billing will cause an increase in emergency ward attendance, adding \$14.3 million to the Werribee Mercy Hospital's costs each year. Treasurer, will you commit to axing the tax and save bulk-billing for our residents in Melbourne's west and for all Victorians?

#### **North-Eastern Metropolitan Region**

**Richard WELCH** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:26): (790) My question is for the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. The SRL has already begun to reshape the lives of those in Glen Waverley in my electorate – not for the better, but for the worse. With an \$11 billion shortfall on the first stage alone, there are only two ways this funding gap can be filled: by higher taxes for local residents or by ramming in as many high-rise towers into Glen Waverley as possible to maximise state profit. Now Glen Waverley will spend the next decade as a construction zone. Coleman Parade and Myrtle Street, once bustling streets, now stand unusable. The community has been stripped of its voice all because the government need to indulge in overdevelopment to pay for an unnecessary project they are too broke to afford. What is the complete list of property developers he and his predecessors have met with regarding the Suburban Rail Loop?

#### **Southern Metropolitan Region**

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:27): (791) This is directed to the Attorney-General, this question. I, like many others, have been put onto a Russian ban list to stop us –

*Members interjecting.*

**David DAVIS:** There are a number of us in the Parliament who have been clobbered –

**A member:** You weren't special.

**David DAVIS:** No, no. I agree with that. But my point is: what step will the Attorney take to ensure that the resilience and strength of Victorian MPs is indicated? None of us will resile from our positions on Russia. We think its behaviour in Ukraine has been appalling, and we think that it is a terrible regime that is in operation. So my question to the Attorney is: what step will she take to ensure that those Victorian MPs who are banned will be able to convey their strength and support for the stance that has been taken by the international community?

**The PRESIDENT:** Mr Davis, that was a magnificent effort in weaving Russia into a constituency question. I cannot let that go through, but I think the minister will take note of your contribution.

#### Northern Victoria Region

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (12:28): (792) My constituency question is for the Minister for Water. The City of Greater Bendigo has announced a proposed partnership with Western Composting Technology to establish a composting facility located in Huntly. The proposed private composting facility expects to process up to 30,000 tonnes of food and garden organic waste annually and is to be located on council land right next to the Bendigo Livestock Exchange in Huntly. More than 20,000 sheep and lambs are sold at the exchange every week before being transported across the state and overseas. Public submissions for this development have already closed, and both local residents and stock agents are frustrated about the lack of consultation and engagement. The Huntly community is still recovering from further flooding in January this year. Local residents have raised concerns about biosecurity risks and the decision of the local council to build the facility on a flood plain. I ask the minister to review the proposal and respond to the concerns raised by the local community.

#### Southern Metropolitan Region

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (12:29): (793) My question is for the Minister for Police. Last month I met with traders in Port Melbourne, and I listened to their concerns around the increasing levels of crime and the antisocial behaviour that is occurring in the retail precinct around Bay Street in Port Melbourne. The businesses and residents are really concerned about the increasing levels of crime that are occurring. Bay Street is a vibrant community. It has got dining and commercial services, yet locals are feeling increasingly unsafe, and security has been taken out of the major shops in the area. The need for greater local presence for police has been of great concern for many communities in my area of Southern Metropolitan Region. We hear today that police have got concerns around protests where local services are being taken out of the community. I ask the minister to provide the Port Melbourne Business Association with an assurance that he will address this issue as a priority and ensure that there are more patrols in the Bay Street area.

#### Northern Victoria Region

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (12:31): (794) My question is for the Minister for Small Business. Minister, how many small businesses have been sent flood grant audit letters? How much money does the government anticipate clawing back? And will you ensure businesses are not unfairly penalised for not taking photographs of the damage? Many small businesses affected by the October 2022 floods made use of grants available to help them repair their premises and return to trading, but now 18 months later the state government is sending out letters threatening to take back the money if people cannot produce evidence. The government must understand that at the time of the floods businesses were not taking time to catalogue every detail of the damage – they were busy trying to return to normal as fast as possible. It adds insult to injury for the government to give this money to flood victims and then 18 months later demand it back if they do not have enough photos of the water damage. The government's actions will add further stress to individuals who have had to endure so much due to floods.

**Northern Metropolitan Region**

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (12:32): (795) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. I have had countless complaints in my electorate about the awful condition of the roads at the moment. On Old Sydney Road a number of potholes pose a safety risk to drivers in the area. Potholes have become such an issue that even students at one of my local schools, Our Lady of the Way primary school in Wallan, have raised their concerns in classrooms, drawing artwork of different potholes and having a competition about it. Old Sydney Road serves as a vital arterial for Mickleham, Beveridge and Wallan, acting as an alternative to the Hume through the rapidly growing communities in our growth corridors. Given the dangerous conditions and the critical role Old Sydney Road plays in the northern growth corridor, can the minister advise if there are any plans to resurface Old Sydney Road to ensure those who travel on it can travel safely?

**Sitting suspended 12:33 pm until 2:01 pm.**

**Motions****Floods**

**Debate resumed.**

**Sarah MANSFIELD** (Western Victoria) (14:01): I am pleased to rise to speak on this motion. Watching the determination and strength of the people of communities in northern Victoria when faced with the millennial floods of 2022 was awe-inspiring. Day after day you dragged sandbags to protect homes and buildings, you rescued wildlife, you rescued each other. During floods and fires Australian communities prove again and again that there is profound altruism in our hearts. Amidst our worst natural disasters, care and solidarity prevail. Looking after each other is our innate and immediate response. This community care is the most valuable resource we have when disasters strike.

In 2022 widespread flooding was devastating for communities across the state. It affected 63 of 79 municipalities, and the hardest hit were those in this part of northern Victoria. Communities like Echuca, Rochester, Shepparton and Yea experienced the unimaginable – homes, farms, businesses, community services, schools, roads and bridges were all damaged. Over 18 months on there are areas where repairs continue, as we have heard, and many remain without homes. This is before the impact on people's health and wellbeing is considered. This event took an enormous emotional toll that I know continues to this day.

The 2022 flood was not a natural disaster. The increase in devastating flooding on this continent is the result of destructive human interaction with nature to the point where we have changed the climate itself. The Hawkesbury has just flooded again, as have outback Queensland and the Illawarra. Brisbane, Lismore, Fitzroy Crossing, Cairns and even Melbourne have experienced severe floods in the past two years alone. Scientists have been warning us for decades that this is exactly what would happen if we continued to burn fossil fuels and ignore a planet in distress, yet successive state and federal governments – Labor and Liberal – have pursued coal and gas relentlessly. Meanwhile coal and gas corporations continue to make record profits and pay little tax, and communities are left to clean up the mess. The ongoing failure of governments to show the climate leadership we need by ending coal and gas shows contempt for the experiences of those communities affected by the 2022 floods. Rolling out renewables is all well and good, but it must be accompanied by a rapid end to coal and gas, and not only for domestic use. Australia is one of the world's top exporters of coal and gas, and coal and gas burnt elsewhere impacts our climate just as much as that that is burnt here.

We are also grossly underprepared for the climate change that is already locked in. Even if we stopped burning all fossil fuels immediately, the grim reality is that a hotter planet and more frequent and severe weather events are here and here for decades to come. Once-in-a-generation events are becoming a regular occurrence, and we need to get ready for this new normal, as difficult as that may be to acknowledge. We are seeing the consequences of this lack of preparedness every time a disaster is experienced, and regional communities like this one here are on the front line.

Reducing the risk to people and property in the first place is critical. Apart from emissions reduction, we also need to rethink our planning system and stop allowing development that places people at direct risk of disasters like flooding. Apparently during the 2022 floods, while people were using boats to access their inundated homes, in their letterboxes they found notices that a planning application for townhouses had been approved for a site that was 1 metre under water at the time. Submissions from Echuca residents about these new buildings on a flood plain were not even considered by VCAT. This is a scenario playing out across Victoria on flood plains, on coasts at risk of inundation and sea level rise and in fire-prone areas where both science and local knowledge are not incorporated into planning decisions. We welcome the state government's recent introduction of a climate trigger of sorts into planning decisions, but it will be slow to roll out through planning schemes if and when they come up for amendment, and it remains to be seen how effective it will be.

Ensuring infrastructure is designed to withstand climate impacts is also critical. Time and again we see infrastructure that is replaced like for like only to be destroyed again the next time a disaster hits. Like-for-like replacement might be fine for a one-in-a-thousand-year flood that actually only occurs actually once every 1000 years, but with these events now occurring much more frequently we must be building back better. Not only should new housing be climate safe and climate ready, we need to be thinking about how we can retrofit existing housing and buildings to ensure that they are more climate resilient. All levels of government need to be considering this.

Disaster responses also need to be stepped up considerably. Victoria's SES, CFA and other disaster response organisations do an incredible job, and I just want to acknowledge the power of work that they did during the flooding events in 2022. We saw the outstanding commitment to their communities on display during that time, but they are woefully under-resourced and understaffed, and we need a comprehensive rethink and bolstering of our disaster response systems. Inevitably, even with the best preparation, there will be extreme weather events that cause damage. Flood clean-up, as the people of Echuca, Rochester and other towns surrounding this area know, can take months or even years. We need to make it easier for communities to do this work. We heard just last week from councils that were affected by the 2022 floods that they are still waiting on funding to be approved by the state government. The Murray River Group of Councils reported there were still \$20 million worth of repairs waiting to be completed in Gannawarra. Shepparton is still \$2 million out of pocket for repairs. The Pyrenees Shire Council, which has recently also experienced fires, is still waiting on eight out of nine funding submissions related to the 2022 flood to be approved. Given the scale and ferocity of the disaster, the system of disaster relief grants for councils surely needs a rethink.

The Greens want to see a greater sense of urgency and commitment to climate preparedness to deal with all of these issues. These are issues that were highlighted during the flood inquiry, and we were pleased to see this Parliament support our push for a further inquiry into the climate resilience of built infrastructure, which is currently open for submissions. We really want to hear from people living in these communities, in Echuca and all of northern Victoria, and every Victorian who has been impacted by climate disasters. What sort of planning and infrastructure innovations do we need to prepare for our future? What sort of housing? What sort of town planning? Do we need more cool spaces in our towns to weather heat events? What kind of public spaces will help us weather future storms? Is it possible to live with our rivers and not against them? We can harness the knowledge and care that is already within communities, including those that experienced the 2022 floods, to build better and more resilient towns.

Recently the Greens invited people to respond to a survey about the ways climate change is impacting their communities. Many responded that the people around them are scared. These are communities that have lived through floods, heatwaves and droughts and lost their homes or experienced days cut off from the rest of the world. Climate anxiety is rife, but they also offered hope for a climate-safe future, and amongst this hope were also clear solutions. By working together, by acknowledging the science and the reality of climate change, we can do this. We can end our reliance on coal and gas and start turning things around for future generations. We can get prepared and withstand what is to come

in the meantime, but we need governments to step up and take action, including the state government, and it should not take another climate disaster to do so.

**Lee TARLAMIS** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:10): I move:

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

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

### *Business of the house*

#### **Notices of motion**

**Lee TARLAMIS** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:10): I move:

That the consideration of notice of motion, government business, 372, be postponed until later this day.

**Motion agreed to.**

### *Bills*

#### **Statute Law Revision Bill 2024**

##### *Second reading*

**Debate resumed on motion of Ingrid Stitt:**

That the bill be now read a second time.

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (14:11): It is great to speak on the Statute Law Revision Bill 2024. I want to thank my colleague Michael O'Brien. Usually my colleague Mr O'Brien goes to great lengths to consult with stakeholders and review the bill in detail, but really all he needed was maybe that program Grammarly or a spellcheck to actually go over and learn about this bill. Safe to say it is probably the easiest bill report he has done for colleagues. The briefing he gave to me was very short, but nonetheless I thank him for that.

This bill I think is indicative of this Labor government. It does nothing to fix Victoria's crushing debt. It does absolutely nothing to address the cost-of-living pressures Victoria is facing. It does nothing to fix the housing crisis, nothing to improve youth crime and nothing to improve productivity in this state.

**Jaelyn Symes:** On a point of order, Acting President, it is important when speaking on legislation to address what is in the bill. There are plenty of topics in the bill that you might like to draw your attention to, and actually what you are advocating for is that outdated bills, errors and legislation should not be improved and amended at an opportunity such as now. I think that that is a poor reflection as an MP to have – that we should have laws that are incorrect and wrong.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** Thank you, Attorney-General, for the point of order and the debate that went with it. On that note, you are correct. We are here to debate not what is not in the bill but rather what is in the bill. I call the member back to the bill.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Thank you, Acting President. I was trying to say I think it is extraordinary that the government has chosen this for a regional sitting. I would think there might be a few more issues of substance they could grace the good people of Echuca with; perhaps the SEC bill they could have put forward here in Echuca, knowing how locals oppose that.

It amends a number of acts that I want to speak on. I find it quite extraordinary – it actually amends some of the Building Act 1993 and the Domestic Building Contracts Act 1995. Under this government's watch, with their reckless agenda and their wasteful Big Build causing massive inflation of building materials and labour, we have seen the collapse of many domestic building companies, including Porter Davis Homes, Montego Homes, Chatham Homes and Apex Homes. Under this government's watch we have seen a huge failure to enforce the law to ensure that dodgy builders are



purchasing legally required domestic building insurance. It is emblematic of this government. They have created a crisis in the domestic building industry, which we know –

*Members interjecting.*

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** Order! Mr Mulholland, this is great, but can we keep it to a dull roar and at least about the bill. Mr Mulholland, without assistance.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** We know the Assistant Treasurer was warned, well in advance, of these building collapses and the risks to the domestic building industry, but of course he did nothing in the way of any serious reform, and we still have not seen any serious reform in this space. Not even a crisis in the domestic building industry is enough to jolt them into action – just a few grammatical changes. I have spoken to countless Victorians, including those in northern Victoria, like those in Doreen and other affected places, who have been victims of the lack of government enforcement of the law and victims of dodgy builders who do some pretty abhorrent things. We need action here in Victoria beyond some grammatical changes. I think they have lost all sense of urgency and priority in regard to this space, and I think that is emblematic of an almost decade-old government that has just run out of puff when it comes to governing Victoria and rectifying problems they have created. The consequences are becoming increasingly devastating for so many Victorians.

What does this bill do? Does it do anything to improve the domestic building industry? No. Does it do anything to fix the Victorian Building Authority (VBA) and the chaos that this government has overseen? No. They are changing ‘draftsperson’ to ‘building designer’.

Following the collapse of Porter Davis Homes, the opposition, including my colleague Jess Wilson, dragged the government kicking and screaming to establish a support scheme for affected customers. It was an appropriate response to assist victims of a disgraced company, but what did this government do to stop history repeating itself? The government did absolutely nothing approaching enough. And what did we see? The collapse of Montego Homes, with around 60 customers without domestic building insurance. There were customers like Jessica Rodriguez, who had her life shattered. A single mum from Doreen in northern Victoria, in the seat of Yan Yean, she spent almost a decade sacrificing mornings, afternoons, weekends and special occasions working to save for a deposit to build a house in Doreen for herself and her nine-year-old daughter. Under this government’s watch the great Australian dream has become the great Labor nightmare. She trusted Montego Homes, but she also trusted this government to effectively enforce the existing law that would keep builders honest. Jess was not alone. We saw gut-wrenching situations, including in western Victoria, in Mount Duneed, where families lost absolutely everything.

The initial response from the minister to our calls to extend the support scheme was no. ‘There is no money,’ is what the Premier’s office said, and the minister responded with a resounding no to our initial calls. It was only after our tireless advocacy and, I have to say, the advocacy of these victims, who did not give up. They rocked up to the front steps of Parliament. They were in the gallery for question time. They contacted ministers. They were on the front page of both the *Whittlesea Review* and the *Geelong Advertiser* telling their stories. It was only then the government was dragged kicking and screaming to extend the support to customers of Montego Homes, which had collapsed, and Chatham Homes as well.

But, predictably, in the intervening period between 20 February, the date it was extended to, and 6 March, when the government announced it, Apex Homes collapsed into liquidation. Again, this was despite Labor announcing the extension of the scheme on 6 March, after Apex had gone into liquidation on 21 February. They failed to include them in the scheme. When my colleague Jess Wilson asked the Assistant Treasurer in question time, he was clearly unaware of the collapse. It just beggars belief that he would be unaware of Apex Homes going into liquidation, affecting so many customers in the south-east, and I would be concerned on that side of the house if this minister is rumoured to be the next Treasurer of Victoria, having been continually not across his brief.

This was another company going into collapse. I followed up with the minister straight after that question and emailed him several examples of people who had written to me very, very concerned that they had lost everything and had cruelly not been included in the scheme that was announced because the minister was not across his brief. It was only this past Monday that we realised that very quietly the government, when the support scheme opened, had extended it to 28 February. That would not have happened without the advocacy of the opposition, the Liberals and Nationals.

*Members interjecting.*

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** The minister – and I know they are embarrassed for him – did not even know they had gone into liquidation. That is how not across his brief he was. The minister did not even know he had cruelly left them out of that support scheme. Because we made him aware of that, those families are now included.

I want to thank the advocacy of my colleague Ann-Marie Hermans but also the local member Brad Battin for listening, for sitting down with these victims who had lost everything and for advocating on their behalf to the minister. Since the collapse of Porter Davis, Labor have made no meaningful changes to stop dodgy builders stealing deposits without taking out the legally required insurance. Labor have done nothing to improve the VBA, which I hear deeply concerning stories about every day. But they are bringing this bill here today, to a historic regional sitting, which makes no substantive changes, as if to torment and insult Victorians.

In the Building Act 1993 they propose to change ‘pools’ to ‘pool’ and in the Domestic Building Contracts Act 1995 ‘draftsperson’ to ‘building designer’. Another act Labor is proposing to amend is the Road Safety Act 1986. Once again it does nothing to improve road safety, but I do love getting out to northern Victoria. I have been to northern Victoria quite a bit recently, whether it be places like Doreen or Mernda, or in Broadford with my great colleague Annabelle Cleeland. Late last year I was up in Yarrowonga with the great local member Tim McCurdy, who is here today, visiting some builders there. A couple of weeks ago I was with my colleague Wendy Lovell up in Wodonga hearing firsthand about the impact of this government’s land tax, which is forcing people to sell up and go and invest in Albury instead, because of this government’s addiction to taxes. It is great to be here in Echuca, in the electorate of Peter Walsh.

The bill does amend the Road Safety Act, and certainly when it comes to road safety this government has been found wanting. Particularly in my electorate, the roads are littered with potholes. Labor has reduced road maintenance funding by 45 per cent since 2020. In 2023, 295 lives were lost on our roads, an increase of 22 per cent on the previous year. Despite this, Labor cut \$230 million from road safety programs in 2021–22 and 2022–23. Labor is clearly not serious about road safety. I think it is obvious to anyone who has had the misfortune of driving on a regional road filled with potholes, this fact. In my electorate I just want to shout out to locals in Wallan, where potholes are a very, very big issue, and I want to shout out to students from Our Lady of the Way Catholic Primary School in Wallan, who did some artwork on their best potholes and their roads, such is the seriousness of this issue for them. The government is seemingly not doing all that much about it.

People have had to fork out hundreds of dollars to pay for a new wheel, a new tyre or to have their suspension checked, many times in multiple incidents. One individual incident will reach the threshold of about \$1600 or \$1700, but they are having to pay several thousand dollars because it is over many incidences with potholes. I drove up here on the Northern Highway. The Northern Highway actually ends in my electorate, and it is probably about the worst stretch of the Northern Highway coming onto the Hume because of this government’s lack of maintenance on the Northern Highway, and I want to say lack of maintenance on Watson Street as well, which seems to be a permanent slow-go zone without any roadworks. There has been a 414 per cent increase in claims by drivers of damage to their vehicles from our roads in the last three years. But what does Labor do on our roads? It just permanently reduces speed limits. You see it everywhere. Roads that used to be 100 kilometres per hour are now 80 kilometres. You see ‘60 kilometres, roadwork ahead’, but you do not see any

roadworks; you just see Labor potholes. Victorians do not deserve this, but this is the price we pay for a government that cannot manage money. It is Victorians that pay the price.

The government are obsessed with shiny megaprojects like the Suburban Rail Loop, the biggest pork-barrelling exercise in Australian history, but not on actually fixing our roads to make our roads safer and make life easier for regional and rural Victorians and Victorians in metropolitan areas as well. It seems like the government has no interest in actually fixing road safety besides a few grammatical errors. The government is admitting it has made mistakes in the past by fixing these acts, but in terms of potholes it has no interest in fixing potholes, and things seem to be getting worse and worse and worse. I think what we need is serious investment. What we need is no more cuts to our road maintenance budget as we have seen under this government. As we have seen recently, they are paying off the credit card with more credit cards. Perhaps they could invest money into fixing our roads and road safety.

**Tom McIntosh:** On a point of order, Acting President, it would be great to come back to the bill at some point. There has been a fair bit of leeway, but if we could come back to the bill, it would be great.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** It is a road safety act; I was talking about road safety.

*Members interjecting.*

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** Order! Enough! Lead speaker, it is a road safety act, so keep on going.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Hopefully the member for Eastern Victoria, who lives in my electorate, has learned a few things about the Road Safety Act. Another act that I would like to talk about as well is the Gas Industry Act 2001. With the way this government treats the gas industry and the way it treats Victorians who use gas in their business or may want to use it at home, you would think that there might simply be an amendment to ban it, and we know this government has a secret plan to ban gas. They have banned gas developments for new homes, so they are saying to some Victorians who are going into our growth areas they are not allowed to use gas, but they are saying to everybody else it is all good. If you actually dive deep into their gas substitution road map, you see some pretty scary stuff about what they are planning on doing in the future. You do not create a gas substitution road map if you are not planning on banning gas altogether, and that is what this government is doing. I was meeting with some families from our Hindu community out in Mickleham recently, and they are very concerned about Labor's proposed gas ban. They have got new family members moving into areas like Mickleham that will not be able to get gas – they cannot get gas – and they are really concerned about that and what that means for them.

**A member** interjected.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** What we are going to do we have already announced. The Liberals and the Nationals, when we form government in 2026, will reverse that gas ban, because we understand the needs. As I said, I was up in Wodonga recently, and we recently saw Seeley International, who produce gas heaters, announce that 120 jobs would be lost from the local community in Wodonga after they relocate to South Australia, which actually has a Premier who is begging our manufacturers to come over, whereas this government, including the member for Mill Park, seem to be very anti-gas, which is also anti-manufacturing. I have been meeting with manufacturers in my electorate in the northern suburbs who are very concerned about this government's approach to gas and their ability to manufacture in the northern suburbs going forward, but also in regional Victoria as well. Seeley International said:

The accelerated disruption to our industry caused by the Victorian government's inexcusable anti-gas obsession, and using taxpayers' money to pay consumers to replace Australian-made gas heaters with imported reverse cycle systems, is extremely detrimental.

You might think protecting regional jobs was more important than moving a quotation mark, but apparently not. We saw the same with Qenos recently, and I know my colleague David Davis said in the media that Qenos had long played a central role in Australia's manufacturing sector and said the state government's energy policy was driving manufacturers out of the state, which is true. He said that frightening surges in taxes, energy costs and regulation in Victoria make us uncompetitive, and:

A firm like Qenos uses gas as both a feedstock and an energy source and has been hit hard by the surge in energy costs under Victorian Labor. Security of gas supply is also critical ...

But it has botched its gas policy, and it is 'a significant impediment and must be reversed if businesses are to survive and compete'. But they are not competitive in Victoria because of this government's approach to gas. A premature exit from gas without creating viable alternatives and credible solutions is entirely reckless and will end up costing consumers the most.

Another act that is proposed to be amended is the EastLink Project Act 2004, and I know my colleagues from the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region and the Eastern Victoria Region will be interested in this one. I use EastLink every now and then, and it is a fantastic road, a long time in the making. It was first shown in the Bolte government's visionary 1969 Melbourne transport plan as the F35 freeway. But on this side of the house we do not like broken promises. The Bracks government promised that EastLink would be toll free, so that little beep – everyone hears it – when you are travelling along should be a reminder of Labor's broken promise of no tolls. Unfortunately, I suspect people think this more regularly lately since cost of living is out of control under this government. It was one of the most famous broken promises in the history of Victorian politics, and we condemn that side of the house for it.

Another act proposed to be amended is the Safety on Public Land Act 2004, with the removal of a provision of that act which was repealed by the Sustainable Forests (Timber) and Wildlife Amendment Act 2014. It is very disappointing to see this government bring an end to sustainable native timber logging in this state. What you hear from Labor is they stand up for working people but what working people get is a slap in the face, and that is what they see. They do not care about good blue-collar jobs like in manufacturing; they let gas prices get out of control and end the manufacturing of Australian-made gas heaters like Seeley in Wodonga. They up-ended the livelihoods of forestry workers across Victoria. They promised to stage transition through to 2030 and then fast-tracked their demise by announcing a total shutdown – just disgraceful. Haulage operators affected have been offered just 50 cents in the dollar and harvesting contractors 30 cents in the dollar for the remainder of their contracts, some of which will end soon. It is just terrible. They have failed 2500 timber workers. The industry has generated more than \$770 million each year, much of it in regional areas such as Gippsland. Worse still, we are left without a valuable local source of timber and a gaping hole in fire management.

I was pleased to be up Gippsland way in Sale last year as part of the native bird hunting inquiry, and I know many locals spoke to me about that issue as well. It is a sad result when you have a party beholden to the Greens political party. I would not quite want to be allies with them or cheering them on there. The closest the Greens have ever gotten to a forest is when Adam Bandt flies over it in one of his taxpayer-funded private jets. Many of these workers, be they forestry workers, manufacturing workers or even workers in the government's own projects, enjoy the great outdoors. But we know that government MPs did vote for a ban on duck hunting that was only stopped after the advocacy of the Liberals and Nationals. There were the over 900 that signed my open letter to the Premier and over 400 that attended my forum in Craigieburn, many of whom were wearing CFMEU hoodies and Electrical Trades Union (ETU) caps and steelcapped boots and who worked on government projects, that put enough pressure on this government to reverse their ban on duck hunting.

I know Mr Galea was pretty disappointed, but the Premier made a captain's call. You know what, it was the right captain's call on duck hunting. If you speak to anyone out this way but particularly in the growth areas of Melbourne – places like in my electorate the seat of Kalkallo, which has over a

thousand registered duck hunters; the seat of Greenvale has even more registered duck hunters, thousands – many people that live in our growth areas and across regional Victoria enjoy it as a generational recreational activity, and it should remain so. But you know they are clamouring to go further. We know, if given the opportunity, they will lock up our national and state parks and they will also end four-wheel driving. That is not me saying that, that is people like the ETU. They have already locked up the Grampians, closing off some of the best and most historical walking tracks, banning wild camping and scrambling across rocks. The Grampians was once a place where people could go to escape the hustle and bustle of everyday life, to perhaps escape to forget they had a Labor government. Now they do not even have this. You must always do what Labor tells you to do is what they say: stay on the worn path and only swim with a permit – just ridiculous. You can tell this government has dreams –

**Lee Tarlamis** interjected.

**Evan MULHOLLAND:** Maybe if the member was not interjecting, he would understand. You can tell this government has dreams of finding new ways to end the weekend, and it salivates at the prospect. All I can say is if only Labor defined ‘path’, because the government has clearly lost its way. It is a decade-old government, and this is the best it can bring of substance to a historic city in regional Victoria. Despite this bill being indicative of a tired, old – almost decade-old – Labor government, we do not oppose this bill. It is worth fixing mistakes and ensuring legislation is correct. I just wish the people of Echuca were treated with a bit more respect than this bill.

**Michael GALEA** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:37): I rise to join what is already a wideranging debate on the Statute Law Revision Bill 2024. In doing so I want to acknowledge that we are here today in the city of Echuca and how wonderful it is to be here, especially as I see the Murray River behind my Liberal colleagues on the other side of the chamber. I see that we are on the right side of the Murray River as well. I do want to acknowledge the people of Echuca, who have so warmly welcomed us all here today. I also acknowledge that I am here speaking on the land of the Yorta Yorta people.

This regional sitting is a great opportunity for us to take a slice of the Parliament – not the entirety of the Parliament, not everything that we do of course –

**Nick McGowan:** A small piece.

**Michael GALEA:** a small piece of the Parliament to regional Victoria to showcase a little bit of what we do. But more importantly for me this week it has been a real opportunity for us to not just stand here and perform to them but to actually listen. I particularly appreciated two speakers this morning, Ms Tara Atley and Mr Cameron Barnes, who came and spoke to us so powerfully about their experiences as young people in this region. I think one of the biggest takeaways for me not just today but from this entire week has been the voices of people, especially young people, in northern Victoria and listening to what they have to say.

It has been quite a busy week up here for some of us, starting on Monday in Shepparton. The Public Accounts and Estimates Committee has launched an inquiry into tobacco and vaping controls in the state of Victoria, and we held our very first hearings in Shepparton. We heard from local police, from healthcare providers, from schools as well and from various other stakeholders. We heard lots of really interesting, incisive evidence, but the most powerful for me was to hear from two marvellous school captains from Greater Shepparton Secondary College, a terrific school which has had an enormous rebuild under this Labor government, with \$160 million and some really quite incredible facilities there. These two school captains, Sabri and Bella, came and spoke to us and shared their experiences of how school students in different age groups view the issue of vaping in particular, and it really, really helped to inform where we go next with that inquiry.

I also had the great privilege of attending a youth forum in Shepparton along with Ms Lovell and the member for Shepparton, Kim O’Keeffe, where we had a Q and A and also heard from young people

about what their desires are for the future of their region and what they want to achieve. That is where it ties in so well to the bill that we are talking about today.

**Nick McGowan:** On a point of order, Acting President, I may well have lost the plot – it happens from time to time – but on a point of relevance, I gave Mr Galea I think some leeway in sharing his delight at being in Echuca, which we all feel, and his delight at the speeches this morning, which we were all delighted about, but I would like to at least draw him to the bill before the chamber today, if that would be possible.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** I will uphold your point of order, but I will also point out that just as you stood up Mr Galea said, ‘And it brings me back to the bill we’re here for today.’ So, Mr Galea, as you were.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Acting President. It would not be a parliamentary sitting without my friend Mr McGowan raising a point of order on me.

**Nick McGowan:** On a point of order, Acting President, could I withdraw my point of order?

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** I am not sure that is actually allowable, but Mr Galea, keep on going, please.

**Michael GALEA:** With great appreciation, thank you. Statute law bills are among the many important bills that our Parliament does from time to time put through. It is not perhaps the most exciting bill, but it is one of the very important bills that we do because, as Minister Symes referenced earlier, it is part of what we do as housekeeping and making sure that our laws are current and up to date. Most of the bills that we put through have substantive changes; this is a different format than that. This is making sure that the bills that we already have in place are correct and up to date and that any errors in them can be fixed. They are an important part of the process as well. I note, though they may complain, that members opposite have certainly had no hesitation in using that to their great advantage to speak about many various different issues today.

The last time we debated a bill such as this, the statute law amendment bill of last year, we had some rather interesting contributions as well. It was the first time having a statute law amendment come through following the passing of the late, great Queen Elizabeth. There was, as part of that, the requirement for us to update various terminologies – ‘Her Majesty’ to ‘His Majesty’ of course – and it was also used to reform some rather outdated modes of address. It came to our attention with the bill – it was the first time that I became aware – that the official title of the opposition was actually ‘Her Majesty’s or His Majesty’s most loyal opposition’. Those opposite did protest very much about that change, about being reformed to just ‘the opposition’. I know that others in this place, such as Mrs McArthur, were very upset about us taking out that reference. She wanted us to refer to her as ‘His Majesty’s most loyal subject’. I am not sure if my sartorially deficient friend Mr McGowan disagrees with that as well. Perhaps he may also wish to be referred to as ‘His Majesty’s most loyal subject’; he can fill me in on that on his next point of order. The statute law bill that we debated at that time did address that, and it became a lot more, I think, interesting than those of us on this side expected, because there was such vociferous opposition from those opposite accusing us of republicanism by stealth, which was an extraordinary statement to make. That brings me back to some of the many things that this bill will do.

In the case of the royals, of course the royal family has a strong connection with the city of Echuca, where we find ourselves today, as well. I understand that in 1934 His Royal Highness Prince Henry, the Duke of Gloucester, who was the brother of King George VI, visited Echuca during centenary celebrations, and the mayor greeted him before he left for the local agricultural show in Victoria Park. His visit was brief – apparently he spent 30 minutes in Echuca – so I am happy to say that we have already spent a lot more time in Echuca now than His Royal Highness.

**Evan Mulholland:** On a point of order, Acting President, it was the previous statute bill that mentioned the monarchy and made changes, not this one, so I would ask the member to come back to the question. As much as I would like to see a republic one day, it is not part of this bill.

**Michael GALEA:** On the point of order, Acting President, the purpose of my discussion was to highlight the sorts of things that statute law amendment bills cover, and this is an example of that.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman):** Mr Galea, I think I will just bring you back to this bill. I think that is the safest course of action.

**Michael GALEA:** I will gladly comply with that, Acting President. I was about to get to a good bit, because the Queen herself did visit. It is a shame that we do not get to go through that, but there are of course a number of various changes that this bill will make to various acts, and that will affect people across the state of Victoria. Whether you are in Echuca or whether you are in Eumemmerring or Edithvale, there are various parts of this bill that will make changes.

**Nick McGowan** interjected.

**Michael GALEA:** And even Ringwood. That does not start with an 'E', Mr McGowan, but yes, that will also be affected by the changes in this bill. Amongst the significant changes will be changes to the Building Act 1993, the Docklands Act 1991, the EastLink Project Act 2004, the Forests Act 1958, the Gas Industry Act 2001, the Heritage Act 2017, the Impounding of Livestock Act 1994, the Major Transport Projects Facilitation Act 2009 and the Heavy Vehicle National Law Application Act 2013. As my friend Mr Mulholland referred to, it also makes some changes to the Road Safety Act 1986, and he was very excited to talk about potholes. How excited I am to make a contribution on this point, which is that we have had many, many people in the Rowville area contact me and Mr Tarlamis over the past few months concerning the state of Napoleon Road, which runs along the Rowville–Lysterfield border. Many people have raised issues with us concerning the condition of the road. We have of course listened, and we have raised that with the minister. In fact I made an adjournment about it not in this particular place but in this house just a couple of months ago. How wonderful it is now to see that the government has committed not just to patching up those potholes on this important local road but to a full resurfacing of Napoleon Road, the entire section of the state-managed road –

**Nick McGowan** interjected.

**Michael GALEA:** we got it, Mr McGowan, through advocacy, which is what a lot of MPs do – all the way from Kelletts Road through to Glenfern Road, including a rebuild of the intersection at Lakesfield Drive as well. So, a terrific thing to be able to share – unlike the doom and gloom of Mr Mulholland. Whether you are in the Rowville electorate, whether you are in other parts of the south-east or indeed metropolitan Melbourne or whether you are in regional Victoria, we are getting on and delivering these projects to make sure that our roads are as safe as possible. We can actually do that at the same time as doing future state-shaping projects such as the Suburban Rail Loop as well, which in addition to supporting residents in my constituency of the south-east will also benefit regional constituents. So a university student living in Gippsland will be able to access education at Monash or at Deakin or elsewhere, and in time, as the project continues around the north, that will flow on to other parts of regional Victoria as well.

*Members interjecting.*

**Michael GALEA:** To say that we cannot be doing big projects because we have to focus on one particular issue really just goes to show, unfortunately, the narrowminded way in which you view things, and it explains why the last time you were given the gift of government, Ms Crozier, you did not actually deliver anything at all for the people of Victoria, let alone northern Victoria.

As I did say, there are many factors of this bill, including the Heritage Act 2017, and it would be remiss of me to talk about heritage and not mention the fantastic heritage that we have here in the city of

Echuca: from the old port of Echuca right through to the Hopwood's punt hotel all the way through to our iconic paddle-steamers, which we heard from earlier today. I think some in this place were hoping that our traditional bells would be replaced by the sound of a paddle-steamer. We did not quite get that, but we still nevertheless heard them humming along on the Murray today. There is a rich history in this city, which is great to be a part of and great to experience.

Again, as I say, whichever part of the state you are in has a history, whether it is Echuca or my region of the south-east, where of course I was privileged to take part in the saving of the historic railway house in Beaconsfield just last year, which is a big asset for the community, and that is something that is really exciting to see – that we can protect that heritage whilst at the same time removing that level crossing at Station Street in Beaconsfield, one of I think 76 now that have already been completed across Melbourne, with more underway. As we do that, and as we do these state- and city-shaping projects, it is really important that our heritage, as best as can be, is still protected, and those amendments regarding the heritage act will bear that through as well.

I mentioned paddle-steamers. Another iconic activity on this river behind us here today is the Southern 80. I have spoken to many constituents in my region who love their trip up to Echuca each year whether to participate in or to watch that particular event – a great driver for the local economy here that is taking advantage of this fantastic river and scenery that we have behind us today. I am certainly not personally equipped to partake in that sport – you would not want me to do that – but I am happy to see it as a great part of this local economy.

Whether it is the historical value of the city that we are in now that we can talk about or the various other aspects of this bill, and I am sure future contributions by others will also be fairly wideranging, this is an important bill. It may be relatively procedural compared to some of the things that we deal with, but it is nevertheless an important part of what the Parliament of Victoria does. As I say, as great as it is to be here showcasing the Parliament to Echuca, for me the benefit has been far more in the listening – listening to people, whether it be stallholders here today in Echuca, and we just had a farmers market across the street, right through to, as I said, those young people in Shepparton, who I really do want to thank for sharing their time with me. This is a straightforward bill. It should be supported, and I commend it to the house.

**Renee HEATH** (Eastern Victoria) (14:51): It is often said that within this house we focus on issues within the tram tracks, and never has that been more obvious than today when we have a regional sitting and we have a bill that focuses on typographical errors. I find it, to be honest, quite insulting. I think for people, even those that have come into the gallery today, it is quite upsetting that rather than talking about jobs, rather than talking about the cost-of-living crisis, rather than talking about the fact that one in three children in Victoria cannot read proficiently – and that goes to one in two when you get to areas like this – we are not talking about any of that but we are talking about whether we should have a semicolon or a comma. I think that is absolutely ridiculous.

I have seen this in my own area, particularly with the closure of the native timber industry, that locals have been crying out, saying, 'Hang on, we aren't a little city. We are a regional area with our own set of issues. They are things that people within Spring Street might not understand, and can you come and actually listen to us?' That is something that has been completely ignored.

However, I will talk about this bill. The purpose of this bill is to amend minor errors in a number of acts – typographical errors, grammatical errors – and to just basically tidy things up. There are quite a few acts that are going to be amended, but there are two that I would like to focus on particularly, the Forests Act 1958 and the Gas Industry Act 2001. With acts like that you would think when coming to a country area you would be talking about substance within the forestry industry – an industry that has created thousands of jobs within regional Victoria, an industry that has put billions of dollars into Victoria, and that has been shut down against the consultation of locals. You might have consulted with some people. You have probably consulted with activists for the yellow-bellied glider, but you have not consulted –



**Jaelyn Symes:** What's the yellow-bellied glider? You're making up animals.

**Renee HEATH:** no, I am not – with people who have had their lives and their towns ripped apart because of decisions made by this government.

With the gas act, we read in the newspaper today that gas is becoming more relevant to Victorians than ever. Albanese has spoken about how he would like to see more industry, he would like to reboot manufacturing. This is what Mr Heffernan from the gas industry said:

Despite the rhetoric slamming gas, its importance to Australia is increasing.

We are not talking about that aspect though, are we, within the gas act. We are talking about grammatical errors. I think it is absolutely ridiculous.

**Jaelyn Symes** interjected.

**Renee HEATH:** I will pick up on that interjection. I think that it is such an insult that you cannot even listen to a country member – and I know you are one, but stuck in the city – because here I am talking about things that actually matter to country people, and I think it is worth saying.

Like I said, I have seen the closure of the native timber industry, we have seen with the power industry the local industries being shut down – the gas industry. It is so funny that even though we stand on top of resources that are enough to power the nation we are still in the midst of an energy crisis, but we are not looking at those aspects of the bill.

Locals have felt – and I have spoken to many within my region, which is the Eastern Victoria Region – that members of this government have somehow viewed country constituents' opinions as less, their quality of life as less important and their ability to make a living, to educate their children and to have good, sustainable jobs as less worthy of being fought for. Just because there are less people in the country does not mean that they are less worthy of being fought for – absolutely not. Some have expressed that while their local MPs have fought for them, in the bigger picture when it comes to the government it has been like they are out of sight and out of mind, and I would tend to agree with them. Like I said, never before has it been more obvious than now, when we are in Echuca and we just use this time to talk about a perfunctory bill that is completely of no consequence. It is like the government is happy to come, maybe get a couple of photos up here and spend time just tidying up an act that they could not be bothered doing while they were in Parliament in Melbourne. What we are discussing today is –

**Jaelyn Symes** interjected.

**Renee HEATH:** Exactly. I will pick up on that interjection. It is purely procedural work; it is of no importance. What this government is basically doing is running a spellcheck over legislation –

**Jaelyn Symes:** Which is important.

**Renee HEATH:** Yes, it is important, but it is running a spellcheck over legislation. Here we are debating things of little or no consequence. This just proves that it is a city-centric government that has finally come to the country, and when it does, this is the quality of the debate. They do not choose a bill that delivers cost-of-living relief, they do not choose a bill that talks about local industry –

*Members interjecting.*

**Renee HEATH:** We have not spoken about it. We have not spoken about a bill that talks about jobs. They have not spoken about a bill that is going to address the difference in children's outcomes between the city and the country.

Of course I will commend this bill to the house because it is about typographical errors. It would be pretty stupid to even consider going against that, so I support the bill. I support running a spellcheck over acts. What I do not support is a government that chooses to come here and not listen to people,

not talk about the things that actually matter in their lives but just get an administrative little thing out of the way. I think it is quite insulting. Thank you so much for listening to me. I commend the bill to the house.

**David LIMBRICK** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:59): I am going to disagree with both the government and the opposition on this bill. This bill is important. I am very happy to be in Echuca and experience the beautiful town and talk to lots of the people, who are very friendly. They are going to be able to witness something that is very unusual by this bill being put forward and debated in that the bill is effectively government – and not just this government but government in general – admitting that they have made mistakes and trying to fix them, which is a very unusual thing. I think this is a rare opportunity, so I am quite enthusiastic about this bill. There was discussion earlier by Mr Galea about sartorial deficiencies, and I hope I am not sartorially deficient. But also in the last statute law bill that was brought up – I did have an amendment; I do not have amendments this time – we identified that one of the acts we were changing was the Unlawful Assemblies and Processions Act 1958, which to my shock and my team’s shock actually excused murder in certain circumstances. This time we are not amending that, but we are amending some other acts.

Let us have a look at some of the mistakes. I do not claim that these are mistakes of this government; they are mistakes of government in general. As was pointed out by the Attorney-General in an interjection just before, some of these acts that we are amending were actually put through by different governments.

The Building Act 1993 – let us look at a mistake that happened with building cladding. We all know about the flammable cladding problem, but what lots of people do not realise or do not think about much is that the whole flammable cladding disaster was essentially caused by government regulations on heating efficiency in the first place. They said, ‘Well, you have to have X, Y and Z level of efficiency.’ Of course people jumped in to try and produce products which helped meet that efficiency and ticked the box of the government regulation, and it just so happened that they happened to be flammable and very dangerous. This was a problem caused by government itself.

I am very happy to be amending the Docklands Act 1991 today. In fact if you read today’s *Age* newspaper, you will see an article in there about the Docklands and about my idea of how to do something about Docklands. I am proposing that we set Docklands aside as a special economic zone, and what that means is that state government taxes in the area would be abolished for a period of 10 years to allow economic growth. If there are any people in Echuca who want to advocate for this area to become a special economic zone, I would very enthusiastically support that as well. I think it would be a very great boost to the local economy.

We are also amending the Heritage Act 2017. In the Heritage Act I think what we are actually amending here – I will check my notes – is a spelling error. I know that I have at least one staff member who would like to repeal the Heritage Act completely, but I will note that in the last term of Parliament the government made a very big mistake and subsequently did not actually go through with it. They tried to heritage list the Eastern Freeway, if you recall. At the time, I spoke about my love for the Eastern Freeway and how beautiful it is, but heritage listing it is probably a step too far.

Similarly, the Victorian Energy Efficiency Target Act 2007 – nearly everything about this endeavour was a mistake. Think about what happened recently with the dodgy fridges that were apparently not suitable for shops or with the power boards many years ago that were distributed to households that were supposedly going to save power – no doubt the carbon emissions saved by those power boards that never actually happened were counted. I also heard a story about these balloons that you could stick in old chimneys that stopped drafts. Of course the process of the government giving away these products destroyed the market for those products and anyone selling those products went out of business, but that is a whole other thing.

I definitely will not be opposing this bill. As others have said, it does perform changes which are necessary to ensure that there are not errors in our acts in the state of Victoria. I would encourage people, especially the government, to find more mistakes that they have made and fix them, like what we are doing with this statute bill today.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read second time.**

*Third reading*

**Jaelyn SYMES** (Northern Victoria – Attorney-General, Minister for Emergency Services) (15:04):  
I move, by leave:

That the bill be now read a third time.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read third time.**

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

*Motions*

**Floods**

**Debate resumed on motion of Jaelyn Symes:**

That this house acknowledges the October 2022 flood event and the devastating impact it had on communities in Victoria.

**David ETTERS HANK** (Western Metropolitan) (15:05): The torrential rainfall that hit Victoria in October 2022 led to one of the most devastating and prolonged natural disasters seen in this state. We watched on as already brimming rivers and saturated catchments failed to contain the unprecedented volumes of rain, bursting their banks and inundating communities across the state. The damage was extensive, impacting 63 of Victoria's 79 municipalities and affecting thousands of Victorian families, businesses, producers and community organisations. Approximately 25 per cent of the north-central region was inundated. All river systems within the region experienced major flooding, with the Campaspe River experiencing its highest flood on record.

We know that many of our rural and regional communities were still reeling from recent flood events as well as bushfires and of course the pandemic. I want to acknowledge the impact of the floods on those regional communities in northern and central Victoria; the residents whose homes were flooded, too many of whom still wait for those homes to be rebuilt; the farmers who saw crops destroyed and livestock and other resources lost or ruined; the traditional owners who were excluded from their country and saw their cultural heritages damaged. I want to acknowledge that the trauma and loss experienced within these communities still endure for so many people.

As the deputy chair of the Environment and Planning Committee I heard many, many heart-wrenching accounts from community members as part of the inquiry into the 2022 flood event in Victoria. But we also heard extraordinary stories of bravery, of generosity, of dedication and of resilience. There were many examples, but I would like to highlight a local one. During the hearings held here in August we heard about the work undertaken by the Campaspe Shire Council staff during the floods, 40 per cent of whom were directly impacted by that flood. I am going to slightly paraphrase the transcript from that day of hearings, but it goes:

Those who could showed up every day to support the community, many juggling multiple roles and working for days on end fatigued and without adequate breaks. During the event, which lasted many weeks, our staff

performed a myriad of roles ... setting up, maintaining and monitoring the pumps across the shire, which were everywhere –

24 hours a day –

... clearing drains, closing roads and ... maintaining road access where possible ...

We forget about animals during floods, but council staff supported animal management. Council staff established and maintained 24-hour relief centres for 35 days, rotating staff from across the organisation into those roles. And again I paraphrase:

We managed the equivalent of 30 years of waste in 60 days in our waste facilities. We sandbagged our critical assets. We began the secondary impact assessments. We started damage assessments of all the critical infrastructure ... there were about 33 bridges that I remember hearing of at one stage. We responded to community requests across the municipality from very anxious and distraught residents as well. They needed that support and information.

Those council staff got no break – likewise so many of our first responders and community members, who responded so gallantly to the events that were unfolding around them. The committee heard many similar accounts from across the state of community members pulling together, working day and night, helping each other and keeping one another safe. It was truly humbling.

But the committee also heard many accounts of the inadequacies of the state's emergency response – of the confusion, of poor communications, of alerts that were supposed to warn residents of incoming floodwater that came either too late or not at all or in some cases were simply wrong. In my own region there is the township of Maribyrnong, and on the night of the floods people there went to bed having received a text saying that the floodwaters were receding – only to awaken at 3 am with the water lapping at their doors. The text they had received was simply wrong, and as a result residents were literally forced to flee and some 600 households in the Maribyrnong township were flooded – as were multiple retirement units at the Rivervue retirement village, which was not even on the emergency management plan.

The committee has spent more than a year examining these failures and grappling with what actions need to be taken to better prepare for and mitigate against future flood events. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the many community members, expert witnesses and of course the secretariat that serviced the committee so it could pull together the diverse range of issues and hopefully come back with a meaningful response to address some of these issues. But as we know, these events will continue to be experienced.

While there are immediate and short-term actions to be considered, and these will be addressed in the final report of the committee into the 2022 flood event in Victoria, which will be completed in the coming months, there are long-term issues to be reckoned with as well. We know that these types of events can no longer be realistically categorised as 'once in a decade' or 'once in a century' or 'once in a millennium'. With the inevitable acceleration of climate change, these events will be more frequent and more devastating. So how do we prepare for the inevitable consequences of climate change, the full impacts of which will be measured not in months or even years but in decades?

On the one hand we can expect longer periods of drought. On this, the driest continent in the world, water will be an increasingly scarce resource. How do we prepare for this? We need much more water storage if we are to survive extended harsh periods of drought, and theoretically we could always build more dams. But of course there is an inherent tension in this proposal because we know that extended and more intense flood events will follow those droughts, leading to the rivers and catchments overflowing and potentially inundating more communities. We also need to consider the imminent rise in sea levels and the impact that will have on housing and infrastructure, on food production, on health and on basic sanitation. For example, it would only take a very slight rise in sea levels to inundate both major Melbourne sewage plants, rendering them useless.

These are challenges that the Environment and Planning Committee will consider in its inquiry into climate resilience and adaptation that commences immediately after this flood inquiry is completed. We will examine the risks that climate change poses to our state's built environment and infrastructure and the impact these risks will have on all Victorians. We will be looking at our preparedness to deal with these impacts, the barriers to upgrading infrastructure to become more resilient to the impacts and our readiness for future climate disaster events.

Climate change is no longer a calamity that will take place in the distant future – something for future generations to deal with. It is happening right now, and it is the biggest threat we have ever faced on this planet. The scale of the challenge can be overwhelming, but it is incumbent upon government to take action, to heed the lessons learned from the events such as the 2022 floods and to find ways to better prepare for and mitigate against the severity of future natural disasters.

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (15:14): It is now over 18 months since the major flood event that saw local communities devastated by flooding. As a member of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee, I have been part of the inquiry that is looking into Victoria's preparedness for and response to the floods. The committee received 880 submissions, and we held public hearings in Rochester, Echuca, Seymour and Mooroopna as well as Melbourne, but we know that the impacts of these floods were felt right across the state, across 63 local government areas. There were many different agencies involved in the flood response, and at the time many people were asking, 'Who's in charge?' With a flood of this scale, resources were stretched to the limit and local emergency services and residents did what they could to respond.

Following any major disaster of this scale it is important to reflect on what happened and what can be done better. There has been a lot of rebuilding, but subsequent flooding at Christmas and in January has brought many issues to the surface yet again. Natural disasters are becoming more frequent and intense, and Victoria needs to be better prepared, particularly in regional areas that face the brunt of floods and bushfires. But 18 months on, many regional councils are still wound up in red tape, draining staff resources in completing hundreds of pages of paperwork and trying to prove flood damage. The Gannawarra council lodged certified claims for \$8.6 million with the state government in October 2023 and appointed contractors in December, but so far \$1.6 million has been approved and they are still waiting on the state government to approve the remaining \$7 million to repair flood-damaged roads. In Buloke shire there is close to \$30 million in damage claims for roads, bridges and culverts to repair them, and to date only one project has been approved, for \$300,000. In Loddon so far \$4.6 million of works have been completed, and the council is still waiting on \$23 million of claims relating to roads and culvert damage. None have been approved. The state government needs to approve these projects so that local councils can get the work done.

The Lake Eppalock hydrological study is open for public feedback after local residents rallied long and hard for action, and the flood study in Campaspe has recently commenced. In Huntly local residents are calling for action to clear creeks and rebuild levee banks, and progress is being hampered by the many different local authorities that oversee our waterways. In Carisbrook local residents are seeking support from the Central Goldfields shire for an independent review to examine the effectiveness of local infrastructure put in place to reduce flooding. The Rochester Community House continues to work hard to support the local community to help them rebuild and recover. After subsequent flooding local farmers are reaching out for assistance, yet short-term contracts make it difficult to employ and retain mental health workers and others involved in flood recovery support, leading to even longer wait times and requests for assistance. The federal inquiry into insurance is being held in Rochester today, and as I speak with caravan park owners and residents in flood-prone areas it is clear that insurance is a major issue. Premiums continue to skyrocket.

In Mooroopna this week I spoke with a young lady who said many of her friends have still been couch-surfing since the October floods. Their rentals were damaged, forcing them out, and there is no guarantee that they will actually be able to return home. As we undertake this inquiry into the floods,

it is important to recognise that the government alone cannot respond to natural disasters, and neither can regional communities. It takes a combined effort working together to rebuild and recover.

This year the Premier signed a contract for the Suburban Rail Loop, a project that will cost Victorian taxpayers up to \$200 billion, yet 18 months on from the floods residents in Rochester are still living in sheds and caravans. It is time Victoria looks to the example of states like Queensland and builds back better to ensure that we are better prepared for disasters in future. I want to see these priorities reflected in the coming state budget.

**Harriet SHING** (Eastern Victoria – Minister for Housing, Minister for Water, Minister for Equality) (15:20): The motion we are debating here today is fitting, as a further conversation continues almost every day in so many parts of the state around where to from here, and it seems simultaneously just like yesterday and yet generations ago that flood was contemplated by and faced by communities in this part of the world. The devastation, to my mind, is something that is evidenced when the rain falls even in only puddles right through to surging torrents that remove all trace of the connections and the infrastructure that people rely upon every day across rural and regional Victoria but also down very close to the centre of Melbourne, and we know that living on and across flood plains, living in and around catchments and riverine waterway environments there is risk associated with increased rainfall, with rising water levels and with population growth along with the volatility that we see increasingly in weather patterns in recent years which has, and I think not unreasonably, been attributed to climate change amongst other things.

The October floods in 2022 peaked at 94.8 metres above sea level. That is the highest on record since records began back in 1867. We know that communities in this part of the world in particular are well accustomed to the impact of flood, and yet it is the extent of it which tested the resolve and indeed the capacity of communities to make and keep each other safe and indeed, in the days and weeks and months that followed, to face the devastation and to begin to rebuild.

When we think about this part of the world and the Campaspe and the Murray and the Goulburn wending its way up to Barmah, we know that it is this meeting point of rivers which creates the risk, which is also at the heart of much of this region's productivity. Some of the wonderful, rich soils and the food production capability in this part of the world is due in large part to the way in which soil is moved and deposited, the way in which water comes and lays across the landscape in a seasonal setting. However, when the rain falls and it does not stop, when, as we heard from Tara today, all but eight homes in Rochester are inundated, we know that there is an increasing need for communities and for governments of all levels to respond to the challenges that lie at the heart of flood response and recovery, that lie at the heart of the provision of relief, but also that it is necessary to draw upon all of the resilience and the resolve, the passion, the dedication and the enthusiasm for community members to volunteer their time and to help people in their hour of greatest need even when their own circumstances indicate the probability of enormous loss for them and for their families.

What I want to do today with the time available to me is to begin by thanking, recognising and extending my respect to the thousands of people who were at the heart of the relief, rescue and recovery response from the State Control Centre, which we see and continue to see improve because of the capacity for interoperability at all levels of government to engage with everyone from Life Saving Victoria to the Department of Defence, the work for the SES and for Emergency Recovery Victoria and what we are doing with Parks Victoria. The work of local businesses and enterprises and everyone from our paramedics to our police and the work that we see tirelessly from our CFA volunteers and brigades from Fire Rescue Victoria has been second to none. We know, for example, that in my part of the world there was a six-day deployment from Gippsland up to Echuca to assist with the flood recovery and with rescues. We also know that swiftwater rescues were an incredibly important part of making sure that the death toll was not higher than it ended up being.

We continue to grieve for the loss of life, the loss of livestock, of property, of incomes and of a sense of community when roads, houses and infrastructure were swept away or otherwise disappeared from

view under water. We know that across our waterways and our riverine systems, with that huge volume of water, it was in the days and weeks after that additional challenges arose and needed to be managed and addressed. From mosquitoes through to hypoxic black water, from large-scale issues around opening up access to towns that had been cut off, it was necessary to make sure the problems were identified but, in equal measure, solutions were developed and were able to be implemented. The three successive La Niñas experienced in Victoria have created a volatility the likes of which few of us can remember or recall having been attendant in the state as part of mean temperatures and rainfall. This has created a further measure of uncertainty around the way in which we understand and forecast modelling and response.

As other speakers have indicated today, this is not confined to the parts of the flood plain up here in northern Victoria. Down to the Maribyrnong, across three local government areas there, across 62 local government areas around the state, the disaster and flood recovery effort was something that needed to begin immediately and be sustained over a lengthy period of time. There were people who were involved in the response who I do want to put on the record today as having been instrumental in not just the immediate response – not just the physical safety of people in and around flood-affected areas – but the ongoing need to provide support following anguish and in the face of deep trauma.

The community of Rochester is one such example of the repeated exposure to the devastation of flood. When we think about 2011 and we think about what occurred then, when we think about the floods in the 1980s and when we think about the challenges associated with the millennium drought, it is this volatility that has characterised the challenges faced by communities such as Rochester. It is necessary then in that regard to acknowledge and to single out those things which do work in the face of such tragedy and uncertainty – from organisations and groups like the neighbourhood house, like the people who work for and with Campaspe Shire Council, the people who have been part of the efforts in online and social media, the exchange of information and sharing of support, right through to the partnerships within our water authorities and catchment management authorities which have been so central to the way in which information has been able to be gathered and shared and to where we go from here with modelling, flood studies, flood preparedness, early warning systems and indeed future opportunities to understand and to mitigate risk.

We saw earlier this year flooding occur again. I remember that in 2022 I stopped at an SES unit to watch the Melbourne Cup with a group of volunteers – volunteers who had been on the job for days and days and days. On Valentine's Day many parts of the state were again under water, were again affected by storms. Storms and floods are natural disasters. They are phenomena that we are not unaccustomed to. It is the magnitude, however, of these events which tests our resolve, particularly as our populations grow, as people move to parts of the state where again the natural beauty is in and of itself an attraction and where history is something which draws us to rural and regional Victoria. But from areas like Echuca, which filled and distributed 195,000 sandbags, to Mooroopna, Mildura, Kerang, Tatura, Rochester, Swan Hill, Maribyrnong, Kinglake, Molesworth, Seymour, Shepparton and Benalla – the list goes on – each of these stories and communities deserves its own place in the history of what we have done, what we have done well, what we still need to move to improve and how we can better understand the importance of interoperability, whether that is our frontline responders, whether that is partnerships with council or whether that is working with industry within the water sector in particular: people who shored up water treatment plants so that, again, access to water could be preserved. Access to drinking water, access to functional septic systems, was able to continue while people were in the throes of absolute disarray and uncertainty because of the impact of rising floodwaters.

When we look to where we go from here, it is I think with a mixture of different approaches and, indeed, emotions. On the one hand fatigue – communities are exhausted. We have seen the impact of the constant, unwavering pressure upon groups, individuals and organisations who have sought to maintain a measure of routine, of stability, of certainty, as communities rebuild. But we also know, and I think the record will show this through the House of Representatives' committee work in

Rochester today, that ongoing uncertainty around the question of insurance – around premiums, around various parts of the sector, around prudential and actuarial risk assessment. In plain terms, how people can afford to insure their properties is another source of anguish. We are in a position as all levels of government to do something about these matters, and indeed it is incumbent upon us that we do. We also need to understand the volatility of the situation in which we live, whereby water occurs all too frequently in volumes too great or too small to meet demand or indeed to enable people to live safely and to live well.

I want to thank people who gave their time, their effort and their energy, even as their own homes were inundated, for everything they did to provide support to people in their hours of greatest need – those people from CFA brigades who went to caravan parks to extricate people who themselves had been caught in the floods in 2011 and were so paralysed by grief and anguish that they could not move. I want to thank the people who worked to make sure that children, that the elderly and that those people whether caught in drains or caught on rooftops were able to be secured and moved to somewhere safe and somewhere dry; the people who worked at Elmore to make sure that people moved to that particular facility could have temporary accommodation that met their needs and that provided a measure of support. I want to thank the people at the SEC, across government and indeed the people who continue to work today to make sure that the needs and the aspirations of communities are well understood.

We also need to take stock of the many achievements that rural and regional communities and indeed those down in the Maribyrnong area have displayed and continue to display. This is not simply a question of government intervening to make sure that risk is mitigated and removed insofar as it is also an opportunity for everybody to partner in celebrating the strength and the determination of rural and regional communities to bind together to make sure that where one person is safe, all people are safe.

There are many people who have been singled out on the public record today. There are too many to name with the time that we have available in one regional setting. What I do, however, want to underscore is the united sentiment of this Parliament, and I would hope all levels of government – particularly as we can see with the Campaspe Shire Council and with others across the many, many LGAs affected by the floods – a singular desire to continue to learn and to continue to improve. To allocate funding – billions of dollars of funding – is one thing. To make sure that the support is there in order to continue to support communities against the backdrop of flooding is another entirely. We are determined to continue this work.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL** (Northern Victoria) (15:35): I rise today to speak on Minister Shing's motion 371. This motion is to acknowledge the 2022 flood event that devastated our Victorian communities, predominantly here in my seat of Northern Victoria Region. Being a resident of Invergordon I was well aware of the happenings of the flood crisis as it occurred here in the north, although I was one of the lucky ones – my home was not flooded, my children could still access their school and my husband could still make it to work and farm the dairy farm on which we live. It was wet and muddy, but we were blessed. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for the many in our extended neighbouring communities.

Although I was not personally impacted by the 2022 flood event at home, I was impacted through association. Whilst on the road home from Mildura I was inundated with desperate calls from residents right here in Echuca – residents who were trying to access sandbags, sandbags that were not available. This was all prior to my election to Parliament. Luckily I was able to contact Mr Tim Quilty, who then contacted our Minister for Emergency Services Ms Symes. This saw a prompt reaction from the government, and sandbags were restocked and available to local residents.

During my travels to and from Mildura at the time I witnessed and experienced the many roadblocks, detours and personnel involved as the floods ravaged the land. It was scary. To imagine what this would have been like through my own home is something I do not want to dedicate my time to. Instead



I have listened firsthand to all of our locals who made submissions to the 2022 flood inquiry. I have learned vast amounts from what these families and individuals have experienced – homelessness, business losses, deaths, environmental damage, mental anguish and trauma and an incredibly long road to recovery and rebuilding. I have also been inspired by the tenacity and resilience that my fellow northern Victorians have shown. This is what I love about my community. We are tough, proud and work together when we need to. We are there for each other. We find what we can do to help make that positive impact, and we get the job done.

In October 2022 the heavens opened up and tried to drown us out. We had close to a month's worth of rain in two days. The floods took their toll, but we are rebuilding together. We have learned lessons and made changes, knowing this will happen again. Some have left the area indefinitely, but the majority of northern Victorians have chosen to stay and rebuild. Why? Because this is our home, where our hearts are. This is our history and our future, and we will continue to treasure this land that occasionally has us on the ropes but delivers much more happiness in the long run.

**Joe McCracken** (Western Victoria) (15:38): I too rise to speak on this motion, knowing that many others have acknowledged the extreme impact that it has had right across the state, particularly northern Victoria. That has also come out in the flood inquiry report that was tabled today, and I acknowledge all the members of that committee and also those that gave evidence to that inquiry. It was an incredibly important inquiry, and the evidence that was given was given in good faith in the hope that there would be action in the future that will prevent any future crisis happening in this particular way.

Some of those that gave evidence to that inquiry were from my electorate of Western Victoria, and specifically they spoke about the flooding that occurred in October 2022 at Carisbrook, which is only a small way out of Maryborough in my electorate. I would firstly like to acknowledge two people in particular, Wayne McKail and Greg Corcoran, but there are a number of community leaders that also made a significant contribution regarding the Carisbrook area and advocated in order to make sure that the facts around the flood levee in Carisbrook are widely known so that we can have a safe levee that protects the community, property and livestock.

I guess the main issue that I would like to talk about is the flood levee that is in Carisbrook, particularly the fact that it probably does have an issue with its design. Essentially, if locals had had input – full and proper input – into the design of the flood levee, we probably would not have had some of the challenges that resulted as part of the October 2022 floods. Locals feel as though they have not been fully consulted about various aspects of the design and a number of various treatments that have been put in place that are probably ineffective. I have met the locals – I have been out and had a look and done a tour of the flood levee – and I tend to agree there are probably a lot of changes that could be made. Locals came together and came up with a list of 10 suggestions that will help, and I would like to read them out (a) to put them on the record and (b) to make sure that everyone is fully aware of them.

Firstly, the number 1 recommendation is larger culverts under Bucknall Street. Clearing creeks to allow better water flow – currently they are clogged up with debris and tree branches and all those sorts of things. Establish culverts under Wills Street. Number 4: overland water junction – the area needs to be improved. In the October 2022 floods the levee actually broke, which caused significant damage. Culverts under the Pyrenees Highway – the current culverts there are not particularly helpful. The suggestion is to put in up to 12 larger culverts, which would help water get away a lot quicker. Currently it gets banked up and it can even overflow. The raising of the levee higher than the Pyrenees Highway is a significant point. Number 7: the raising of Marion Street has created damming of water near housing, and there are three houses in particular that are being impacted. The damming of the water has an impact on the health and livelihoods of the people around there and can cause quite big issues; this needs to be addressed. The Belfast Road pipe under the levee – the community did not approve this, they were not consulted, and it really does not make a lot of sense. Number 9: the larger culverts under Landrigan Road, particularly at Belfast and Williams Road, need to be reconsidered.

And number 10: redesigning the levee and culverts, particularly as water has flowed down in such a way that it is directed towards the cemetery and has flooded it even when the rain events have not been as significant as the events we saw in October 2022 – it is not really an appropriate way of handling things.

Additionally, the group of residents want to have an independent inquiry conducted by a suitably qualified professional that examines the levee in Carisbrook so that we can get a professional independent report done which will give an indication of its suitability for the area. This would be a fairly wideranging review looking at a number of aspects of the levee, taking into account a lot of the evidence that was heard in the inquiry that was tabled today but also having a more independent look from an expert, which might give some advice on design features and so forth. My colleague Mrs Broad also mentioned that before.

I do really want to acknowledge the locals that have suffered loss, whether that be loss in terms of property, income, livestock, homes or livelihoods. Loss is very difficult to quantify sometimes, because we also have difficulty in quantifying the loss of our health, particularly mental health, and quantifying stress is a very difficult thing to do. So I want to put that on the record: we acknowledge all those difficulties that many locals faced and to some extent still continue to face. I guess this whole process has outlined the importance of having infrastructure that is able to handle one-in-50-year, one-in-100-year and one-in-1000-year flooding situations and an identification system that can figure that out, so we can make sure that we do have infrastructure in place that actually does deal with this in a way that protects locals and also those who may not be familiar with the area so that they are not put in harm's way.

Lastly, I would also really like to acknowledge first responders in this. It is particularly important that the SES and the volunteers of the SES are acknowledged for the hours and hours and hours of work that go into protecting locals in harm's way. We are not just talking an 8-hour shift, we are talking days upon days upon days of work, sometimes with very little break, very little sleep, in conditions that many of us might even struggle to work in. I really do want to value and acknowledge the fact that we have got some excellent, wonderful volunteers that have done some brilliant work in protecting people, communities and families and getting them out of harm's way.

We have acknowledged that this was a significant event; we also acknowledge that an interim report has come out today with some findings. I look forward to reading through that, and when the final report comes out later on, I look forward to the government's response. Hopefully we will see a response that encourages and gives hope to a lot of the communities, particularly the community of Carisbrook in my electorate, that a lot of these flooding events arguably could have been prevented or could have had the extent of damage lessened. Hopefully we will see those recommendations taken on board so that this sort of thing does not happen again.

**Tom McIntOSH** (Eastern Victoria) (15:46): I am glad to be here for this motion that acknowledges the devastation and impacts of the floods in October 2022, and I think it is fitting that we are having a regional sitting, as I mentioned earlier in my members statement. I want to start off by acknowledging the traditional owners, the Yorta Yorta. It was great to hear from Uncle Rick both last night and this morning. I think the President was absolutely spot on when he talked about how every time, whether it is a smoking ceremony or a welcome to country, we learn something. Often I think about connection to land, and particularly here we are today talking about floods. Growing up on the farm, I can think back to the contours of land where water would sit and where we would have flooding and boggy patches, and I would bog the ute repetitively, year after year in the same place, and not learn from my mistakes. I think that that connection to land is important, and it is important to acknowledge that and to think about that. So thank you, Uncle Rick.

Natural disasters are a terrible thing, and as Mrs Broad pointed out, they are becoming more frequent and more severe in their devastation. One of my earliest memories is of the CFA trucks coming up the driveway, with local volunteers coming to put a fire out on our farm. I know that all of us are very

thankful to all volunteers that assist us, whether it be the CFA or SES, in disasters and bushfires and floods and whatever it may be. Hearing Tara speak this morning – and a couple of people have touched on it so far – made me think about the initial trauma but also the prolonged disruption to people's lives, whether it be education, accommodation, where people are living, what it means from a family perspective with families moving around and with houses being uninhabitable but also what it means for sports groups and for community groups, because we know that community is so important, particularly in the regions, where there can be more distance between people, and those bonds of community groups are particularly important.

It is in these times that we see our volunteers – and it does not matter where people are from, whether it is locals, farmers, townies, whatever – coming together, whether it is across regions or indeed whether it is across state borders. We know that we had people assisting from all across Australia and bringing in personnel, watercraft, skills and experience to help with the disaster and assist each other. In the region I represent, Eastern Victoria, obviously we have had significant disasters in the last five years with the fires in 2019–20; the floods; very recently the Buchan cave floods and the deaths occurring there, tragically; and Mirboo North with the winds that flattened the town and surrounding towns and left a terrible trail of destruction for which work is still ongoing.

I did want to pick up a few things from those opposite. I am going to talk about what occurred during the event, the clean-up of the event and the investment that we are making, but I do think it is worth noting that we are talking about natural disasters. As I have said, it is noted that they are getting more severe and more frequent, and those opposite do not seem to want to talk about a plan to deal with the driving causes. To put it quite simply, we need to acknowledge and accept that as more carbon enters the atmosphere and it warms up, we get more severe weather impact outcomes. If there is more moisture in the atmosphere and we have rains, mini tornadoes or prolonged droughts, we get worse and worse outcomes.

I have spoken in the Parliament many times about how this impacts all Victorians, whether it is through storms or whether it is through prices at supermarkets for food and groceries, because the more drought years we have, the less sustainable our farms are and the more prices have to go up. I wanted to talk about this in the previous debate, but I did not get an opportunity to. There was talk about amendments to acts around emission reductions from 2007, legislation that was set up and enacted –

*Members interjecting.*

**Tom McINTOSH:** I am hearing questions about whether it is relevant. Yes, it is absolutely relevant. It is relevant to our communities, which do not want to see worse and worse disasters occurring to their homes, to their farmlands, to their natural places, so this conversation is absolutely relevant. As I was saying before, whether it is hitting people in the hip pocket around supermarket prices for food and whatnot, whether it is insurance bills, every time an insurance bill comes to the letterbox and it is higher, that is a cost of living that is impacting families. And your side's inaction for 20-plus years on climate change –

*Members interjecting.*

**Tom McINTOSH:** Federally. I think everyone here will remember Scott Morrison sitting in Parliament with a lump of coal. I will slowly move through things because I know that you find it all quite amusing. These have real cost-of-living and quality-of-life implications for people right here, right now. There is a cost. Those opposite like to talk about how taxpayers money is not free. Quite rightly – and I spoke in my members statement this morning about this – people in the city respect and value regional Victorians for what regional Victorians contribute, whether it is through food, manufacturing or a variety of things, or ensuring that we have access to our natural spaces so that people from the city can come out and enjoy those. I think Victorians are happy to come together, whether it is through volunteering or through our tax system to pick up the bill to fix the issue of devastations as they come. But if we just run blindly and do not acknowledge the fact that this issue is

going to get worse and worse, we are going to get more frequent disasters and the bill is going to get bigger and bigger, to me it is like running headfirst into a brick wall. I just do not understand it.

Those opposite are saying that they have not been in government; I think in politics broadly, whether it is in Victoria or federally in this country, the coalition at basically every step have tried to stop action on climate, and they are doing it right now with nuclear. First, they wanted small modular nuclear reactors; now they want large nuclear. I do not want to go far into that, we will leave it there, but it is just another example of them being unwilling or unable to deal with the science and the reality. I raise this because in the last bill in here – and you talk about being sensitive to issues – the opposition were firing off at us about gas and the resources under our feet. They would rather frack farmland and get resources out, not worrying about water tables, not worrying about farmers, and –

**Melina Bath:** On a point of order, Acting President, could you please bring the member back to the actual motion, which is on the 2022 floods?

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger):** I think it might be easier if I just ask the member to come back to the bill.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Mrs Broad and Mr McCracken were both talking about frequency of events, severity of events, and you laugh. You sit there laughing, but it is real. If you do not think it is real, why did you say it? You said –

**Melina Bath** interjected.

**Sonja Terpstra:** On a point of order, Acting President, it would really be appreciated if Mr McIntosh could continue his contribution without continual interruption.

**Tom McINTOSH:** If you are talking about future events and investment in ensuring that they do not occur again, then we must do both mitigation and adaptation. I think we agree on adaptation. Let us ensure that water levels do not rise, that people's houses do not flood and community assets do not flood. I think where we are not in agreement is when your members are standing here saying that we have resources under our feet that should be tapped. I will not go into what it does for local water tables, the environment, farmland and all that sort of stuff, but the extraction of those resources and the emissions that causes and what that does for future disasters absolutely has to be acknowledged.

This event, as has been touched on, severely impacted more than a thousand properties, and 2000 people have accessed emergency and temporary accommodation since the floods began. There were lives lost, and that has been acknowledged. The Parliament passes on its condolences to the families of the deceased today. Like others, I also acknowledge and thank Victoria Police, the SES, the CFA, Life Saving Victoria and ESTA, which is now Triple Zero Victoria, for the nearly a thousand water rescues that they performed. It has been mentioned a number of times just how big this disaster was, with recovery funding arrangements being activated for 63 local government areas.

There has been substantial financial support provided. There was \$466 million for business and community sport flood recovery grants programs, and that was supporting our local businesses and not-for-profit and community organisations; \$245 million for primary producer support through flood recovery grants, concessional loans and transport support programs; \$71.6 million in financial support through business and not-for-profit concessional loan programs; and \$54 million for flood recovery for small business relief. There was \$44.7 million for a range of business recovery support, and \$1.8 million for tourism and events to flood-impacted communities.

Just touching on that tourism side of things, one of the reasons why I am really happy that we are here – and we had the market set up at lunch, with all of us buying local products – is that it is important to get that tourist economy happening again. Sometimes people are hearing about these events and how terrible they are – which they are, and Minister Shing spoke earlier about ensuring that local water bodies are safe and not full of sewerage and whatever else so it is safe for people to come back in and be in the area – but once that has occurred, it is really important to get people in and spending money

in the local economy. I think that it is important for this government to be focused on supporting local regional economies over times of natural disasters. On the clean-up, there was \$150 million for the state coordinated clean-up activities and \$40 million for a gate fee rebate for flood waste.

Financial and legal assistance is something that I am quite passionate about. I worked for the Financial and Consumer Rights Council, helping people in financial hardship. Traditionally that has involved helping people who are in hardship for a variety of reasons with their essential services – telcos, mortgages, those sorts of things – and making sure that companies are treating them well. Disaster relief is a bigger and bigger area where we have dedicated financial counsellors, both in Victoria and Australia, because there are so many unseen issues that come out of natural disasters that people are not prepared for. It stems all the way from being underinsured through to just being able to get by when people are unable to work.

I am going to run out of time, so I just want to say I am very glad we have been able to hold the regional sitting here today in the region. Our thoughts are with everyone, and congratulations to everyone who has helped out over the time so far.

**Melina BATH** (Eastern Victoria) (16:01): To quote Dorothea Mackellar, *My Country*:

I love a sunburnt country,  
A land of sweeping plains,  
Of ragged mountain ranges,  
Of droughts and flooding rains.

We stand on the banks of the mighty Murray here, and it is a beautiful place to live and be. We do so and we enjoy that lovely Murray River outside, but back in October 2022 she was not beautiful, she was a terror. The Murray and other rivers in the northern part of state peaked at higher levels than in the 2011 floods. They burst their banks and they created enormous turmoil in the towns of Rochester, Echuca, Seymour, Mooroopna and Shepparton, in parts of Bendigo and Kerang – I could go on – and in the smaller towns as well. They impacted the shires of Gannawarra, Campaspe, Murrindindi, Mitchell, Buloke, Loddon, Greater Shepparton and Greater Bendigo. We know that in ripping through the landscape and the townships, they tore people's homes apart and people's lives were also impacted to a huge degree. We certainly reflect with sadness on the lives lost – the human lives but also the animals, including livestock, pets and native fauna.

We have heard today from a variety of speakers about extraordinary acts of compassion, dedication and selfless volunteerism and of huge physical effort and support for each other. I concurred with the Leader of the House Minister Symes when she spoke about the pride of being a human being in this area and the great work that people have done.

I also feel very proud to be on the Environment and Planning Committee – I have been on that committee for nine years – and to have attended the hearings in Rochester, Echuca, Seymour and Mooroopna to listen to the testimonies of people. There is nothing more humbling to hear of than the selfless work people have done for their communities but also to be walked through people's fear, anguish, disbelief and loss and the distress of those experiences.

It is often said that country people are resilient, but I think their resilience is sometimes tested to a point beyond resilience. I really believe that, and I have heard from listening to those people that they do not want to go through the same level that they experienced in October 2022 again – they cannot. Their resilience is stretched beyond measure. We heard about sandbags and the human chain that often existed, where people packed sandbags and would move those sandbags to where they were needed. We heard about people who purchased sand and gave away those sandbags as well. We heard about the shortage of sandbags, and we heard from CFA volunteers, SES and Shepparton Search and Rescue. We have heard very much from local councils about the work that they have contributed to their communities. On spontaneous volunteerism, we heard how people came in to the edges of towns and fed those who were working around the clock to support their nourishment. We heard of spontaneous

leadership. I will just use one example from when we went to Seymour. The Seymour Football Netball Club really led the way in terms of support and action. They went into people's homes and front yards to extricate them from difficult situations and try to salvage things of value.

We also heard in relation to pre-flood warnings the concern that many people had about the lack of warnings. If I can, I will relate a couple of comments from the interim report from the flood inquiry that we have tabled today and some of the concerns from people. One of them, a very special person, is Cameron David Lovering, who was both I think in the CFA and also a Salvation Army first responder. He said:

I personally view this inquiry as the only viable expression to date to communicate our experience in the hope that it aids our community.

From my recollection he said, 'You're the first members of government to come in and listen to us.' I said, 'Sir, we're not government; we're mixed MPs. We're from government, we're from opposition and we're independents, but we're here to listen.'

That gave me cause for concern, because we hear from the Victoria State Emergency Service often about continuous improvement, but I am concerned that the lessons up into the hierarchy are not being learned. I said this in the inquiry in Melbourne when we heard from the leadership of the emergency services. I said to them, 'I know every day you come to work wanting to do the best for your state and your community, but I am genuinely concerned when I hear from people who have lived that reality in Rochester that they are not being heard.' Now, this gentleman is in the CFA, and I am concerned that there was not that level of debriefing and community consultation that needed to be done at the time or just post the floods when the waters were receding. This is when people need to tell their experience and tell how things can be improved.

We also heard – I think it was in Shepparton – from members of the public about how in the incident control centres they did not feel there was that adequate conversation or the communication. This is about listening to the local experts; that is one thing that I have learned through this experience and this inquiry. Certainly in my own region, Eastern Victoria Region, we had floods on 9 June 2021. The experience there was that we had members of the SES, whether they were on duty or not, having coffee in the establishment when their vehicles were being flooded underneath. How are we not learning from that period of time through talking to the local experts, understanding that there are people in our communities, in all of these communities, who have had that breadth of experience whether it be in the emergency sector, the volunteer sector or maybe just from watching like mad the waterways and the river gauges? We need to understand and respect those people and engage with them from a government level. As I said, everybody in the hierarchy comes to work to make it a better place, but I am concerned – as are people that we have heard from – that they are not learning from those experiences.

But there is hope, and part of this hope is about understanding, and when we get to the recommendations – not just the findings that we hear today, and they are very good findings and we endorse them from our inquiry – we need to read those from the Labor state government, to deeply dive into the ramifications of those recommendations and to not give them lip-service but work out a way to move through them, accept them and make these communities in the northern region, in the western side of Victoria, in Maribymong and in Gippsland better and safer places. We heard very clearly the beautiful sentiments in Mooroopna about the need to improve the CALD community information systems, the early warning systems for them. How can they work with local council and local emergency services to bring that message really clearly into those CALD communities?

I will suspend my comments on Goulburn-Murray Water, water authorities and catchment management authorities until we have a later debate and until the recommendations come out, but suffice to say that listening to those communities we heard varied opinions on the responsibility for the how, the when and the volume of water releases and again that communication there, so let us return to that very important discussion at a later time.

We also heard about the loss of infrastructure. We heard from levels in councils that roads are not just roads, they are absolutely vital links that connect our communities, that connect people from their homes and from their places of primary production into our communities for health, education and work. They connect the raw materials, the fantastic food and fibre that we produce, into our communities and to market, to port and to manufacturing. These are absolutely of primary need.

I know people come up here from the city, for example, and they are frustrated with the potholes. I live in Gippsland, and we have immeasurable potholes and dangerous road surfaces. They need to be repaired, and we have heard it today. And I know my colleague Gaelle Broad spoke about betterment. They need to be repaired to a better position. I think Wendy Lovell also spoke about betterment – that just returning it back to what it was is not good enough. I am sure there will be recommendations post that.

We heard from the Gannawarra council, and their CEO spoke about having \$8 million in certified road repair projects that were signed off by the department last October, 12 months after the floods. They went out to contract in December, and only \$1.16 million of these have been approved. That is a lot of roads, road surfaces and bridges that need to be repaired for communities to repair. Give communities that importance so that they feel validated and that they are respected.

We also heard from Lincoln Fitzgerald from the Loddon council: \$4 million of completed works, and this was approximately a year post the floods, but \$36 million of road repairs. He also went on to say when we listened to him during the committee hearings that council has \$8 million worth of its own infrastructure that needs to be fixed post the floods in sporting pavilions, halls, caravan parks and so on. So you have got \$36 million in roads and infrastructure and \$8 million in town building assets – these are things that need to occur and be expedited.

We heard from Rob Amos, the mayor of the Campaspe shire, and we talked about the word ‘trust’. He wants governments to trust councils more. He said, ‘We have to take a few hundred photos every few hundred metres. The maximum claim is \$500,000 that we can claim per section. It just drags out this process.’ These are the sorts of things too that Brooke Ryan said, from her experience. Brooke cited the lengthy support from within the community:

I do believe that the community banded together, but we were let down by emergency services. I cannot say that strongly enough. There are things that we need to learn ...

That was about the emergency services.

There are members who have quoted their experiences. We want to have a bright future in this region. We want to have assurity that there are lessons learned. We call on the government. Across debate and across the chamber from time to time there is this bickering and there is this undercurrent. I hope the government will absolutely focus on what is needed for regions to become more resilient and to build back better and support local community to feel confident that they can go back into their homes, that there will be better warning systems, that local volunteers will be better supported and listened to and that they have a brighter future, because I do not believe our locals can go through this level of concern and impact again.

**Jacinta ERMACORA** (Western Victoria) (16:16): I am pleased to speak on this motion on the flooding that occurred here in October 22, but before I do, I just want to say how delighted I am to be in Echuca and to be up on the mighty Murray River and all its tributaries. I travelled a 4½-hour journey from a city that is 3 hours from Melbourne and I am in another city that is 3 hours from Melbourne, so I am very much an outer regional person, and I am very glad to be here listening to the unique experiences of the Echuca and broader regional community.

I first want to acknowledge the damaging effects of the floods in October 2022. It had so many impacts on Victorian communities and in particular here in Echuca and in Rochester. I want to also take this time to thank all of those from the community that stood up and went to work to protect the homes, lives and businesses of everyone. We have heard lots of contributions today that have described some

absolutely wonderful joint, collaborative conduct of communities – at the larger scale and at the smaller, minute scale – working together in extraordinary circumstances. In particular I would like to acknowledge Mrs Tyrrell’s contribution. She is not here now, but she described a community working together very, very well. Right from the ground level, where there were community members, volunteers and emergency services members all stepping in and helping friends, neighbours and strangers alike, what we saw was true country community spirit come alive.

Yesterday afternoon I visited the Echuca East Primary School. This not being my electorate, I asked my staff to google primary schools in Echuca, and that was the one that came up, with the staff that responded the quickest. So there I was, and I got to meet with the grade 5s and grade 6s. I want to thank them for welcoming me into their classroom and to their school. I did have to ask them to help me in doing an acknowledgement of country, because I was not local, and they were absolutely fantastic in providing me with the language and the national groups that I should be acknowledging.

Before we got onto the flood stuff, they were definitely curious about the work of a politician. They definitely gave me the 20-question grilling. They asked me how old I was, do I pay tax, what football team I follow and what my hobbies are. I think the room nearly exploded when I answered the football team question. They also asked me about community safety and whether I have ever met Premier Jacinta Allan. How did it feel to win an election, they asked me, and did I have a difficult childhood and how long did I study at university. One young Indigenous student rather confidently asked me, ‘What is your cultural background?’ I thought that was a fantastic question to ask.

So when we got onto the floods conversation, the tone of the room did change. When I asked, ‘Who remembers the floods in 2022?’ absolutely the entire room of students put their hands up. They remembered. In fact the atmosphere really did change in the room, and the classroom was quite aware of some of the children that were more affected than others, and they were very thoughtful and generous about that.

These are some of the memories the children have. One family left town for fear of mosquito-borne diseases. Other children said, ‘We had to leave our home.’ Other children remembered how scared they were watching the waters rise whilst at the same time it was raining – continuing to rain. They remembered helping together, filling sandbags. It is a very calming exercise; I have done it myself. Filling sandbags – it can be very calming and helpful to do something practical. The children enjoyed working together on that.

So I want to say thank you to Echuca East Primary School grade 5s and 6s for sharing with me their memories and experiences. I also want to thank acting principal Josh Molluso and the office team there, who set up the details of my visit so efficiently. Echuca East is a small school. It is just under 300 students, and I was pleased to discover that about 70 of those 300 students are Indigenous students. That visit reminded me of just how much we have to be proud of in our state education system.

In October 2022 Victoria experienced the wettest month on record. Rapidly escalating warnings and worsening weather patterns triggered the emergency services commissioner to issue a dire warning to Victorians to prepare for floods. Between 6 October 2022 and 3 January 2023 over 1400 flood warnings for the Riverine area were issued to the community. Eighty-nine days of stress, uncertainty and loss were experienced by Victorians caught in the floodwaters. The VICSES worked tirelessly to ensure that they were as prepared as they could be, setting up 50 sandbag collection points around the state with the assistance of numerous local councils. During the flooding period over 1.5 million sandbags were collected and dispatched for use – an incredible number and a testament to the work of services, community, volunteers and the children at the Echuca East Primary School, who obviously also helped. As a former CFA Warrnambool brigade member, I remember making sandbags in the lead-up to the 2010–11 fires in and near Warrnambool.

Back in 2022, Thursday 13 October saw a period of heavy rainfall and again saw the VICSES and other services responding to a tremendous number of calls for assistance. During that day 3049 calls



for assistance were made to the VICSES, 128 rescues were required and 1766 flood-related incidents were reported. As the days went on, the numbers began to increase as we saw water rise and floodwater begin moving further downstream. In total 20,000 requests for assistance went out to the VICSES, 957 rescues were performed and 6447 flood incidents were reported. I do not think I need to emphasise just how staggering those numbers are and just how essential teams like the VICSES were during this period.

Last night at the reception I met members of the Rochester and Echuca SES units, and it was fantastic to hear some of their experiences during the floods. As we heard earlier this morning, only eight of the houses were not affected by floods, and many of the Rochester SES members had their own properties impacted, and if not their own, then those of their family and friends. Here in Echuca you experienced some of the highest rainfall on record: 160.3 millimetres of rain recorded. The Murray River broke its peak levels of the 1974–75 floods by 14 centimetres, rising to 38.4 metres. In the space of a month and a half VICSES had over 17,000 calls for help. That is singularly the most number of calls for an event that VICSES has ever received. Over a thousand water rescues were performed to save people trapped in floodwaters, not to mention the displacement of whole communities and the devastation caused by floods to those towns and their people. These floods saw lives lost and 2000 people requiring emergency and temporary accommodation support. During this time we sadly lost two members of the Victorian community – a man in Rochester and another in Nathalia – and I offer my utmost condolences and sympathies to the families of those two men who tragically lost their lives.

Many now may still be struggling with the mental aspects of being caught in a natural disaster. We must never forget to be there for our friends and neighbours and communities. I express sincere thanks to Victoria Police, VICSES, the CFA, Ambulance Victoria, Life Saving Victoria, ESTA – or Triple Zero Victoria now – and all staff and volunteers and community members who worked tirelessly throughout the flood period. I wish to also acknowledge those interstate agencies that came and aided in flood relief efforts: the Western Australian Department of Fire and Emergency Services, the South Australian Country Fire Service and the Queensland Fire and Emergency Service. In total, 748 homes were destroyed and 1583 homes were left damaged.

The Allan government has supported communities through financial assistance, relief centres and accommodation. With support from the Commonwealth government we have invested \$1.8 billion into those communities devastated by floods. \$150 million was spent on a state-coordinated clean-up. Amongst all the funding for businesses, financial assistance and school and community support, \$4.4 million was given to support mental health for those impacted by the floods, acknowledging the long-term mental impacts that these events have on people and communities.

In Rochester we saw hundreds of families without homes or displaced, and many are still in that situation. Immediate and medium-term accommodation was rapidly set up at the Elmore Events Centre, which became a small village of houses for those who were unable to return to their homes. As it was close to Rochester, it meant that those in the accommodation could still be connected to the community and could still attend work and attend school. This is that strength of local community that is so important during these periods of time.

After the recent bushfires I visited Pomonal, and it was very interesting to hear of the relationship between their ability to respond and recover as a community and the pre-existing strength of community networking that was there. I was fascinated to hear from members of the Pomonal resilience committee, which is a longstanding committee of their local progress association, that every November they have a community dinner, which is their fire preparation dinner. I wonder whether the best value of that dinner is from the practical fire preparation that is prompted or whether the best value is the community connections and the relationships that are formed and maintained that provide strength in a disaster situation. I actually think the latter is the case. That is what we have heard today and over the last couple of days as we have been here in Echuca. I express my appreciation to the parliamentary team for their work in establishing this today.

**Trung LUU** (Western Metropolitan) (16:32): I rise to address this chamber today on this significant motion, motion 371 on the 2022 floods. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge and pay respect to those whose lives were disrupted by the 2022 floods. In October 2022 water gushed over the spillway at Lake Eppalock near Bendigo, releasing water into the Campaspe River and flooding the northern Victorian town of Rochester, with over 85 per cent of homes inundated. The flood caused serious evacuations of Seymour, Carisbrook, Wedderburn and Charlton and left Echuca residents encircled for days by floodwaters. It also caused considerable damage to farmland, roads, waterway supply and infrastructure, and some areas are still recovering.

Like residents in the north of Victoria, residents along the Maribyrnong River in my electorate have also experienced similar hardship, with over 500 homes flooded. Residents ended up living in caravans for months because their homes were really damaged and unfit to be occupied. This was due to a combination of failures: the early warning system not working properly, a lack of emergency management and bad planning decisions by the government – decisions that left hundreds of traumatised victims, something that could have been avoided. Floods in the north will have downstream consequences. The most profound effect on my constituents in the Western Metropolitan Region was a flood that affected homes around Flemington Racecourse.

History provides us with many valuable lessons. In response to the 1974 flood disaster in Maribyrnong, a 1986 government report found that a flood retarding basin, a structure to capture rising water and slowly release it near the Melbourne Airport at Arundel, would be the best application in avoiding future floods and disaster. In other words, successive governments have failed to act on this issue for the last 36 years. Let us make this 60th Parliament a parliament that seeks to protect Victorians from flooding as a matter of principle and leave the political pointscore at the door. Let us take on board the recommendations that were provided to government. Both sides of government, from Kirner to Kennett, from Bracks to Baillieu, have failed to do so. It is time to act and act together in the 60th Parliament to make sure that the Maribyrnong River is not a scene of disaster and floods again. I strongly believe that we should treat others as we would want to be treated, so let us treat the homes of those being flooded as if they were our own. The government must do everything within its powers to assure that it will never happen again across the whole state.

Resilience needs to be incorporated into our infrastructure. The only piece of infrastructure in my area in Victoria is a 2.5-metre-high flood wall that was built in 2007 by the Victoria Racing Club to protect the Flemington Racecourse. The Bracks government, a Labor government, supported this flood wall to protect the racecourse but rejected the Arundel retarding basin, claiming it would harm the environment, flood farmland in the area, be too expensive and cost too much. One would ask the question, especially when it comes to flooding in the Maribyrnong River: are the horses more valuable than people? In 2019 the Victorian government decided there would be no new dam, citing concerns about climate change and the potential lack of water flow not making it a worthwhile investment. This decision was supported by the former Minister for Water Lisa Neville and was based on a forecast that wrote down significant reductions on water levels in our state rivers by 2065. However, three years later, what happened? Northern Victoria was struck with the devastating floods. Hopefully this underscoring will urgently make the government re-evaluate their water management strategies.

While it is important to learn what we can do better, it is also important to focus on what we do well. Being Australian, indeed Victorian, involves confronting life's challenges always head-on. Victorians meet challenges with gusto, and our culture of mateship ensures we always support each other, as we have seen in northern Victoria over the recent flood disasters. I know my colleague Ms Bath put in her contribution Dorothea Mackellar's poem *My Country*. This beautifully encapsulates our system and its beautiful landscape involving constant struggle – a sweeping land of droughts and flood plains, the beauty and the terror. This passionately illustrates that, warts and all, we love our country. As Australians and as Victorians it certainly has enabled us to recover from major disasters such as flood and fire, because it is in our blood and it is in our DNA. However, in the social contract the people of Victoria expect us to not only rebuild but build back better. Our environmental challenges strengthen

us mentally and spiritually and remind us that our greatest asset is not capital but friends, family and community, as demonstrated in Echuca and all the suburbs and regions in the north of Victoria, and across the state with the bushfires.

It is time we reflect on why we are gathered here today in this library in Echuca, which has been transformed into a Parliament. I would like to acknowledge and extend my deepest respect to the members of the SES, Victoria Police and the CFA. The CFA are often forgotten when it comes to supporting flood responses. I would like to take this opportunity to share some important work the CFA conducted in northern Victoria in relation to the floods of 2022. Thousands of CFA volunteers supported the flood response, including a strike team from other areas of the state such as Gippsland, the north-west and my own electorate Western Metropolitan Region. Unfortunately, many of these members' homes were also affected by the floods. Some could not protect or prepare their home because they were out helping the community. In Rochester 43 of 45 fire brigade members' houses were flooded. Several fire stations and fire trucks were also affected by the floodwaters. In Echuca, emergency services had to act fast before the expected high tide mark hit. A 2.5-kilometre mineral earth levee was built in two days using excavators and a bulldozer. A similar length of sandbag levees was built along the Campaspe River to protect the homes of residents.

We must commend the hard work of these volunteers. Residents of Echuca and SES volunteers worked day in and day out to manage this severe weather event. The river rose and caused the town's inundation. Volunteers laid down 195,000 sandbags, which reinforced the levee. I would like to take this opportunity to again extend my deepest respect to the residents of Echuca and members of the community who are volunteers. Let us ensure that communities like Echuca will not endure the hardship of another flood. We hope all these contributions will endeavour to build our infrastructure to prevent future floods and disasters in Victoria.

**Sheena WATT** (Northern Metropolitan) (16:41): Acting President, thank you for the opportunity to get up and speak on the motion acknowledging the 2022 floods and the disastrous effect these had on so many communities all around our state. I was a member of the inquiry for the interim report that was tabled today, and I look forward to the final report when it is tabled in our Parliament not too long from now. Being on that inquiry did indeed give me a unique insight into what occurred around our state and the devastating impacts it had on so many communities all around Victoria. Reflecting on the work of that inquiry, what it did was bring us to some regional towns so that we could meet with community members, properly grasp the severity of the event, listen to the people that were most affected by these floods and get a firsthand experience of the issue. I have got to say that it was quite a challenging opportunity to be given to hear of the lives, stories and circumstances of so many folks that had survived the floods. Can I thank all those members that came before us to share their insights and experience. It is never easy being someone with lived experience, getting up in front of parliamentary inquiries and sharing your story, sharing your hardships and your struggles and telling very real stories about what it means for your life today, whether it is folks living in caravans or moved out of their aged care homes or folks whose jobs disappeared seemingly overnight. There were all sorts of experiences that we heard – folks that had not slept for days and days, with only the clothes that they had with them. I acknowledge and thank them for coming and sharing those stories. And it was so good to actually see so many of them last night at the function, so thank you to those that came along.

Can I just say that there is a really important factor worth considering as we discuss the 2022 floods, and that is that it really was the wettest month in Victoria's history, with unprecedented rainfall, and it caused real destruction and havoc across the state. I know so many have spoken about the work of our volunteers, and I will take a moment to acknowledge them and all they do. But when we talk about the havoc, it is about the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of Victorian communities and knowing that whilst some buildings are being built, others still have a long way to go. Homes are still being built as well. So I thank them for sharing that with us and coming back yesterday evening and today to share more. It really did serve as a crucial platform to assess the response to the recent flooding

and to glean really valuable insights about future preparedness – things that I had never thought to consider.

I especially acknowledge all the medical professionals and health teams that came in for some really rapid response health care, whether that was people getting their medicines or making sure people had access to equipment, aids and other things that we needed to keep people well over this time. It was extraordinary, particularly when I reflect on Rochester, where the floods had such a severe impact on the medical professionals and the pharmacies in the region, so thank you.

Also I must say that there is so much that came out in that inquiry through scrutinising the effectiveness of the current strategies – the way we do things – identifying some areas for improvement and evaluating the coordination of response efforts. I certainly am looking forward to that final report of the inquiry and do recommend the interim report to all that are interested.

I have got to say, though, throughout the flood crisis what we did see was a real demonstration of our friendships. There were friends arriving from interstate: our allies such as the WA Department of Fire and Emergency Services, I am thinking about the South Australian Country Fire Service and also from a little bit further north the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services. They all came to lend their support to their neighbours and friends in need. Can I just say their support was around all sorts of things but certainly mainly consisted of deploying five rescue boat teams, swiftwater rescue crews and personnel particularly skilled in incident management, all of which significantly bolstered our capabilities during the emergency. What really opened my eyes was the coordination that happened, the seemingly seamless coordination between all those agencies – both local agencies and our friends from interstate – during that time. Thank you to all of those that do all the work in advance to make it so that when these events come up we are not struck by big surprises.

What we do know is that the 2020 fires meant that in our state we really did look at Emergency Recovery Victoria and their preparation for orchestrating regional recovery initiatives, but also statewide initiatives, whether they were to aid individuals, communities or indeed businesses that were affected. When it came to, just a couple of years later, the 2022 floods in Victoria we saw the efficient navigation and case management that was at this time paramount in ensuring that individuals were really looked after, connected with the services that they need when they need them the most and sparing them the burden of recounting their experiences repeatedly. I know that it can be a particularly traumatising experience to retell your story time and time again just to get the services that you need, so knowing that that mechanism was in place was enormously helpful. I have got to say that throughout Victoria these dedicated case managers tirelessly worked around the clock to ensure optimal outcomes for those most in need.

There was so much evidence that came to us, but can I acknowledge the work of the neighbourhood houses. They are such rock-solid backbone organisations in our state all over that stand up for communities time and time again, and the crew at Rochester are just something really special. They are made of such enormous goodwill and spirit and their resilience is unlike anything I have ever seen, so I acknowledge the work of the neighbourhood house up there and all the neighbourhood houses that stepped in to support each other during this time.

I know that there are studies and future works that will carry on as a result of the 2022 floods, but I know that we are a wiser state for having taken the time to examine what worked and did not work through both the parliamentary inquiry and the work of our emergency response agencies, and I hope that we do not see that devastation again.

Can I also just acknowledge that despite it not being more prominent in the work of the inquiry that I participated in, the loss to the cultural and intangible cultural heritage across our state from emergencies is really, really tough. Whether it was Black Saturday or the floods most recently, a little bit of our heritage and a little bit of our state story goes away with every natural disaster that we have, so it is worth reflecting on and thinking about how we can continue to protect and defend the cultural

and intangible cultural heritage of our state through these most troubled of times. So thank you to everyone for all you have done; thank you for the motion before us. I know that there are others that do want to speak on this, and I will give them an opportunity to do so, but first and foremost I will end my remarks with a big thankyou to the volunteers and the communities right here and right around our region. Thank you.

**Michael GALEA** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:51): Like the speakers before me, I also rise to share a few remarks on the motion before us today, one which I am pleased to see enjoys wide support from across chamber, as it should. The flooding event of 2022 affected many parts of our state, but it particularly affected northern Victoria, which is why it is so good for us to be here today in this community to be hearing directly from people. I spoke before in an earlier contribution about it being, yes, great for us to be showcasing the Parliament to people up here. Even if it is a small slice of it and even if it is not quite the full experience, it is great to be showing what we do and how we work, but it is far more meaningful for me at least to be able to listen and to be able to be here in a community such as Echuca, which has been through such a terrible situation, as have many other communities of northern Victoria, most especially Rochester, just down the road from here. It is wonderful for us to listen, and I have enjoyed listening to contributions from across the house today. Perhaps 'enjoyed' is not the right word, but I have really valued and appreciated hearing from locals in this region as well. I have read as well with interest the interim report tabled by the Environment and Planning Committee today on this very issue, and I look forward to their full report in just a couple of months time.

Being up here and thinking of the community spirit in this region, I am reminded of a quote by American civil rights campaigner Coretta Scott King, who once said:

The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.

Today we are in a great community. That community is forged of so many people. It is forged of residents, shopkeepers, volunteers and emergency service workers – heroes in our community, both volunteer and paid, who have worked, as I think Mr McCracken said, in conditions unimaginable to many of us in this place. Mrs Tyrrell as well spoke beautifully about her experience as a resident of this region and how she was fortunately safe from most of it. She was speaking with people who were directly affected, as indeed quite a few people in this place were.

I was also moved by the comments of Minister Shing and many others who spoke so passionately, as well as by Minister Symes, who spoke about some of the amazing individuals. Really, to hear those stories relayed to this place paints that picture beautifully well. Minister Symes also talked about her experience in Benalla when she was in year 12 as a high school student going through the major flooding event that happened over there at that time. We only recently discovered this, but it turns out that something we have in common is that we were both residents of Benalla at that time in the early 1990s. The difference for me is I actually do not remember the floods, because I was one year old.

**Bev McArthur** interjected.

**Michael GALEA**: I was in nappies. But my mum has always spoken to me about that remarkable event. I think we were in one of the few parts of the town that was not directly inundated by flooding at that time. We had come up from Melbourne and lived there for a few years – a few wonderful years up in Benalla that apparently I adored very much, and I adored that the neighbours used to feed me as well. But there is a great community spirit there, and that is something that my mum always talked about to me too, that community spirit in Benalla at the time of those floods. It is that community spirit that we see here as well in towns like Echuca and Rochester and across this great region.

There is so much that can still be said, but there is so much that has already been said by others. I do not wish to use my contribution today to go over what has already been said, because I think to repeat it would not necessarily be to emphasise it, but again I acknowledge the incredible organisations that have all chipped in, from the SES, the CFA, FRV, Victoria Police, Forest Fire Management Victoria, Life Saving Victoria, Ambulance Victoria to countless volunteer organisations. In times of distress the

one thing that unites us all as Victorians and indeed as Australians is that we come together to help each other out. We certainly saw that in this region in the floods of 2022. Some of us saw it from afar, but many in this place saw it firsthand and in some cases were directly involved with that too.

There are an enormous array of supports that the government has brought in to support flood-affected communities. There is still, as we have heard today, more work to be done. But I am really pleased to see all of the work that has been undertaken and the genuine commitment by all in government, but especially Minister Symes and Minister Shing, to work with these communities to ensure that they are built back better and rebuilt in a way in which they are as resilient as can be. We have a very dramatic climate system in this country and we always have, but we also know that it is getting worse each year. I believe it might have been Mr Ettershank who made a comment about a future committee inquiry that will be looking into our resilience. That is a committee that I am involved with, and I am looking forward to seeing that come to fruition.

There is much more to be said, but again I would like to finish where I started, which is to say that being here for us today is not so much for us to be talking to you, to the people of Echuca, it is for us to be listening to you. I have really valued my time up here in Echuca but also in Shepparton and in northern Victoria all this week. It has meant a lot to me. To everyone who has come forward and shared their stories with us, especially if it has been painful to do so, I just want to say a very big thankyou. I commend this motion to the house.

**Motion agreed to.**

### *Adjournment*

**Gayle TIERNEY** (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (16:58): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

### **Multicultural festivals and events program**

**Michael GALEA** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:58): (820) My adjournment matter this evening is for Minister Stitt in her capacity as Minister for Multicultural Affairs. The action that I am seeking is an update on the funding being delivered to support multicultural events across Victoria, but especially those in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region. The Allan Labor government has a proud track record of and a strong commitment to investing in multicultural festivals and events through programs such as the multicultural festivals and events program. That program in particular has helped out groups such as the Springvale Asian Business Association to put on its amazing new year celebration each year.

Recently, along with colleagues including Mr Tarlamis and members from the other place, I had the privilege of attending the Victorian Afghan Associations Network's Nowruz festival in Dandenong Park over the weekend. This celebration of Afghan new year, which was timed to be at the end of Ramadan, attracted more than 10,000 people, both Afghan and from other cultures and from right across the south-east of Victoria. It was a wonderful showcase of Afghan culture, which was absolutely fantastic to take part in. I would like to take thank Hafiz Asadi, the VAAN president, for extending an invitation for me to attend the festival.

I also had the privilege of attending with the Vietnamese community and joining with them in the flag-raising ceremony in Dandenong on Saturday. This was a very special annual ceremony, which was an important event for the community and a flag-raising for the people in acknowledgement of the forthcoming Black Friday anniversary of when people had to flee at the fall of Saigon.

I also had the privilege of joining with the Cambodian community over the weekend in the Cambodian Buddhist Association of Victoria's new year celebrations in Springvale South. I would also like to thank them and acknowledge that we are now in the Year of the Dragon, Buddhist era year 2568. It

was terrifically attended by many people from across the community, with lots of cultural performances, prayers and dances. I would like to thank the CBAV for inviting me as well.

I am very proud to represent a region such as the south-east that is the multicultural heart and multicultural capital of this state, but we are certainly not the only region that has strong and vibrant multicultural communities, including up here in northern Victoria. I had the privilege of meeting many members from diverse backgrounds at the Shepparton Youth Forum on Tuesday. It was really wonderful to see and learn from their experiences, particularly their stories as new Australians setting up their lives in wonderful regions such as where we are today. To restate the action that I am seeking: it is for the minister to update me on the funding being delivered to support multicultural events in Victoria and in particular in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

### Energy policy

**David DAVIS** (Southern Metropolitan) (17:01): (821) President, my matter is for the Minister for Energy and Resources, but before I get to that I want to thank you and the parliamentary staff for the work that has been done on this amazing sitting day – an incredible effort by staff. I also want to thank the mayor and the shire for their support and the huge and warm welcome we have had from everyone in the area. It has been a great day.

My adjournment is for the Minister for Energy and Resources, and it concerns the sneaky gazettal today of the ban on gas appliance rebates. Despite about 60 per cent of gas appliances being manufactured in Australia and less than 5 per cent of electrical appliances being manufactured in Australia, we now have a ban that has been gazetted today. This will cut consumer choice. It will cut down the options and it will hit poorer people hardest. Those that would previously have received a rebate to assist them buy a new cooker or a new heater will not get those appliance rebates any more. This is a ban that hits the poorest and hits people in regional Victoria.

**A member** interjected.

**David DAVIS:** That is exactly right, those in regional cities will be hit hardest by a lot of this. This has been done without proper consultation with the industry. I say higher greenhouse emissions will result as there will be some shift away from gas to electricity that is largely still in Victoria generated by coal generation in the Latrobe Valley. Higher emissions will be generated in the immediate term by this particular change, so what I am seeking from the minister is that she not only publish the modelling of the greenhouse gas emissions – because I have no doubt that that will show higher emissions – but most importantly that she review this decision urgently, that she consult with the gas industry, including the manufacturing industry, and that she reverse the ban on gas.

### Duck hunting

**Georgie PURCELL** (Northern Victoria) (17:03): (822) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Outdoor Recreation, and the action I seek is for him to overturn the heavy-handed wetlands bans given to volunteer duck rescuers over the weekend. It is certainly lovely to be here in Echuca. It is a beautiful part of my electorate. I would really love to check out the local wetlands, but I cannot. That would be illegal, because I got banned from attending them on the weekend.

There are three wetlands in Campaspe shire that were closed ahead of the 2024 duck-shooting season to reduce the risk to endangered birds, including Kow Swamp, Greens Lake and Lake Stewart, and between Echuca and Barmah the river is very popular for boating and canoeing. But there is something that many people do not realise. Mr Galea would know, as he was part of the inquiry, but these areas actually cannot be used right now for recreational activities; it is illegal for outdoor recreationists to go to these places during the duck-shooting season. They could receive a banning notice like I did. The operators of Sydney Harbour Kayaks have long been opponents of duck shooting, as they are unable to operate their kayak and canoe ecotours of the stunning Gunbower system while duck shooting takes place due to safety fears.

Despite so many rescuers being banned from attending wetlands over the weekend, it did not stop us from bringing in a number of wounded and illegally shot birds – something that we knew was inevitable and that came through very clearly in the inquiry process.

Just down the road from here, at Kerang, volunteer rescuers collected four protected blue-winged shovelers. These are birds that shut down entire wetlands due to their presence, but still duck shooters could not tell the difference between them and so-called game species, and they maim them, plunge them into the water and allow them to suffer slow and painful deaths. We also brought in coots, grebes and an ibis that were also killed by duck shooters who, despite all attempts, are guaranteed to wound and kill the wrong species.

I would really like it if the Game Management Authority and the police did not focus on volunteer rescuers like me and the dozens of others who are out there on the weekend and instead focused on the shooters who are participating in this illegal shooting, but it is very, very clear they refuse to do that. In fact they rocked up to a licensed duck rescuer's place of work on Tuesday and served her a banning notice in front of patients that she was vaccinating. It is an attempt to cover up the cruelty of what is happening out there on the wetlands, and I hope that the minister will consider overturning these banning notices so we can get out there and do the job that the government and authorities refuse to do.

### **Rochester swimming pool**

**Wendy LOVELL** (Northern Victoria) (17:06): (823) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Regional Development, and the action that I seek is for the minister to commit \$12 million in funding for the construction of a new swimming pool in Rochester, and if it does not fall in her portfolio, I ask her to pass it on to a minister whose portfolio it does fall in. The town of Rochester was one of the hardest hit in the October 2022 Victorian floods, but they are still suffering the psychological and economic after-effects of the flood. Widespread damage was done, including to the town pool, which was inundated with water. The site of the Rochester pool has become a psychological trigger point for the community. The broken and deserted facility is a constant reminder of the flood and its devastating effects on public spaces and private homes of Rochester residents.

Two hot northern Victoria summers have come and gone with no pool for local kids to learn how to swim, for fitness-committed residents or retirees to do their daily laps or for families to cool off in the baking summer heat. A community pool is not just about swimming sports. It is about recreational play, water safety education and staying fit for life. In small rural towns that do not have the same amenities as larger towns or cities, community pools also provide a crucial place for locals to meet and socialise.

Campaspe Shire Council has been in frequent consultation with its residents regarding aquatic facilities throughout the shire, and that consultation has highlighted how important an aquatic facility is to the residents of Rochester. Six hundred people engaged with council's post-flood consultation on the pool and provided extensive feedback on what they want from a community pool. Their message was loud and clear: the community is crying out for a pool that will engage people in a wide range of aquatic activities. Council has listened to this feedback and adopted a long-term strategy, which involves removing the old pool and building a new fit-for-purpose aquatic facility. Council have agreed to commit \$500,000 of council money to demolish and remove the old pool shell and associated buildings. They will now undertake a planning and design process that will aim to deliver an aquatic centre that meets the community's needs. The key components of the proposed new facility include a 25-metre pool for lap swimming and water aerobics, which will have the capacity to be heated to extend the swimming season; a water play park; a cafe and shaded seating area; and a landscaped parkland with an open grassed area. Council have taken the Winchelsea outdoor pool redevelopment as a benchmark and estimated the cost to be around \$12 million. I urge the minister to commit to delivering this \$12 million of funding for the Rochester town pool. The residents of Rochester truly deserve this legacy project.



### COVID-19 vaccination

**Moira DEEMING** (Western Metropolitan) (17:09): (824) My question is for the Attorney-General. Will the Attorney-General confirm, regarding Victorian Government Solicitor's Office advice, chief health officer and pandemic orders and directives and policies used to enforce the COVID-19 vaccine mandates, whether or not the Victorian government and under its direction Victorian employers and service providers unlawfully limited human rights, shut people out of public life, caused workers to be discriminated against and terminated by (a) dealing with Victorians' protected information by collecting, recording, disclosing or otherwise using it outside the lawful permitted purposes as defined under section 10 of the Australian Immunisation Register Act 2015, and/or (b) under laws that are invalid because they do not validly bind Commonwealth law?

### Health funding

**Georgie CROZIER** (Southern Metropolitan) (17:10): (825) My matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for Health. A recent report by the Royal Flying Doctor Service found that, compared with people in metropolitan areas, rural and remote residents are nearly three times more likely to be hospitalised and 2.7 times more likely to die from avoidable causes. Delays in testing, diagnosis and treatment lead to people becoming sicker and needing more urgent care. Local services are essential to supporting the health and wellbeing of regional communities. A regional community, such as where we are today in lovely Echuca, needs a strong health service. It is these health services that provide support not only to the local community and to surrounding communities but to the clinicians and the senior administrators that provide leadership roles within the local communities and are very much part of the fabric of the community, and these hospitals are replicated across the state.

On ABC radio on 4 April the AMA Victorian president Dr Jill Tomlinson said she was 'worried about what is coming in the budget for Victorian health care' as 'we don't have the opportunities to cut' and 'cutting staff, no matter where you cut them from, does impact frontline services'. This is in the context of course of the amalgamations that are going to occur under the Victorian Labor government, and there are many CEOs and many people across Victoria who are very concerned about the government's plans. Dr Tomlinson at the time called on the government to commit to an urgent meeting to discuss these concerns. The action I seek is for the minister to advise if she has met with the AMA president and what assurances she will give that health services will not be cut, especially in regional Victoria. Regional communities across Victoria deserve better services, not cuts and not forced mergers that will lead to service closures, job losses and the loss of local community voices.

### Cost of living

**Sarah MANSFIELD** (Western Victoria) (17:12): (826) The action I am seeking from the Treasurer is for him to ensure that regional communities receive cost-of-living support in the upcoming budget. Last year the Victorian Greens cost-of-living survey painted a heartbreaking picture of profound distress right across regional Victoria. Regional Victorians told us how they are struggling to afford their rent, bills, food and health care. They told us about the negative impact this is having on their mental health due to constant worry about paying rent and bills. Many told us of impossible decisions, choosing between putting a roof over their heads, putting food on the table or accessing health care for themselves or their families.

While these are common experiences across Victoria right now, in regional communities this is often compounded by distance and isolation, higher travel costs, smaller rental and housing markets, limited choices in supermarkets and healthcare providers and a lack of access to child care and other support services. Regional inequality has been on display recently in evidence presented to the education inquiry. Teachers have described the reality for many students at regional public schools who are up against it before they even arrive at the school gates, families living in tents and caravans with no cars to drive their kids to school and no alternative transport options, kids arriving without breakfast or lunch, no local food relief options and a lack of access to affordable paediatric and allied health care, which if they can access at all, they have to travel to Melbourne for.

These problems have not arisen overnight. They are the result of chronic underinvestment in public services and a failure of government regulation. When sharing their stories in our survey, people made it clear they want to see direct government action to stop unfair increases in rent, bills and food. The groundwork is being laid for an austerity budget, but that is a choice that government is making. Labor could instead choose to raise revenue by, for example, making big corporations like the banks, the gambling industry and property developers pay their fair share. They could choose to redirect government subsidies for fossil fuel and racing industries to services in regional areas like public housing, community health services, schools, childcare services and public transport. They could also choose to use regulation to make essentials more affordable for people, like regulating the supermarkets, preventing unlimited rent increases and regulating the short-stay industry to free up housing stock. Budgets are about priorities, and the upcoming budget will show what the Victorian Labor government is choosing to prioritise. I call on the Treasurer to choose to support cost-of-living relief for people in regional communities.

### **Country Fire Authority funding**

**Gaelle BROAD** (Northern Victoria) (17:15): (827) My adjournment is for the Minister for Emergency Services. Last year I attended the handover of a new fire tanker at the Sedgwick CFA, and captain Brendan Drechsler summed up the appreciation felt by the local community. A new heavy tanker was officially handed to the Tatura fire brigade this week, providing new safety features including rollover and burnover protection to help protect members of the brigade and providing an extra 1000 litres of water to fight fires.

CFA volunteers invest so much in our local community, and they are very grateful for the public investment in these heavy tankers. For many CFA brigades across northern Victoria, the age, suitability and safety of their vehicles is one of their biggest concerns. Documents made public last year revealed that 193 vehicles in the CFA's fleet are over 30 years old and 429 are more than 25 years old. In June 2020 the Labor government committed to delivering a new fleet of 48 heavy tankers to replace ageing single-cab tankers by late 2023. To date less than half of these new tankers have been delivered. As natural disasters become more frequent, we cannot afford to go slow. In 2022 the government collected \$800 million from the fees Victorians pay to the fire services property levy, but according to the state budget papers only \$7.6 million was to be spent on new asset infrastructure.

CFA volunteers in northern Victoria have raised concerns over the standard of their facilities, the allocation of funding and declining volunteer numbers. We have seen the important role of the CFA in not only protecting but also preparing local communities for bushfires and flooding. With the state budget fast approaching, the action I seek is for the state government to prioritise investment in the CFA and to step up the pace for delivering new heavy tankers.

### **Gender transition**

**David LIMBRICK** (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:17): (828) My adjournment item is for the Minister for Health in the other place. The Cass review, the most extensive evidence-based evaluation into gender treatments for children, was released a few weeks ago in the UK. This review found major problems with the critical appraisal of treatments at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, including editorial independence, rigour of development and applicability. It also found major gaps in the way patients are assessed. It confirmed my suspicion that government policy in this area may have been captured by ideologues and not evidence. It looked at international studies and found the evidence does not support the idea that using puberty blockers or cross-sex hormones reduces suicide risk or improves mental health outcomes. In light of this new evidence, before any more children are harmed, my request for the minister is to stop the use of puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones in children, to stop social transitioning at schools without parents' consent or knowledge and to hold an inquiry into the treatment of young people experiencing gender distress as a matter of urgency.

### Upfield rail line

**Evan MULHOLLAND** (Northern Metropolitan) (17:18): (829) My adjournment is directed towards the Minister for Public and Active Transport and concerns train services in the north. V/Line services along Wallan and Donnybrook consistently fall short of meeting the commuting needs of residents, and coupled with the cancellations from Rail, Tram and Bus Union strikes, my constituents face a daily headache with their commute to and from work. Commuters regularly stand throughout the whole duration of travel and in many cases are forced to sit in baggage areas or prevented from boarding V/Line services altogether. V/Line – and this government, I would say – boasts that V/Line is Australia's fastest-growing regional railway operator. Well, it is only growing in passengers at a rapid pace because hundreds of thousands of homes are being built in growth areas that used to be regional towns with no plans or abandoned plans to electrify the track.

The Melton and Wyndham Vale electrifications have been promised by Labor at not one but two separate elections. Now Labor describe this not as a broken promise but as an evolving promise. Well, I will tell you what, I was in Werribee on Monday with over 100 locals with the shadow cabinet, and the people of Werribee are not happy with the broken promise of Wyndham Vale and Melton electrification. It is like another Melton hospital. Every election they will just keep promising and promising again.

Rerouting Seymour and Shepparton services along the Upfield line is urgently required to improve the capacity of services for commuters in Wallan and Donnybrook. The Public Transport Victoria development plan in 2012 under the Liberals and Nationals government originally proposed this, and the 2018 Victorian rail plan proposed and urged the government to connect the Upfield line to the Craigieburn line through the Somerton link allowing an extension towards Wallan to be completed by 2025. The government even mused in an *Age* article that this project could be completed in line with the Metro Tunnel. I have continually raised this in my adjournments and constituency questions. The population of Craigieburn is expected to reach 90,000 to 100,000 in 2025, yet no project has been undertaken on upgrading this essential rail infrastructure. It has been proposed again in several transport plans, urging the government to do it, but they are too busy pushing frivolous projects like the Suburban Rail Loop, which means there is no money for growth areas in my community that are desperately after electrification services where hundreds of thousands of homes are being built. This project is supported by PTV transport groups, the Northern Councils Alliance and every northern suburb council and community group. I seek the action of the minister to provide an update on any plans for the duplication of the Upfield line.

### Supermarket prices

**Aiv PUGLIELLI** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:21): (830) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Agriculture, and the action that I seek is that she support farmers to get a fair deal when it comes to supplying Coles and Woolworths. Everyday people are paying more and more for their groceries, and all the while our farmers are paid less and less, strongarmed by Coles and Woolies, the two big supermarkets, who really only care about increasing their profits at the expense of both our primary producers and shoppers. Coles and Woolies are raking in profits – over \$1 billion each, megabucks, made by charging customers more and squeezing farmers to the point of collapse. We have all heard of farms, some being run over multiple generations, that no longer break even each year. Many farmers are on the brink of giving up. Many are closing their gates and they are shutting up shop. We must all make our voices heard for our local growers and producers. These farmers deserve a decent price for their produce. The Labor government needs to step in and protect our farmers. They deserve a fair go.

### Twelve Apostles precinct redevelopment

**Bev McARTHUR** (Western Victoria) (17:23): (831) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Regional Development. On 8 February I asked the Minister for Development Victoria a constituency question about the compulsory acquisition of farmland for the government's Twelve

Apostles precinct development. The response took eight weeks. Worse still, it said only 'Not our problem, ask another minister'. This is despite the fact the project is listed on the Development Victoria website as 'delivered by Development Victoria', despite the fact the Engage Victoria consultation was directed to Development Victoria and despite the fact the *Government Gazette* declaration was made by the minister responsible for Development Victoria under the Development Victoria Act 2003. Was the question wrongly directed? If so, could it not have been easily redirected? And if that is beyond the wit of this government and their departments, why not say so immediately, not wait eight weeks? Eight weeks to get the answer that we cannot, or will not, answer you.

In 2020 I raised this unhelpful, obstructive, time-wasting and disrespectful practice with our enlightened President. He said:

... sometimes the distinction between portfolios is not clear-cut and it is a matter of judgement as to where a matter should be directed. In my view in an instance such as this it would be a courtesy to the house for ministers to pass the matter on to the correct minister for a response.

That is a perfectly reasonable approach.

A written response from a minister, whether the matter was directed to them in the house or not, is in order ...

said that President. How good. But if ministers continue to ignore this, as a house we should seriously consider our response. I hope this attitude does not result from political inclination. Perhaps it is a shrug of the shoulders from overlooked departmental staff, but if you are a member of the public whose life will be deeply affected, a reply like this is not a shrug of the shoulders but a kick in the teeth. My constituent wrote recently:

Valuers for the State are entering ... this week ... to determine what the area they are taking is worth. Kindly, they written they will not enter our family home without consent. We won't be so lucky with the remainder of the property with which they plan to force their way onto. Soul destroying.

Minister, on this long-planned project, which surely requires total transparency, I ask again: will the land acquired by Development Victoria be leased or sold to any third party – for example, the Eastern Maar corporation or an overseas entity?

### **Firewood collection**

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL** (Northern Victoria) (17:26): (832) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Environment in the other place. During the Easter break I took a drive through the Barmah forest. I was shocked at the enormous amount of dead fall littering the ground, causing a potential fire hazard – piles of dead trees and branches covering the ground, inhibiting the growth of saplings and the regeneration of forest. The forest is dying in places, but there is no room for new growth. On the Easter weekend a number of fires were deliberately lit in the Barmah forest, putting the lives of campers enjoying the long weekend at risk.

My constituents have also reached out with concerns that yet again there is not a single place within the Greater Shepparton or Moira local government areas designated for people to collect firewood. With the current cost-of-living crisis worsening, regional Victorians are struggling with the rising costs of firewood. Yet again my constituents in the Northern Victoria Region are literally being left in the cold by the Allan Labor government. The action I seek is for the minister to open the Barmah forest and let the forgotten residents of the Northern Victoria Region collect firewood for this coming winter.

### **Literacy education**

**Renee HEATH** (Eastern Victoria) (17:27): (833) President, firstly, I would like to thank you for hosting such an amazing event and thank all the amazing parliamentary staff. Thank you particularly to Anne and a few others.

My adjournment is for the Minister for Education. Children deserve a quality education, and in Victoria they are not getting one. One in three children cannot read proficiently, and in rural and regional areas that number rises to one in two. Parents of students have reached out to me saying that

their kids have reported that classrooms are stressful, chaotic and distracting. A principal told me that in regional areas they cannot recruit teachers, and this is backed up by the data that in Gippsland per teaching position they get 0.7 applications, so it is true. Once they have them they have trouble retaining them. Another parent said to me that because her daughter did not have a strong foundation in reading, she is now stressed because she is behind, and she is worried that she will not be able to catch up.

Being able to read is vitally important, because if you cannot read, you cannot then read to learn. If children have a strong foundation, they can do anything, and I believe that we should be leading the nation with a good education system to give kids the best possible start in life. My adjournment is for the Minister for Education, and the action is that the minister supports our educators to teach phonics in our schools. This would require a broad-ranging review to embed phonics in English and literacy programs and upskilling our teachers to ensure that they have the capacity to support young people so that they are ready for the workplace and the real world.

### **Lake Wendouree lighting project**

**Joe McCracken** (Western Victoria) (17:29): (834) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Regional Development, and it relates to the Lake Wendouree lighting project in Ballarat, which the state government contributed \$2.5 million to. Since the official opening of the troubled project it has been plagued with challenges. Only a couple of weeks ago locals, in the local media, reported that a number of lights were actually failing – they just did not work. No-one knows why; they just did not work. Just this week, in fact two days ago, it was reported in local media that the Ballarat City Council has revealed that all the safety switches on the lights have to be redone at a cost that is very significant. The action that I seek from the minister is, one, to conduct a review of how the project went so wrong, specifically given that the state government contributed \$2.5 million to this project; and secondly, that the government apologise to the people of the Ballarat community for having a project in place that clearly is not serving its purpose. Less than six months after it was opened it is just an absolute disgrace. The thing is, locals actually raised big issues before the project was completed and as the project was being completed, and they were continually ignored. I even spoke to an expert electrical contractor this morning who said they had spoken to a number of people both in the City of Ballarat and in the state government saying that what was planned would not work. What happened? It was ignored again. And what is the result? We have got a shoddy project in Ballarat – around the crown of Ballarat, Lake Wendouree – and it is a dud project.

### **Regional Development Victoria**

**Melina Bath** (Eastern Victoria) (17:31): (835) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Regional Development, and I am pleased to see she is at the table tonight. In 2012 the then Deputy Premier, the Honourable Peter Ryan, instigated the Regional Growth Fund. It was \$1 billion to invest in the regions in business, in infrastructure and in communities. Under the Allan–Andrews governments what was front of house has now become the outhouse, and indeed we can see what is happening in my electorate of Eastern Victoria Region and indeed in the Latrobe Valley. Jobs and growth have stagnated under Victoria's Labor government. Jobs growth over the past decade has been the equivalent of 0.47 per cent on an annual basis. We can see that 0.5 per cent is far less than the average population growth of 2 to 2.5 per cent. We are getting left behind. What we can see is that their flawed policies are having such a huge impact on our regions.

If we turn the coin over and look at the unemployment rate for the Latrobe Valley, these are the statistics. This is the evidence. It is higher by comparison than in any other regional centre or indeed Melbourne; 5.1 per cent is the unemployment rate in the Latrobe Valley. The Premier's own seat happens to be 3.3 per cent. And what have we got in this region? Well, we have got a government that has instructed the Latrobe Valley Authority to spend over \$300 million in the course of its history for a glossy brochure of what the most recent pathway is supposed to be. It is a glossy brochure, it has got

wonderful aspirations in there, but there is no direction, time line or leading light into how we are going to create wealth.

In respect of all the closures that are occurring under this government, we have got the closure of mills and we have got the closure of our native timber industry. The facts remain. We also see, as a sign of the times, the fact that Australian Carbon Innovation – which was actually set up under two Labor governments, under state Labor and federal Labor – was to talk about and invest in, from the university stage to commercialisation, carbon innovation in lignin and lignite and we have seen this wonderful enterprise shutting down under this Labor government. I call on the minister to advocate for renewed funding back into Regional Development Victoria to make regional development the focus and not be the outhouse under this government.

### **Rural and regional roads**

**Trung LUU** (Western Metropolitan) (17:35): (836) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. I rise to speak on an alarming statistic, with 480 regional roads subject to speed limit reductions or warning signs due to their poor condition. These reductions highlight the extent of neglect and underinvestment in maintaining our road infrastructure, posing significant risks to motorists and hindering economic productivity. The action I seek is for the government to allocate a critical maintenance regional road funding program to establish permanent repair crews based in regional areas. The deterioration of the state's roads is a serious threat to public safety and economic prosperity. Lowering speed limits on regional roads is only a bandaid solution and fails to address underlying issues caused by years of neglect and funding cuts to road maintenance.

It is time to prioritise road safety and the wellbeing of all Victorians. There needs to be immediate and decisive action to overhaul the road maintenance program, allocating sufficient resources to address the backlog of repairs to ensure the long-term sustainability of our road network. Victoria's function as Australia's largest food and fibre exporter is at risk as our regional roads crumble. Our ability to efficiently get produce from the paddock to export markets is being impeded by our second-rate country road infrastructure. Let us not forget the continuing neglect and mismanagement by this government, with over \$38 billion in cost blowouts on major projects and \$600 million on cancelling the Commonwealth Games. I ask the minister to consider establishing permanent repair crews based in regional areas, as suggested by the Victorian Transport Association, as a step in addressing the volume of work and the depth of issues plaguing our regional roads. The critical funding program would support local government efforts to maintain our local roads. Again, I ask the minister to consider this proposal.

### **Suburban Rail Loop**

**Richard WELCH** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:37): (837) My adjournment is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure in the other place, Danny Pearson. The Allan government is using taxpayers money to buy off local communities to support the Suburban Rail Loop project. The \$250 million SRL community grants fund has already given out over \$3 million, and here are just a few examples: \$80,000 was granted to a theatre production; \$13,300 for online self-guided virtual tours of Box Hill landmarks; over \$40,000 each to multiple clubs for new electronics; more than \$13,000 for STEM toys for party packs for babies; over \$68,000 on podcasts about the SRL; and \$13,100 to increase diversity inclusion in ultimate frisbee. This is despite some of the recipients of the grants being outside the 1.5-kilometre precinct proposed for the SRL; furthermore, some are over 5 kilometres from the proposed zone.

While many of the recipients are worthy causes, I struggle to see what they have to do with the SRL. A club that received the funding commented: 'I don't know what the connection is between the SRL and community sport.' Other representatives have noted that as a condition of taking the grant they are required to invite a member of the SRL or the government to their events. Many of the clubs who received the funding were encouraged to post promotional material for the SRL. While the SRL is \$30 billion over budget this seems likely a rort to win over local communities that are sceptical of

Labor's SRL blowout. Community groups and clubs deserve funding in their own right and should not have to be on their knees as a propaganda tool in order to serve their communities. If the local MPs have failed to support them the way they should, clubs should not have to become propaganda in order to get the funding they so richly deserve. The action I seek from the minister is to detail in writing who authorised and administered these grants, and on what terms, and when Labor will end this SRL rort.

### **Ringwood East train station**

**Nick McGOWAN** (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:40): (838) I think there is a problem with the clock, President.

**Harriet Shing**: Quality control, Mr McGowan.

**Nick McGOWAN**: I am glad we are talking about quality control, because some weeks ago in this place I rose to talk about a wee problem I had.

**Harriet Shing** interjected.

**Nick McGOWAN**: It was not my haircut, although that is a fair comment; I will take the interjection and accept it on this rare occasion. I did have a wee problem – and the President knows where I am going with this – in relation to a train station.

**A member** interjected.

**Nick McGOWAN**: I did lose my tie as well; that is also true. It was in relation to a train station in my electorate, in Ringwood: the East Ringwood train station. The problem is that the government of the day, which is you across there, have spent in the order of \$700 million, and I do not mind it being spent in my electorate – that is great and I welcome that – but what I am afraid you have forgotten to include is a toilet at the East Ringwood train station.

*Members interjecting.*

**Nick McGOWAN**: That is the pun; that's right. It is unfortunate that Ms Terpstra is not with us at the moment. I do not know where she has gone; she is probably on the highway back to Melbourne – that is fine. I am glad that she was able to support a petition by local traders. All jokes aside, for the traders this is an important issue. It is a pleasure on this rare occasion to have so many ministers present, so I can only encourage you to, around the cabinet table –

**Harriet Shing**: It is all for you, Mr McGowan.

**Nick McGOWAN**: Thank you very much. It is actually for the community of Ringwood and the communities of Mitcham and Nunawading and the others that we represent.

**Bev McArthur**: Do they have a member for Ringwood?

**Nick McGOWAN**: No, they don't. But nonetheless it is important that at East Ringwood train station we have a toilet. It is important for the kids, it is important for the mums, it is important for the dads and it is important for the senior citizens. There are not toilets at the nearby shops. It is not appropriate –

**Melina Bath** interjected.

**Nick McGOWAN**: It is not an overlook; I think it is intentional. I do understand there have been some discussions between the government and the council. I do believe that the sticking point is that nobody wants to clean the toilets once they have been put in place. I urge the minister for transport to help us overcome that little obstacle and, on behalf of the government of Victoria, to commit to the government cleaning it rather than the local council having to take on that responsibility. That is not unusual. Most such toilets are looked after by Public Transport Victoria. This is a demarcation.

I see no more fitting way to finish our stay here in Echuca and the day today than to put forward a little issue for local people, because it does matter to them – it is important. We have all been users of public transport. We want Victorian people to use public transport more and more. If we are going to be serious about that, if we want to encourage that, then we need to provide the facilities to ensure that when you go to the suburbs out in Ringwood all the way from the city you can get there and go to the toilet if you need to. That is important for young people, it is important for senior citizens, it is important for anyone who uses public transport. I implore the government to take the initiative so that we could have a toilet at the East Ringwood train station.

### Responses

**Gayle TIERNEY** (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Regional Development) (17:43): I can report there were 19 adjournment matters this evening that covered a variety of areas and portfolios. But before I deal with some of the matters that were raised in my portfolio of regional development, can I also take this opportunity to thank everyone who has been involved in making sure that this sitting has been as successful as it has been. It has been an incredible time, not just in the chamber but the opportunities with local community members have been amazing. It has been incredibly interesting to hear firsthand from people their experiences as well as meeting a variety of communities on our way up here and on our journeys back to our offices or our home bases. Again I thank everyone who has been involved in this. It does pay tribute to the need for this to occur when it does, and I think it provides those who have got metropolitan seats with a real opportunity to see what rural and regional life is all about, because there are only pluses attached to living in regional Victoria.

Turning to some matters that were directly referred to me, there is an issue with lighting around Lake Wendouree. It was a project that was undertaken by the Ballarat City Council, and yes, there was a contribution by the state government in respect to that. There is a technical issue that is affecting the lights. There are contractors onsite already fixing this issue, and I think it deals with around about 30 lights. It is a fault, and the work that will be taken is under warranty so it will not be costing any additional moneys, Mr McCracken.

In terms of matters in relation to regional Victoria, of course the matters that Ms Bath particularly raised are matters that will become clearer as the budget is handed down early next month, but obviously I will continue to advocate for improvements in regional Victoria, day in and day out. It is a fantastic portfolio, and it is a fantastic area of government involvement with community. But I want to use this as an opportunity to set the record straight in that the number of new jobs created in regional Victoria has grown again, and Victoria's regional unemployment rate remains the lowest – the lowest – in the country at 3.5 per cent, reflecting the strength of this state's economy. The ABS regional labour force data released recently shows another 7300 people in regional Victoria found jobs in that last month, the largest increase in the country. The number of people employed in Victorian regional communities now is 821,800, an all-time high, driven by a strong economy delivering benefits for Victorians across the state. More than 32,000 regional Victorians have found work over the past 12 months. Regional employment in Victoria has grown by 163,000 jobs, or nearly 25 per cent, since November 2014 when the Labor government was elected, the strongest regional jobs growth in the nation. Unemployment remains low in many areas of Victoria according to the ABS. In Warrnambool and the south-west the jobless rate is 1.8 per cent, in Bendigo it is 2.2 per cent, in Geelong it is 3.2 per cent and in Shepparton it is just 1.4 per cent. The most recent ABS state accounts data shows Victoria's economy has grown by a cumulative 9.1 per cent over the past two years, ahead of New South Wales, ahead of Queensland, ahead of Western Australia and ahead of Tasmania. So I will leave it at that.

**The PRESIDENT:** I reckon at this point the greatest way I can show appreciation to our fantastic Parliament team is to be really brief. We appreciate everything you have done. You are fantastic. And now I declare this regional sitting adjourned.

**House adjourned 5:48 pm.**